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# MUNICH WORKSHOP BRIEFING



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTMINSTER



24 May 2018

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

Pre-Festival Workshop at Prix Jeunesse International 2018,  
Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Munich, Germany

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1 Drama and storytelling as vehicles for informing young children about forced migration</b>	
1.1 Overview of fictional treatments of migration and diversity.....	3
1.2 Content for preschoolers .....	4
1.3 Scripted and semi-scripted drama series.....	5
1.4 One-off dramas .....	6
1.5 Non-fiction edutainment and documentaries .....	6
<b>2 Stimuli for telling migration stories</b>	
2.1 Giving children insight into the meaning of ‘refugee’.....	7
2.2 The European Broadcasting Union’s ‘Message in a Bottle’ series .....	9
<b>3 Getting migration stories to a diverse audience</b>	
3.1 Challenges of commissioning, producing and engaging children .....	10
3.2 Online and view on demand (VOD) viewing .....	11
<b>4 Empathy as a dimension of storytelling</b>	
4.1 Feeling sorry for a crocodile.....	13
4.2 Children’s perspectives .....	14
4.3 Avoiding victimhood.....	15
<b>5 Choices about language and scriptwriting</b>	
5.1 ‘Soundscapes’ and language learning .....	16
5.2 Drama and reality formats: scripted, semi-scripted and unscripted.....	18
5.3 Religion written in as a ‘normal part of life’ .....	19
5.4 Whose voice – children or parents? .....	20
<b>6 Multicultural representation as the norm</b>	
6.1 Stereotyping without meaning to .....	21
6.2 No more labelling .....	22
6.3 Moving on from stories about refugees and football .....	23
<b>7 Recommendations .....</b>	<b>25</b>

## 1 DRAMA AND STORYTELLING AS VEHICLES FOR INFORMING YOUNG CHILDREN ABOUT FORCED MIGRATION

In 2014-16 Germany opened its doors to far greater numbers of people fleeing their homes than any other European Union (EU) country. At the beginning of 2017, after three years of particularly high levels of immigration, Germany had 5.2m residents who were born in a non-EU country, representing 6.3 per cent of its population.<sup>1</sup>

This was the highest percentage of non-EU-born inhabitants for any of the 28 countries in the EU, except for Austria (7.7 per cent) and two Baltic states, Latvia and Estonia, both of whose populations include former Soviet citizens who have not acquired any other citizenship. The average for the EU-28 is 4.2 per cent. Whereas Austria's high percentage is attributable to arrivals from Serbia, Turkey and Bosnia-Herzegovina, for Germany the figure reflects its recent openness to migrants and refugees from further afield. While there were 116,400 Syrians in Sweden, 51,400 in the Netherlands, 31,000 in Denmark and 11,500 in Bulgaria, according to Eurostat data for 1 January 2017, the equivalent figure for Germany was 577,300.<sup>2</sup>

As Syrian applications for asylum in Germany rose in 2016, so too did those from people fleeing Iraq and Afghanistan – to 97,162 and 127,892 respectively in a single year.<sup>3</sup> The number of children among those fleeing to Germany can be surmised from the proportion of under-18s in the populations of Syria and Iraq. As reported by UNICEF, in its *State of the World's Children 2015*, under-18s accounted for 41.5 per cent of Syrians and 46.7 per cent of Iraqis, with under-5s making up 11.8 and 14.5 per cent of each country's total population.<sup>4</sup>

Reflecting the impact of major demographic changes on all communities in Germany, whether born in the country or elsewhere, there has been significant media activity around the issues raised by forced migration. Producers of children's content realised that children were constantly hearing parents, teachers and news bulletins talking about 'refugees', but with little real sense of what being a 'refugee' meant. In 2017 the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI), affiliated to Bavarian broadcaster, Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), published an edition of its research journal, *TelevIZion*, entitled 'Refugees, Integration and the Media'.

IZI findings showed that 70 per cent of 6-9-year-olds in Germany had heard about refugees from television, rising to 89 per cent for those aged from 10 to 12. *TelevIZion* also revealed that knowledge among 6-9-year-olds was most accurate when they obtained it from the media, especially public service television, rather than from their parents. Those findings highlight the important role screen media play in helping children to make sense of recent events. What can we learn then from those who commission and make such content for children?

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<sup>1</sup> Eurostat, [Migration and migrant population statistics](#), 22 June 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat, [Main countries of citizenship and birth of the foreign born-born population](#), 1 January 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Asylum Information Database (AIDA), <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany>

<sup>4</sup> For more regional and comparative data see J. Steemers and N. Sakr, 'Children's screen content in the Arab world: An introduction' in N. Sakr and J. Steemers (eds.) *Children's TV and Digital Media in the Arab World: Childhood, Screen Culture and Education*, London: IB Tauris, 2017, p 3.

## 1.1 Overview of fictional treatments of migration and diversity

This workshop briefing, the third in a series of three, is part of a project focused on the representation of refugee and migrant children in European screen content for children. The one-day workshop took place in Munich on 24 May 2018, hosted by IZI under the umbrella of the biennial six-day Prix Jeunesse international festival of children's screen content. In keeping with the 2018 Prix Jeunesse theme of 'Strong Stories for Strong Children', the workshop explored treatments of migration and diversity in mainly fictional storytelling genres for children aged 12 and under. Several had been made for German public service broadcasters, namely those making up the ARD (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland) and ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) networks, both of which contribute shows to the jointly operated children's service, KiKA (KinderKanal). We also showed content aired by public service broadcasters in Belgium (VRT/Ketnet), the Netherlands (NPO), Slovenia (RTVSlo), Serbia (RTS), Switzerland (SRF) and the Welsh-language broadcaster, S4C.

In terms of genre, the range of clips discussed at the workshop included animation for preschoolers, drama, both series and one-offs, reality storytelling and children's documentaries. The clips featured children of Arab heritage and touched on forced migration or broader issues connected with diversity, but all were from shows aimed primarily at a majority European-born audience.

### The novelty and necessity of representing child newcomers on screen

Any young child of Arab heritage who sees someone like themselves in a European-made show may find this unusual, as it will have been rare for them to see themselves on TV screens in the countries they came from. Yet newly arrived children and their families are often completely unaware of the potential relevance to them of local screen content in their country of arrival. Aside from an obvious preference for content in their own language, refugee and migrant families are unfamiliar with the practice of public service broadcasting, which is non-existent in the Middle East, and they are understandably distrustful of media organisations, most of which are run by authoritarian governments or government associates in their countries of origin. Children's programming in Arabic on the most widely-watched Arab channels is dominated by imported animation from North America, Europe and the Far East, because dubbing imports is cheaper than making content in local Arab dialects for small audiences.

The economic challenges of making local children's content in Arab countries have left the sector largely underdeveloped in terms of supply chains, scriptwriting and production.<sup>5</sup> When Arab children do see themselves in home-grown content, it is most often as passive recipients of instructions and information imparted by adult presenters, who are more intent on teaching and directing than entertaining.<sup>6</sup> When they look for content in the new European settings, the device they use is most likely to be a mobile phone. For those whose lives and education have been disrupted by war, mobile phones have become vital for communication with family members as well as for translation apps, accessing music, video and

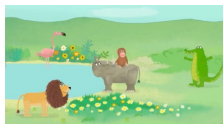
<sup>5</sup> See Steemers and Sakr, 'Children's screen content in the Arab world: An introduction' (op.cit.), pp 5-6.


<sup>6</sup> 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, p 191.

games.<sup>7</sup> As children in all situations switch to online media consumption on mobile phones and tablets, the question of how to reach them has been a focus of all workshops in the series, including the one in Munich.

In Munich, as at the workshops in Manchester<sup>8</sup> and Copenhagen<sup>9</sup>, a key objective was to alert European policy-makers, broadcasters and producers to the media needs, wants and experiences of young Arabic-speaking children now living in European countries, drawing on research into children's screen content and audiences in the Arab world, funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and conducted in 2013-2016 by members of the workshop team.<sup>10</sup> Another was to create space for dialogue between European and Arab practitioners. To this end we invited Arab producers and education specialists, to comment on European content that featured migration issues or included children of Arab heritage. The project as a whole looks at content for children under twelve, as reflected in the sample selection below. Of these, only *Merna in the Spotlight* was not discussed, through lack of time.

