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MANCHESTER WORKSHOP BRIEFING

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4 December
2017

**Children's Screen Content in an Era of Forced
Migration: Facilitating Arab-European Dialogue**

Children's Global Media Summit, Pre-Summit Workshop

BBC Media City, Salford Quays

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1 SCREEN CONTENT FOR AND ABOUT REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN IN THE UK: AN OVERVIEW

Refugee children comprise just a small segment of the UK child audience. According to statistics from the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, the UK gave asylum or other protection to 28,000 children in the seven years to February 2017. But fair and accurate media representation of displaced children surely constitutes a key step towards helping them learn a new language and feel at home in a new country. According to a [UNHCR report](#) in 2017, integration of Syrian refugees under the UK's Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme was proceeding well but there was room for improvement in English language provision.¹ Appropriate media content can serve not only those children caught up in forced migration. It is also an important way of communicating with UK-born children who have watched them arrive, at a time when children are becoming more fearful about the world around them. The NSPCC added a new webpage to its Childline service in 2016, called '[Worries About the World](#)', in response to the increasing number of children turning to Childline with anxiety about disturbing events seen in the news and on social media.

Children are ill-equipped to put news in perspective and, when it comes to violence in the Middle East, even adults confess to lacking knowledge of background and context, despite headlines and pictures in mainstream media. The Council for Arab-British Understanding conducted a poll in 2017, in which 81 per cent of respondents said they knew little or nothing about the Arab world. The personal stories of young children caught up in forced migration have remained largely absent from dominant media representations, except when it is too late, as demonstrated by pictures of the body of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, washed ashore on a Turkish beach in 2015. In a study of smartphone and digital media use by refugees, Marie Gillespie and her co-authors noted that, despite the high level of media reporting *about* refugees, provision of news and information *for and by* refugees is inadequate. Her study worked with Syrians who were well-educated and digitally literate but could not tell what mediated sources of information to trust.²

1.1 How much material is there and who makes it?

This workshop briefing is part of a project about representation of refugee and migrant children in European programming. Hosted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the workshop was a chance to see how different child voices are represented in English-language content, including shows produced for the UK. The majority of programmes for children that deal with diversity in the UK, including the lives of refugee children, are commissioned and screened by the BBC for its linear children's channels, CBBC (for viewers aged 6-12 years) and CBeebies (0-6 years), but are also available on demand on the BBC iPlayer.

As a public service broadcaster, the BBC has a mandate to produce material for marginalised and minority groups. In fact it is virtually the only commissioner of UK-originated children's content, including drama and factual programming, let alone children's content that depicts ethnic or social diversity or topics such as migration. With most children's schedules dominated by entertainment and animation shows, any TV programme made about refugee or migrant children, or even simply children from a diverse background, is usually a documentary.

¹ UNHCR, *Towards Integration: The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme in the UK*, 2017, pp 20-21

² Marie Gillespie, Lawrence Ampofo, Margaret Cheesman et al, *Mapping Syrian Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks*, The Open University and France Médias Monde, May 2016, p 5.

Virtually all examples of relevant content we found for our workshop were documentaries. Exceptions were *Apple Tree House*, a rare live action drama series for pre-schoolers on CBeebies, and two animation imports: the US series, *Arthur*, and the Canadian series, *Mixed Nutz*. Section 6 of this briefing shows that live action drama is a rarity because it is difficult to fund and sell internationally, and because of practical issues such as the time and effort involved in casting, especially recruiting child and adult actors from minority backgrounds. So *Apple Tree House* is rare in terms of both its genre and the work that went into producing it. It is also unusual in that, whereas most shows in our sample were made by people who had not themselves experienced forced migration or discrimination, and UK broadcasters were shown once again in 2017 to be under-performing in respect of ethnic diversity and social mobility,³ the writers of *Apple Tree House* based it partly on their own experiences of growing up in an inner-city environment.

Our overall project aims to assess the range of representation for children aged under 12, as most relevant content that does exist for children is primarily for teenagers. We based our sample selection on different target audiences, in line with broadcasters' own assumptions about who is watching their shows.

1.2 Pre-school content (0-6 years)

<u>Apple Tree House</u> (2017)	
Production Details	Synopsis - Series 1: Episode 2 – <u>'First Days'</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commissioner: CBeebies • Producer: Gregory Boardman and Eugenio Perez; Three Stones Media • Company: Five Apples Ltd. • Episodes: 60 X 15' (2 series) • Format: Drama with animation sequences • Creators: William Vanderpuye, Maria Timotheou, Akindele Akinsiku. 	 <p>The series follows Mali, who has just moved to the Apple Tree council estate and makes a new best friend called Sam. The friends go on adventures, solving daily problems and overcoming childhood dilemmas in a 'very contemporary inner-city world', which could be 'any city in the UK'.</p> <p>The series plays as a mainstream idea that reflects both the diversity of characters that you might find in the inner city, but also 'a diversity of storytelling' giving opportunities to reflect the writers' own life experiences e.g. experiencing Ramadan, or explaining what children have seen on the news (e.g. a story about refugees).</p> <p>A prominent show, <i>Apple Tree House</i> is a part of <u>BBC efforts</u> to offer a 'more authentic' view of children's lives from diverse backgrounds.</p>

<u>Where in the World: Hamza</u> (2017)	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commissioner: CBeebies • Producer: Dominic Sant • Company: Evans Woolfe • Episodes: 20 X 15' (1 series) • Format: Documentary 	<p><u>Where in the World?</u> is an international preschool documentary series that aired in June 2017. It follows eight children in eight countries in their daily lives. Producer Dominic Sant said: 'It's just really trying to capture what they do and where they go. One of the key drivers for us was the sense that a lot of what children see is obviously the news and aid campaigns. That's all great, but the kind of wider missing context was normal children living ordinary lives, just getting on with it. So we thought it'd be really good to go and film children with their families doing things, going to school, playing with friends and hopefully we achieved quite a lot. You know, it made me very aware of how fearful we all are of each other. Just trying to get into some countries was almost impossible, but we got there ... We tried not to put on an Anglicised view of the world onto this child we were filming with'.</p>

