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

Workshop at the Danish Film Institute as part of the Copenhagen International  
Documentary Festival, CPH:DOX

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## 1 REACHING YOUNG CHILDREN IN NORTHERN EUROPE WITH FACTUAL CONTENT ABOUT FORCED MIGRATION

Iraqi, Syrian and other refugees and migrants who undertake dangerous journeys to Europe are often viewed as a set of statistics: numbers of people drowned in the Mediterranean; asylum seekers by country of origin and country of application; separated families seeking reunification; and unaccompanied minors. Yet it is often forgotten that Europe has a long history of forced migration. The 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries saw Jews and Muslims expelled from Spain, and Huguenots expelled from France. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw millions forced to leave their homes because of invasion, persecution or deportation. In some cases, such as the Nazi occupation of Greece and the former Yugoslavia, refugees from Europe sought safety by heading south, to Egypt or Syria. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the face of Taliban militancy in Afghanistan, the US-led invasion of Iraq, political upheaval across the Arab region, and violent conflict in Syria, the direction of flight has been reversed. In thinking about how we reach young children with stories about migration, it is worth remembering that these past European experiences of dislocation are often overlooked by European media, which instead report the ‘hostile environment’ created by European governments around immigration - a ‘hostile environment’ that fosters insecurities about potential removal if you are unable to prove or obtain citizenship.

Nevertheless, for most Europeans, filmed reports are the most accessible way to find out about forced migration, and the same is true for children, who can be introduced to stories of refugee children or children whose parents were refugees. Equally important, however, are opportunities for children of refugee or migrant heritage to see themselves on screen. This is happening in Scandinavia and the Netherlands, which count significant numbers of refugees among their populations, including thousands of Syrians who arrived in 2014-16, as they escaped civil war. In 2015, Syrians accounted for 43 per cent of asylum applications in the Netherlands, 41 per cent in Denmark, 35 per cent in Norway and 33 per cent in Sweden, while 63 per cent of applications in Finland were from Iraqis.<sup>1</sup> With many children among the recent arrivals, how have producers of children’s screen content in these countries reflected the stories of children who were born in Syria, Iraq, Palestine or elsewhere?

### 1.1 Overview of relevant factual content for young children

This workshop briefing, the second 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. Hosted by the Danish Film Institute (DFI) on 19 and 20 March 2018 as part of the annual Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival, CPH:DOX, two half-day workshops offered an opportunity to explore how the topic is handled in children’s content made in Denmark, the Netherlands, the UK and Germany. In all these countries, screen content that focuses on children newly arrived in Europe is rare. The few examples to touch upon these issues are commissioned and broadcast predominantly by public service broadcasters (PSBs), including Danmarks Radio (DR, Denmark), Nederlands Publieke Omroep (NPO, Netherlands), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC, UK) and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF, Germany). In

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Connor/Pew Research Center, *Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 million in 2015*, report released 2 August, 2016, p 21, <https://pewrsr.ch/2wwWN4J>


Denmark, the DFI, Denmark’s national body for supporting film and cinema, is involved in the funding and distribution of children’s content to a significant extent.

These funding patterns reflect the strong tradition of public service broadcasting in these countries, including mechanisms for making and screening children’s content. For example, Denmark has two publicly funded channels for children, DR-Ramasjang for preschoolers and DR Ultra for older children. In the Netherlands, most children’s content airs as a block for preschoolers (Zappelin) and a block for older children (Zapp) on the NPO3 channel, and this content is repeated on the digital channel, NPO Zapp Xtra. Since free-to-air private broadcasters across Europe have drastically scaled back their commitment to children’s content over the past decade, PSBs are virtually the only commissioners of domestically-produced children’s programmes.<sup>2</sup> However, PSBs face competitive pressures from US transnationals, such as Disney, Viacom and Time Warner, and from online platforms such as YouTube (see Section 2.1).


The Copenhagen workshops discussed formats that inform children through factual representations rather than fiction, because we were hosted by CPH:DOX, a documentary festival. Films ranged in length from 12 to 24 minutes, and some have been screened at film festivals, including CPH:DOX, and in schools rather than on television. The workshop series is designed to facilitate discussion between those in Europe who regulate, commission, fund, produce or comment on children’s content and invited Arab expert practitioners with experience of children’s media. The programming we selected is for children aged under 12, in line with broadcaster assumptions about who watches their shows, but also reflecting the small amounts of relevant content made for this age group, as opposed to screen material for adolescents.

We organised our workshop clips in line with two themes chosen by the Children and Youth Section of CPH:DOX, namely ‘escaping’ (**PÅ FLUGT**) and ‘democracy’ (**DEMOKRATI**). Starting with these broad themes, we then divided the material according to the more specific themes that emerged during workshop discussions.

## 1.2 Dangerous crossings


<a href="#">Hello Salaam</a> (The Netherlands [NL], Greece, 2017)	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Producers: Hasse van Nunen &amp; Renko Douze</li> <li>• Production Company: Een van de Jongens</li> <li>• Director: Kim Brand</li> <li>• Broadcaster: NPO Zapp</li> <li>• Commissioner: KRO-NCRV</li> <li>• Format: Documentary</li> <li>• 16 minutes</li> <li>• Screened at CPH:Dox 2018</li> </ul>	 <p>This short documentary follows two Dutch pre-teens, Sil (10) and Merlijn (11), who decide to spend their summer vacation at a refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. From their mothers – who both volunteer in the camps – they have heard stories of children who live there, having made the dangerous crossing from Turkey in unseaworthy boats. We showed clips depicting Sil’s and Merlijn’s experiences of the camp, including a visit to an inflatable boat ‘graveyard’, handing out food to families crammed in temporary housing, and making friends with a group of refugee boys - aided by a translation app - which prompts them to reflect on how it might be to lose one’s home, and become stranded in a foreign country.</p>

<sup>2</sup> Jeanette Steemers and Feryal Awan, *Policy Solutions and International Perspectives on the Funding of Public Media Service Content for Children: A Report for Stakeholders*, May 2016, p.51, <https://bit.ly/2rAtpEY>

<a href="#"><u>Ferie på Flygtningøen</u></a> (Vacation on Refugee Island, Denmark, 2017)	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writer and director: Frej Pries Schmedes</li> <li>• Producer: Dorthe Rosenørn Schmedes</li> <li>• Broadcaster: DR Ultra</li> <li>• Production Company: Loke Film</li> <li>• Format: Participatory Documentary</li> <li>• 24 minutes</li> <li>• Screened at CPH:Dox 2018</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Ferie på Flygtningøen</i> explores the situation of refugees on the Greek island of Samos from the perspective of Alvin, a Danish boy who enjoys a beach holiday with his father (the film's director). The film opens with Alvin snorkelling in the sea, where he finds a small orange life vest and learns that it must have belonged to a child. Alvin subsequently tries to find and meet children who live in refugee camps on Samos, and hopes to give them candy. The clips shown during the workshop included Alvin finding the life vest and meeting a group of children in a refugee camp - an encounter that is interrupted by police, after which Alvin and his father spend several hours at the police station.</p>