## 1.2 Content for preschoolers

<b>Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten (The Programme with the Elephant, 2007- present, Germany), 2016</b>	
Production Details	Synopsis <a href="#">Flüchtlingsspezial (Refugee Special)</a>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Producers (Refugee Special): Renate Bleichenbach and Markus Tomsche for WDR</li> <li>Writers: Renate Bleichenbach, Markus Tomsche and Clemens Gersch</li> <li>Age group: Preschool</li> <li>Broadcaster: WDR/ARD/KiKa</li> <li>Format: Animation, documentary</li> <li>Duration: 24 min</li> </ul>	 <p>A little blue elephant provides continuity for this regular show, which offers entertaining and educational short films. The elephant invites young viewers not only to watch but also to engage in the show with songs, quizzes, stories, and games. The show also addresses more serious topics, such as friendship, grief, fear, and tolerance. In this episode, the programme introduces children to the complex subject of 'refugees'. It opens with a cartoon in which a rockslide forces the crocodile Viktor to leave his pond and seek a new home, meeting resistance from the occupants of other ponds along the way. Later in the episode, documentary clips introduce children from Syria and Ghana, newly arrived in Germany. It closes with the presenter encouraging children to find out about migration stories within their own families.</p>

<b><a href="#">Jamillah and Aladdin (2015-2016, UK)</a></b>	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Broadcaster: BBC (CBBC, CBeebies)</li> <li>Production Company: Kindle Entertainment</li> <li>Age group: 4-7</li> <li>Format: Comedy Drama</li> <li>Duration: 52 x 14 min</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Jamillah and Aladdin</i> is a live-action drama series featuring magic and comedy. Set in a fanciful version of 8<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad, it has a modern-day twist, as the protagonist is Jamillah, a young Londoner living with her extended family, who finds a magic lamp in the attic one rainy day and unwittingly becomes a hapless genie's new master. Fulfilling her first wish, the genie transports her to Baghdad where they meet Aladdin and have adventures. We showed a clip in which the genie loses his memory after being hit on the head by a mango, and Jamillah and Aladdin try to remind him who he is.</p>

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Nadia Kutscher and Lisa-Marie Kress, "Internet is the same like food": An empirical study on the use of digital media by unaccompanied minor refugees in Germany', *Transnational Social Review*, Vol 6, Nos 1-2, pp 200-203.


<sup>8</sup> <https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/88429031/ManchesterWorkshopBrie04122017.pdf>


<sup>9</sup> <https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/96194739/CopenhagenBriefing19to20March2018.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Naomi Sakr, Jeanette Steemers et al, *Orientations in the development of screen media for Arabic-speaking children*. London: Communication and Media Research Institute, University of Westminster, 2015, pp 15-16


<b>JoNaLu (2008-2014, Germany)</b>	
Production Details	Synopsis - <a href="#">Der Kaufladen (The shop)</a>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadcaster: ZDF/KiKa</li> <li>• Producer: Jan Bonath for Scopas Medien AG</li> <li>• Script: Helge Mey, Michael Schulden, Ina Werner et al.</li> <li>• Age group: Preschool</li> <li>• Format: Animation</li> <li>• Duration: 26 x 35 min (2 series)</li> </ul>	 <p>The names of the protagonists, Jo, Naya and Ludwig together make up the title of <i>JoNaLu</i>. Jo and Naya are mice and Ludwig is a ladybird. The trio live together in a mouse hole in the house of Paul and his mother. On their excursions, they discover the world, showing children how to respond to different situations, and encouraging them to learn through music and dance. Other characters come from different countries and are recognised by speaking a different language: Caruso is from Italy, Sibel is from Turkey, Nikolaj speaks Russian, Carmen speaks Spanish, Scottie speaks English and Minou is from France. We showed a clip in which Naya and Sibel make coins from paper to go shopping in Jo's play shop.</p>


### 1.3. Scripted and semi-scripted drama series


<b>4eVeR (2016-, Belgium)</b>	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadcaster: VRT/Ketnet</li> <li>• Writers/Directors/Producers: Camiel Scheer &amp; David Madder for ScheMa producties, in collaboration with Awel (<a href="https://awel.be/">https://awel.be/</a>)</li> <li>• Age group: 9-12</li> <li>• Format: Drama</li> <li>• Duration: 48 X 12' (Series 1). There have been 4 seasons.</li> </ul>	 <p>4eVeR is a semi-scripted drama series, focused on the friendship between four Flemish teenagers who live in the same neighbourhood, but who grow up in very different families. The teenagers from white Flemish, mixed race and Moroccan backgrounds have fun together, but they are also confronted with difficult situations, problems, and setbacks. Themes covered in 4eVeR include love, insecurity, foster care, bullying at school, living in a new family, media literacy, poverty, depression, and discrimination. The clip shown in the workshop addresses the 2016 terrorist attacks in Belgium one year on as well as aspects of religion, and absent fathers.</p>

<b>Dschermeni (2017-present, Germany)</b>	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadcaster: ZDF/KiKa</li> <li>• Producers: Martin Choroba, Johanna Teichmann (Tellux Films), Klaus Döring, Andreas Steinhöfel (Sad Origami)</li> <li>• Age group: 8-12</li> <li>• Format: Fiction</li> <li>• Duration: 6 X 25'</li> </ul>	 <p>This drama series follows the unusual friendship among four teenagers: Moritz, who is German-born; Rüyet, who is also born and lives in Germany and whose family came from Turkey two generations ago; a Syrian boy, Yassir, who is a refugee; and Aminata, a Senegalese girl who has applied for asylum in Germany with her family. Both Yassir and Aminata risk deportation. We showed a clip from episode 4, in which Moritz and Rüyet press for Yassir's and Aminata's right to stay in Germany by visiting the asylum office where Moritz's mother works. At home with her family Rüyet defends her brother, who has come out as gay. Following an angry scene, she flees the family home to a hut by a lake, where the friends often meet. Aminata is worried about her brother Youssof, who is part of a criminal gang dealing in stolen goods, which she fears puts the family at risk of deportation if he is caught.</p>

## 1.4. One-off dramas

<b>Nur (2014, Slovenia)</b>	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadcaster: RTV Slovenija</li> <li>• Dir. Kaya Tokuhisa</li> <li>• Producer: Metka Dedakovic</li> <li>• Prod. Manager: Barbara Daljavec</li> <li>• Exec. Prod. EBU: Beryl Richards</li> <li>• Producer EBU drama: Metka Dedakovic</li> <li>• Distribution: EBU Exchange</li> <li>• Duration: 16 min</li> </ul>	 <p>Nur, a young Syrian girl, arrives on her own at her uncle's house in Slovenia after fleeing the war. Her parents still live in Syria. Her uncle, a busy doctor, is often not at home and does little to assist Nur in settling into her new environment. Nur is also unable to establish a working phone connection with her parents and increasingly isolates herself in her uncle's flat. The only thing that reminds her of home is a bottle of rose water she finds on her uncle's shelf. After accidentally spilling it on the floor, Nur embarks on a mission to the outside world to replace it. During this journey, she gradually makes friends with Pia, a Slovenian girl who lives next door.</p>


<b>Swing (2017, Serbia)</b>	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadcaster: RTS - Radio Televizija Srbije</li> <li>• Director: Branko Vucic</li> <li>• Executive Producer EBU: Beryl Richards</li> <li>• Distribution: EBU Exchange</li> <li>• Duration: 15 min</li> </ul>	 <p>Swing tells the story of two brothers who arrive in Serbia after fleeing conflict in their home country. On arrival, they have to hide from the police as they are travelling without documents. As one of the brothers, Saber, gets sick, they hide in a shed on a farm where Milos, a Serbian boy, lives with his parents. While Saber recovers slowly, his younger brother, Amir, makes friends with Milos, who secretly provides the pair with food and supplies. When Milos's mother discovers the brothers and calls the police, they are forced to leave.</p>