³ Ofcom, *Diversity and Equal Opportunities in Television*, September 2017, pp 7, 26, 28

1.3 Primary school content (6-12 years)

<u>My Life: New Boys in Town</u> (2017)	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commissioner: CBBC • Producer: Rachel Drummond-Hay and Tamsin Summers • Company: Drummer TV • Episode: Aired 4 March 2017 • Format: Documentary 	<p><u>My Life</u> is a documentary series commissioned by CBBC which follows the lives of individual children across the world</p> <p>In <i>New Boys in Town</i> 12-year-old Adel, a Syrian refugee recently settled in the UK, embarks on a mission with his friend Elijah to welcome new refugees in his hometown of Bristol. One of them is Ahmad who is spending his first summer in the UK. The film follows Ahmad, Adel and Elijah at the Bristol Bike Project where Ahmad is given a bike to fix up before the three of them head off to enjoy a cycle ride around the city, which marks a poignant moment for Ahmad, who has barely ventured out of his flat other than to the supermarket.</p> <p>Drummer TV also produced the BAFTA winning short documentary <i>The Boy on the Bicycle</i>, set in a refugee camp in Jordan/Lebanon and also part of the series. According to <u>Kez Margrie</u>, CBBC Executive producer, the series represents 'a treasure trove of different directing styles'.</p>

<u>My Life: Coming to Britain</u> (2015)	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commissioner: CBBC • Producer: Ameer Fairbank • Company: Lizardfish, Manchester • Format: Documentary 	<p>Part of the <u>My Life</u> Series, <i>My Life: Coming to Britain</i> follows the lives of two girls from Sudan and a boy from Romania as they try to settle into their new lives in the UK. Rania's and Marwa's story shows them embarking on a new journey of making friends, learning English and getting used to the weather. The film shows the girls embracing all things British, from fish and chips to having their first birthday party in the UK.</p>

<u>Arthur</u> (1996-2017)	
Production Details	Synopsis - Series 14, Episode 25: <u>'In my Africa'</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commissioner: PBS (US) • Producer: Cookie Jar Group (Canada) • Episodes: Aired on CBBC • Format: Animation 	<p>Set in the fictional American location of Elwood City, <i>Arthur</i> revolves around the lives of 8-year-old Arthur Read, his sister DW, and their friends and family. The show has educational goals connected to literacy, problem-solving and social goals linked to friendship, diversity and family. In this episode, Sheik moves from Senegal to Elwood City and joins DW's class. She presents him with a picture she has drawn of a hippo bus to swim to school and a volcano. He replies: 'I've never seen a lion in my life. Where did you learn this nonsense?', explaining that he comes from a big city. The teacher responds: 'DW I'm sure you meant well, but you should learn about a place before you describe it'. DW subsequently studies maps and books about Africa, determined to learn about the continent.</p>

1.4 "Tweens" (8-10 years)

<u>Mixed Nutz (2008)</u>	
Production Details	Synopsis - Episode 1 - <u>'School's in Session'</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commissioner: Shaw Television and PBS (US) Producer: Big Bad Boo Studios (Canada) Episodes: 13 X 30' Format: 2D Animation 	<p><i>Mixed Nutz</i> endeavours to promote diversity and tolerance by celebrating cultural difference. The main characters in <i>Mixed Nutz</i>, all of whom are 9 years old, are Babak from Iran, Sanjay from India, Adele from Austria, Damaris from Cuba and Jae from Korea. We showed a clip from Episode 1 where new boy, Sanjay, originally from India, joins the class and introduces himself to his new classmates using jokes and humour, but not all of them understand him. In the following sequence, Damaris, whose parents moved to the US from Cuba, introduces herself to the class, but is shy to speak in front everyone.</p>

1.5 Secondary school (11-16)

<u>Refugee (2016)</u>	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commissioner: TrueTube.co.uk Producer: CTVC (UK) Episodes: 1 X 11' (2016) Format: Live action drama Target audience: secondary schools 	<p>The film is presented as follows: 'If you were forced to leave your home and could only take one bag, what would you take? What would it feel like to be on the run from your own country, in the hope of finding a safe place somewhere else? In this short drama, we meet a young girl and her family in an unknown land and discover how they came to be there, far away from home.'</p> <p>In 2016, <i>Refugee</i> became the first online film ever to win the Children's BAFTA for Drama. The judges praised the use of the reverse timeline to tell the story as a slow reveal and the use of an ordinary setting relatable to the target audience.</p>

1.6 Family viewing

<u>Educating Greater Manchester (2017)</u>	
Production Details	Synopsis - Various clips featuring Rani, a Syrian refugee
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commissioner: Channel 4 Producer: Twofour Group (UK) Episodes: 8 X 47' (2017) Format: Fly on the Wall documentary Target audience: family, but post 9pm watershed 	<p>Set at Harrop Fold, a secondary school in Salford, the episode focuses on 11-year-old Rani who recently moved to the UK from Syria and is struggling to settle in.</p> <p>Clip 1: Rani meets with the student counsellor and discloses to her that he is being bullied by another (British) student.</p> <p>Clip 2: Rani's teacher sets up a meeting between Rani and Murad, a 16-year-old student who also fled from Syria. Her aim is to provide Rani with a buddy he can talk to. After the meeting, Murad is interviewed about his flight from Syria (via a boat) and his missing father.</p> <p>Clip 3: Coverage of Rani and Jack's story on <u>This Morning</u> (ITV), 31 August 2017. Rani and Jack sit next to each other on the couch and are interviewed by the presenters about how their friendship developed.</p>