<a href="#"><u>CBBC Newsround</u></a> (UK, 2017)	
Production Details	Synopsis - <a href="#"><u>Ayshah meets child refugees in Greece</u></a>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commissioner: CBBC</li> <li>• Broadcaster: CBBC</li> <li>• Format: News for children</li> <li>• 2 minutes</li> <li>• Broadcast 14 March 2017</li> </ul>	 <p>CBBC Newsround reporter Ayshah Tull travels to Greece to meet children who have recently fled to Europe from conflict zones, particularly from countries in the Arab world. In interviews with children and youth (who remain anonymous), Aysha learns that many of them are currently stranded in Greece and are eagerly hoping to move on and find a new home.</p>

### 1.3. Seeking Safety

<a href="#"><u>Een jaar zonder mijn ouders</u></a> (A Year Without My Parents, NL, 2017)	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director: Els van Driel</li> <li>• Producer: Anouk Dark</li> <li>• Executive Producer: Anouk Donker</li> <li>• Production Company: IKON</li> <li>• Broadcaster: NPO Zapp</li> <li>• Format: Documentary</li> <li>• 23 minutes</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Een jaar zonder mijn ouders</i> puts the spotlight on eleven-year-old Tareq, who has fled war in Syria to live in Europe. Tareq embarked on this journey without his parents, leaving them behind with his sister and brother. Once arrived in the Netherlands, Tareq starts a new life and goes to school (a clip shown at the workshop). However, he faces an uncertain future, not knowing if and when he will see his parents again. This documentary follows Tareq in this critical period of waiting for a reunion with his family after having been apart for more than a year.</p>


<a href="#"><u>Tro Håb Afghanistan: Laylas Melodi</u></a> (Faith-Hope-Afghanistan: Layla's Melody, Denmark, 2013)	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Directors: Jens Pedersen &amp; Tai M. Bakthari</li> <li>• Producer: Jakob Gottschau</li> <li>• Production company: Pederson &amp; Co</li> <li>• Broadcaster: DR</li> <li>• Format: Documentary</li> <li>• 16 minutes</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Laylas Melodi</i> is one of five films in the series <i>Tro Håb Afghanistan</i>, which follows children in Afghanistan who live in the shadow of conflict in the country. The film follows eleven-year old Layla, who lives in a Kabul orphanage. Her father was killed in the war and she has not seen her mother for four years. However, Layla feels happy in the orphanage, because she can go to school and play music. Layla learns that her mother is coming to visit her. We showed clips demonstrating how Layla is torn between excitement about the reunion and fear that she might be expected to return to her mother's village to get married.</p>

[The One Minutes Jr.](#) (NL, 2017)


Production Details	Synopsis - <i>My Trip by Marwa and My New Friends by Aya</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commissioner: UNICEF &amp; The One Minutes Foundation</li> <li>• Producer: Cinekid &amp; Stichting De Vrolijkheid</li> <li>• Format: Animation (Marwa), Documentary (Aya)</li> <li>• 2 x 1 minute</li> </ul>	 <p><i>The One Minutes Jr.</i> is a participatory arts and video initiative that highlights the diversity among children and youth around the world. Through workshops, children produce videos of 60 seconds on a topic of their choice, and are mentored by adult film professionals. <i>My Trip</i> and <i>My New Friends</i> were made in workshops involving two Syrian girls (Marwa and Aya) who live in refugee accommodation in the Netherlands. <i>My Trip</i> is an animated treatment of the journey Marwa took with her family to escape the conflict in Syria. In <i>My New Friends</i>, Aya reflects on how she settled into a strange new country by making new friends.</p>

### 1.4. Living in limbo

[Asylbarn - Jamila, Gid jeg kunne flyve](#) (Asylum Child - Jamila, If only I could fly, Denmark, 2013)


Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director: Jannik Hastrup</li> <li>• Producer: Dansk Tegnefilm with support of the Danish Film Institute</li> <li>• Animation: Jannik Hastrup</li> <li>• Episodes: 3 x 10 Minutes</li> <li>• Format: Animated drama</li> <li>• Target audience: 6-9 years</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Jamila, if only I could fly</i> is one of three animated dramas in the series <i>Asylum Child</i>, based on the experiences of refugee children in Denmark. Jamila is an eight-year-old girl who was born in a Danish refugee camp, after her parents fled to Denmark from Iraq ten years ago. Jamila has had many friends at the refugee center, but most of them only stay for a short while. As the clips shown at the workshop revealed, right now, Cecilie is Jamila's best friend with whom she flirts with boys and goes belly dancing at the afterschool club. But Cecilie and her family have been denied asylum and are deported, even though Cecilie was born in Denmark.</p>


[Nuzuh](#) (Displacement, Malaysia/Yemen, 2016)


Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director: Shatha Alghabri</li> <li>• Producer: Yemen Identity Organisation</li> <li>• Streamed by Oxfam International</li> <li>• Format: Documentary interviews</li> <li>• 4 Minutes</li> </ul>	 <p>'We used to sleep on the floor — not in bed — so that when an explosion happened, the glass wouldn't shatter on us', explains one girl who fled Yemen's capital city, Sana'a, with her family. Through the thoughts of children who have fled to Malaysia to escape the dangers of living in a conflict zone, this short film highlights the ongoing war in Yemen. The children talk about what they miss about their lives in Yemen, whether they want to return to their home country, and what they would do if they were the president of Yemen.</p>

### 1.5 Diversity and cultural exchanges


[Heijplaters](#) (Harbourboyz, NL, 2018)



Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director: Mirjam Marks</li> <li>• Producer: Nienke Korthof</li> <li>• Production company: Tangerine Tree</li> <li>• Commissioner: EO/IKONdosc</li> <li>• Broadcaster NPO Zapp</li> <li>• Format: Documentary</li> <li>• 15 minutes</li> </ul>	 <p>Set in Heijplaat, a working-class harbour district in Rotterdam, this observational film introduces five boys who are close friends despite all coming from different religious and cultural backgrounds. They were born in the Netherlands, but their origins range from Dutch and Turkish to Surinamese, Syrian and Chinese. However, for this close-knit group of friends, these differences do not seem to matter. The clips we showed of <i>Heijplaters</i> revealed that in an area where containers and ships replace playgrounds, there is not much for the teenagers to do, which makes their friendship particularly important.</p>

<a href="#"><i>Hassan og Ramadanen</i></a> ( <i>Hassan and Ramadan</i> , Denmark, 2017)	
Production Details	Synopsis - Film and webisodes 1-17
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commissioner/Broadcaster: DR Ultra</li> <li>• Dir. Ulla Søe</li> <li>• Prod. Mette Mailand</li> <li>• Production Company: Plus Pictures with The Danish Film Institute</li> <li>• Format: Documentary</li> <li>• 45 minutes (film) / 17 x 5-9 minutes (Web series)</li> <li>• Target audience: Grades 3-6</li> </ul>	 <p><i>Hassan og Ramadanen</i> centres on eleven-year-old Hassan who lives in Køge, Denmark, with his family, originally from Iraq. Hassan's family are Shia Muslim and he has decided he wants to try fasting for the first time during Ramadan, inspired by his older brothers and parents. But how can Hassan concentrate at school, succeed at football, and play with his friends while not eating or drinking from dawn to sunset? <i>Hassan og Ramadanen</i> is a 45-minute documentary film, divided into 17 webisodes of 5-9 minutes duration for distribution as a web series on YouTube. We showed two clips. In the first, Hassan explains to his family that he would like to join them in fasting. In the second, Hassan and his father talk in the car about how and why they identify Denmark as their home.</p>