<b>Dad (2014, Wales)</b>	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadcaster: S4C</li> <li>• Writers: Catrin Clarke, Angharad Devonald</li> <li>• Director: Ashley Way</li> <li>• Producer: Sophie Francis</li> <li>• Distribution: EBU Exchange</li> <li>• Duration: 14 min</li> </ul>	 <p>Ten-year-old Cai is suffering the impact of a nameless war happening far from his home in Wales. His soldier father has returned physically damaged and mentally fragile from the conflict. Cai and his mother are finding it hard to love this changed man. But, on a windswept beach, Cai befriends Amir, a refugee, who has got washed up alone and is scavenging to survive. The meeting of the boys from two different worlds is the beginning of healing for both.</p>

## 1.5 Non-fiction edutainment and documentaries

<b>Berlin und Wir (Berlin and Us, Germany, 2016)</b>	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadcaster: ZDF/KiKa</li> <li>• Director: Heike Raab</li> <li>• Prod: Till Dreier, Christine Pfennig, Markus Steiner (IMAGO TV)</li> <li>• Editorial: Margrit Lensen, Eva Radlicki</li> <li>• Age group: 11-15</li> <li>• Format: Documentary</li> <li>• Duration: 8 x 24 min (2 seasons)</li> </ul>	 <p>This non-fiction series features four teenagers (Seyid, Akram, Rashad and Bayan), who live in Berlin after fleeing their home countries, and four Berlin-born teenagers (Millane, Linus, Malina and Oskar). Their shared goal is to find out if they get on with each other, and if they are able to grow as a team. The camera follows them for three months as they experience their city and explore how much they have in common. We showed a clip from episode 4, which follows girls Malina and Rashad as they attend a football training session at Malina's soccer club. The series' first season won the 2018 International Kids Emmy for factual content in Cannes; its third season is in production.</p>



<b><u>Neuneinhalb: Karim und Mahdi - Eine Grenzenlose Freundschaft</u> (Nine and a half: Karim and Mahdi - A Boundless Friendship, 2017, Germany)</b>	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadcaster: ARD/WDR/KiKa</li> <li>• Age group: 7-11</li> <li>• Format: Documentary/News</li> <li>• Duration: 9 min</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Neuneinhalb</i> is a nine-and-half minutes long news feature for children. This episode centres on the friendship between Karim and Mahdi. Mahdi fled his home in Afghanistan with his family two years ago and now lives in Germany. However, the family has not yet been granted asylum and might face deportation. Nevertheless, Karim and Mahdi enjoy their time together by celebrating Mahdi's 11th birthday - the first time in his life he is having a birthday party - going swimming and eating lunch with all of Mahdi's family.</p>

<b><u>Ayham: Mein neues Leben</u> (Ayham: My new Life, 2016, Switzerland)</b>	
Production Details	Synopsis - Film and webisodes 1-17
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadcaster: SRF, Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen; ZDF/KiKa</li> <li>• Directors: Marek Beles &amp; Illona Stämpfli</li> <li>• Prod. company: Essence Films</li> <li>• Age group: 11-15</li> <li>• Format: Documentary</li> <li>• Duration: 28' 40s' and 15' webisode (KiKa)</li> </ul>	 <p>Together with his family, 11-year-old Ayham is forced to flee from Syria to escape the war. He did not really want to leave his home and his friends, but the danger was too great. The family travelled for five months before starting a new life in Switzerland. The first few months are tough, but at school, Ayham soon makes friends with classmates who like to play football. The football coach discovers his talent and makes it possible for him to have a trial with the Grasshopper Club in Zurich. The club then takes him into its junior team for one year.</p>

<b><u>Merna in de Spotlight</u> (Merna in the Spotlight, 2016, Netherlands)</b>	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broadcaster: EO/IKON, NPO Netherlands</li> <li>• Director: Mirjam Marks</li> <li>• Format: Documentary</li> <li>• Duration: 15 min</li> </ul>	 <p>Eleven-year old Merna and her parents had to leave Iraq because, as Christians, they were under threat from Islamic State fanatics. Merna previously only sang in church, but in Lebanon she makes a name for herself on the Arabic version of <i>The Voice Kids</i>. After waiting two years for permission to find a new home, Merna's biggest dream is simply to be able to live in a safe environment with her family.</p>

## 2. STIMULI FOR TELLING MIGRATION STORIES

### 2.1 Giving children insight into the meanings of forced migration

The workshop opened with a discussion of what kind of story can best represent complex issues around forced migration and diversity for children as young as 3 to 5 years of age, who may encounter refugees in preschool care settings. Participants expressed different views on what and how much such young children can grasp. Several remarked that preschoolers who have fled their home country suffer not only disruption to their daily routine, but also a sense of alienation when settling into a new society. At the same time, as a Lebanese producer pointed out, young children are not necessarily able to express

their feelings of 'disorientation, disruption and confusion'. A US participant remarked that children newly arrived in the host country are 'probably quiet and intimidated, afraid to be there', while their European-born peers might want to ask them questions. A Swiss producer added that preschool children are constantly learning about 'what is good and what is bad' and why that is the case, and those from the host community would be curious to know why something 'bad' might have happened to a displaced child.

A representative from Sesame Workshop in the US suggested that, although language, cultural barriers and psychosocial barriers are bound to exist between newly arrived children and the children of the host community, *both* groups are experiencing disruption of their daily routines. She argued that all preschool children are curious, and that the right type of content can 'create a safe space' in which children are encouraged to ask their parents and teachers questions about forced migration, 'creating something that will unify or help make that bridge between the host and the migrant community'.

It was agreed that a starting point should be to dismantle adult preconceptions of what children understand, rather than agonise about children's understanding. A US producer noted that most preschoolers are barely aware of 'other countries', ethnic diversity, and war, which suggests a need to introduce 'the notion that somebody is coming from far away with a different language' before the topic of forced migration is tackled. German, Lebanese and US producers reported evidence showing that racial diversity is not an issue for preschoolers even if it is an issue for their parents. As one said, a 'creative show for preschoolers that pre-supposes that [racial diversity] is going to be perceived as something strange or weird or uncomfortable is probably a mistake'.

A 24-minute episode of the preschool series, *Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten* (The Programme with the Elephant), focusing specifically on refugees and aired on the German children's channel, KiKa, introduced young children to the topic of forced migration through a mix of animation and non-fiction content, including clips of children newly arrived in a German refugee camp. The episode closes with the adult presenter, André, and a green puppet encouraging children in the audience to ask their own parents and grandparents where they come from. Although not referring explicitly to the German refugee crisis of 1945, this advice recognised the displacement of German-speaking people from Central and Eastern Europe during the 1939-45 war. Some participants saw educational value in this open-ended line of enquiry that concluded the show. One Arab participant said:

**I don't think we can pretend to know what these children are feeling and thinking, but we can help them to ask questions. The puppet segment with the adult standing next to him is a very positive one ... it's very direct, it's very simple. What are refugees, why are they here? It serves everyone to understand, whether it's the host or the actual migrants. [Let's have] more of that rather than "here is the answer to your problem". Just keep it open and address all the issues in the storytelling.**

A producer of the German drama series *Dschermeni* from ZDF agreed that children see forced migration differently from adults and are more open to becoming friends through play and shared activities. This understanding is reflected in *Dschermeni*'s storylines for 8-10-year olds, where the four protagonists – all from different demographic and ethnic backgrounds – spend time together by a lake, playing games,

and discussing their personal problems. At the same time, the series does not shy away from addressing themes from adult life and pressing political issues, including lengthy asylum processes in Germany, illicit working by refugees, and the deportation of asylum-seekers deemed to come from a 'safe' country. One Syrian-born participant living in Berlin remarked that, by addressing these issues through child-centred stories, the series functioned as a form of 'political education' for children in Germany.

A Lebanese producer described *Dschermeni* and *Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten* as 'very brave' examples of storyline development, since they address not only political issues but also – in the case of *Dschermeni* – topics that are taboo in some communities. In *Dschermeni*, Rüyet, whose family are of Turkish origin, discovers that her brother is gay, which is a subject of conflict within the family. As a Slovenian producer pointed out, rejection of homosexuality is not confined to Turkish or Arab families but some parents of European origin also struggle to accept it. A Canadian producer of Lebanese heritage commended the series for dealing with different layers of diversity and discrimination, and for showing how racial and sexual discrimination often overlap. She remarked: 'I want to honestly applaud you for the show. It's brilliant because you're bringing in topics that are dealt with on an international, national and governmental level and now you're bringing it to children. This exposure is so important'.

