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Summary

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SECRET CRED

**SESAME STREET HAS LAUNCHED
AN AMBITIOUS PLAN TO EXPAND ITS
GLOBAL REACH AT THE SAME TIME AS
IT BATTLES TO KEEP KIDS WATCHING**

BY BELINDA LUSCOMBE

government has promised to transform the site of a former 12,000-acre surface mine into a commercial development park with offices, retail and, most important, jobs.

GOVERNOR JUSTICE SAYS he's going to make sure the project gets built. Justice is a Democrat, but his political appeal has been likened to that of Trump's. Both are wealthy businessmen who until now had never held elected office, with little in the way of concrete political ideology. Justice even has a tax controversy of his own: millions of dollars in unpaid fees assessed on his coal mines.

Still, his central promise resonated with voters: "jobs, jobs, jobs." And to the extent that he had an economic platform, it emphasized tax cuts and reviving coal. Justice even reopened a few of his company's mines just days before the election—an apparent down payment for the bright future in store for the industry.

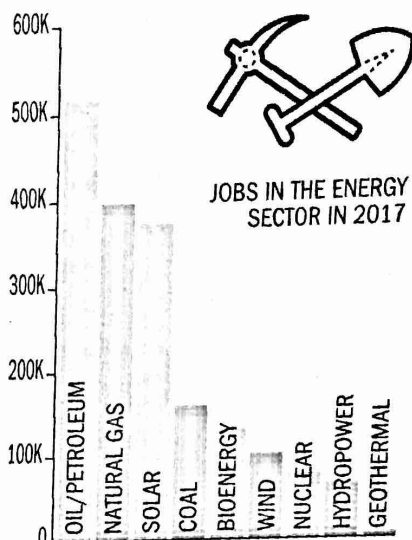
Taking office has a way of bringing a politician back to earth. West Virginia faces a deep budget deficit, thanks in part to the shrinking revenue from the state's coal tax, and even the most severe regulatory rollback won't reverse that trend. While Justice is fond of saying that miners have been "overregulated out of a job," he has come to realize that coal will not be as important to the state's future as it was to its past. "There's real hope and real optimism," Justice says, but "you're still going to have thousands and thousands of displaced miners."

The governor's agenda includes a wide variety of measures to raise revenue and repair the state's recently downgraded credit rating. He wants legislators to raise the state's sales tax, create a new business tax and increase the gasoline tax. (They have balked so far.) And he proposed a sliding scale of taxation that would make coal companies pay more when their production increases.

It's all part of an effort to think beyond the state's dominant mineral. Justice wants to spend billions of dollars to rebuild roads and increase broadband Internet access—nearly one-third of people in the state can't get it—in an attempt to make West Virginia more attractive to outside investors. He hopes he can jump-start the timber and furniture-making industries and encourage new

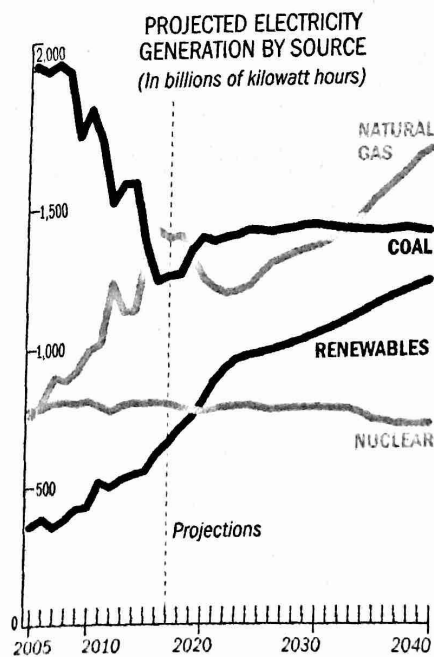
FALLING EMPLOYMENT

With a boom in fracking and a surge in renewable energy, the coal industry has been eclipsed as a source of employment



STALLED GROWTH

Even with the repeal of Obama's power-plant regulations, demand for coal is not projected to surge in the U.S.



