

Revolution in Television:

Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood

Ryland Hjelman

Historical Paper

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Introduction

On February 19th, 1968, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* first aired on television. It first aired nationally in 1968. This new program for kids changed the world of children's television and inspired generations to come. Not only was *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* a success in child psychology, but it also saved the medium of public television altogether. Created by a man with disdain for the public children's television of his time, it certainly revolutionized public television. *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* touched on ideas of kindness and equality that no other show at the time dared to dwell on. So in the end, we are all welcome to visit *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.

Fred Rogers: His Early Life

Fred Rogers, born on March 20, 1928, was the creator, host, lead musical composer, and chief puppeteer of *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. He was a single child at his home in Latrobe, Pennsylvania¹ until his parents, James and Nancy Rogers, adopted a girl when he was 11. He also learned to play piano in his childhood. He was bullied as a child by his classmates and he would make up songs on his piano through his tears.² Fred Rogers, after graduating from Latrobe High School, went to Dartmouth College for a year before transferring to Rollins College in Florida. This was where he met his future wife, Joanne, (the name she was given at birth was Sara Joanne Byrd, but she goes by Joanne). He first became interested in television in his senior

¹ "About Fred," *The Fred Rogers Center*, <https://www.fredrogerscenter.org/about-fred>

² "15 Heartwarming Facts About Mister Rogers," *Mental Floss*, <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/93430/15-heartwarming-facts-about-mister-rogers>

year when he visited his parents and was awed by the newest addition to the household, a television. Fred immediately wanted to be a part of the industry.³

Fred Rogers: Early Career

Fred Rogers got his first job working in television when he was hired as an assistant and floor manager music programs for NBC in New York City. He was then hired by WQED in Pittsburgh, a community television station, in 1953 to work in programming. WQED In Pittsburgh was the first of its time in the US because it was the nation's first community-supported television station. In the next year, Mr. Rogers was co-producing a new program called the *Childrens' Corner*. This allowed Rogers to use the puppets he had fallen in love with as a child. Rogers made his first appearance as "Mister Rogers" on a Canadian broadcasting show called *Misterogers* that laid the groundwork for *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.

In 1962, Rogers became an ordained Presbyterian minister. The Presbyterian Church asked him to help children and their families through television. Fred Rogers was a man of faith that taught tolerance wherever he went. When a Christian viewer of 6 years named Amy Melder promised him that, "he was going to heaven," Rogers wrote back to her saying:

"You told me that you have accepted Jesus as your Savior. It means a lot to me to know that. And I appreciated the scripture verse that you sent. I am an ordained Presbyterian minister, and I

³ "Fred Rogers," *Biography*, <https://www.biography.com/performer/fred-rogers>

want you to know that Jesus is important to me, too. I hope that God's love and peace come through my work on *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*."

-Mr. Rogers writing to Amy Melder

Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood

Fred Rogers' moved back to Pittsburgh in 1966 to be with his wife, Joanne, and his two young sons, James and John Rogers. While in Pittsburgh, he created *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. In 1968, it aired on PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) stations throughout the country. The show varied little over the course of 895 episodes from 1968 to 2001. Every episode of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* started off with Mr. Rogers' changing into his sweater and sneakers, feeding his tankful of fish, and then going out to visit his various friends and neighbors. He brought his viewers on a magical trolley ride to the Land of Make Believe, where he meets his puppet-like friends and tackles topics such as friendship and trust.

These two worlds were inspired by Mr. Rogers' childhood in his hometown, Latrobe, Pennsylvania. "*Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, the layout of it, and the doctor, and the baker and the dentist were all in this small town of Latrobe Pennsylvania, along with the trollies," told David Newell, who played Mr. McFeely on *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, to *USA Today* in 2003. "He was using it as a symbol to tell stories, a touchstone. That's how the trollies became part of the neighborhood and how Trolley became a character."⁴

⁴ "How Fred Rogers' Family Inspired 'Mister Neighborhood'," *Biography*, <https://www.biography.com/news/mister-rogers-family-inspiration>

Mr. Rogers' Trademark Clothing: His Famous Sneakers and Cardigans

Over the 33 years the show was on television, it always started with Mr. Rogers walking through the front door and trading out his raincoat and suit jacket for a sweater. Mr. Rogers had about 24 of them. All made by his mother. In 1984, the Smithsonian Institute⁵ decided to put one of his sweaters on display. He decided to wear sneakers on *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* because he found they were quieter on set. When the trolley arrived in the Land of Make Believe, Mr. Rogers would quietly slip behind the scenes to bring the puppets to life without his viewers ever noticing.