## 2.2 The EBU's 'Message in a Bottle' series

The workshop explored three short fiction films with a forced migration theme, that were made as part of the European Broadcasting Union's (EBU) Children's Drama Exchange series. Marion Creely, former executive producer of the EBU's Children's Documentary Exchange, explained that the EBU's drama and documentary exchanges offer an economical way of sharing content among countries, who contribute one show and received a whole series in return. In the documentary exchange, featuring children aged 10-12 and aimed at 8-12-year-olds, films have previously been made in diverse countries and languages, including countries geographically outside Europe, such as Jordan, Egypt, Japan and South Africa.

The EBU Children's Drama Exchange, aimed at 6-9-year-olds, uses minimal dialogue to allow easy dubbing and cross-border distribution. The theme 'Message in a Bottle' was adopted for the series from 2014 to 2018, when it was replaced with a new theme, 'Tell me a Secret'. The workshop discussed *Nur*, *Dad*, and *Swing*, three films made in Slovenia, Wales, and Serbia respectively, that are connected by the 'Message in a Bottle' theme.



In *Nur*, a Syrian girl, who has left her family in Syria to live with her uncle in Slovenia, finds comfort in the scent of a bottle of rose water, which reminds her of home. A Slovenian producer, who worked on the EBU exchange, noted that the child playing Nur was of Serbian parentage. Her uncle was played by an engineer, not an actor, who is in fact half-Syrian and half-Slovenian. Members of the Syrian community in Slovenia advised on the authenticity of interiors and dialogue.

In *Dad*, a Welsh boy befriends a refugee boy on a beach, who is trying to send a note to his father in a bottle that he throws into the sea. Made before headlines about refugees dominated the news, *Dad* traces the Welsh boy's realization that both his father, a disabled soldier, and the boy have been traumatized by something they associate with the sound of planes. In *Swing*, two brothers, who have escaped from war in their home country and are in transit to Germany, evade arrest by the Serbian police. The younger brother carries the address of relatives living in Germany in a flask for safe-keeping.

The drama and documentary exchanges offer opportunities for producers to try new things. Creely recalled working with production teams in places where notions of childhood differ from those prevalent in Europe and North America. She had found that, in some Middle East countries, children were often initially not granted much of a role or dialogue in the film, but producers' involvement in the exchange encouraged them to give children more of a voice. She cited a Jordanian film called *The Breadwinner*, made as part of the exchange in 2005, about a 12-year-old girl who is taken out of school to help her fisherman father after he hurts his back, as evidence that children are 'quite happy to talk and tell their story' if given a chance. Jordan and Egypt have not been part of more recent exchanges.

When it comes to distribution, however, the one-off nature of the films and their close link to broadcast limits their chances of being seen. Although S4C, which contributed *Dad*, showed all the films in the series, not all broadcasters do likewise. This leaves open the question of how to improve promotion.

### 3. GETTING MIGRATION STORIES TO A DIVERSE AUDIENCE

#### 3.1 Challenges of commissioning, producing and engaging children

Dialogue with producers during the workshop revealed the challenges of commissioning, producing and engaging young audiences. These become even more acute in content that deals with topics that are considered taboo among minority populations. One of *Dschermeni's* producers agreed that German broadcaster ZDF had been brave to commission a show that not only features refugees, but also portrays homosexuality. But the main difficulty, he said, had been to find under-age actors with Turkish backgrounds who were willing play a gay character. An Arab participant noted that a children's show containing mention of homosexuality would never be commissioned in the Middle East.

Lack of funding, exacerbated by restrictions on advertising during children's content, emerged as a key issue at the workshop in Munich, as it had at the previous workshop in Copenhagen. European public service broadcasters consequently end up as practically the only commissioners of locally-produced children's shows. In Germany private broadcasters focus heavily on animation and rarely commission factual content or drama that addresses political or societal issues. Thus the majority of children's content in Germany is commissioned by public service broadcasters ARD and ZDF, and their jointly-owned children's channel, KiKa, resulting in intense competition among production companies for limited slots and funding. Similarly in the UK, the BBC is virtually the only broadcaster to fund locally produced children's content. In small countries like Switzerland, where the market is fragmented between different language communities, public service broadcaster SRF is alone in commissioning home-grown children's content for its diverse language communities, while private TV stations rarely cater for young children at all.

Meanwhile, the advance of online VOD platforms presents challenges for European broadcasters, who are finding it more difficult to reach and engage children with linear channel offerings. The producer of the German preschool show *Die Sendung mit dem Elefanten* explained that WDR had created an app called 'Der Elefant' and made some content available online, including on YouTube, in order to reach a wider audience. But, in his opinion, the show is still seen primarily by white middle-class children, whose parents monitor what they watch on screen. Participants concurred that children were drawn more to YouTube than public service television, and this was particularly the case for ethnic minority audiences.

### 3.2 Online and View on Demand (VOD) viewing

In the face of competition from YouTube and Netflix, European broadcasters are trying to reach children online. For example, a distribution team at Switzerland's German-language public broadcaster SRF identifies the online behavior of the channel's target audiences by age and distributes "SRF Zambo" (the umbrella term for its children's programmes) accordingly: preschoolers retain one daily 8-minute slot on the linear TV station SRF1, allocated to the programme *Gutenachtgeschichtli* (bedtime stories), while all other children's programmes are streamed on the SRF Zambo [website](#). SRF Zambo also provides an [Instagram account](#) and an interactive [website](#) where children aged 6-14 can create a profile, share photos, and post to an online discussion board. According to a producer from Switzerland, audience tracking informs the distribution and marketing plan for every show. The same producer was very positive about the creative potential that comes about through online distribution, because of the way it frees producers from the rigid time restrictions of linear broadcast slots. He said:

**You are no longer bound by fixed slots; you can produce as many minutes as the story calls for. It can be a three-minute story, but also a 15-minute story. Last year we made a fiction series. There was no problem that one episode was five minutes long, another was seven, then six.**

In Europe, producers are also working on strategies that integrate online distribution alongside linear broadcasting. The Flemish drama series *4eVeR*, aimed at 9-12-year-olds and commissioned by Belgium's Flemish-language public service broadcaster VRT/Ketnet, is available on a linear channel, Ketnet, on the VRT website and on YouTube. The workshop learned from the producers that online and linear viewing of the show has been roughly equal, between an absolute average of 35,000 viewers for the linear screening and about 30,000 online viewers for each episode, which accounts for 23-25 per cent of the target market in a small country like Belgium, where Flemish-speakers number around 6.5 million.<sup>11</sup>

The producers of *4eVeR* attribute the good ratings to the series' semi-scripted narratives and a reality drama format (see Section 4.2). The first series comprised 48 short episodes of 11 to 14 minutes, shown daily. They also believe its appeal rests on the fact that 'it is not about refugees...it's a well-integrated family who are actually fully Flemish'. As one said: 'In many fiction series the Arab guy is the poor guy; in our series the poor guy is the Flemish guy' while the family of Arab heritage are financially comfortable and friendly.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/517196/population-of-belgium-by-region/>

## Viewership and revenue potential of online platforms

Some participants familiar with young people's viewing practices in the Arab region concurred in pointing out the possibilities of online video platforms, including YouTube, for sharing content made by and for children in Europe with children in Arab countries. One mentioned [Mohamad Al Jounde](#), a 16-year-old Syrian recipient of the 2017 International Children's Peace Prize, awarded in the Netherlands for his work as a 12-year-old refugee in Lebanon, where he and his parents started a school and he taught other child refugees maths and his passion, photography. Mohamad now lives in Sweden, where, according to a Lebanon-based participant who is in touch with him, he tells stories through YouTube. She said refugee children share content with their friends through online platforms and their storytelling should be encouraged.

Young people in Saudi Arabia have been getting around strict local restraints on their cultural expression by using YouTube for more than a decade and in November 2013 [Reuters](#) reported that Saudi Arabia had become the world's biggest user of YouTube per capita, reflecting the widespread uploading of homegrown lifestyle, satirical and other edgy content. In May 2018 the consultancy Global Media Insight found that the number of active [users of YouTube in Saudi Arabia](#) had overtaken active users of Facebook, while [YouTube penetration in the UAE](#) was close to Facebook at 79 per cent. Sesame Workshop in New York announced in December 2017 that the Abu Dhabi-based producers of *Iftah ya Simsim* had joined forces with YouTube's Creators for Change initiative and that the show's third season, starting in September 2018, will feature the region's top YouTube content creators, with some additional episodes available exclusively on YouTube.