Source: U.S. Department of Energy

businesses to set up shop. There is also hope in West Virginia's growing tourism industry, which has benefited from privately sponsored environmental-cleanup efforts across the state's scenic trails, mountains and waterways.

Justice doesn't refer to his plans as economic transition, a loaded phrase sure to draw even more ire from the coal industry, but it's clear that that's exactly what he wants to achieve. The prospect elicits excitement in some quarters and fear in others.

For those still working in the mines, the decline of coal is a direct blow to their ability to provide for themselves and their families. An experienced coal miner can earn \$100,000 along with benefits and the promise of a pension. Jobs in the new industries targeted by economic-transition plans—think call centers, shipping warehouses and non-union manufacturing—often pay minimum wage or else require specialized training and a college education.

But in a state where coal has long been an icon as well as a livelihood, the industry's fade takes a psychic toll. Coal is in the names of West Virginia's roads and rivers, stamped on its buildings and the source of scholarships at its leading universities. For years, the football teams at Marshall and West Virginia squared off in the Friends of Coal Bowl, and in 2009 the state named coal its official rock. "West Virginia has always relied on coal," says Tom Southern, who lives near the coal museum in Madison. "That's been their mainstay. That's what they do."

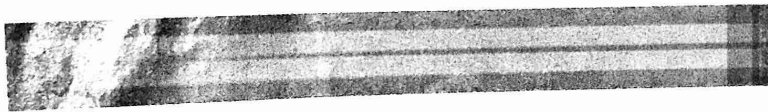
Yet the possibility of a different way of life doesn't seem to scare all older coal miners. Randy Smith, a longtime miner who was first elected to the state senate as a Republican in 2012, proudly wears a Friends of Coal lapel pin. His office is decorated with memorabilia from decades in the mines, and he says he wants coal jobs to remain a career for those who desire it. But it's always been a hard life, and he says he'd welcome more options in the state. "I'm a coal miner, been a coal miner all my life. My son, I didn't want him to be a coal miner. The coal is in my blood, but I want what's best for my kids," Smith says. "We have to use this opportunity to diversify our economy. Coal will never be what it was." □

SESAME STREET PRIDES ITSELF ON BEING ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST INCLUSIVE PLACES, BUT IT'S QUITE A HARD JOINT TO BREAK INTO.

When the show introduced Julia, a character on the autism spectrum, in April, she had been gestating for six years. The first brand-new Muppet in a decade, Julia was initially planned as a cartoon character for the web but got such a big response that after an 18-month test run in the exurbia of digital storybooks and animation, she was canonized in Muppet form and allowed into the neighborhood.

The *Sesame* folks, who produce a 30-page-plus curriculum for the show every year, consulted with more than 250 experts and advocacy groups as Julia was being formed. A series of white papers had been written on her before she even had a face. She has a compendium of autistic characteristics, such as an increased sensitivity to sound and a tendency to flap her arms when excited. (She has a spare set of arms for such occasions.) The covering of the toy she carries, Fluffster, had to be changed because it would distress some kids with sensory issues. She arrived fully loaded with online resources for teachers and parents. As a final touch, Julia's puppeteer is the mother of an autistic child.

For the autism community, Julia's debut is a watershed moment. Not only do kids on the spectrum rarely see a kid like themselves on TV, but other kids don't either, especially one who is treated as part of the gang. "It resets the baseline of



LET'S BE PUSHING THE ENVELOPE



1969
ANGER: Over the years, Oscar the Grouch has been criticized for being too abrasive for preschool viewers. "We might not be able to create a character like Oscar now," senior vice president Carol-Lynn Parente has said. Some African Americans also regarded Oscar as a belittling stand-in for black urban residents.

1969
RACE: James Earl Jones was *Sesame Street*'s first celeb guest. In 1970, Mississippi public TV banned the show for 22 days because of its racially integrated cast.



1983
DEATH: After the passing of actor Will Lee, who played shopkeeper Mr. Hooper, the show talked about his death and what it meant.