<a href="#">#JegErDansk</a> (#IamDanish) video campaign, 2017	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Production company: Gorilla Media Denmark</li> <li>• Director: Alex Sabour</li> <li>• Format: Documentary interviews</li> <li>• 2 Minutes</li> </ul> 	<p><a href="#">#JegErDansk</a> was made in response to the following <a href="#">statement from the Danish Parliament</a> in February 2017: 'Parliament believes that Danes should not be in the minority in neighbourhoods in Denmark. Today there are areas in Denmark where the proportion of immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries is over 50 percent'. This phrasing implied that someone cannot be Danish if they have migrated to Denmark from a non-Western country.</p> <p>The video shows several Danish children with migration backgrounds being asked where they are from. After answering that they are Danish, they are told they are in fact not Danish. The children's reactions range from confusion to tears, and the video closes with a text reading 'Dear politicians, please remember who you're talking about'.</p>

## 1.6 Participation and engagement

<a href="#">De Kinderburgemeester</a> ( <i>The Children's Mayor</i> , NL, 2017)	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dir. Susan Koenen</li> <li>• Executive Prod. Albert Klein Haneveld</li> <li>• Prod. company: Hollandse Helden</li> <li>• Broadcaster- Commissioner: NPO Zapp - KRO-NCRV</li> <li>• Format: Documentary</li> <li>• 15 Minutes</li> <li>• Screened at CPH:Dox 2018</li> </ul> 	<p><i>De Kinderburgemeester</i> focuses on Yassine, a boy of Moroccan heritage who was Children's Mayor in Gouda for one year. Yassine has two goals for his one-year 'term of office': bringing children from different ethnic backgrounds together and meeting his role model, the Moroccan-born mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb. The clips in the workshop show Yassine sending an email to Aboutaleb, asking if they can meet. Aboutaleb replies saying that he does not have time, but perhaps Yassine can drop by. After a tour of the town hall, Yassine is told that the mayor is not available. But he does not give up and eventually manages to arrange a meeting, during which the mayor tells him that he has to work 'extra hard' as children's mayor, because many people have prejudices against Moroccan people. The closing scene shows a wistful Yassine as he hands over power to his successor, Romaissa.</p>

<b>Het Haar van Ahmad</b> ( <i>Ahmad's Hair</i> , NL, 2016)	
Production Details	Synopsis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dir. Susan Koenen</li> <li>• Prod. Albert Klein Haneveld</li> <li>• Prod company: Hollandse Helden</li> <li>• Broadcaster/Commissioner: NPO Zapp: KRO-NCRV</li> <li>• Format: Documentary</li> <li>• 23 Minutes</li> <li>• Screened at CPH:Dox 2018</li> </ul>	 <p>Twelve-year old Ahmad has just arrived in the Netherlands from Syria. While he is busy trying to integrate into Dutch society, learn a new language and make new friends, he is also on a heart-warming, personal mission: he is growing his hair, so that it can be donated to a Dutch child who has lost their hair due to illness.</p> <p>The clips we showed revealed Ahmad's initial struggle with making new friends and learning Dutch, his growing confidence, and that for him, donating his hair is a way of giving something back for the help he and his family received from the Netherlands.</p>
<b>ZDF Logo!</b> (Germany, 2017)	
Production Details	Synopsis – <a href="#">Verteilung von Flüchtlingen in der EU</a> (Distribution of Refugees in the EU)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prod. ZDF</li> <li>• Broadcaster: ZDF</li> <li>• Format: Animation</li> <li>• 1 Minute</li> </ul>	 <p>This animated clip explains the distribution of refugees within the European Union (EU), and that the EU is now suing three of its own member states - Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic - who are failing to meet their refugee targets.</p>

## 2. CHALLENGES OF FUNDING AND DISTRIBUTION

The workshops highlighted the many challenges that exist for European producers when creating content that speaks to the communication needs of children newly arrived in Europe. In fact, European broadcasters and governments have a legal obligation to ensure that this content is commissioned and distributed. Article 17 of the United Nations' Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) declares: 'States Parties ... shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health'.

Our previous research project revealed that children in Arab countries enjoy local screen content that engages with issues affecting their own lives and experiences if it is available.<sup>3</sup> When asked in creative workshops to construct their own schedules they also chose a diverse range of content including drama, news, quizzes, documentaries and sitcoms, reflecting a 'public service sensibility'. However, this is not what they get in practice, because Arab-owned children's channels are saturated with imported animation, which is cheap to buy and offers the opportunity to censor culturally sensitive content such as references to alcohol and relationships.<sup>4</sup> Across the region only Moroccan and Lebanese broadcasters are required to broadcast content aimed specifically at children, but these regulations are rarely observed. In their home

<sup>3</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,

<sup>4</sup> 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.



countries, Arab children have not had access to large amounts of domestic content, and what they have seen is often heavily didactic and dominated by adults in ways that undermine children's agency and fail to promote critical thinking and progressive values.

## 2.1 Subsidies' impact on know-how

The above observations indicate that European content producers have ample potential for providing material that is both novel and interesting to children caught up in forced migration. But their biggest hurdles in doing so are securing both a commission and finance; with most productions reliant on subsidies, this is not getting any easier. In many European countries, local children's content is commissioned almost exclusively by PSB channels with few alternative sources of funding.<sup>5</sup> Denmark operates a small public service fund, *Public Service Puljen*, which is available to commercial broadcasters, and at least 25% of this fund has to be spent on children's content.<sup>6</sup> The DFI is obliged to spend 25 percent of its programming budget on children's content, which according to one DFI representative, resulted in a sufficient number of films for people in the film industry to accumulate 'more knowledge and experience [so] that they become better'. A Swedish participant noted that Sweden had a similar system and a commissioning editor for children's film, but removal of the position led to a decline in applications, with a decline to zero when the 25 per cent obligation was removed, leading to its reintroduction. In the Netherlands, film funding is available from organisations such as the NPO Public Broadcasting Media Fund and The Netherlands Film Fund.<sup>7</sup> Director Susan Koenen secured funding for *Het Haar van Ahmad* from the Dutch Cultural Media Fund before it closed in 2017.<sup>8</sup> Filmmakers complain about the difficulties of obtaining public funds because of lengthy and bureaucratic application procedures. One Danish producer said he had given up on applying for public funding altogether, because of the time and labour involved in getting partial funding, which is never given upfront. For his company, it was easier to negotiate corporate sponsorship deals – for example, with Facebook and Google. Yet this carried risks of content being diluted by commercial priorities.