The Saudi and UAE social media statistics reflect what a UAE-based participant in the workshop, Nathalie Habib of Blink Studios, called the 'very strong' level of engagement with online video platforms in the Arab world. Expressing admiration for the content sampled at the workshop, she urged Europeans to distribute it in the Arab world through online platforms, not necessarily through broadcast deals, as this could 'open up new windows of revenue'.

Habib cited audience statistics for the latest Gulf version of Sesame Street, *Iftah ya Simsim*, to prove her point. Reporting that viewership of *Iftah ya Simsim* had grown from 200 million views and 200,000 subscribers in 2015 to 300 million views and 0.5 million subscribers today, Habib stressed that online viewing and subscription VOD were changing the landscape for screen content in the Middle East region because international SVOD providers like Netflix and Amazon and regional ones like Icflix are willing to invest money in making children's content for local markets.

'We didn't have budgets before', Habib said. 'Now they're talking about budgets being allocated for original content. They're being very wary and very slow, but it's definitely making a huge impact on our media landscape and now everybody's mobilizing in a different way'.

## 4. EMPATHY AS A DIMENSION OF STORYTELLING

In the summer of 2015, the thousands of refugees from Syria arriving in Germany were welcomed by applauding crowds and commended by mainstream media. Now, three years later, the mood has changed. An emerging media discourse has suggested that refugees are no longer so welcome in Germany and that the country is being ‘swamped’ by immigrants.<sup>12</sup> At the same time there has been a rise in support across Europe for political parties that take a strong stance against immigration. In response to this shift, one key question that emerged during our workshop was whether and how children’s screen content that features forced migration can foster empathy, and what kind of strategies producers can use to create this kind of content. Given people’s different backgrounds and experiences, empathy requires an act of imagination and intellectual engagement to understand what it is like for another person to experience adversity.<sup>13</sup>

### 4.1 Feeling sorry for a crocodile

The first clip shown during the workshop was an excerpt from German broadcaster WDR’s *Die Sending mit dem Elefanten*, which opens with an animated sequence in which a crocodile called Viktor has to search for a new home after the pond he lives in is destroyed by a rockslide (rather than other animals). He finds a new pond. Initially the animals who already live there try to send him away but, after Viktor saves a monkey from drowning, the pond’s inhabitants decide that he can stay. After watching the clip, participants highlighted differences between the softer depictions of animation and the reality of refugees’ lives.



Some praised the producers’ use of animation to engage with forced migration, because it allows children to identify with Viktor’s experiences of discrimination and exclusion. A Syrian-born artist and filmmaker thought that the use of animated animals helped to avoid stereotypes. A Slovenian broadcaster saw universal appeal in the clip, remarking that, although the story

reflects the experience of refugees, Viktor’s story of exclusion ‘can be experienced by every child’ regardless of their ethnicity. A Palestinian-born educational researcher concurred, noting that every child experiences exclusion at some point in their lives, such as when a group does not let him/her join in play. While the animation was judged to encourage empathy, a Syrian participant pointed out that it is normal not to want to share, especially in this case where the characters were afraid of the crocodile. She said children should not be made to feel guilty about the initial reluctance to share with Viktor.

Some participants commented on the fact that Viktor (the immigrant) has to perform a heroic act (saving the monkey) in order to be accepted by the other animals. A Palestinian researcher who grew up in Denmark interpreted the crocodile’s heroic act as a realistic representation of societal expectations of refugees, saying: ‘this is actually relevant in Denmark. Migrants have to earn something’. Her view was

<sup>12</sup> Franziska Zimmerer (n.d). ‘[German media on the refugee crisis: How the refugees-welcome campaign has backfired](#)’. LSE: *Polis: Journalism and Society at LSE*.

<sup>13</sup> Alison Landsberg, ‘Memory, empathy and the politics of identification’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol 22, No 2, 2009, p. 223.

echoed by a Lebanese producer who noted that refugees often feel they must do something special to ‘deserve’ acceptance, even though escaping a war zone and heading for a new continent might be deemed a heroic act in itself. A US researcher with experience of working with children in Lebanon, who are often under pressure to support their families emotionally and also financially through work, felt that the animation implied that refugees had to be ‘exceptional’ to be accepted. Since they are subject to both psychological and emotional pressure, she wondered whether it was also ‘okay’ and possible to show children as vulnerable from time to time, without portraying them as victims.

## 4.2 Children’s perspectives

Stories which unfold from a child’s perspective have proved effective in engaging children with issues of forced migration. In the case of German drama series, *Dschermenî*, Klaus Döring, both a producer and writer of the show, explained that the production team had sought to create a series that approached the refugee question through the eyes of a German boy. Moritz is blond, middle-class and lives ‘a lonely life with his parents’. Throughout the entire show, there is ‘no scene where there is no kid’, reinforcing the perspectives and experiences of children from a variety of different backgrounds, where ‘all the time we just know what the kids know’.

A Canadian producer of Arab heritage welcomed the approach taken in *Dschermenî*, saying:

**One of my favorite things is the opening, because I saw a kid from every different background; it speaks to multiculturalism and to your ethnic background, your religion and so on [...] Usually in Canada, for example, the predominant notion is “okay, I’m gay” [but] the concept of coming out only applies to you if you are white. So how do we deal with it, if you are Canadian and belong to a different culture as well? That exposure is so important for kids just to have that understanding, and it has not been talked about enough. [Here] the way [the producers] brought it in is like [the kids] are dealing it with from all different backgrounds on a kid-to-kid level. Brilliant.**

The workshop heard that, as the series’ story unfolds, *all* of the characters end up taking refuge in the hut by the lake due to problems at home. Döring summed up this narrative choice as follows: ‘We wanted to have the kids get a feeling for being a refugee’.

Another programme to foreground children’s perspectives is the Flemish drama series *4eVeR*, which uses body cams and a non-scripted approach (see Section 5.2). In this way, the producers sought to give the narrative an authentic feel that children from different backgrounds can relate to – so much so that, as discussed in 5.2, workshop participants were keen to know how far younger viewers were aware that it was fiction and not reality.

The short Swiss documentary film, *Ayham: Mein neues Leben* (Ayham: My New Life) also presents the perspective of a child, a 10-year-old Syrian boy who fled to Switzerland with his family. The director, Marek Beles, whose own family left the former Czechoslovakia for Switzerland when he was a child, explained that he made the film with the aim of ‘telling a story only through the child’s eyes’. The



production team followed Ayham over two years, from his arrival in Switzerland through his experience of gradually settling into his new environment, making friends at school and joining the local football team. According to Beles, the film's focus on a child's point of view resonated with children in the audience, 'because the stories are coming out of the children, the children are really interested in other children and their stories'. Over time Ayham decides that he does not want to go back to Syria, even though his father wants to return.

### 4.3 Avoiding victimhood

As previous workshops revealed, European shows sometimes portray children with forced migration backgrounds as victims and fundamentally different from European-born children. But those workshops also showed how victimhood discourses are challenged by other shows that represent diversity without making it an issue and present characters that children in the audience can relate to.

#### 'You don't have to be a refugee to be traumatised'

The EBU's short fiction film *Dad* is about a Welsh boy, Cai, who is on holiday with his parents, including his father, who appears to be a former soldier suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD). On a beach, Cai befriends a lone foreign boy, Amir, who appears to be a refugee. The boys have fun together until military planes fly over the beach and trigger an acute stress reaction in both Amir and Cai's father. As the producer explained, in gradually understanding his friend's problem, Cai begins to understand his father's trauma as well. A Palestinian-born participant appreciated the recognition that trauma is experienced by both the Welsh family and lone child: 'You don't have to be a refugee to be traumatised ... it disturbs [that assumption] in a respectful and honourable way'. A US academic noted the impact of the adult also showing fear. Although the target audience is 6 to 12-year-olds, the producer said the intention had been to make a film that both children and adults would relate to. While 6-year-olds might not yet be able to understand the film's message, she recalled attending a screening for children of the same age as the 10-year-old boy in the film. In her words, 10-year-olds 'absolutely get it'.