<u>The Big Family Cooking Showdown (2017)</u>	
Production Details	Synopsis – Series 1, Episode 5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commissioner: BBC2, 8pm Producer: BBC, UK Episodes: 12 X 59' (2017-18) Format: Reality game show Target audience: family 	<p>This competitive food show celebrates families who cook together. We showed a clip from Episode 5 (aired on 14 September 2017), featuring the Ayoubi family, long-settled migrants, who moved to the UK from Syria 25 years ago. The clip reveals diversity inside the family, with one daughter, a construction engineer, wearing hijab and the other not.</p>

2. REPRESENTATIONS OF REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN ON UK TELEVISION

2.1 Victimisation and ‘othering’

Workshop discussions suggested that migrant and refugee children are (sometimes unintentionally) represented as lost and ‘othered’ children, who are victims, passive and do not have a ‘proper’ (i.e. European) childhood. This was common in films about children’s lives in the camps and extended to their representation in European productions. The experiences of refugee children are sometimes depicted in sensationalist ways, including in shows aimed at a general audience such as *Educating Greater Manchester* and in interviews on breakfast TV, *This Morning* (ITV). Here, refugee children were shown as requiring the help of (European) adults and children, as grieving and sad. Constructions of victimhood can unintentionally become entwined with prejudice, as when a refugee child (‘the other’) is shown accusing a British child (‘one of ours’) of bullying. However, workshop participants noted that other episodes of *Educating Greater Manchester* showed Rani integrated into a mixed friendship group and ‘mucking around’ (see below).

Responses to clips about Rani from Channel 4 and ITV

Participants noticed the continual one-way direction of interactions with British children in *Educating Greater Manchester* and particularly in the *This Morning* interview, where the local boy, Jack, was held up to be enterprising and kind, the sort of child who was ‘going to go far in life’. In contrast, the exchanges with the Syrian boy, Rani, appeared awkward and stilted, as if, according to one comment, the presenter ‘does not know what to do’. A Syrian participant saw a ‘one-sided speech’ about ‘grief and victimisation’, which reinforced assumptions about ‘this begging mentality’. Sad accompanying music reinforced the sense of victimhood. According to one US participant, herself a migrant to the US:

‘It’s very rare that we see refugee children doing something that would be teaching the host children to do something, whether it’s as simple as kicking the ball and scoring a goal or even helping out, with helping to solve a problem. Usually what we see is victimisation [...].’

For one UK producer this approach was symptomatic of ‘always going for the headline’ and the ‘quick fix’, because it was easier to ‘try and push for sympathy stories’. Empowerment would mean communicating something different, focused on optimism rather than the ‘thing that is going to get the headline [...]’.

The clips focused on some of the more awkward encounters, but it was acknowledged that *Educating Greater Manchester* did show different types of interactions and clear instances of ‘resilience’ as the story developed and Rani developed friendships. This allowed similarities to be shown as well as differences. A particular incident showed Rani involved in mischief with his British friends, described by one participant as follows:

‘There is a van with a lot of dust on it. Rani draws a rude picture on it with his mates and they run off. [...] And a lot of other kids get in trouble for it. Watching it with my 12-year-old, that is when she felt like he’d arrived, and she got to know him and she was rooting for him and he was a normal kid. He was actually free in that moment to be exactly the same as the other boys who were gathered around that van.’

2.2 Ethical issues

Some workshop participants expressed concern about the ethical and psychological dimensions of refugee children's participation in TV and film productions, especially news reporting and reality TV. In *Educating Greater Manchester*, the TV crew interviews Murad, an older boy from Syria, about his experience of fleeing and they ask him what he knows about his missing father. Participants from the US and Europe asked 'why would you ask a child on television if he believes his father is alive?' and remarked "you know that they are searching for the tears'. A Palestinian children's rights advocate warned that the interview opened up 'very, very sensitive issues'. He and a Lebanese producer wondered how the interview was set up and whether Murad had received any counseling because the interview might have caused him to relive traumatic experiences.

2.3 Representing individuality and agency

In contrast to shows for a family audience, most children's shows were thought to present a more balanced, positive and optimistic representation of refugee children and children of immigrant heritage living in the UK. *My Life: New Boys in Town* and *Apple Tree House* showed young children with families and friends, experiencing everyday activities. In both drama and documentaries, the stories are typically presented from the child's point of view through voiceovers which one participant described as 'much more engaging and much more empowering'. The producer of *Apple Tree House* said its mixed cast allowed the producers to deliberately 'subvert the stereotypes in terms of who can do what'. Another participant, a German expert who has researched child audiences and how they respond to certain types of narrative and representations, found that *My Life: New Boys in Town* offered plenty for children to engage with through its format and storytelling. She said:

It's a wonderful piece. The beginning of this format shows a boy who is in charge of his life, he is competent, and he can do a lot of things. He is part of the family, so he's not alone. At the same time, you get the subtext that it's not as easy as you might think. It's very engaging for the audience because we know non-fiction sometimes has a difficulty to get the attention of the audience. So, it's really engaging, we want to know more about him, he is a character and we really want to go with him, to learn with him. The way it's staged, it has beautiful pictures; it's very well edited [...] a brilliant empowering piece. [...] And it's great to hear his voice.

