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LONDON SYMPOSIUM BRIEFING



UNIVERSITY OF
WESTMINSTER



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



14 September
2018

**Invisible Children: Children's Media, Diversity
and Forced Migration**

Symposium at King's College London, Anatomy Museum, Strand

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Symposium that forms the subject of this briefing was the last event in a year-long project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) under the title 'Children's Screen Media in an Era of Forced Migration: Facilitating Arab-European Dialogue'.

The project, part of the AHRC's Follow-on Funding for Impact and Engagement, was intended to engage stakeholders in the field of children's screen media in discussions about representations of and for children from non-European backgrounds, including Arab countries such as Syria and Iraq, who have recently arrived in Europe through forced migration. Dialogues took place through three workshops, in Manchester, Copenhagen and Munich; they have been recorded in a briefing report for each one¹ and summarised in the *Project Report to Stakeholders*, mentioned below.

The one-day end-of-project Symposium, also intended to promote dialogue, followed a different format from the workshops. Whereas participants in the latter all watched and discussed clips from relevant screen content selected by the project leaders, the Symposium consisted of five panels, involving a total of 24 panelists and five chairs. The first was an introductory session, at which the project team reviewed the workshops and their outcomes and presented the *Project Report to Stakeholders* summarising the workshop discussions.

Panelists on Session 2, representing broadcasters, diversity consultants and advocates for quality in children's television, assessed advances and setbacks in representations of diversity in children's content in the UK, Europe and further afield. In Session 3, early career scholars of Arab heritage presented findings about media treatments of flight, trauma, asylum and immigrant communities, as well as education initiatives for refugee children. This was followed by a session in which producers and commissioning editors analysed the processes and challenges behind commissioning, producing and distributing screen content that adequately reflects demographic changes. In the final session, entitled 'Next Steps', panelists identified regional and global events and exchanges that could contribute to sustaining conversations about diversity in children's media beyond the end of the project.

This briefing provides an overview of topics that emerged during the five sessions. As such it also forms part of a consolidated report, entitled [Children's Screen Content in an Era of Forced Migration](#), which brings together all five publications produced as a result of the project.

2. REACHING CHILD AUDIENCES

Among the themes that emerged from the symposium discussions was the question of how content producers can reach child audiences most effectively with content that fairly and accurately represents increasingly diverse societies in Europe and elsewhere, given current changes in the screening of children's content on different media platforms. This question remains a priority for future encounters around production of children's screen content.

2.1 Children's channels moving online

The symposium heard that children's programming on linear television is in decline across the world, with more and more TV channels for children moving to streaming content online. It was noted, for example that France 4, a French channel dedicated to children's programming, will stream all content online after it ceases broadcasting

¹ Links to the individual briefings are given on the Acknowledgements page at the end of this document.

in 2020. DR Ultra, the Danish public broadcaster dedicated to children aged 7-12, will also be converted into a web channel by 2020.²

Some producers welcomed this shift. In Belgium, half the target audience for VRT's teenage reality drama series *4eVeR* already watch the show online. A commissioning editor at DR Ultra said his channel's move to online streaming will allow content to be better tailored to young audiences and so compete with commercial platforms. Given teenagers' attraction to fictional content, DR Ultra seeks to attract a wide youth audience through short drama series that are streamed online. The editor said:

For us it [online distribution] was a really good thing because it meant that we had to signal to all the users in all the chains of development and producing that we [...] need to structure our programmes differently.

One challenge facing public service broadcasters' online platforms is strong competition from well-funded globally operating Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD) channels, including Netflix and Amazon Prime. However, an academic participant suggested that the current expansion of SVOD platforms amounts to a 'bubble', which can ultimately benefit public service channels if the latter learn from the SVOD providers' production and distribution strategies.

In one example of a public service channel tapping into the opportunities offered by online distribution, an editor of the ZDF documentary drama series *Berlin and Us* explained that the programme's website provided clips, a blog, and a live chat through which viewers could connect with the protagonists and ask questions. She revealed that the show was 'binge-watched' online by much of the target audience. The show's non-scripted approach translated to open-ended narratives for each episode, which in turn encouraged audiences to watch all eight episodes online in one sitting.