The short dramas *Nur* from Slovenia and *Swing* from Serbia, also part of the EBU Drama Exchange, were likewise both thought to show children as agents rather than victims, in their case by allocating adults peripheral roles. One Palestinian researcher thought the films showed displaced children as 'strong kids' who 'want to be responsible' and 'take care of themselves'. A Lebanese producer commended both films for showing children's problem-solving skills and resourcefulness. *Nur*, she observed, is confronted with the problem of having to replace her uncle's rose water which she has spilled by accident, while in *Swing*, two refugee brothers are shown working with a Serbian boy to avoid being stopped by police from reaching Germany. The same producer applauded the fact that *Nur* was depicted as respectful of the social rules

of her new environment: when trying to find rose petals to make rose water, she stopped short of taking petals without permission. The Slovenian producer of *Nur* explained that the film aimed to avoid tapping into stereotypes in order to focus on Nur's individual emotional journey. To enhance the authenticity of the depiction of Syrian culture, the Slovenian production team worked closely with a Syrian advisor living in Slovenia. This person had apparently said that Syrian families would usually send a son to a safer place in the first instance rather than a daughter.

The German factual reality format *Berlin and Us* (2016) was also made with the intention of creating counter-narratives to victimizing portrayals of refugee children within European mainstream media and, judging by the feedback, it succeeded. According to one of the producers:

**There was one thing which was above all, ... one thing [we put] first, that we don't want to show the refugee kids as victims. We wanted to show them that they have the same strength and are strong as the kids in Germany. [...] We had several refugee kids themselves who wrote us in emails or commentaries on our blogs to say "this is the first time that you show our story ... I feel good that you showed it".**

## 5. CHOICES ABOUT LANGUAGE AND SCRIPTWRITING

### 5.1 'Soundscapes' and language learning

Language learning is relevant to children of all backgrounds and ages. While preschool children are learning their own language, children newly arrived in Europe need to acquire a language that is often very different to their mother tongue. Children generally acquire new languages very quickly, as highlighted by a sequence from *Berlin & Wir* (which was not shown during the workshop) in which Rashad explains that she came to Germany two years ago speaking only her mother tongue, Arabic, and some English. Two years later, she is fluent in German and sometimes struggles to find the right words in Arabic.

*JoNaLu* is a CGI-animated series for preschoolers shown on Germany's public service children's channel for children, KiKa. It engages with the diversity of language but, instead of broaching it directly, features characters who speak foreign languages and have different accents. In a clip shown during the workshop, the Turkish-speaking butterfly Sibel is learning a few German words by playing 'shop' with the German-speaking mice, Naya and Jo. The Turkish dialogue is not subtitled as preschoolers would not be able to read the subtitles. One of the programme's writers, Ina Werner, told us in an email exchange that the major aim of *JoNaLu* was to foster preschoolers' German language skills. The show features characters who speak foreign languages as different 'soundscapes', which in turn can foster children's awareness of their own language. According to Werner, German preschool children are familiar with hearing these different soundscapes at nursery and kindergarten, and the show sought to reflect this reality.

Werner told us that children with migration backgrounds responded positively to *JoNaLu*, because they were pleased to see television characters speaking their mother tongue, while German children are also able to identify with the characters, even though they may not understand every word of the dialogue.

Workshop participants praised the language diversity of *JoNaLu*. One German producer remarked that the programme's way of dealing with different languages is 'exactly the way kids would act in kindergarten' through repetition. He explained that children often become fluent in German within only 3-6 months of arriving in Germany. 'They just talk and keep talking and it doesn't affect their playing because they are just playing and talking along and then all of a sudden language starts to evolve'. A specialist on multiculturalism based in Denmark admired the way *JoNaLu* represents cross-cultural experiences through linguistic diversity.



The clip seen in the workshop contains a sequence in which Sibel and Naya make money from paper to spend in Jo's 'shop' and then sing a song about *Geld* (money). One Arab participant felt this made money the focus of the episode rather than sharing, which is what happens in the end. She also noted that for children coming from the Middle East or living in the refugee camps, 'money is the only conversation they have every day because their parents are complaining that they don't have it'. The

producer of the series, who was unable to attend the workshop, had previously told us by email that German parents had also expressed similar worries about the focus on money.

However, other participants, including Arab colleagues, felt that children playing with money was uncontentious. One said: 'I don't know any children who have not played with making money or visa cards; it's very normal that children play bank and they play like they are adults'. A German academic pointed out that money is 'something we [all] have in common'. She added: 'We can't just assume that everybody is poor'. This point was corroborated by a Syrian participant who pointed out that the poorest refugees in the Middle East are those who are displaced inside Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, rather than those who can afford to migrate to Europe.

The Welsh-language EBU drama *Dad* also develops its narrative through soundscapes. The workshop learned that most EBU exchange dramas feature minimal dialogue, because of the challenge of subtitling for young children. Workshop participants praised *Dad* for evoking the characters' emotional journeys through sounds – the sea, the beach, the plane overhead – and body language. The producer explained that the film followed the Welsh boy's many complex emotions and shows that, despite his difference from the refugee boy, there is camaraderie between them.

Arab colleagues found that the film created an unspoken emotional narrative that allows the audience to feel the characters' struggles themselves and that the boys' body language, including their hugging each other at the end, is 'something that we can all connect [to]'. A German academic added that language can often contribute to stereotyping and its avoidance in *Dad* means 'you don't know where the characters come from – what you see is their experience, without language distortion'.

## 5.2 Drama and reality formats: scripted, semi-scripted, unscripted

The workshop discussed the forms of storytelling adopted in scripted and semi-scripted dramas as well as 'unscripted' reality formats. *Dschermeni* is a drama series scripted in the traditional way. Two of its main characters, a Syrian boy, Yassir, and Senegalese girl, Aminata, are seeking to stay in Germany. Yet, while parts of the story engage with migration and asylum, this is not the sole focus of the drama – something we described in our Manchester Briefing as a strategy that shows diversity without naming it. *Dschermeni* revolves instead around the friendships and daily lives of four teenagers.

According to one of the show's producers, 'we wanted to have a very strong narrator [in Moritz the lead character] and we wanted to entertain the kids'. The clip shown in the workshop included a scene in which Moritz feels jealous of the attention his refugee friends receive from his mother, who is working in an asylum office. As they leave the office he gets into an argument with Yassir and Rüyet, voicing 'his' view (heard from his father) that refugees (including Yassir's brother) should not be working in the black economy in Germany. Teichmann added that, despite the series' various fast-paced narrative strands, its rhythms also allow for 'quiet and poetic moments' in which audiences have time to feel the characters' emotions (see Section 4) and understand their family conflicts.

Like *Dschermeni*, the Flemish drama series *4eVeR* centers on the friendship of a diverse group of teenagers, one of whom comes from a Moroccan and Muslim background. However, *4eVeR*'s approach to production is very different. The series, made by producers with past experience in reality television, can be described as a realistic drama that is semi-scripted, produced with non-professional actors aged 12-15, and shot with hand-held and body cameras.

The producers explained that they developed the basis of the narrative and themes of individual scenes, but the dialogue is in large part improvised by the actors. They auditioned over 400 young people, and according to the producers, although it is 'hard work' to produce with young people who have no acting training, it gives the programme a much more authentic feel. Indeed, workshop participants remarked that *4eVeR* 'feels very real', like content that is 'user-generated' while also being 'premium'.

In the clip shown at the workshop, the Muslim family are grieving for a relative killed in a terrorist attack in Belgium, but the bereaved boy is taunted by another child at school as if he were complicit with the terrorists. A children's producer from the Middle East said of the clip:

**To me it feels very real. The reason I can say that is because one of my colleagues is Syrian and he has three teenage boys living in the West. The conversation in the beginning is so reminiscent of a similar conversation we had with them when there was one of the incidents that happened in the last two to three years, especially with his older son who had to go to school the next day and he was being bullied. [My colleague] told him what he needs to say and it was all in the same spirit of understanding, tolerance, and "don't fight. Don't fight back" in the sense of "don't argue [because] a lot of people have mixed feelings about what's going on". So ... the dialogue is real, the parents' attitude is real, what's going on in school is real and it's happening on a daily basis.**

A Palestinian academic based in Denmark compared the programme to the Norwegian reality drama *Skam/Shame* (NRK), suggesting that blurring the lines between fiction and reality is attractive to audiences. The appeal of *4eVeR* is also connected to the fact that the series' themes are grounded in the interests and concerns of Flemish-speaking children in Belgium. The producers explained how they collaborate with the child helpline *Awel*, drawing on this information source to identify 'hot topics' that concern children before every series. Fear of terrorist attacks was one of the anxieties voiced by children after the attacks on Zaventem airport in 2016. The producers also refer to guidance on audience viewing preferences compiled by the Flemish broadcaster, VRT.