2.4. Gender representations

The workshop clips focused almost exclusively on young boys with the exception of *Coming to Britain*, which revolves around two Sudanese girls, and *Apple Tree House*, which features two girls and one boy in the

main roles. Girls appear less on television than boys in general⁴ and on-screen representations of refugee girls are particularly rare. Some Arab participants were concerned that representations of children from Arab countries ran the risk of embracing pre-existing gender stereotypes, which may well circulate in Arab media but hardly represent the reality of women's lives. Scenes for the preschool show *Where in the World: Hamza's Story* were filmed in Jordan. A clip we showed featured Hamza with his parents and siblings at home. A Jordanian TV executive among the participants commented on the way he was shown with his mother in the kitchen and with his father in the mosque. She said it reminded her of primary school books used to teach Arabic in Jordan, where 'we usually find the woman in the kitchen.... and the father is going to swim or'. Here, she said, we saw the father in the mosque, which is more of a serious thing, and he [Hamza] is helping his mother cooking [...] We don't see her working although we have a lot of women working now'.

UK producers at the workshop acknowledged issues about representing girls, but also drew attention to the practical challenges of making films with and about refugee girls, when it is often difficult to get permission. This was backed up by the experiences of content producers in Germany. A participant reported that a meeting of producers who had worked with refugee children revealed that it is possible to find girls and 'really give them a voice' but that it involves a lot of effort. 'You can't take the first choice, because first you will get four, five, six boys and then you will get the girls'. UK producers explained how they found themselves confronted with additional pressures of time and finance when making films in Arab locations. The producer of the *Where in the World* series was aware of the way Hamza had been portrayed doing different kinds of activity with each parent, but explained:

The challenge is, in terms of the commission, when we were casting we had two weeks to find a child. Then the director had three days to receive [...] It's problematic in places, but the realities of pressure and directors [...] to cast a strong child, that was the driver [...].

2.5 Lack of European knowledge about Arab childhoods

The difficulties of representing children from Arab countries in European programmes also remind us that Arab and European concepts of childhood differ. Feryal Awan, who studied screen content produced for children across the Arab world, found there is often more emphasis on becoming an adult than being a child.⁵ Whereas European producers tend to emphasise children's agency, it is rare to see children speaking with their own voice on Arab television, because adults typically take on the role of instructors and teachers in children's programmes. Examples include magazine shows such as *Anbar*, on Qatar's pan-Arab channel Jeem, and *Bait Byoot* on Palestinian TV, which are dominated by adult presenters, who, instead of seeking children's opinions, constantly provide advice and judgement.

⁴ Maya Götz and Dafna Lemish (eds) *Sexy Girls, Heroes and Funny Losers: Gender Representations in Children's TV around the World*, New York: Peter Lang, 2012

⁵ Feryal Awan, *Occupied Childhoods: Discourses and Politics of Childhood and their Place in Palestinian and Pan-Arab Screen Content for Children*, PhD thesis, University of Westminster, 2016, pp 216-17

3. DIVERSITY DILEMMAS

3.1 Structural limitations in the children's media landscape

3.1.1 Commercialised global media

The priorities of profit-driven commercial media in search of global markets mean there are limited resources and space for live action content that features the authentic experiences of children, unless this is subsidized and promoted by content providers with a remit to promote diversity in local markets, usually public service broadcasters. One UK producer told the workshop: 'The people who put the money in want to appeal to the widest mainstream audience there is'. This also means that some markets are more valuable than others, because 'you are going to get more per view out of America than you can get in the Philippines or somewhere else.' Producers wanted to show diversity and different cultures, but 'sometimes people higher up the food chain have a say and unfortunately, we do hit a bit of a barrier'. The example was quoted of someone in a commissioning position telling a producer that a programme would not sell to 'other territories' if it featured a mixed-race couple together. These limitations did not change in the digital world, because according to one online producer, 'we still have to present our case to our financiers, and clients, and the people who are paying us'.

Similar issues about diversity affect content in Arab markets, where imported animation dominates the schedules, including those of MBC3, the popular children's channel of the Saudi-owned TV group MBC. Some local animation production has been built around local characters, as in the case of Cartoon Network's *Mansour*, set in the UAE, or *Bakkar*, set in Egypt, but this remains rare and can be used more as a marker of national identity than an endorsement of diversity.

3.1.2 Lack of diversity among UK scriptwriters and actors

Diverse representations in children's content are further impeded by the limited representation of the UK's ethnic diversity in its media workforce, as producers, directors, writers or performers. It is not easy for scriptwriters from a relatively privileged background to write convincingly about life experiences they are unfamiliar with, such as those of children of lower socio-economic status. Three Stones Media, which made *Apple Tree House*, used 'street casting', the practice of recruiting unknowns who have not been to drama school, to achieve authenticity and realism. But *Apple Tree House* producer, Gregory Boardman, said that this method of casting child and women actors from ethnic minority backgrounds had been especially time-consuming and sometimes difficult. He explained:

After six months of casting, [trying to] put a boy from a genuine Muslim household on screen, we probably only had less than a dozen families come forward. The [Grandson character] literally was a choice of one. It's sad to say that the part of Grandma, the numbers of professional actresses in this country who could play her part was below 15. We actually saw quite a lot of amateur performers to try and bring to the list. In terms of cultural precedents and women performers from a Muslim background available to perform in this country, it was a tiny, tiny list. We've been absolutely blessed because she's been amazing on-screen and hopefully she'll inspire others to follow her.

3.1.3 Other challenges of television production

The limits of live action contrast with the opportunities of animation, where diversity of appearance can be shown by painting characters in different colours. Yet diversity involves far more than appearance. One participant argued that showing diversity extends to personal qualities and behaviours. Another asked the question of how a tolerant society should deal with intolerance, whether it was acceptable to be open to diversity that may actually reflect and foster intolerance and racism. Another noted the reluctance of some US producers to show a black child being uncooperative, for fear of perpetuating negative stereotypes. Meanwhile it was also noted that ‘diversity’ on some live action programmes can appear staged. Arab participants felt that the Syrian father wearing a *tarbush* to cook in *The Big Family Cooking Showdown* (see Figure 1) was a gimmick and not authentic.