1994
DRUGS: Cheech, who became famous for his pot movies, was a guest star.



1972
DISABILITY: Librarian Linda was a deaf character who had a recurring role.

1978
SMOKING: Alistair Cookie of *Monsterpiece Theater* smoked, then ate, a pipe. Later, the pipe was removed.



Understanding," says Kristie Patten Koenig, chair of the department of occupational therapy at New York University. "If you have a child who's autistic in your neighborhood, you have a different understanding than if you don't. With *Sesame Street*, we all have an autistic child in our neighborhood."

Getting Julia right may have been a tall order, but she isn't close to the biggest challenge the organization is taking on. Kids' TV has undergone a climate change, as the behavior and viewing patterns of families shift and former sources of revenue dry up. To survive, the show founded with the express purpose of reaching every child did a deal with subscribers-only HBO. That cultural adjustment has to be negotiated just as the organization attempts a more radical structural shift: Sesame Workshop no longer wants to make a TV show that tries to help kids learn and be kind. It wants to become a global educational force that happens to have a TV show.

SOME FORM OF SESAME STREET is now broadcast in 150 countries: the show has introduced an Arab Muppet to Israeli TV and an HIV-positive Muppet in South Africa and Nigeria. In Afghanistan, says Sesame's research, 80% of TV-watching children and 70% of their parents tune in to *Baghch-e-Simsim* (Sesame Garden), which in 2016 introduced the

hijab-wearing Zari, a model of girl empowerment.

Last year the folks who popularized the phrase "I can't hear you—I have a banana in my ear," joined forces with the International Rescue Committee. Their joint proposal to take educational and social-emotional support to refugee kids in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria is now one of eight finalists for a prize from the MacArthur Foundation worth \$100 million, alongside such global heavyweights as the Carter Center. "The MacArthur competition puts us in a different conversation," says Sesame Workshop's chief operating officer, Steve Youngwood.

The organization is also on the cusp of a pilot program that pairs *Sesame Street* characters with IBM's Watson to test adaptive learning in schools. The plan is to figure out if a computer can interact with a kid in a way that would enable it to learn a child's strengths and weaknesses and adjust its responses accordingly. But there are some very low-tech experiments too. "We take TVs on rickshaws into villages in Bangladesh" so kids can be exposed to healthy and positive messages, says Sherrie Westin, who heads the philanthropic and humanitarian arm of Sesame Workshop. She cites studies that suggest young kids are the most receptive to programs that lessen the effects of childhood trauma.

Sesame Workshop spent \$22 million furthering its global ambitions last year, raised from a combination of foundations, government and corporate partners. But the State Department has funded *Baghch-e-Simsim* only through November. "If I don't get funding for Afghanistan, I have to walk away," says Westin.

'It's competing with every piece of content ever invented, from a cat video to *Gone With the Wind*. That's a bit daunting.'

GARY KNELL, former Sesame Workshop CEO

PREVIOUS PAGES: SESAME WORKSHOP (THESE PAGES) CHEECH, TRACIUS JACKSON, DONALD GRUMP, PERRY PERRY, JULIA, SESAME THE GROUND, EARL, LINDA THE LIBRARIAN, MR. HOOPER, ALI STAIR COONE, KAMI, MAHBOUB, ZARI, JULIA, SESAME

2002

HIV: Kami, an HIV-positive Muppet, appeared on the South African version of the show, *Takalani Sesame*.



2010

SEX: Guest star Katy Perry wore a dress many considered too risqué for kids. Her song never aired.



1988-2005

GENTRIFICATION: Ronald Grump and/or Donald Grump, two depictions of a certain property developer, try to make the street great again.



2006

DIVERSITY: Mahboub, an Arab Muppet, was introduced to the Israeli version of the show, *Rechov Sumsum*.



1994-2000

DISABILITY: Wheelchair user Tarah Schaeffer became a series regular at 9 years old.

2016

FEMINISM: Zari, the first native Muppet on the Afghan show *Baghch-e-Simsim*, goes to school and interviews famous people.