Answering questions about whether young audiences identify *4eVeR* as fiction or reality, a producer recalled that one of the actors went to his own school after his character had been sick in the series, and younger pupils said to him: 'We thought you were sick; how come you're at school?'. However, he said, the difference between the characters and 'real' people' was emphasized through the actors' social media accounts and blogs, which are in their own names, not those of their characters.

Although the factual series *Berlin und Wir* is not scripted, the producers told us in an interview after the workshop that they conceptualized the show's thematic focus before production started. They held castings to find children and presented the children with ideas to help them come up with activities they could share, such as playing music and sports and cooking.

### 5.3 Religion written in as a 'normal part of life'

Clips from *4eveR* and *Berlin und Wir* evoked some comments from participants about their treatment of religion. For example, a scene from *4eveR* in which teenage Jamil asks his father if he can accompany him to the mosque was interpreted by a Muslim participant as potentially highlighting a difference between Jamil and other Flemish teenagers. However, the producers clarified that the scene needed to be understood in the wider context of the storyline, which reflected a universal parenting issue: in fact Jamil had been grounded by his father previously for some misdemeanor and suggests going to the mosque to get into his father's good books. He later decides not to go again.

Commenting on the terrorist incident referenced in this episode, the producers said they had wanted to stress that young people from migrant families 'are also victims' because 'it is their religion that is abused for terrorist reasons'. A Palestinian researcher based in Denmark welcomed the programme's depictions of how teenagers deal with religion as part of their daily lives. She saw the show as an authentic representation of a multicultural Belgian society, where people from different backgrounds and different religions live side by side. She added: 'I love that the mosque is a normal part of his life – because it is'.

The clip from *Berlin und Wir* showed German-born Malina giving 11-year-old Syrian-born Rashad a football lesson. The talk turns to religious practice when Malina asks Rashad if she intends to wear the *hijab* headscarf when she is older. Individually, away from Rashad, Malina comments that she sees the headscarf as a mark of oppression. A BBC producer with a French/Egyptian background and a Syrian producer living in Berlin wondered why *Berlin und Wir* allowed religion to act as an identity marker since Islam is not the only religion in either Egypt or Syria. A producer responded that the show is not scripted and the conversation about the hijab emerged naturally. She also noted that another Syrian girl in other episodes wears skimpy shorts and t-shirts while stating that 'religion is in her heart'.



*Berlin und Wir:  
Rashad and Malina  
on the football  
pitch*

Picture from KiKa

<https://www.kika.de/berlin-und-wir/sendungen/sendung95160.html>

The headscarf conversation elicited questions about religion and reciprocity among workshop participants. A US educator and entrepreneur thought the encounter between Rashad and Malina was lacking in reciprocal dialogue about religion. He accepted the producers' point that another episode filmed at a self-defense class showed a Syrian girl being far more intrepid than her German counterpart. Nevertheless, he felt that Rashad does not get an 'opportunity to raise questions about the German girl and how she deals with the world'. A Canadian producer who previously wore the hijab expressed concern about preconceptions of Muslim girls in North America and Europe as 'oppressed' and 'probably bald' beneath the scarf. A US academic countered by saying Malina's curiosity about Rashad's beliefs seemed very natural.

One of the producers of *Dschermeni* noted that religion was a central issue in Germany now and that a future season of the show was in planning, where the main location would be a school and problems would include bullying and antisemitism.

#### **5.4 Whose voice – children or parents?**

Drawing on the notion of the 'burden of representation', which refers to the phenomenon whereby the few members of minority communities who appear in the media are assumed by people outside those communities to represent the whole group,<sup>14</sup> one of the workshop moderators suggested that Rashad – whose facial expressions and body language throughout the headscarf discussion indicate some inner turmoil on her part – should be understood as speaking for herself, not as informing viewers about any assumed consensus regarding the dictates of Islam. This triggered a debate about whether children speak for themselves or echo their parents.

A Lebanese producer countered that Rashad is not expressing her own opinion but that of her mother: 'because in our culture ... there is no autonomous opinion until you reach a certain age, where you have to get into big fights and arguments to get what you believe is right. [...] Whereas the German girl, it's ... so much

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Claire Dwyer, 'Contested identities: Challenging dominant representations of young British Muslim women'. In Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine (eds), *Cool places: Geographies of youth cultures*, London: Routledge, 1998, p 60.

her own opinion'. A US academic also felt that Malina's way of posing questions to Rashad appeared genuine and natural, despite implying judgmental attitudes about Islam.

Others noted that it is not a straightforward question of autonomy or conditioning. A PhD candidate from North America remarked: 'there are always these moments where kids are both trying to find themselves while also repeating other things. But in that repetition, they are also finding themselves, right? It's a question of who a person is, it's never quite that simple'. She added that she would have liked to know more about the family dynamics of the children in *Berlin und Wir* and their parents' opinions about their children's involvement in the series. She recalled having spoken to Syrian mothers who are concerned about their teenage daughters in Germany and felt that German mothers might be equally concerned about their daughters.

A Palestinian researcher who lives in Denmark disagreed with the notion that Rashad was not voicing her own opinion. She suggested that to think otherwise was to buy into stereotypes about Islam that dominate in mainstream media. She argued that wearing a headscarf is a choice, saying: "I think it's something that we have to accept instead of having this assimilationist idea that people who come to Denmark need to take their scarf off... I don't care if it's because she wants to make her parents happy or anything else, but we need to see and to acknowledge that people who wear scarves also do it because they want to'.

She did not believe that Rashad would necessarily change her opinion about the headscarf when she is older, because her research with children had shown that religion matters and is a subject that children with an Arab background engage with on a daily basis. She said:

**They [children] do say "I'm Muslim and I pray five times a day", so we have to have programmes where curiosity and talking about it are at the core. Religion does matter. I worked with kids, my empirical study is with kids. [...] Religion does matter for their own identity development.**

## 6 MULTICULTURAL REPRESENTATION AS THE NORM

### 6.1. Stereotyping without meaning to

Research by the UK regulator Ofcom, reported in 2017, revealed that 35 per cent of children aged 8-11 in the UK said there were not enough programmes showing children who look like them.<sup>15</sup> Against this background, the workshop explored the live action comedy drama *Jamillah and Aladdin*, commissioned by the BBC for its two children's channels, CBeebies and CBBC, and targeted at an audience of 4-7-year olds. Ten-year-old Jamillah lives in London and discovers an old lamp in the attic. She rubs the lamp and out comes a genie who grants her a wish. Jamillah wishes for adventure and is transported to 8<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad, where she meets Aladdin. The programme is one of very few preschool drama series in the UK with an ethnically diverse cast and the producer told the workshop that it sought to avoid stereotypes.

<sup>15</sup> Ofcom, *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*, November 2017, p 10.

She said it aspires to be an ‘entertainment drama’ with a ‘fantasy adventure story’ that gives children ‘a sense of the world’. Cultural contrasts came with ‘lots of sunshine, lots of colour, and seeing lots of different faces that are not white, which was kind of the main aim’.

