

How the new season of Sesame Street stands up against racial hatred

Despite the show being ‘apolitical’, forthcoming episodes aim at showcasing the importance of diversity and cultural togetherness.

At a time when Donald Trump’s views on race seem designed to make the US more divided than ever, an attempt at unification is coming from an unlikely source: children’s television.

The new season of [Sesame Street](#) seems to be the perfect counter to Trump’s rhetoric, as it specifically focuses on “helping kids recognize similarities and celebrate differences – particularly around race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class”.

The first episode of Sesame Street’s 48th season sees Elmo, Big Bird and co travel to different, diverse neighborhoods around New York City. The gang travel to Chinatown, to a west African neighborhood, and to a predominantly Mexican area. Mexico, and its citizens, were a particular target of Trump’s ire during his campaign.

Sesame Street head writer Ken Scarborough said the show was aiming to expose children to different cultures, through simple ideas like food and dance.

“Obviously in this day and age it seems to be a time when differences aren’t celebrated,” Scarborough said. “I think there’s a lot of distress in the world, there’s a lot of things that you look for simple solutions and simple answers to things and a lot of that has to do with ‘the other’.

“People aren’t really ‘the other’. So it’s sort of seeing past that blaming other people for something that is not a problem of people per se, but is just a problem of understanding, of education.”

The Sesame Street cast travels around New York City in a balloon in the first episode, looking for a magic wand and discovering those new areas. Some of the episode was filmed in Brooklyn, in May, causing quite a stir among regular parkgoers as the puppeteers maneuvered their characters in the hot sun.

Scarborough and his team began writing the show in October last year, in the midst of one of the most divisive presidential campaigns in recent history.

Trump was particularly critical of Mexicans during his campaign – [describing immigrants](#) from Mexico as rapists and drug dealers – and his pledge to build a wall on the US-Mexico border was one of his signature promises.

His attempt to ban people from predominantly Muslim countries added to criticisms that he was heightening racial tensions.

Sesame Street has proved progressive in other areas over the years by helping children deal with different people and issues they might face. Earlier this year the show welcomed [a new character called Julia](#), who has autism, to the cast.

The way the other characters interacted with Julia served to help viewers understand why children with autism might behave in certain ways.

[Sesame Workshop](#) – the not-for-profit, educational arm of Sesame Street – has also run programs aimed at helping children who have a parent in jail or family members serving in the military.

Rosemarie Truglio, vice-president of education and research of Sesame Workshop, stressed that the show was “apolitical” and that the focus was not a direct response to Trump, but said the season would serve as a “wonderful opportunity for different children to learn about different races and cultures”.

“We don’t want to be myopic,” Truglio said. “We want to be able to open our world to learn more about our world and the people in it.”

In a phone interview, Sesame Street character Elmo said he had found the focus on race and ethnicity beneficial.

“We meet people from Mexico and Africa and all different places,” Elmo said. “Elmo thinks that you can find friends anywhere. And any time you find a new friend, you learn new things too.”

The puppet said he was excited for the new season to begin and to share his experiences with viewers.

“Elmo learned that what makes us different is what makes us special,” he said.

“Elmo thinks it’s important to celebrate the differences we all have. It’s important to recognize the things we have in common. And not our differences.”