2017

AUTISM: Julia's quirks don't keep her from being one of the gang.



Julia's toy rabbit, *Fluffster*, had a textured covering that autistic kids would not tolerate, until her puppeteer, Stacey Gordon, pointed it out

little boy playing with toys (educational value: zip) got more than 15 million views over the same period.

"[Sesame's] videos move a little more slowly than kids are used to," says Jill Murphy, editor in chief of Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that helps parents negotiate media. "That can be a positive thing. It teaches patience." On the other hand, parents want their kids to watch stuff together, and older kids age out of *Sesame Street* earlier than they used to, so the younger ones switch off too.

Toddler junk food like Ryan's ToysReview aren't even *Sesame Street*'s biggest rival. "It's competing with every piece of content ever invented, from a cat video to *Gone With the Wind*," says Gary Knell, a former Sesame Workshop CEO, who now runs the National Geographic Society. "That's a bit daunting."

Also daunting: from 2008 to 2016, Sesame Workshop lost 70% of its DVD revenues and 50% of its licensing income, Dunn says, mostly because of the one-two punch delivered by the iPad and streaming video. Endless free programming ensures that no character can dominate the toy shelves the way Elmo did in the '90s. And even if Julia did become the must-have doll of the season, fewer kids play with toys because of all those games on the iPad.

In 2015, Dunn negotiated a deal with HBO, which covers the cost of producing the show for the next five years. Why did the cable giant best known for racy and violent entertainment want a wholesome kids' show most people can get for free? In no small measure because Netflix and Amazon Prime have kids' shows and HBO craves parents. "Programming that parents can trust has never been more important," says Lisa Heller, HBO's senior vice president of family and documentary programming. The arrangement, for an estimated \$20 million-plus a year, gives HBO exclusive rights to new episodes for nine months. After that, PBS can air the show as it has done for almost half a century. Since most sub-5-year-olds don't have much of a grasp of novelty, the Sesame executives guessed the change would not cannibalize their PBS audience.

So far the gamble appears to have paid off. Ratings for the show were 12% higher on PBS in 2016 than in 2015. And the HBO show is drawing a third more viewers this season than last. So the TV show, for now, seems safe. "What we hope is that quality rises to the top," says COO Youngwood. "The HBO deal gives us five years to reinvent ourselves."

As for changing the world, that might take a little longer. But it's hard to completely dismiss the power of an operation that has outlived most TV shows simply by sticking by its principles. And its puppets. □

While the organization tries to change the landscape overseas, the domestic terrain is shifting under its feet. Very few children watch *Sesame Street* the way their parents did, by sitting down in front of the TV at a given time to watch an hour-long *Saturday Night Live*-meets-Dr. Seuss mashup of celebrity appearances, pop-culture spoofs and the letter p. Nor do their parents buy episodes on DVD. They can just bring up whatever clip they want on the Internet. "The rules have changed so much," says Sesame Workshop CEO Jeff Dunn. "Kids have changed so much. The funding models have changed so much."

And that shift has been fast. In the last quarter of 2015, kids ages 2 to 11 watched about 11 hours of Internet video a month, according to Nielsen. By the end of 2016, that had jumped to 15 hours, an increase of 36% in one year. Meanwhile, time spent watching TV, either in real time or on demand, dropped 10% over the same period, to 90 hours a month. Ratings for Disney and Nickelodeon have been on a steady decline since 2012, even as the number of kids younger than 11 in the U.S. has held at about 48 million.

In response to these changes, Sesame Workshop cut its broadcast back to half an hour and in 2016 started a nimbler studio that makes only videos for the web. But its offerings are a little like kale on a buffet table groaning with eyeball candy. Kids have more tempting options. Since March 19, for example, a clip of Julia playing with Elmo has garnered more than half a million views on YouTube. That sounds respectable until compared with other kid-centric channels, like Ryan's ToysReview, where a clip of a

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JEFF DUNN,
Sesame
Workshop CEO