The Puppets Of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*

The puppets of Make Believe from *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, King Friday XIII, Queen Sarah, Henrietta Pussycat, X the Owl, Lady Elaine Fairchilde, Daniel Tiger, and Grandpere were all a part of the magical Land of Make Believe.⁶ Make Believe was a way to talk about difficult topics in a way that children would understand. The puppets were all controlled by Mr. Rogers, who would slip behind the set to maneuver them. All of the puppets are currently on display in the Pittsburgh Children's Museum.

The Cast of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*

There were 15 cast members in *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, including Mr. Rogers' and 2 others who played the puppets (Mary Rawson and Maxine Miller). The show also had some

⁵ "Mister Rogers' Sweater," National Museum of American History, https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_680637

⁶ "The Puppets," Mister Rogers Neighborhood, <https://www.misterrogers.org/puppets/>

special guests like Tony Bennett, Margaret Hamilton, Jeff Erlanger, and Yo-Yo Ma.⁷ Below is a list of the cast:

Betty Aberlin as *Lady Aberlin*

David Newell as *Mr. McFeely*

Joe Negri as *Handyman Negri*

François Clemmons as *Officer Clemmons*

Chuck Aber as *Neighbor Aber*

Bob Trow as *Bob Dog*

Don Brockett as *Chef Brockett*

Audrey Roth as *Miss Audrey Paulificate*

Elizabeth Seamans as *Mrs. McFeely*

Mary Rawson as *Cousin Mary Owl*

Marilyn Barnett

Elsie Neal

John Reardon

Maggie Stewart as *Mayor Maggie*

Rogers Testifies Before the Senate

On May 1, 1969 Fred Rogers went before the Senate Subcommittee on Communications to plead for a \$20 million grant for public television. This \$20 grant had been proposed by

⁷ "Cast - The Mister Rogers," *The Neighborhood Archive*, <http://www.neighborhoodarchive.com/mrn/cast/>

President Lyndon B. Johnson but was now threatened by President Richard Nixon.⁸ Funding for public television increased from \$9 million to \$22 million because of his impassioned statement about how television had the potential to turn children into productive citizens.

Rogers addressed subcommittee chairman Senator John O. Pastore by outlining his submitted testimony stating that:⁹

“One of the first things that a child learns in a healthy family is trust, and I trust... trust you will read this. It’s very important to me.”

-Mr. Rogers defending PBS

Rogers stated that his program, with the help of all the other stations, had a budget of \$6,000. He added on to that saying \$6,000 only pays for less than 2 minutes of cartoons.¹⁰

The “Betamax Case” and Mr. Rogers’ Involvement

In 1975, Sony introduced their Betamax to the U.S., a prototype videotape player-recorder that was quickly left in the dust by the VHS and VCR because of their longer

⁸ “Nixon Administration Public Broadcasting Papers, Summary of 1969,” Current, <https://current.org/1979/02/nixon-administration-public-broadcasting-papers-summary-of-1969/>

⁹ “Mr. Rogers - Testimony Before the US Senate on Funding for PBS,” American Rhetoric, <https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fredrogerssenatetestimonypbs.htm>

¹⁰ “Won’t you be my neighbor?,” CPB, <https://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/mrrogers>

recording capabilities. It was the Betamax that gave its name to a court case that has played an important role in copyright law over the next decades to come.

The Betamax allowed people to record shows right off the air. It was an incredible innovation from a time when you still had to get up from the couch to change the channel. The public was amazed by the new product, but major entertainment corporations were not as impressed. Walt Disney Productions and Universal Studios filed a lawsuit in 1976 in the hopes of stopping the sales of Sony's Betamax. They claimed that TV producers would lose millions of dollars if their content was continuously duplicated and distributed without authorization.