Several participants cited evidence showing the extent to which children are consuming content online. In the UK 52 per cent of children aged 8-11 in the UK have their own tablet and access news online.³ Panelists in Session 2 said children with minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to have mobile devices, and that social media provide opportunities for disseminating alternative narratives to those created by mainstream media. A BBC commissioning editor reported that children go online in search of authentic representations and that children have been found to repeat-watch episodes from the BBC series *My Life*, which follows children from a variety of different social and ethnic backgrounds.

2.2 Disconnect between displaced children and public service media

The symposium offered no easy answers to whether the move online will make content reflecting diversity more visible to young refugee and migrant children. First, studies show that representations of diversity are limited in children's screen content. The International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) in Munich analysed more than 1,500 hours of television across 24 countries in 2007 and followed up in 2017 with a repeat study of eight of these countries, which found that, 'despite advocacy, research and education

² <https://digitaltv.dr-ultra-kun-streaming-2020/>

³ Ofcom, *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*, 2017, pp 2-3.

about the importance of equality in gender and racial representation, children's TV, which is mainly dominated by men, continues to present white boys as "the normality" and girls as "the other".⁴

Secondly, it is not clear how much public service media content actually reaches young people with migration backgrounds. One media expert asked:

Marginalised people are marginalised partly because they are not engaged with public service programmes. So to what extent are you [producers] making these programmes in the hope of including an audience that appreciates and gets value from them as well as educating your broader audience?

The response to this was largely anecdotal. Although it is difficult to get statistical data because of the obstacles to conducting audience research with marginalised groups, including recently displaced children, some producers spoke of interactions that had taken place with audience members during the course of filming. The Flemish producers of *4eVeR* recalled that, when shooting scenes on the streets, they had been approached by Arab boys who told them they liked their show. A similar experience was recounted for the UK preschool drama *Apple Tree House*, filmed on a housing estate in east London. On one occasion mothers of Bangladeshi origin had surrounded an actor of Asian background who plays a headscarf-wearing grandmother in the show and told her that they regularly watch *Apple Tree House* as a family. The programme maker suggested language would be an obstacle to conventional audience research because the women who spoke to the actor 'would be talking on social media but almost certainly not in English'. An executive producer with the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) spoke of the positive responses she had witnessed from children watching EBU dramas during screenings in an ethnically diverse area of London. She said it was a 'magical experience' for children to see others like themselves 'in the country that maybe they or their parents have come from'.

2.3 Displaced children and online learning

George Alain of the Open University introduced his doctoral research at the symposium, aimed at designing educational mobile phone apps for displaced Syrian children living in refugee camps in Greece. Since the majority of these children have not been in formal education for a long time, digital technologies offer a route to improving literacy and mitigating the language barriers Syrian children face if they attend Greek schools. Alain stressed that the process of designing a mobile phone app to achieve these goals should start with a 'bottom-up' approach that involves children themselves as well as social workers and teachers.

When it was mentioned that many apps targeting refugee children have been designed already but have not been taken up, Alain blamed previous developers' failure to take refugee children's wider social circumstances and needs into account. He advised researchers to start by establishing children's interests and sensitivities and to proceed with this knowledge in mind.

3. REPRESENTING HARDSHIP

3.1 Trauma from different perspectives

Ethical questions about depicting the painful experiences of displaced children came up in the symposium as they had in the workshops. Sophie Chalk of the International Broadcasting Trust (IBT) noted that one in three UK

⁴ Maya Götz et al, 'Whose story is being told?', *TeleviZion*, 31/2018/E, p 65.

children aged 9-16 worries [about conflict in the world](#). As the number of refugees seeking safety in Europe rose, mainstream media covered the situation incessantly, often without explaining the issues in ways appropriate for children. If children are to approach the world with an open mind rather than fear, she said, they urgently need screen content that enhances understanding of diverse cultures and traditions.