The Swedish organisation, The Financing Forum for Kids Content, aims to address some of these challenges. Projects participating in the Financing Forum are pitched to a number of suitable and significant decision makers, who in turn might offer support with funding. According to its Creative Director, Annette Breijner, the Financing Forum presented 23 projects from 14 countries for funding in the last year, including documentaries for children, where diversity is a key issue. However, she added producers need to have a marketing strategy in place from the start:

**The producer must know your target group and the mechanisms of marketing the film and build an audience. You can design your audience, thinking from a very early stage [...] which helps to reach your target group. Because that does not come by itself, but you can help build a taste in children just how you can help them learn how to appreciate a good meal and quality standards.**

<sup>5</sup> Steemers and Awan, *Policy Solutions*, p.51.

<sup>6</sup> Steemers and Awan, *Policy Solutions*, p.51.

<sup>7</sup> The Netherlands Film Fund is the national agency responsible for supporting film production and film related activities in the Netherlands.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.government.nl/topics/the-media-and-broadcasting/funds-for-the-media>

Some producers have sought support from charities, but this can bring other problems. According to a Dutch producer, ‘NGOs don’t necessarily know about media, how it works.... So, they want to be in it and wave their flags and banners and stuff like that. So, you have a huge problem making a real documentary without them being on top of it’. A representative from a UK NGO pointed out that funding agencies constantly wanted producers ‘to prove to them how media have impact’, not appreciating that impact can emerge ten years later. Although it was difficult to measure impact, a Danish representative argued that ‘We have to become better in sharpening the arguments for why it’s making a difference’.

## 2.2 The YouTube syndrome

One growing and major obstacle in funding children’s factual content is the increasing difficulty of attracting young audiences to watch children’s broadcast content. Broadcasters are losing young audiences to online platforms, particularly YouTube, where getting children to watch documentaries is, according to a Danish broadcaster, ‘hard’. A Dutch filmmaker added that children who have migrated to Europe from Arab countries are primarily watching YouTube and adult news content because they have grown up watching satellite TV in their countries of origin. Distribution and the ability to reach out to audiences was now a key factor. As one Danish producer remarked:

**I never met a funder who said: “I will not promote diversity”. But the problem is the distribution. The problem is that they [commissioners] are very scared of throwing their money towards something that is not being used, which is understandable. What we’re facing in Denmark is that Flow TV is going for the lowest common denominator and is turning TV into a candy store and cheap thrills, competing with cat videos in a way.**

Children still watch a lot of linear television on a TV set, but this audience is declining as children’s viewing shifts to on-demand online content on tablets and mobile phones. A 2017 study by the UK regulator, Ofcom, suggests that UK children’s viewing (aged 5-15) of linear TV on a TV set had declined from just under 16 hours a week in 2007 to 14 hours ten years later.<sup>9</sup> Older children, in particular, are spending more time online, with 8-11 year olds and 12-15 year olds in the UK spending over 13 hours and 20 hours online a week respectively.<sup>10</sup> This represents a challenge for broadcasters, but online distribution is not always the answer. According to an Arab participant working for an NGO, if ‘there is no funding or actually someone dedicated to distributing it online and finding channels, then nobody watches it’. An experienced Danish director added that there are ‘a lot of films ... produced in Denmark focusing on diversity and those films live a very, very lonely life on some internet platforms by an NGO. It really is a little bit of a waste’.

Reflecting on factual content, a Scandinavian PSB executive added: ‘the issue is that we don’t know how to use them’. Apart from schools and cinemas, this PSB had ‘few good examples of how documentaries like these work on what we call VOD (video on demand) which is where we meet our target group, which is children aged 7-12’. He suggested that most of his target audience – children aged 7-12 – watch

<sup>9</sup> Ofcom, *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report*, London: Ofcom, 2017, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Ofcom, p. 25.

entertainment and animation on YouTube and commercial channels, which makes it difficult for them to 'sell' documentaries focused on flight and diversity. Some short-form content about forced migration was shown in children's news bulletins and these were used to attract children to other stories. But distributing factual content was challenging because 'children don't choose to watch documentaries. We have a few, but we have far more examples of these not working, trying to get them to watch documentaries themselves. They don't is the short answer. They click on entertainment and fiction even on the public broadcasting website'. In his view 'the biggest market right now' for documentaries was schools.

The exception was *Hassan og Ramadanen*, which DR released as a web series of 17 shorter episodes on YouTube in 2017 and on the DFI's website, Film Centralen, as a 40-minute documentary. *Hassan og Ramadanen* did 'exceptionally well on YouTube', racking up approximately 100,000 views per episode. A DR executive said, 'we don't know why'. Such lack of knowledge about what child audiences view and value reflects the failure of audience measurement and evaluation in a rapidly evolving viewing landscape.<sup>11</sup> This lack of data stands in stark contrast to subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services (Netflix) and social media (Facebook), which rely on proprietary data, guided by algorithms, to push popular content to child consumers.

In the view of an Arab representative working for an NGO, it might anyway be a mistake to always assume that children only watch short-form content, because they often view other children on YouTube for periods of over half an hour on topics that really interest them. A Swedish industry representative, active in marketing and development, pointed out that children are drawn to factual content because they are 'extremely interested in politics and how the world is put together', but they also want to make 'their voices heard and have influence'. It was up to adults to put documentaries into the schedules. A Lebanese producer suggested that children in the Arab world might be watching less television simply because there is 'nothing on TV that talks to them'. Echoing the success of *Hassan og Ramadanen*, she pointed to the success of the Lebanese web-based youth series *Shankaboot*, commissioned by BBC Media Action.<sup>12</sup> *Shankaboot* proved popular on YouTube and social media because it addressed issues that affect young people, such as drugs, relationships and gun crime.

While television and online distribution could be described as complementary, some attendees argued that linear television and film festivals are no longer an effective means of distributing factual content to children, and that producers should also consider online platforms and community screenings. Several workshop participants argued that it is not always easy to build an audience online. Websites and YouTube channels need to be maintained and promoted to ensure discovery by the audience. In a radical departure, a producer from a Danish advertising company claimed that they experienced no difficulties in promoting content online, but that online distribution strategies often require a compromise between 'dumbing down' the quality and successful online marketing. According to him, 'getting people to see anything is actually quite easy'. In his view promoting material on Facebook or YouTube was easier and faster than going through 'a two-year-round of funding and then hope that it'll go on television'.

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<sup>11</sup> Sonia Livingstone and Claire Local, 'Measurement matters: difficulties in defining and measuring children's television viewing in a changing media landscape', *Media International Australia*, 63 (1), 67-76.

<sup>12</sup> *Shankaboot*, an interactive web-based video series filmed in and around Beirut, Lebanon, was the first web series drama in the Arab world.

### 2.3. 'I miss the voice of the children'

European producers revealed that it is often difficult to identify the kind of screen content children want to see, and even more difficult for children newly arrived in Europe. A DR audience researcher reported that it is particularly hard to conduct research with small target groups, such as refugee children, who are not easy to reach. Other workshop participants suggested that children from minority ethnic backgrounds might not be interested in watching European TV, because these programmes rarely reflect their lives. For example, one participant with a Syrian background, living in Denmark with her own children, remarked that the voices of children are often missing in content produced for them. She suggested that children are too often framed by the perspectives of adult producers.