The case went to court in 1979. The U.S. District court ruled in favor of Sony, saying that taping programs for entertainment purposes was fair use, and did not infringe copyright. There was no proof that the practice did any harm to the motion picture industry. But Universal, unhappy with the previous verdict, appealed again in 1981. The ruling from 1979 was reversed.

In 1983, the Betamax case arrived in the Supreme Court. The case, *Universal Studios vs. Sony Corporation of America*, was nicknamed the "Betamax Case." Nearly 50% of all American homes had a VCR by this point. The case was an argument of extremes that was argued for a year. On one side, you had Jack Valenti, yelling that, "the VCR is to the film producer and the American public as the Boston strangler is to the woman home alone." And on the other, was the testimony from Fred Rogers who was defending the VCR. He stated that:

"I have always felt that with the advent of all this new technology that allows people to tape the 'Neighborhood' off-the-air... they then become much more active in the programming of their family's television life. Very frankly, I am opposed to people being programmed by others.

My whole approach in broadcasting has always been ‘You are an important person just the way you are. You can make healthy decisions’... I just feel that anything that allows a person to be more active in the control of his or her life, in a healthy way is important.”

In the end, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Sony. The case resulted in 5 members of the Supreme Court voting that the VCR does not infringe copyright and 4 members who disagreed. The court held that, "[t]he sale of the VTR's to the general public does not constitute contributory infringement of [Universal's] copyrights."¹¹ The Court concluded that there was not a significant likelihood of copyright holders who license their works for public broadcasting would object to their content being recorded for entertainment purposes at home. They also cited Mr. Rogers:

“He testified that he had absolutely no objection to home taping for noncommercial use and expressed the opinion that it is a real service to families to be able to record children’s programs and to show them at appropriate times.”

The decision made by the Supreme Court set two standards.¹² The first is that recording a broadcasted program to watch later is of fair use. The second states that the manufacturer of a device or technology that can be used for copyright infringement but also has “substantial

¹¹ “Sony Corporation of America v. Universal City Studios, Inc.,” Oyez, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1982/81-1687>

¹² “Sony Corp. v. Universal City Studios :: 464 US 417 (1984),” Justia, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/464/417/>

non-infringing uses” can’t be held liable for copyright violations by those who use it. Overall, the “Betamax Case” and Mr. Rogers’ influence on it still influences copyright law today.¹³

Mr. Rogers’ Ideas and Philosophy

Anyone who remembers *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* can recall the fondness in Mr. Rogers’ voice and the feeling of safety that could be felt whenever watching the show. Unlike many other shows at the time, Mr. Rogers’ wasn’t afraid to talk about difficult topics in *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. This would include when Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Mr. Rogers’ also made the show in a slow-paced format that was unlike the other fast paced action shows that children enjoyed at the time. At the beginning of *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Mr. Rogers would always calmly feed his fish. He believed that we all need slowness to listen, look carefully, and learn.

Not only did he believe this, but he also considered all feelings to be natural, including the dark ones. He believed that we should validate our emotions, not suppress them.

Rogers’ also had a deep respect and understanding of children. He saw television as a way to reach children and serve families. He tried to help them feel understood and safe.

In Conclusion

Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood was an amazing show that assured children with its warm tone and heartfelt lessons. Mr. Rogers wasn’t afraid to talk about difficult topics, and that was

¹³ “How Mister Rogers Saved the VCR,” *Mental Floss*,
<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/29686/how-mister-rogers-saved-vcr>

definitely a first in childrens' television. Mr. Rogers also had an influence over legal topics like copyright. He also basically saved public broadcasting when he testified before the Senate and pleaded for an increase in budget. It's hard to bring up public television without including *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.