The symposium's panel presentations explored a variety of approaches to representing the experiences of displaced children. A researcher who has followed the making of television for Palestinian children warned against overuse of the term trauma. She said non-governmental organisations and Western journalists have often described Palestinian children affected by violent conflict with Israel as 'traumatised', thereby shifting the focus from what is in essence a political conflict about land rights to a matter of psychology. She said:

I feel in the Palestinian case children are looked at only through trauma discourse. So there's no other way of looking at Palestinian children – [as if] the only thing they are is traumatised. They're not looked at as having a childhood [...]. Actually they do have a childhood, just not the kind of childhood that we're used to.

Alain added that some teachers in Greece needed encouragement to treat refugee children there like any other child and not to position them as different from Greek children. The teachers were saying they did not know how to deal with Syrian refugee children. They said 'we know they are very traumatised so we are afraid to tell them you have done something wrong'.

In 2005 the BBC aired a documentary called *Asylum*, following four families for two years through the prolonged and tortuous asylum process in the UK. A member of one of the families, who was eight years old at the time of flight from Algeria, spoke from personal experience of her concern that refugees' stories could be silenced if media workers are afraid to ask searching questions. She said:

These children have already been traumatised; they want to talk about things and they want to unbury so much, but people who have not gone through the same [experience] are not ready to [...] put in the work to [...] help people to adapt.

She suggested that agreement is lacking on what constitutes trauma. A child psychologist based at Harvard University also argued that 'trauma' varies according to place and time and that researchers and producers ought to 'trust the children' on a case-by-case basis about whether they are ready to share their story at all, and if so, on camera. A German researcher advised distinguishing between trauma, a condition which calls for a professional response, and a 'traumatic experience', which is something sufferers re-live over and over again.

3.2 'Children are interested in children's lives'

Producers and editors shared some of the strategies they have adopted to promote children's content dealing with serious factual topics. The approach behind German public broadcaster ZDF's *Berlin and Us*, a series that follows eight teenagers, half from refugee backgrounds and half born in Germany, was to focus on friendships, conversations, and fun activities that are interesting to young audiences aged nine and up. In the case of Danish public broadcaster DR Ultra's web series about an 11-year-old Danish Muslim boy called Hassan, who wants

to try fasting during Ramadan even though he is officially too young, the subject of Ramadan was treated as incidental. A DR Ultra editor explained:

By making the selling point a universal child's perspective that is fascinating for all children, we had a lot of children select these clips because they're interested in children's lives, and then they got a perspective on Ramadan. We don't sell it as "Hassan has to go hungry all day". They would never have chosen it if we had tried to sell it as a show about Ramadan, which it wasn't. It was about a guy like them playing football and trying Ramadan.

A UK producer highlighted the wealth of material that can be educational and entertaining for children, saying:

As programme makers moving forward, we have to consider a refocusing of what children's media means to our families and to our children. [...] by looking away from the glitzy homogenized Hollywood view of what media is and looking at real stories that matter to us, we can find the real stories that existing around the world can be just as entertaining as Hollywood.

3.3 Histories of conflict and forced migration

Noting a mainstream media tendency to treat the levels of forced migration in 2015-16 as a new phenomenon, an academic with Arab background asked media practitioners at the symposium whether they had ever reflected on other migration stories from the past 50 years. In fact, as was pointed out in response, an episode of the German pre-school programme *Die Sendung mit der Maus* (The Show with the Mouse), which had been devoted to the subject of refugees, had implicitly alluded to mass population movements caused by previous wars because it ended with the presenter encouraging child viewers to ask their parents and grandparents where they are from.⁵ A UK children's content producer agreed that people everywhere 'have some great stories to tell and explain why we're here now'.

Historical particularities of forced migration were highlighted in a panel contribution showing how the concepts of 'home' and *awda* (return) mean very different things to first generation refugees from Palestine than to their children and grandchildren. For children who have been born in refugee camps, the camps represent home and 'the idea of the literal return seems to be slipping away'. For their parents, however, returning home has both physical and symbolic meanings. A puppet show clip from a 2014 episode of the Palestinian children's TV magazine programme *Bait Byoot* illustrated these changing meanings of home and return. In it a Palestinian grandmother tells her grandson how beautiful life in Palestine once was and that he needs to keep passing down the story of flight to his children and grandchildren.