The lack of programmes featuring refugee children is linked to a wider lack of diversity in European media industries. People with minority backgrounds are rarely to be found occupying positions as directors, editors, and broadcasters.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as one Danish academic pointed out, children's programmes in Denmark and Sweden are often embedded within Scandinavian concepts of the child and childhood, which, at times, clash with the 'more conservative' understandings of childhood that exist within families who have recently taken up residence in Europe.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.4. Cinemas and schools

One way to give young refugee children a 'voice' is to involve them in production. In 2017, the Cinekid film festival in the Netherlands ran a project, *Cinekid Inclusive*, that sought to involve children from marginalised backgrounds in producing short films distributed in cinemas. In cooperation with *One Minutes Jr*, Cinekid produced 11 films of 60 seconds duration, which were made with the participation of children in Dutch refugee camps. During a one-week workshop as part of a pop-up Cinekid festival during the school summer holidays, children living in asylum centers worked with the assistance of adult facilitators, some of whom spoke Arabic. They made films that display a range of topics and formats, choosing their own subjects and style, from the difficulties of settling into a new society (*Aya*), to comedy, and mother-child relationships, not just migration. Cinekid subsequently showed the films at the Cinekid festival, at which the young filmmakers were also present. Since April 2018, they have also been included as trailers before children's films at the Eye Film Museum in Amsterdam and may in future be seen on TV.

Video initiatives like *The One Minutes Jr* underline the importance of the participatory filmmaking process. However, some Arab participants were concerned about the psychological effects of children reliving their experiences as refugees, although one Arab producer thought it could be a form of therapy. Others were concerned about the power dynamics between the children and the adult facilitators in making production choices. Two Syrian-born participants suggested that the decision to make the films in asylum centres might have prompted children to focus more on their experiences of forced migration, when working together with European-born children might have prompted a broader range of topics.

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<sup>13</sup> This issue also emerged in the first workshop in the series, held in Manchester, in the UK. See pp 9-10 of the workshop report at <https://euroarabchildrensmedia.org/manchester-workshop-report>

<sup>14</sup> See also 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 25-28.

While *The One Minutes Jr* series was successfully distributed in cinemas, Cinekid's representative noted that, in the Netherlands, children themselves do not generally choose to watch documentaries. Another distribution avenue, also heavily used in Denmark, are schools. For example, the DFI runs a streaming service for [schools](#) and produces study guides for shows like *Hassan og Ramadanen* and *Tro Håb Afghanistan*, which are shown as part of the school curriculum. In the Netherlands, documentary films for children are gathered together on broadcaster NPO's website [Zapp Echt Gebeurd](#) (Zapp Really Happened), which school teachers can freely access.

The advantages of screening documentaries at film festivals and in schools are that these exhibition spaces allow for face-to-face discussions. After the premier of *Een jaar zonder mijn ouders* at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), for example, children in the audience were able to discuss the film with the director and Tarek, the film's subject, who was present at the screening.



[Click image to play clip](#)

## 2.5 EU funds serving children in refugee camps

The workshop learned of a current BBC Media Action project for children affected by forced migration to be funded by the European Union (EU). The project is aimed at connecting displaced Syrian children in all parts of the world. Targeting children aged 3-5 years, 6-12 years, and 12-16 years, BBC Media Action plans to produce 20 five-minute videos for each age group, working with local production companies and advisers, including drama consultants and psychologists. The EU has so far funded a pilot in Lebanon, with further funding dependent on its outcomes. With half a million Syrian children currently living in Lebanon and 59 percent of these outside of formal education, BBC Media Action's pilot is educational and seeks to address numeracy and literacy for 3-5 year-olds as well as life skills (based on Unesco/Unicef frameworks) and psychosocial support for the older age groups. Focus groups are being used to identify children's media preferences and the best method of distribution. Distribution is likely to be through online channels and community screenings in collaboration with NGOs, community groups, and schools, because Syrian children are not watching much TV. A major challenge has been the EU's requirement of demonstrable impacts in the short term. While it is easy to estimate the impact of aid when it is in the form of vaccines, it is difficult to predict and demonstrate the practical outcomes of media content that addresses topics such as child rights, citizenship and tolerance. This kind of 'impact' is not easy to measure, not least because it is likely to be long term.

## 3. PUTTING FLIGHT INTO PERSPECTIVE

### 3.1 Life vests and rubber dinghies

Workshop discussions centered on the ways in which children who are forced to leave their homes should be represented on screen. This emerged first in relation to films about children's lives in refugee camps as well as their experiences of fleeing.

#### **Different feelings about portraying dangerous journeys**

Arab participants felt that the experiences of displaced children were sometimes essentialised in factual content aimed at European children, such as *Hello Salaam*, *Ferie på Flygtningeøen*, and BBC Newsround. By focusing on children's forced migration journeys – including details of discarded life vests and rubber dinghies – this content ran the risk of sensationalizing children's experiences of escape. A Syrian participant now living in Denmark felt that what was often missing was any information about children's lives prior to the escape: 'their culture, their music, their literature, their stories ... because we have a lot of common stories'. It was acknowledged, however, that *Hello Salaam* did show balanced interactions between the refugee children and the two Dutch boys, where friendships were forged through drinking tea together, communicating through a Google translation app, and a raucous snowball fight towards the end of the film.

Two Danish participants argued that films focused on flight, such as *Hello Salaam* and *Ferie på Flygtningeøen*, do have educational value, offering European-born children an opportunity to learn about forced migration and what it's like to live as a refugee. Other Arab participants felt that a sequence showing an inflatable boat 'graveyard' in *Hello Salaam* might be too distressing for European children, instilling a sense of guilt that Europe is not doing enough. When it comes to refugee children themselves, it was suggested that they no longer want to see screen content about this short period in their lives. According to one Lebanese producer, refugees have had 'enough of seeing this on the news and everywhere. What we want to see is something different, something about us that is more empowering'. One Danish producer of Iranian heritage questioned whether children would watch *Hallo Salaam* because it was 'programming for adults' and the children's discussions were 'a reflection of their [Dutch] parents'. Referring to a scene where the boys discuss the effects of being a refugee, he added: 'I've never heard kids talking about buying property, ever'.

### 3.2 To label or not to label?

A constant theme that emerged in the workshop was whether the media should focus on children's forced migration journeys at all, revealing some differences between European and Arab participants. Some with forced migration backgrounds suggested moving away from children's journeys because this too

often constructs a narrative of victimhood where European-born children are ‘us’ and newly arrived children, being singled out as a separate group, are ‘the other’. <sup>15</sup> Labeling newly arrived children as ‘refugees’, ‘migrants’, or ‘asylum seekers’ was felt to reinforce such binaries. However, it was also stressed that content about escape, and children’s experiences of conflict and migration, plays a vital role in educating European-born children about the reasons why many Arab families have recently arrived in Europe. One Danish academic said: ‘We could do it differently, sure, we could do it in many ways. [...] I think it’s really important that we address it. I think it’s an obligation on society, because it’s been such a huge problem for the last five years’. A participant who fled Syria and now resides in Denmark added that it could eventually be therapeutic for children to confront the traumatic experiences of their transit, but that this was not something to undertake soon after their arrival. On the contrary, it could take several years for them to be ready to talk about what happened.