Figure 1: Mahmoud Ayoubi talks to the show's co-presenter, Nadia Hussain (Still from *The Big Family Cooking Showdown*, BBC, 2017)

3.2 Approaches to representing diversity: meaningful or tokenistic?

3.2.1 The risk of tokenism

Participants felt there was a fine line between showing diversity and tapping into stereotypes of race and gender. If children from different national and cultural backgrounds are given certain ‘labels’ in children’s screen content – such as Black, Asian, Arab, etc. - or are ascribed certain attitudes, there is a risk, even unintentionally, of tapping into stereotypes and of constructing refugee children as different. There was agreement about the pitfalls. One comment on the Canadian animation series *Mixed Nutz* highlighted the benefits of showing ‘what we have in common’ before looking at ‘how diverse we all are’, because, without showing the commonalities, there is a risk of creating a sense of ‘us and the others’. A Syrian artist and director asked whether it was a question of presenting diversity as it exists or talking about the value of diversity in society. She argued that, if characters are picked merely to fill the predetermined roles according to colour or religion, this is ‘the opposite of diversity, it is enforcing stereotyping’.

Inadvertent stereotyping was perceived in *Arthur*, an educational animation series made for the US PBS network. The clip we showed could be interpreted to signal that living in a city is somehow superior, although it was probably intended to show that the city origins of the boy from Senegal means he is ‘like us’.

3.2.2 "Show the diversity, don't name it"

It was argued that writers and producers can weave issues of diversity into engaging storytelling and characters, without diversity as such being the purpose of the story. As one participant put it, 'you can show the diversity, don't name it'. Another said that adults are 'desperate to get the difference out', whereas 'children discover difference just by turning up somewhere'. Yet, he said, stories are often not written from the point of view of discovery in a child's mind'. If there is diversity of representation in stories, children of different backgrounds can all relate to the same story and want to engage with it. Such stories are not about who children are or where they have come from but about seeing someone you can relate to on screen. This approach was illustrated with a storyline about a solar eclipse from *Apple Tree House*, in which Grandma Zeinab is the one with the telescope who helps everyone with the science but disappears during the eclipse itself so she can go to pray. The producer recalled:

We did a story about an eclipse. It touched a little bit on folklore. The parents of the characters had different views about what the eclipse meant. [...] Just by working with the story, we were able to put so much in the script. In the end, the episode is about a group of children watching the solar eclipse, but culturally the information we were able to contain within that was hopefully of great value. But we didn't forefront any of that information.

A similar approach was illustrated on the UK reality format, *The Big Family Cooking Showdown*, which not only revealed diversity within one family, the Ayoubis, but also challenged gender stereotypes about Arab women. Only one daughter in the family wears the hijab, but she is the one who works in the construction industry as a structural engineer and is shown in her hijab and hard hat on a building site, giving instructions to male builders. For one US participant in the workshop, seeing this family on television countered all sorts of stereotypes in the news and did so 'indirectly', in a 'wonderful way'.

4 FINDING OUT ABOUT CHILD AUDIENCES

4.1 Difficulties of measurement

Within the workshop, it was recognised that there is an urgent need for more reliable audience research with young children, including children caught up in forced migration, because we know little about what children are consuming on broadcast and online platforms and why they are consuming it. The difficulties of measuring audience responses when so many devices are used for television viewing are potentially serious at a time when children's public service broadcasting provision is falling and under threat.⁶ Statistics from the UK broadcast regulator, Ofcom, released in November 2017, show that 21 per cent of UK children aged three to four have their own tablet, as do 35 per cent of 5-7 year-olds and 52 per cent of 8-11 year-olds. The vast majority of them use the tablet to go online. Yet, even so, live viewing on the TV set remains an important part of children's lives, especially for younger children, for whom TV on the TV set makes up the largest proportion of their media time.⁷

⁶ Sonia Livingstone and Claire Local, 'Measurement matters: difficulties in defining and measuring children's television viewing in changing media landscape, *Media International Australia*, 163 (1). pp. 67-76.

⁷ Ofcom, *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*, 2017, pp 2-3.

4.2 Knowing how children engage with the wider world

Research is lacking on how children in the UK and Europe engage with the rest of the world. This is a significant concern for an organization like the BBC, which is required by its charter to ‘provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them’.⁸

Ways to make children less fearful

Producer Dominic Sant recalled that his production company, Evans Woolfe, had been inspired to produce *Where in the World?* in eight countries after they noticed NSPCC research that suggested that up to 40 percent of British children worry about world events. This was revealed when they set up the new Childline webpage with the title ‘Worries about the World’. Sant felt that there was a discrepancy between the daily realities of children living in countries other than the UK and representations of those realities in UK news media and aid campaigns. The aim behind *Where in the World* was to produce content that makes children less fearful of what happens outside the UK. For Sant the depiction of children successfully negotiating their daily realities amongst family and friends was crucial:

One of the key drivers for us was the sense that a lot of what children see is obviously the news and aid campaigns. That’s all great, but the missing wider context was normal children living ordinary lives, just getting on with it.

It was challenging to make this kind of content, particularly in countries where you need permits to film, but feedback from UK parents whose children had watched the series was encouraging. According to Sant, after one episode showed a child using a bucket as a drum, a British mother tweeted a picture of her children drumming, copying what they had seen on TV.

4.3 German research with refugee children

Researchers from the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) in Munich, Germany, recounted their findings from interviews they had conducted with 40 refugee children, newly arrived in Europe. For these children ‘empowerment’ often means simple practical things, such as being able to go out on the street, having free time, and for girls especially, being able to ride a bike, or – for those from Afghanistan – being able to go to school. The researchers found that refugee children often want to look forward, not back to the past. This was relevant to the portrayal of two Sudanese girls settling into their new home in *My Life: Coming to Britain*.

⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/corporate2/insidethebbc/whowere/publicpurposes>

Responding to a reference in the episode to the fact that the girls' family left Sudan because the father's life was in danger, and a question about the film's very positive treatment of the girls' attitudes to life in Britain, Maya Götz of IZI said:

If you talk to refugee children who are there [in Europe] for one, two or even four years, they are really at home. They are struggling with things in the here and now and not with what has been four years ago. It's a part of their lives but it's not the main part. We often love to portray them still as refugees and most of the children who are here, their father or mother was at risk; that's why they are here, otherwise they could have stayed. They have background stories that are really tough, but to tackle them you have to be very careful. So, they are there and they are just normal children. They cope with the background stories pretty well.

Götz also noted, however, a need for producers and broadcasters to know how UK-born children watching the episode respond to the girls and their story. 'We have to learn' how children perceive these things, she said, because 'we don't know'.

4.4 Research on children and media in refugee camps

While research with child audiences in Europe is complicated and often incomplete, credible data on media use by children in Arab countries is almost non-existent. A Jordanian television executive told the workshop that her colleagues assume that content can be produced without input from children. She said: 'We don't have children come and participate or even ask them what they want. We just preach at them and we give them messages'. She reported that parents concerned to protect their children from harmful content were often tempted to rely on an avowedly religious children's channel, like the Jordan-based *Tuyur al-Janna* (Birds of Paradise), because they perceive it as safer than Disney or other cartoons, even though others accuse it of brainwashing. Strong opinions among parents can make it hard for European producers trying to film 'normality' in an Arab country like Jordan, because they have to assuage concerns about media among parents and teachers and overcome deep distrust.

BBC Media Action, the BBC's international development charity, and Sesame Workshop, the New York-based non-profit organization which provides learning resources through television and other media, were both due to start projects with refugee children in camps in Jordan and Lebanon in 2018 that may start to provide some insights into these children's particular use of and responses to media content. BBC Media Action's Alexandra Buccianti told the workshop that, based on the initial research, expertise from the BBC Children's department and BBC Learning will be used to develop content to help 3-5 year-olds with literacy, numeracy and problem solving and 6-12 year-olds with problem solving, critical thinking and a sense of belonging. Many of the latter group have either been out of school for long periods, or never attended. For 13-16 year-olds, where being out of school for long can create a deeper sense of isolation, there are plans to develop a drama format around the idea of community. Content will be distributed online, by broadcast and also in refugee centres.

Sesame Workshop has collaborated with local partners to make local adaptations of the preschool educational show *Sesame Street* in many countries dealing with refugees and displacement, including Afghanistan. Estee Bardanashvili, of Sesame Workshop, told the workshop how it responded to the Syrian crisis by partnering with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), created for refugees after World War 2, with a view to creating content for refugee children that can help them be resilient and develop coping mechanisms in the face of trauma, as well as showing parents how to engage better with their children. Together these bodies launched a pilot Sesame Workshop/IRC Early Childhood Humanitarian Initiative in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Syria to produce and assess the accessibility of educational print and video materials for children aged 3-6 in urban centres and refugee camps, for example on mobile phones. In late 2017, Sesame Workshop and the IRC won a MacArthur Foundation '100 & Change' Award, securing \$100m to continue supporting the education of refugee children affected by the Syrian crisis.

5 EDUCATION AND 'ENTERTAINMENT' IN CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING

5.1 Refugee schooling crisis

Forced migration brings with it an education crisis that particularly affects refugee children from Syria, Iraq and Sudan. Syria and Sudan were in the top five countries for UK asylum grants in 2016 and Iraq was in the top five for UK asylum applications.⁹ UNICEF, the UN agency that provides humanitarian and development support to children and mothers in needy countries, estimates that around 2 million children have no schooling inside Syria while as many as 731,000 Syrian child refugees in surrounding countries, primarily Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, were out of school in 2017, a 6 per cent increase over 2016. It expects that more than 5 million Syrian children will need education assistance in 2018. As pressure on host community services mounts in countries neighbouring Syria, and refugees exhaust their savings, access to schooling becomes ever harder. A UNICEF regional study compiled in 2015, under the title *Education Under Fire*, estimated that internal displacement and conflict were resulting in 3 million Iraqi children and 3 million Sudanese children missing out on education.¹⁰

Efforts, like those of BBC Media Action and Sesame Workshop to address the education crisis through media resources, raise questions about the relationship between education and entertainment, and the extent to which educational content sets out to be entertaining. Entertaining lessons are not the norm in Arab education systems, a Syrian participant told the workshop, leading to a situation where 'most kids hate school'. But education and entertainment were also conceptualized as separate themes for the Children's Global Media Summit in Manchester to which the pre-summit workshop was affiliated. At the BBC, children's education comes under the aegis of BBC Learning (with links to the UK school curriculum), whereas entertainment with broad learning objectives falls within the realm of the BBC Children's department, which has its own commissioning objectives.

⁹ <https://fullfact.org/immigration/uk-refugees/>

¹⁰ UNICEF, *Education Under Fire*, New York: UN, September 2015, p 7.

5.2 Potential crossover between areas of expertise

Producers usually consult education or child specialists when they are targeting preschool audiences, but such consultation is much less common in making content for older children. Workshop participants who had pitched programmes to the BBC said that BBC Children's and BBC Learning were not just separate but had fundamentally different agendas, which require producers to decide beforehand whether to focus on education 'with a capital E', as one put it, to suit BBC Learning, or on 'softer education', in which case it would be proposed to BBC Children's. One producer suggested that the two parallel paths were missing a lot from each other. He said:

The thing that strikes me is that historically, the medium of television and other cultural mediums have been quite separate from education in terms of the progress of producers and creators on the television side. Producers do draw on education, they do draw on advice. But if you think of the creative directors working in education and what they are exposed to in terms of sociology and the psychology of the child [...]