A children's television producer based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) urged Europeans to improve their knowledge about Arab history, societies and cultures and challenge the stereotypical representations the region has been subject to in much mainstream European media over the last half century.

⁵ See *Munich Workshop Briefing*, p 8.

4. CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

Like the workshops, the symposium revealed how much scope exists for involving children in producing content.

4.1 Children as producers

Alain showed how his research had demonstrated ways in which displaced children and children of the host community can take an active part in designing educational tools. His research team developed a mobile phone app with the participation of children living in refugee camps in Greece, as well as their parents and teachers. Through their involvement the team was able to identify both children's media preferences and the social challenges they are facing. Greek children and their teachers also wanted to engage with the refugee children's culture, while Syrian children wanted an app that was both culturally and linguistically relevant. Alain said:

They want to see things from their own culture, things that are related to them, to their mother tongue, and developed within a participatory manner, with teachers, with parents, with children from the early stages.

The Dutch documentary filmmaker Mirjam Marks has worked on several participatory filmmaking initiatives with refugee children in the Netherlands. One initiative produced *The One Minutes Junior* films⁶, made in collaboration with Cinekid, The One Minute Foundation, and [Vrolijkheid](#), a Dutch foundation running creative workshops with children and teenagers in centres for asylum seekers. Children in the centres, helped by filmmakers and artists, made 60-second videos on a topic of their choice. These films were distributed on YouTube and at the Cinekid festival, attended by children who had made them.

At the symposium Marks introduced her current project, *Zara and the Magic Football Boots*, a six-episode drama for national broadcaster VPRO, made in collaboration with Cinekid and Vrolijkheid, scripted by well-known Dutch writers and set in asylum-seeker centers. Marks showed a clip of the first episode, about a girl who wants to be part of a soccer team. It was made with refugee children who took on supporting roles and created animation sequences in the film. The serial was scheduled to premiere at Cinekid 2018, watched by all the refugee children, before being screened on Dutch national TV.

4.2 Children as presenters

The Jordanian television producer Sharif al-Zoubi introduced a pitch for a television show he has been commissioned to produce for Jordan's Roya TV, in which local children, including refugees, get a chance to contribute as presenters and reporters. Jordan has accommodated millions of refugees over a long period but little has been done to meet refugee children's media needs on local television.⁷ Al-Zoubi told the symposium that he plans a live show which, besides an adult presenter, will feature seven children becoming presenters and reporters, with some activities taking place in refugee camps. The aim is for children to voice their opinions and aspirations for the future.

⁶ See Copenhagen Workshop Briefing, pp 5 and 11.

⁷ See UNESCO, *Assessment of Media Development in Jordan*, Paris: 2015, p 130

4.3 Children as actors

There have also been initiatives to integrate migrant children as the protagonists in children's programmes, but these can face challenges. The symposium learned that the team behind *Berlin and Us* had worked hard to approach schools, social workers and institutions to find teenagers who recently fled to Germany. They found it especially challenging to recruit girls, whose parents were worried about possible lack of supervision, and it took time to build up trust with refugee families.

Although the producers prompted the teenagers in *Berlin and Us* with ideas about activities they could do together, the show is not scripted and the characters acted naturally on camera. Commissioning editor Margrit Lensen recalled that, during the filming process, the group of teenagers grew as a team, developing friendships and tolerance for each other. She said: 'We think all of them could be good role models for the audience watching them. And their relationships show that it's much more rewarding to approach one another with curiosity than with prejudice'. She added that refugee children among the viewership shared their responses and own personal stories on the programme's blog, providing feedback that was taken into account in subsequent seasons of the show.

Challenges in casting children from minority communities were also recounted by the makers of the Belgian reality drama series *4eVeR*. They saw about 400 children during auditions, of whom 1 per cent were Muslim. They eventually used a specialized casting agency to find a teenage actor with a Muslim background to feature as one of the main characters. Rather than making immigration or diversity the main focus of the series, the producers chose to challenge stereotypes by portraying the daily life of a Muslim family firmly integrated into Flemish society – an approach that attracted a large audience. As one of the producers said:

We try a different approach. It's just a show, we are not playing the immigration card only but focus on similarities instead of difference. We are convinced that we can reach a lot more kids by using this method and because we reached already almost 100,000 children in our target market, we think it works.