A Lebanese participant, who works with a UK NGO, suggested that lessons could be learnt from ways that other forms of diversity are shown, such as disability. ‘They try very hard to not make a big deal out of being disabled’. She suggested the same could apply to refugee children who are ‘now a section of society and they are normal kids’.

### 3.3 Advantages of the documentary genre

Previous intrusive journalistic practices in conflict zones represent a significant hurdle in terms of media access. A BBC Media Action representative, who has worked in refugee camps in Lebanon, recounted that refugees often resist being filmed by journalists in the camps. She said: ‘people are just like: “Go away. Don’t come and see us”. They don’t want you there. They’re sick of people coming and looking at them’. It was acknowledged that journalists often depicted life in refugee camps in sensationalist ways, without exploring more personal, nuanced stories.

Some participants felt that the problem with the story of escape is not the escape as such, but negative coverage of it. The alternative, which is open to makers of documentary films, is to re-tell individual stories of forced migration in a detailed, personalized and sensitive way. One Danish researcher, who has interviewed many immigrants and refugees in Denmark, revealed that people with forced migration backgrounds are often very willing to share positive experiences of their journeys to Denmark with others. She said:

**You can actually try to re-tell the story of escape, so it’s not only a negative story but also a positive story, because people love to tell it. If you ask [immigrants and refugees in Denmark] about a positive story related to the flight, they love to tell their story. They love to tell their story about how long it took to come to Denmark, but I can also recognise that they don’t want to tell the story that just repeats the stigmatisation. So I think there is a dilemma but also a possibility to re-narrate the story.**

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<sup>15</sup> See also p. 6 of the *Manchester Workshop Briefing* report from the first project workshop in Manchester, at <https://euroarabchildrensmedia.org/manchester-workshop-report>

### 3.4. Going ‘home’

Some of the films discussed during the workshops constructed different meanings of ‘home’ for children. Even when children have moved to another country, they may still be hoping to return to where they came from or, alternatively, seeking to escape from cultural and societal pressures. The short video *Nuzuh* (Displacement), which is streamed on Oxfam International’s website, presents interviews with Yemeni children living in Malaysia, who are asked whether they would like to return to their homes in the Yemeni capital, Sana’a. All of them say ‘yes’ and explain enthusiastically that they miss things like going to ballet classes, wearing traditional dress, and sleeping in their own bedrooms. *Nuzuh*’s emphasis on the children’s desire to return to Yemen was seen by one Lebanese producer as presenting a ‘very powerful message’ for Europeans, namely, that displaced people ‘don’t want to integrate, they don’t want anything from you’. ‘All they want is the war to stop so they can go back’.

There were other interpretations, however. A Syrian participant living in Denmark suggested that younger children are more likely to want to return home, because they associate ‘home’ with spaces, toys, and clothes ‘in their familiar atmosphere’. By contrast, older children who have lived longer in a different country are more likely to struggle with questions of identity, because they ‘will not be typical Yemenis or typical Syrians and also not Danish or Europeans’. These children are less likely to want to ‘go back’ if that means having to ‘start from zero, a new school, new friends’.

To some, the interviews in *Nuzuh* seemed staged, almost ‘like an advertisement’, with the children smartly dressed and their statements indicating a middle-class background. They are certainly not representative of all Yemeni children, most of whom are unable to escape the country. As one participant pointed out, there are currently 2 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in Yemen.<sup>16</sup> Several responses suggested that, similar to corporate sponsorship, humanitarian agencies’ support of screen content can sometimes lead to problematic filmmaking practices and one-sided stories, which exploit children to raise money for their cause.

#### **‘Home should be where life makes sense’**

Discussions about the Danish documentary, *Laylas Melodi*, called into question the very idea that ‘home’ is necessarily a place to which displaced children unequivocally want to return. This short documentary focuses on Layla, an 11-year-old Afghan girl who lives in a Kabul orphanage, placed there by her uncle, while her mother lives in the rural mountains. Layla misses her mother badly but does not seek to return to her village, which is under Taliban control, because she fears that, once there, she will no longer be able to go to school or play music, and that she may be forced to get married. As one Syrian workshop participant commented, *Laylas Melodi* ‘gives the message that sometimes [...] home should be where life makes sense, not where your mother lives. That’s not what home means. What home means for this intelligent girl is where she has a life’.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://bit.ly/2jQ1fly>



## 4. ETHICAL RISKS OF EXPLOITING VULNERABILITY

### 4.1 When is 'close' too close?

Workshop discussions frequently returned to the ethical dimensions of documenting children's experiences of flight in documentaries and news. Some European participants saw films that get close to children in refugee camps, such as *Ferie på Flygtningøen* and *Hello Salaam*, as an opportunity to allow European children to 'get to know what others experience'. Other participants, however, both European and Arab, perceived this approach as a potential violation of children's rights. On a practical level, we learned that revealing children's identities and experiences of escape can also put them at risk of prosecution if they have arrived illegally in Europe.

Discussions surrounding *Ferie på Flygtningøen* brought some of the ethical challenges to the fore. The workshop clips showed how a ten-year-old Danish boy, Alvin (the director's son), visits a refugee camp while on holiday on Samos. Filmed with a smart phone, Alvin is shown meeting children in the camps and handing them sweets, before he is interrupted by a guard, and we learn that he and his father subsequently spent five and a half hours at the police station. The workshop heard that the filmmaker and his son entered the camp without having sought permission beforehand, which some participants saw as infringement of the children's privacy. There was a sense, including among Syrians in the room, that people in refugee camps do not want to be filmed because they feel ashamed of their situation. One also expressed concern about the film's psychological impact on Alvin, but the film's director reassured everyone that there had been no adverse effects on his son. He said the 'main story behind the film is why can't [the refugees] fly where they want? We fly on holiday down there. It's asked many times in the movie: Why can't they move like we do?'

The director said he had wanted to allow the documentary to unfold from the perspective of a child, by 'letting the children themselves be the stars', rather than imposing an adult perspective. He was interested in 'how we tell the world the truth, not for the grown-ups', but stated also: 'it's a European view for European children to understand and get close to the problematic. It's not made for migrant children'. He explained that children who watched the film in Danish cinemas wanted to know more about Alvin's detention by police and his encounters with children in the camp. A Danish-Egyptian participant saw the film as a portrait of the current refugee crisis that offers an alternative perspective to often 'simple' news coverage.

### 4.2 The pitfalls of standing too far back

Discussions also revealed issues arising when filmmakers were thought to be 'standing too far back'. The BBC Newsround episode, *Ayshah meets child refugees in Greece*, comprises short interviews with displaced youths whose faces are concealed and whose background stories are not further explored. Participants suggested that the programme keeps such a distance from the children it documents that it 'dehumanizes' them, making it difficult for children viewing to find points of identification. Similarly, a clip from German children's news *ZDF Logo!*, explaining the distribution of refugees in the EU through a series of graphic diagrams, was perceived as too abstract, because it avoided showing any of the human side of forced migration.