It's almost as though the education world is only just waking up to the power of devices and platforms and the power of television and the moving image. In many ways, they caught onto it very, very late. In similar ways, there are a lot of people working in children's media who don't understand the full complexities of what they are dealing with, because they haven't necessarily come up through an education group.

It feels like the whole of children's media could do with a real crossover in terms of knowledge, so that producers genuinely understand the power of the tool in their hand and educators are also able to understand the medium in itself. Even today, I'm looking at some music tools that seem really well worked out from an educational point of view, but I just know, as a television producer, if you try and make them work commercially to a wide audience, they would die a death. Some of these things have had millions of pounds invested in them that a television producer could equally do great things with. It feels there is a real lack of a crossover that actually all cultures and all regions could benefit from.

5.3 Teaching youngsters about refugees' experience of flight

As part of discussing the mix of education and entertainment in relation to content for and about refugee children, workshop participants viewed a UK web drama called *Refugee*. Aimed at children at UK curriculum Key Stages 3 and 4, namely the 11-16 age group, the drama revolves around the premise of a UK family suddenly having to leave their home as refugees. With a storyline that goes backwards to reveal how the family started off in its Scottish home, it aims to explain the refugee crisis through dramatic scenes of flight. The film-maker, TrueTube, has a website for schools that provides short films, lesson plans and assembly scripts for religious education, citizenship classes and PSHE (personal, social, health and economic

education). It has its own TrueTube channel and beat the BBC to be named best UK channel at the Children's BAFTA awards in 2017. Its film, *Refugee*, also won a number of prizes, including a Learning on Screen Award. Judges praised the use of the reverse timeline to tell the story as a 'slow reveal'. They also praised the use of an ordinary setting relatable to the target audience.

However not all workshop participants were convinced by the reverse timeline. They felt that such educational content still needed the audience to identify with the characters. One suggested that it would have been more effective had the audience had a chance to get to know the fleeing family first, rather than at the end, because this limited the audience's ability to establish an emotional connection with the characters. According to one UK producer: 'I feel that stories are most powerful when you get to know the person in that situation; I think a different version of *Refugee* would do that'.



Figure 2: Still from *Refugee*, TrueTube, 2016

5.4 Showing 'education' on screen

The workshop also viewed a clip from the long-running show, *Arthur*, made for US public television but also aired on CBBC in the UK. *Arthur* is broadly educational in that it promotes social skills among children and some more direct educational learning, although one US participants disputed its educational value. In the scene we showed, a white North American girl character, DW, gets it 'wrong' in her assessment of the lifestyle a newly-arrived male classmate would have experienced in his African country of origin. DW draws an intricate picture, illustrating how she imagines the country, to show classmates but is immediately criticized by both the new classmate and the teacher for what the picture shows. In the clip, the teacher tells her to learn about a place first before describing it. The put-downs imply a kind of superiority for the African boy vis-à-vis the girl.

Some workshop participants felt that children watching the show, especially girls, might be discouraged to come forward with their own ideas, given the response DW encountered when she did this. One German participant felt that DW's enthusiastic drawing reflected her interest in the topic but this was not valued in

the script. She said ‘it needed just one sentence that complimented the girl on her drawing’ [...] ‘These are the moments when you really can make a difference ... You don’t have to blame a child for being positive, for being open. Always keep in mind, as soon as you blame somebody, it has a meaning for the audience’. Here, by implication, ‘50 per cent of the audience is blamed’.

She continued:

Producers ought to think about how child audiences react. Here comes a wonderful girl with all her enthusiasm, with all her fantasy and it’s so easy just to put in the sentence “oh it’s wonderful”, just to encourage her to be who she is instead of slapping her down. This is a very disturbing understanding of education. We know education is not working that way. That is the education not only of the last century, it’s something from the 60s of the last century, where we control them and tell them what they are doing is wrong. Now we know we have to encourage them and give them competences.

6 REGULATORY, COMMISSIONING, AND DISTRIBUTION ISSUES

Part of the rationale for the workshop, and the project it belongs to, lies in the opportunities that exist for European creators of children’s content and advocates of children’s media rights to get involved in conceiving and producing material for Arab children who have come to Europe because they have been forced to leave their countries of birth. Media and other bodies in Europe have the opportunity to integrate the needs of all refugee and migrant children into their forward planning and commissioning.

In theory, they should be encouraged to do this because of the way public service mandates are built in to the UK and European broadcast regulatory environment. These mandates open the way for European media to provide Arab families caught up in forced migration with the benefits of a service they have not experienced, since public service media (as defined by UNESCO in terms of the four simultaneous features of universality, diversity, independence and distinctiveness¹¹) are not found in the Arab region. It is public service mandates that require screen content to serve children and to provide them with locally-originated material. Among Arab countries, only Morocco and Lebanon have any requirement for their broadcasters to include a specific number of hours of programming for children and these requirements are not enforced. Arab-owned children’s channels fill their schedules with dubbed imports, preferring to avoid the cost and censorship challenges of local production, while producers of children’s screen content in the Arab region call in vain for basic regulatory initiatives that would stimulate production, such as protection of intellectual property, respecting of contracts, and provision of tax exemptions and industry incentives.¹²

In practice, as the workshop heard, getting innovative material for children commissioned in the UK is easier said than done.

¹¹ UNESCO, *Public Service Broadcasting: A Best Practices Sourcebook*, edited by Indrajit Banerjee and Kalinga Seneviratne, Paris, 2005, p 15.