4.4 Children as advisors

A commissioning editor for children's programmes at DR was asked how his team involved children in programme making: at what stage did they come in and what remit were they given? His answer was to take the involvement seriously from the start and allocate resources for the process. That means, for example, sharing the first draft of a script with junior editors, who are children within the channel's target group. He said:

It's such a cliché, but it's to stay very humble about what you know and what you don't know. We are really good at producing TV and making it entertaining, but we are really not good at understanding how a child thinks, because every five minutes their references to how they talk and walk changes. Basically it's a new generation every five years and I can only be an expert on how my own life was as a child.

5. CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

The final session of the symposium highlighted the importance of future research and dialogue around the issues raised during the project.

5.1 Discovering what children value

A leading UK specialist in research on children and culture introduced the last session by pointing out that policy-makers and media funders ought to understand that today's child audience is tomorrow's adult audience. Unless they reach child audiences today, they risk not having an adult audience in future. She added that evidence from audience research with children is essential to making a case for the importance of high-quality children's programming to policy-makers.

Another academic noted that the UK regulator Ofcom is good at finding out how children access screen content but provides less information about what shows children watch and what they value. Meanwhile, the findings Ofcom releases about children's use of devices other than the television set are often misreported by the UK press as showing that children 'are not watching TV any more'. In fact, as testified by symposium participants, they are still watching plenty of screen content, on different delivery platforms.

Sometimes research about children's interpretations of what they watch can be important at politically sensitive moments. According to Maya Götz, this is what happened in Germany in January 2018, when a politician of the German right-wing party AfD attracted support on social media after accusing a documentary on a German public service channel about a romance between a 16-year-old German and a 19-year-old refugee of 'pushing' German-born girls into 'the arms of refugees'. Götz told the symposium that IZI's research showed 'no, it's exactly the other way around. After watching it, they know the difference, and they don't want to get involved [in this way] with different cultures'. She said: 'There are some moments when you need exactly this kind of research to show the children's perspective, to bring their voice in'.

5.2 Getting data from commercial services

Many participants wanted a more open media environment in which data on young audiences are made freely available. Commercial broadcasters and SVOD channels are currently not obliged to share their market research. A children's media advocate suggested that licence renewal for commercial channels could be made conditional on those channels publishing their research. Another, recalling how Internet safety for children had moved from a marginal to a central policy concern in just five years, suggested there could be a campaign to bring about legislative change in the European Union that would make audience research freely available by law. The situation in television was contrasted with the film industry, where information about audiences is widely available, giving filmmakers the opportunity to refine future film projects.

While European producers worry about lack of audience data from online platforms, information about audiences in the Middle East has always been scarce and unreliable. However, a producer from the UAE saw opportunities for local companies to join forces with global corporations, such as Netflix, to secure funding. Worried that children's content will increasingly be dictated by media moguls, she argued: 'If we can't beat them, we need to join them and find out what they're up to, so that maybe we can pitch something that would actually make the difference for our part of the world because at the moment we're too small to make any difference'.

5.3 Gaining global reach

One suggestion from the final panel was that the kind of content exchanges fostered within the EBU could be extended globally. An EBU executive producer noted that the children's dramas and documentaries made for exchange among EBU members travel easily because they have so little dialogue. She suggested collaboration with a global agency, such as UNICEF, which is based in Geneva like the EBU, to widen the exchange framework and extend screenings to many more countries through events such as children's film festivals.