How then can filmmakers strike a balance between revealing too much and revealing too little? One Danish participant working for an NGO, summed up the tensions as follows:

**This is exactly the dilemma, because now you are so distant that you're not harming anyone. So, if you get closer, then you're starting to harm people. So, you need to find the right balance. [...] Are you showing some [life] vests, then you go straight to the stomach of people, or do you have a guy sitting from the back talking to her face about how awful it is and you don't get any feelings? I'm not saying one thing is better than the other, just that there is a balance to find.**

### 4.3 Films that change policy

Some documentaries are made with a political goal in mind, for example to critique European asylum policy and the social stigmatisation of children with minority backgrounds. The workshop considered the video campaign #JegErDansk, which was made for politicians, not children, but features young children being visibly confused and upset.

The video was made by a Danish advertising company, Gorilla Media, to challenge a statement issued by the Danish Parliament in February 2017, which suggested that 'Danes' should not be in a minority in Danish neighbourhoods. The statement read: 'today there are areas in Denmark where the proportion of immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries is over 50 percent'. This phrasing seemed to imply a contradiction between being Danish and being descended from non-Western immigrants. In the video, six Danish children with migration backgrounds are asked where they are from and all reply that they are Danish. When told that they are not Danes, the children appear shaken and disturbed and one girl bursts into tears. #JegErDansk went viral after being viewed over 1.5 million times within 24 hours of its release on Facebook. The Danish Parliament then changed its initial statement to be more inclusive, but meanwhile the film-makers came in for criticism from politicians and the public, partly on ethical grounds.

Ethical concerns were also voiced at the workshop. The film's producers explained that the children were all related to, or connected to, the filming team and had been happy to take part. A Syrian teacher doubted whether the film's positive political outcome justified the problematic ways in which it was made. But one of the producers explained that, immediately after filming, the children had started to articulate their own experiences of discrimination. Teachers subsequently took up the issue at school by introducing an assignment on 'What does it mean to be Danish?'

There was evidence from workshop participants that Danish-speaking children from visible minorities regularly experience racism and stereotypical judgments from peers and even teachers, but that this kind of discrimination is not openly addressed. A Syrian resident said children could face 'two circles' of ghettoization, a physical one imposed by the country and one created by their own families. One of the video producers said: 'We don't talk about the identity crises that children who don't look white in Denmark have. I had that when I was a child. I was hurt. People say: "You're not Danish". ... I felt that with time it would change. It didn't, it became worse.'

#### 4.4 Getting the distance right

The workshop discussed how filmmakers can achieve a balance between producing films that individualise children without harming them or portraying them as victims. Participants appreciated the documentary *Een Jaar zonder mijn ouders* as a non-sensationalist, balanced portrait of Tareq, who fled Syria to the Netherlands with his uncle and cousin. His parents could not join him until more than a year later. The film's director, Els van Driel, recalled that, at first, Tareq did not want to speak about his experience of flight to his classmates, which she attributed to a desire to fit in with his Dutch peers and 'be a normal guy'. An Arab participant, herself a former refugee, added that keeping silent about bad experiences might reflect a cultural background that teaches people 'they should be strong, they should be normal, their sadness must just be inside them'. Van Driel recounted that, when Tareq did speak about his experience for the film, it turned out to be helpful for him because his peers supported him emotionally afterwards.

Van Driel chose to tell the story of Tareq's flight in the film, because she felt it was important for Dutch children to hear about it. However, the film's main focus is on Tareq's new life in the Netherlands while he is waiting for his parents to come, and the responsibility this places on his young shoulders. In one key scene, Tareq and his cousin Usama are seen chatting in Arabic at the swimming pool about how they like the big pools in the Netherlands and 'that there is no war'. Van Driel explained that she deliberately kept the camera at a distance so as not to influence their conversation. A Lebanese producer commented on how genuine the scene felt and participants generally commended the depiction of Tareq as a confident, popular boy with a sense of humour. Some noted how one scene, set in Tareq's school, depicts a Dutch boy as very dependent on his mother (he claims that she cleans his teeth braces), while Tareq is represented as independent.

### 5. SHARING KNOWLEDGE ACROSS BORDERS

#### 5.1 Sharing cultural knowledge

Some Danish participants in the workshop lamented the fact that news is virtually the only genre focused on the Arab world that is easily accessible for Danish audiences, and that it too often reflects an anti-immigration political agenda. By contrast, films and television programmes from the Middle East are rarely shown on European screens. This leaves a large gap in knowledge about Arab culture, which Arab participants were very keen to see filled. Culturally aware and sensitive films about children with migration backgrounds offer an opportunity for both European-born children and adults to better understand Arab culture and values. A Danish producer said:

**I think the important part here is to counter the stereotyping that you have in the mainstream media and by that enable the children to also be able to talk to their parents, because you see everything just coming out in the mainstream media, and especially here in Denmark, with a certain political agenda. If you don't tell the full picture to the children, you can absolutely be sure they will feel the same as their parents.**

### 5.1.1 The experience of Ramadan

The Danish public broadcaster DR's web series *Hassan og Ramadanen* covers the practice of fasting during Ramadan. It unfolds from the perspective of ten-year-old Hassan, who decides to fast for the first time like his older brothers and parents. The majority of workshop participants found that *Hassan og Ramadanen* shows Muslim values and practices in a positive light, and teaches children about Ramadan in an entertaining way. Similar to the responses to *Een jaar zonder mijn ouders*, participants suggested that *Hassan og Ramadanen* was not only a programme about Ramadan, but also a portrait of a boy who has a sense of humour, is strong-willed, and wants to challenge himself. Participants welcomed the fact that *Hassan og Ramadanen* addresses issues around identity, showing that Hassan and his father see themselves as both Danish and Iraqi. A clip was shown in which Hassan asks his father which side he would take if Denmark was at war with Germany. His father responds that he would join the Danish army, as his family, house and work are located in Denmark.

Participants from Syria and Egypt remarked on the way religion and food are often taken as proxies for culture, when culture is potentially much richer than religious practice or 'exotic meals'. Other media professionals, however, suggested that religion forms an important part of life for many Arab families in Denmark, and non-Muslim children ought to understand and respect Muslim religious practices. DR promoted learning about Islam by inviting schools to Ramadan parties. A Danish media professional noted that this approach countered the kind of resentment that emerged in 2016 when a Danish town [voted](#) to require day care centres' and kindergartens' lunch menus to include pork meatballs, a traditional Danish meal that Muslim children are not permitted to eat. Some public institutions for children in Denmark had excluded pork dishes and required all meat to be *halal* (slaughtered according to Islamic practice).

### 5.1.2 Diversity and friendship – 'It's not explicit in the film'

The workshop revealed that films that do not make forced migration their main focus, but concentrate on other aspects of children's lives, can be particularly useful for teaching tolerance of other cultures. For example, the Dutch documentary *Heijplaters* concentrates on the similarities between five children of diverse ethnic backgrounds (Turkish, Syrian, Chinese, Suriname, and Dutch; see image), who live in the harbour district of Rotterdam. Rather than making the boys' demographic backgrounds the major focus of the narrative, the film focuses on activities they do together, such as swimming in the harbour, listening to music and rapping, and playing football.