Appendix I



One of Mr. Rogers' sweaters at the National American History Museum

https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_680637

Appendix II



A picture depicting Mr. Rogers' sneakers

https://www.flickr.com/photos/veal_saltimbocca/82793547

Appendix III



Mr. Rogers putting on his sneakers during his beginning-of-the-episode routine

<https://medium.com/@nickriccardo/how-to-dress-exactly-like-mister-rogers-f19eb8f8e9ee>

Appendix IV



The trolley from *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*

<https://www.misterrogers.org/our-television-neighbor/>

Appendix V



The set for the Neighborhood of Make-Believe From *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*

<https://www.misterogers.org/articles/the-neighborhood-of-make-believe/>

Annotated Bibliography

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I used this article from the Fred Rogers Center to gather information about Fred Rogers' childhood and early life while he lived in Latrobe.

"Fred Rogers," Biography, <https://www.biography.com/performer/fred-rogers>

This biography about Fred Rogers from Biography gave me information on Rogers' college years and his early career.

"Mister Rogers' Sweater," National Museum of American History,
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_680637

This was the information the National Museum of American History had on an item in their collection, one of Mr. Rogers' sweaters.

"The Puppets," Mister Rogers Neighborhood,
<https://www.misterrogers.org/puppets/>

This collection of information on the puppets used in *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* from the *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* website gave me information on the puppets used in the show

“Cast - The Mister Rogers,” *The Neighborhood Archive*,
<http://www.neighborhoodarchive.com/mrn/cast/>

This was a list of the cast and other special guests as seen on *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*.

“Mr. Rogers - Testimony Before the US Senate on Funding for PBS,” *American Rhetoric*,
<https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fredrogerssenatetestimonypbs.htm>

This website contains a clip from the case. I used this article from American Rhetoric to gather information about it.

“Won't you be my neighbor?,” CPB, <https://www.cpb.org/aboutpb/mrrogers>
 This article provided more information about how Mr. Rogers helped public broadcasting when he testified before the senate.

“Sony Corporation of America v. Universal City Studios, Inc.,” Oyez,
<https://www.oyez.org/cases/1982/81-1687>

This article from Oyez gave me a rundown of the facts from the Betamax case.

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This article from Justia provided some of the claims made in the “Betamax Case.” It also provided similar cases not mentioned in this paper.

“How Mister Rogers Saved the VCR,” *Mental Floss*,
<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/29686/how-mister-rogers-saved-vcr>

This article from Mental Floss gave me a brief timeline about the “Betamax Case.” It also Provided information on Mr. Rogers’ involvement in it.

American History Museum,
https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_680637

A picture of Mr. Rogers’ sweaters at the American History Museum that I used for *Appendix I*.

Matty Mo, Flickr, https://www.flickr.com/photos/veal_saltimbocca/82793547

A photo of Mr. Rogers’ shoes that I used for *Appendix II*.

Nick Riccardo, Medium,

<https://medium.com/@nickriccardo/how-to-dress-exactly-like-mister-rogers-f19eb8f8e9e>

A photo of Mr. Rogers I used for *Appendix III*.

Mr. Rogers Neighborhood website,

<https://www.misterrogers.org/our-television-neighbor/>

A photo of Mr. Rogers and a trolley I used for *Appendix VI*.

Mr. Rogers Neighborhood website,

<https://www.misterrogers.org/articles/the-neighborhood-of-make-believe/>

A photo of the set for *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* that I used for *Appendix*

V.

Secondary Sources

“15 Heartwarming Facts About Mister Rogers,” *Mental Floss*,
<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/93430/15-heartwarming-facts-about-mister-rogers>

I used this article from Mental Floss to learn some side facts like when he was bullied as a child. I also found some information that would also help me later for some other sections in this article. That includes *Rogers Testifies Before the Senate* and *The ‘Betamax Case’ and Mr. Rogers’ Involvement*.

“Nixon Administration Public Broadcasting Papers, Summary of 1969,” *Current*,
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This article from Current relates to Richard Nixon’s attitude toward public television. I used it in *Rogers’ Testifies Before the Senate*.

“How Fred Rogers’ Family Inspired ‘Mister Neighborhood,’” *Biography*,
<https://www.biography.com/news/mister-rogers-family-inspiration>

This article from Biography gave me information on how Mr. Rogers’ family inspired and had an effect on *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*.

“Fred Rogers,” *Biography*, <https://www.biography.com/performer/fred-rogers>

This biography about Fred Rogers from Biography gave me information on Rogers’ college years and his early career.