This suggestion was endorsed by Sally-Ann Wilson, CEO of the Public Media Alliance (PMA), the largest global association of public service broadcasters, with members in 54 countries. She recalled the success of previous global exchanges. One, which produced 12 short films between 2005 and 2010 under the title *What Makes Me Happy*, was initiated by the Ragdoll Foundation and supported by Save the Children, Oxfam and UNICEF. It featured children in Nepal, Vietnam, China, Colombia, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, South Sudan, Uganda and a refugee camp in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.⁸ Before that there was the acclaimed series *Open a Door*, also promoted by Ragdoll founder Anne Wood, in which broadcasters from 34 countries were recruited to produce a 5-minute story without words from a young child's point of view.⁹

Speaking for the PMA, Wilson told the symposium that 'children's content is absolutely at the heart of what we do'. She expressed concern that children's programming is coming off mainstream broadcast schedules, without being replaced on multiplatform channels 'as effectively as we would hope it would be' and warned that the crisis in securing funding for children's content was likely to worsen in future. She cited examples of good practice across the globe but noted that content produced in this way often found no outlet other than YouTube.

5.4 Future events and action

The biggest future event presented at the symposium was the May 2021 World Summit on Media for Children in Dublin. This is one of a series that started in Australia in 1995 and has been held every three or four years since then, in Greece, Brazil, South Africa, Sweden, Malaysia and twice in the UK, most recently in Manchester, hosted by the BBC in December 2017. Marion Creely, ambassador for the forthcoming Dublin summit, said it would focus on creativity and storytelling and will be preceded by pre-summit gatherings in São Paulo, Johannesburg, Mumbai and, possibly, Dubai.

However, in the view of one participant, the biggest need was to find the levers of power. He said:

We know what to do, what the problems are. Where are the levers of power to affect them? If the idea is that research is going to influence government – maybe that's possible in the UK because of Ofcom, but not elsewhere. In most of the world government knows a lot and couldn't care less. The issue is creating new institutions, not motivating existing ones. It's to use the opportunity that online distribution offers to create new institutions and make content available.

⁸ See <http://www.ragdollfoundation.org.uk/portfolio/what-makes-me-happy>. The British Council makes the films available as a classroom resource at <https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/classroom-resources/what-makes-me-happy>

⁹ For a sample of episodes last shown on CBeebies in May 2007 see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007qll1/broadcasts/2007/05>



This briefing summarises the proceedings of the Symposium held at Kings College London on 14 September 2018 to round of a one-year project to stimulate dialogue between European and Arab stakeholders around European screen content for and about young children of Arab heritage who are living in Europe through forced migration. The project also included three workshops in different locations (Manchester, Copenhagen and Munich) under the same title, 'Children's Screen Content in an Era of Forced Migration: Facilitating Euro-Arab Dialogue'. Reports on the workshops are available online as [Manchester Workshop Briefing: Children's Screen Content in an Era of Forced Migration: Facilitating Arab-European Dialogue](#); [Copenhagen Workshop Briefing: Children's Screen Content in an Era of Forced Migration: Facilitating Arab-European Dialogue – Documentaries, Distribution, Ethics](#), and [Munich Workshop Briefing: Children's Screen Content in an Era of Forced Migration: Facilitating Arab European Dialogue – Drama, Storytelling, Empathy. A Project Report to Stakeholders](#), summarising recommendations from the workshops, was presented to the Symposium on 14 September and is also available online.

For more details see the project website at www.euroarabchildrensmedia.org or contact Professor Jeanette Steemers at Kings College London (jeanette.steemers@kcl.ac.uk).

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The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funds world-class, independent researchers in a wide range of subjects: ancient history, modern dance, archaeology, digital content, philosophy, English literature, design, the creative and performing arts, and much more. This financial year the AHRC will spend approximately £98m to fund research and postgraduate training in collaboration with a number of partners. The quality and range of research supported by this investment of public funds not only provides social and cultural benefits but also contributes to the economic success of the UK. For further information on the AHRC, please go to: www.ahrc.ac.uk

We would also like to thank and acknowledge the support of our project partners. We thank BBC Children's, for hosting the Salford Workshop on 4th December and for providing advice and support. We thank the Danish Film Institute for hosting the Copenhagen Workshops on 19 and 20 March, and CPH: Dox for providing access to festival films. We also gratefully thank the Prix Jeunesse and International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) for arranging to host the Munich workshop on the premises of Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR) on 24 May and for providing advice as well as access to films and contacts with producers. Finally, we thank our project partners BBC Media Action and the Public Media Alliance for offering guidance and support.