¹² Feryal Awan and Jeanette Steemers, ‘Arab and Western perspectives on childhood and children’s media provision’, in Naomi Sakr and Jeanette Steemers (eds) *Children’s TV and Digital Media in the Arab World: Childhood, Screen Culture and Education*, London: I B Tauris 2017, pp 34-37

6.1 Racism in commissioning circles and distribution platforms

The standards of ethics and diversity assumed to prevail among public service media outlets do not always apply to content commissioned for online platforms. One UK producer gave examples of overt racism within some digital companies and multi-channel networks (MCNs) that distribute content on platforms like YouTube. These caused a 'general white-washing of entertainment' for children and minimal representation of black animated characters in online videos. The workshop heard that a company once provided a roster of characters who all had names, except for a black child, who was identified only in terms of his ethnicity. Because YouTube pays more per view in Western countries, even producers based in Asia are incentivized to appeal to a white Western audience and deterred from using hands of different skin colour for 'unboxing' videos or 'how to' tutorials.

The case of *Rastamouse* was cited for the racist comments it had attracted from representatives of a US toy company and a British supermarket. This British animated stop motion series follows a mouse reggae band who split their time between making music and solving crime mysteries, with an ethic of redemption, not retribution. First aired on CBeebies in 2011, it was inspired by books published between 2003 and 2012 that were read on the BBC television series *Jackanory Junior* in 2008. Concerns about possible changes to the original conception of the show caused its makers, Three Stones Media, to turn down a co-production offer. They felt other bodies considered the concept as it stood to be too much of a risk in terms of content. For Three Stones Media the decision to go it alone in getting the idea 'out there' translated into a massive financial risk.

6.2 Limited funding for children's content

Evidence presented to the workshop by participants from various backgrounds indicated that lack of investment in children's media is a global problem. Makers of children's shows for the BBC said the budget for an equivalent show for adults would be three to four times bigger. In Jordan it was said that children's programmes attract neither advertising nor sponsorship. Even Roya TV, a private Jordanian channel with output that meets some public service criteria, has not been able to get investment in children's content, despite trying to persuade local businesses that it should be part of corporate social responsibility policies. The example of Arab channels keeping costs down by showing dubbed US or Japanese imports was cited as a problem because, according to a Syrian director, it 'doesn't represent the reality of the kids'.

However, UK producers did not place the blame on commissioners. Describing the commissioning process for *Where in the World?*, Dominic Sant said it was a 'brilliant experience', although he cautioned that 'there is only one market for a programme like *Where in the World?* And that is the BBC'. The idea stemmed from the company's experience of 'working in schools and with children all over the world in the last 15 years' and CBeebies reportedly saw the importance of 'showing the world' to UK children. The series aired in June 2017. According to another producer, getting commissioning editors 'onside' was only half the job. That person then has to convince all the finance and marketing people in the organization and they are going to be less impressed by enthusiasm around a particular idea than by proof that something has a 'star name' attached or has already been sold successfully elsewhere. Animation is also more likely to get commissioned than live action, which is thought to be harder to sell on international markets.

A producer said that, ideally, ‘you want a broadcaster for children that is happy to have big ratings but is also happy with a small rating that reaches a different part of the audience’. He said there was a ‘real danger’ that, if everything was measured solely on volume and mass, ‘brilliant shows with smaller ratings’ would be overlooked, even though they touch a ‘part of the community or smaller groups that actually feel the show belongs to them’. Participants agreed that the implications of not funding content that teaches children about the world are serious. One summed it up as follows:

Every region has a different economic environment, but we don't invest in our young people's minds like we're happy to invest in pure entertainment for adults [...] we don't put investment in media that are going to build the planet's future. It's a massive problem.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create more opportunities for **open discussion** about children's content beyond industry events where the emphasis is on selling. Producers at the workshop said that even the Children's Global Media Summit was being presented as a market instead of a place where people can talk openly and share information about making the programmes that everyone at the workshop wanted to get made.
- Make more local content in which children **see others like themselves** on screen, as well as people from their localities and communities. This was illustrated in the workshop by confirmation from a Jordanian TV executive that Roya TV in Jordan could readily show the scenes about Hamza in *Where in the World?* to Jordanian children. Children newly arrived in Europe from Arab countries would benefit from seeing others like them adapting to their new environment and learning their rights.
- **Work with children, not for them.** A UK producer said stories should be written ‘from a child's point of view’. A participant who works with the London-based Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) quoted the words of 10-year-old girls developing skills at the media centre of Shorouq, a non-governmental organization set up in Dheisheh refugee camp on the outskirts of Bethlehem. The girls made it clear: ‘Let us do things ourselves or, if you insist, work with us, do not work for us’.
- **Know more** about different notions of childhood across the world and about the previous media experiences of refugee children arriving in Europe, which include images of western culture they have consumed through US movies and sitcoms that circulate on Arab TV. As a UK producer put it, ‘We tried not to put an anglicised view of the world onto the child we were filming’.
- **Find similarities** between children who are new to a country and those already there. A US participant, who experienced migration as a child, said children arriving in a strange place feel empowered if they see themselves sharing something they know with their new friends, whether it's their music, drawing or something ‘as simple as kicking a ball and scoring a goal, or helping to solve some kind of problem’.
- **Be mindful of ethics.** There are ethical implications in publicly touching on the painful past of young refugees. Children who have fled conflict and persecution are likely to have been subjected to traumatic experiences, but they are defined by more than their past. Workshop participants felt strongly about a television scene in which a boy from Syria was asked about his missing father. One summed up the group's feeling by saying: ‘We just opened such a tough issue. They [the TV crew] were asking him about very, very sensitive issues. When you, as a social worker, journalist or lawyer, open an issue you should be able to close it. Who is going to close this?’.



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This briefing summarises the proceedings of the first workshop in a project to stimulate dialogue between European and Arab stakeholders about European screen content for young children of Arab heritage who are living in Europe through forced migration. The one-year project is funded by the UK's Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and includes 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' and a symposium in London in September 2018 under the title 'Invisible Children? Public Service Media, Diversity and Forced Migration'.

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

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