However, despite the show’s aim to be both inclusive and entertaining, some participants were concerned that it could give children false preconceptions about people and places in the Middle East. A Syrian artist and producer, questioning the fantasy representation of ‘historic’ Baghdad and the idea that its inhabitants were all brown-skinned, wondered whether the show perpetuated an Orientalist perspective that has influenced Western thought on the Middle East for centuries. She and a Lebanese producer indicated that the purported connection between Aladdin and Baghdad is based on the fact that Europeans often use the name *Arabian Nights* for the stories of *1001 Nights*, even though they have Persian, Indian and Chinese origins and are not part of Arab tradition. *1001 Nights* was introduced to Europe at the start of the 1700s when it was translated from Arabic by a Frenchman who heard the stories in Aleppo, Syria. The combination of villains and sorcerers eventually fed into negative Hollywood stereotypes, as demonstrated from 1924 onwards by the silent film, *The Thief of Baghdad*, and examined in the 2001 book *Reel Bad Arabs*, which drew attention to negative representations of Arabs even in some Disney films for children, such as *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Return of Jafar* (1994).<sup>16</sup>

The Lebanese producer said the Arab world is home to many stories that are ‘much richer and full of imagination to relay all of the backgrounds, ethnicities, origins, and beauty of what the Arab world represents in its diversity’, and those stories remain relatively unknown to European audiences. A UK academic drew attention to the long tradition of the *hakawati* (oral storyteller) in the Arab world. A Palestinian researcher meanwhile interpreted *Jamillah and Aladdin* as part of a ‘contributive approach’. She said

**I think we need to ask who is the intended audience when we talk about these programmes. In a multicultural educational sense, you would call it a “contributive approach”, where you just add ethnic stuff and Orientalist stuff. This is something that multicultural education tries not to do. But it’s not bad if there are other programmes as well. So if this is the only content for children in Denmark, then I would be worried. But if it’s something that is contextualised with other stories, then I’m not so afraid of the Oriental approach.**

## 6.2 No more labelling

As in previous workshop discussions about how forced migration, minorities and diversity are best represented in screen content for young children, participants expressed a need to avoid attaching labels to people and groups. A Syrian producer living in Germany explained that she would much rather be

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<sup>16</sup> Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs. How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Olive Branch Press, Northampton, Mass., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2009).



thought of as an artist, rather than a ‘refugee artist’, which she is often called, because the term ‘refugee’ signifies a temporary political status and does not define someone’s identity.

A Palestinian-born researcher working in multicultural education told the workshop that she avoids labelling stories as being about immigrants or other minorities because it narrows the audience. An Irish producer made a similar point. She said you could attract good audiences for programmes about immigrants or people with physical, mental or extreme social disadvantage when they are cast as the hero of a story, providing the story is not about their ‘difference’. Instead the programme should focus on an attractive storyline where the child takes on a challenge that most ‘normal’ children might also fear to undertake, such as practising and auditioning to get a part in a school show, trying to get a black belt in judo, running a school charity event and so on. In that way ‘disadvantage’ becomes a subplot and the audience gets to learn about someone’s life and problems while being drawn in to watch an attractive and interesting story. She continued: ‘For most of us when we come up against adversity, we get disappointed and that’s interesting for a TV audience [...] An ordinary child who is brave enough to be vulnerable and then overcomes it in the end is going to be a far more interesting documentary’.

By the same token, the Irish producer said that focusing on children’s talents, hobbies and interests and introducing aspects of forced migration that way would make for better storytelling. A Belgian producer similarly advised embedding tough stories into an entertaining programme. He explained:

**Imagine yourself at home. I have a tough working day and you ask me: “Will you see a programme about a refugee or will you watch something else?” [...] I will choose the second one. But in that second one, maybe they can embed the story about the refugee and I will watch it. If they say it to me upfront, I will say: “Oh, not today”. I think the children are the same; they want to see something nice [...] Like a present, there should be a nice label on it.**

### 6.3 Moving on from stories about refugees and football

Towards the end of the workshop, participants discussed ways in which children’s content about forced migration could move forward in the future. This debate was sparked by a North American educator who, referring to films for children about serious issues, argued that we are witnessing a ‘creative crisis’. He asked:

**How many documentaries can we watch about a young child who just arrived from a war zone, is having trouble surviving and learns to play soccer? Forget us, how many can we expect children to watch?**

A participant from the Finnish public service broadcaster YLE concurred, recalling children’s documentaries he had watched at film festivals about a ‘brother dying of cancer and a parent suffering from

Alzheimers' and did not want to watch again. He said: 'I question who would watch that as a child'. Urging a better understanding of the audience, he was sure that 'good stories can be told' about serious issues and hoped 'there is some sort of option to keep these stories alive'.

A German producer suggested that content should perhaps not only address children but also adults at the same time. He noted that adults often have stereotypical ideas about refugees that need to be challenged, including the dominant misconception that Germany is being 'swamped' or that it is safe for refugees to return to their homes.

Another proposal was that children with migration backgrounds could themselves be given more agency in the process of making films for and about them. A doctoral researcher from North America explained that many film production workshops have been conducted in Lebanon for Syrian refugee children who are now in Europe. These older children have the skills to project their experiences on the screen, using mobile phones. She suggested that adults should 'not bring them [children] into our stories but allow them to bring us into theirs'.

Some participants with Arab backgrounds stressed that content focused on forced migration is still needed to raise awareness. A producer from Dubai, who was forced to flee her home as a child, suggested that, during conflicts in Lebanon and Palestine in the 1970s and 1980s, many people were forced to flee their homes to live elsewhere, and are now giving back to the region as much as they can. She said: 'We do have to tell these stories because the 7 billion people who live on this earth don't know these stories'. A Palestinian-born researcher, who grew up as a refugee in Denmark, compared the previous dearth of stories about forced migration circulating in the public sphere with the present situation, where those stories are starting to be told. Even so, she said, there are still no stories about Palestinian or Turkish immigrants in Denmark. 'We need those stories to change the conception of what [...] forced migration is'.

The producer from Dubai cited the recent Marvel drama *Black Panther* as an example of a film that resonated with a global audience by drawing from fantasy and super-hero narratives but also doing 'a good job of changing perceptions about what Africa is all about, as they celebrated the best parts of it in a futuristic way'. She thought content producers could do the same for the Middle East, saying:

**I think that the balance is to create stories that can go global but at the same time can go back home to what we represent. So the stories need to have a universal message, a global one, whether you use animation, live action - you can still cater to all of these age groups. But what if you just think of a universal story that can travel, but then is representative with nuances that are positive to back home, to the Middle East. That is a stepping stone, a changing storytelling that actually can change mindsets and perceptions.**

## 7 RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Avoid tokenism, labelling and victimization** in storytelling. Representing integration and promoting cultural knowledge requires more than projecting different skin colours on the screen or assuming that one member of a minority shown on screen can stand for a wider group. Narratives that focus on engaging characters and children's perspectives allow young audiences to relate to, and empathise with, topics like forced migration on a personal level. Stories about multifaceted ordinary children overcoming challenges in life are likely to be more appealing to audiences than those dealing with just one side of an experience or depicting children who are flawless and have no weaknesses.
- **Entertain audiences when educating them** about issues of forced migration, integration, and diversity. Programmes that do not make forced migration their main topic but experiment with unusual narratives, formats and soundscapes have proved more effective in appealing to diverse audiences than stories focused on the plight of refugee children only. Stories with a universal message and global appeal can also have nuances of locality that inform wider audiences about other countries and cultures.
- **Pay more attention to distribution strategies.** At a time when children are increasingly accessing screen content via a variety of platforms and devices, producers need to have a comprehensive strategy in place to reach young audiences. Combining linear and online distribution has proven successful for some children's programmes, but web presence needs to be planned carefully to attract viewers.
- **Be prepared to talk about religion.** While it is challenging to depict issues of religion without stereotyping or judging, it is a central part of the lives of many children newly arrived and those born in Europe, and therefore should not be silenced. Children's content needs to help create an open discussion surrounding religion, especially in the current political climate in Europe, where new populist anti-immigration parties are using Islam to promote discriminatory political objectives.
- **Respond to children's concerns and give them a say.** Children are often anxious about events around them and programmes that address these concerns have won loyal followings. Children with and without forced migration backgrounds should have more say in content made about their lives. This can be achieved by integrating more children into the scripting and shooting process, and through testing pilots with them.



This briefing summarises the proceedings of the third 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 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 on 14 September 2018 under the title 'Invisible Children? Children's Media, Diversity and Forced Migration'. Reports on the previous two workshops are available online as [Manchester Workshop Briefing: Children's Screen Content in an Era of Forced Migration: Facilitating Arab-European Dialogue](#) and [Copenhagen Workshop Briefing: Children's Screen Content in an Era of Forced Migration: Facilitating Arab-European Dialogue – Documentaries, Distribution, Ethics](#).

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

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