*The boys from Heijplaters* (NL, 2017)

Mirjam Marks, the film's director, explained that she deliberately sought to make a film that focuses on the boys' friendships, rather than their differences. She said:

... how I formulated it is that it's not explicit in the film, because I don't like to do it that way. It's about friendship in times of polarisation. That's an issue all over in the Netherlands. My thoughts behind it were ... with the news and everything, there is so much attention, especially from adults, on differences among people from different cultural backgrounds or beliefs. But there are so many equal things far more than difference, I think. Children say: "do you want to play football, let's play football," and they don't ask "where are your parents from, where do they live?" or things like that. So that was the underlying reason. I found this group and I made the film - to look at them, without the moral finger.

Some participants remarked that the positive depiction of diversity in a Dutch community sets a good example for children. One saw the film as offering an unusual pro-migration argument by demonstrating that the children benefit from increasing their friendship group when new families arrive in town.

The documentary film *Ahmad's Hair* was also perceived by one participant as 'showing diversity without naming it'. The film focuses on Ahmad, a Syrian boy recently arrived in the Netherlands, who grows his hair in order to donate it to a sick child. Susan Koenen, the director, explained that she wanted to show that Syrian families are in fact not so different from Dutch families, in response to what she saw as rising anti-Muslim attitudes in the Netherlands. As a UK participant observed, Ahmad's family are highly supportive and caring. In one scene, when Ahmad is fed up with his long hair, his father tries to cheer him up. In another, Ahmad's younger sister shows him how easily she makes new friends. In this way, the film introduces the subject of diversity by focusing on human qualities and family life rather than the concept of 'diversity' itself. We see Ahmad grow in confidence and overcome his shyness as his knowledge of Dutch improves and he begins to make new friends.

## 5.2 Sharing political knowledge

### 5.2.1 Asylum processes

In addition to *#JegErDansk* (see Section 4.3), the workshop discussed another film that explores the political aspects of European immigration policy, namely, *Asylbarn: Jamila if only I could fly*. Part-funded by the Danish Red Cross and the DFI, this film combines real-life settings with animation, focusing on two girls, Jamila and Cecilie, who are friends in a refugee camp until Cecilie's family is deported. The film was aimed at children aged 6-9 and has been distributed in schools, accompanied by study guides made by the DFI. Workshop participants saw *Jamila* as an opportunity for introducing both Danish and immigrant children to the political processes surrounding asylum. One producer with a migration background remarked: 'I really liked it on a lot of levels [...] this is the way I would teach my child about Danish immigration policy. A lot of them are refugee children. I know that my daughter would love to see something like that. It's engaging [in] the timing, humour'. A UK participant remarked that the film also focuses on the less mundane experiences of children's lives in refugee camps, such as flirting with boys, dancing and making new friends.

A Dutch producer wondered whether children should be exposed to issues of immigration policy at such an early age. But a DFI representative, who produced educational packs to accompany the show, explained that even young children aged 6 to 8 are aware of these issues, because they have friends from other countries who sometimes face deportation.

### 5.2.2 'Democracy'

In line with CPH:DOX's theme of 'Democracy', the workshop explored both the meanings of democracy and how this concept has been, and should be, treated in films made for children. Although children recently arrived in Europe come from countries where democratic rights of freedom of expression and information are limited, our previous research with children in Lebanon and Morocco showed that they had a strong sense of ethics and justice, and what constitutes fair and unfair treatment in the children's shows they watched.

Workshop discussions revealed that 'democracy' is a term with a problematic history, especially given attempts at 'democracy promotion' in the Middle East by Western governments that spent decades supporting dictators. An Egyptian participant pointed out that children in the Arab region are not necessarily taught the same ideas about democracy as children in Europe, and that it might be better to avoid the term altogether, since it is often 'demonised' in Arab countries. A Danish producer concurred, describing attitudes towards democracy among people he had encountered in Kazakhstan, who had told him that they hoped the US would not introduce 'democracy' in their country as they had done in Iraq. One participant suggested that children in Denmark were also losing faith in democracy after the recent US elections, and reports of media giants violating individual rights to privacy. She suggested that young people are growing up with 'big' questions about political structures. Another, from Sweden, suggested that adults too often try to address political issues from an adult rather than a child's perspective, stating:

**I find that very often when we are discussing what we should show to children and share with them, it's a mental construction about what is good for them or suitable for them, but it's a mental construction that in fact is a way of trying to heal a wound in ourselves and not based on where children are. It's much more about ourselves and it's always a misunderstanding... if we are speaking about unfairness, discrimination and loss, we can speak to children about that. The only thing we cannot do is lie about it.**

One Dutch filmmaker, who has worked with refugee groups in Europe, pointed out that many refugees get disillusioned about European democracy because they imagine it as the 'promised land where values of human rights and children's rights are respected' but encounter instead racism and exclusion. A Syrian-born participant explained that her young sons' interest in participating in local elections in Denmark was generated by an election candidate promising to build a new swimming pool and playgrounds rather than focusing on political issues. This contrasted sharply with her own childhood in Syria, where she wore military uniform at school and attended military training. Before she arrived in Denmark, she had never believed in voting, because 'our country' [Syria] had been 'stolen by the regime'. In contrast, her children were growing up with feelings about what it's like to be a citizen with a sense of allegiance to society.

### 5.2.3 Teaching citizenship

The Dutch documentary, *De Kinderburgemeester*, offers an example of ‘democracy in practice’ and children’s role as citizens. The film follows Yassine, a Moroccan-Dutch boy, as he becomes children’s mayor in Gouda for one year. He has two major aims: to get children from different ethnic groups to mix, and to meet his role model, the Moroccan-born mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb. The film’s director, Susan Koenen, is developing educational materials so that the film can be shown in Dutch schools.

Workshop participants admired *De Kinderburgemeester* as a film that can raise the aspirations of children from ethnic minority backgrounds. One producer with an immigrant background remarked:

**I really like the film. It shows that, even though you have another skin colour, you can still have dreams and be able to pursue them. When I was growing up, I was limited. If I said I wanted to do something [I was told] “why don’t you do something else?” I really like the perspective that he might have a dream of being there one day and he’s trying to pursue it.**

Koenen explained that it was indeed her aim to make a film that would present a role model for Dutch children with Moroccan backgrounds and show them that they ‘can be what they want to be’. She felt that Moroccans often struggle to get on in Dutch society, and that she ‘really wanted for years to show a great Moroccan boy to be an example for other Moroccan kids, because there are not so many examples for them in society, only some soccer players, but not people in politics with high positions that are really taken seriously’. Her observations are borne out in a scene in which Aboutaleb tells Yassine that he will have to work ‘extra’ hard in life, as Dutch people often hold prejudices against people of Moroccan origin. Two Syrian participants wondered whether this scene might place unnecessary pressure on children. But Koenen said ‘It’s reality’. She had ‘really wanted to wake up Dutch children without Moroccan background to know this. They don’t know how it feels’.

Koenen clarified that the film shows the dialogue about needing to work extra hard without thereby endorsing the idea or intending to send that message. Differences then emerged over whether filmmakers should project a realistic or an idealistic picture when engaging with citizenship and democracy. One Syrian participant felt that Yassine fell short of being an appropriate role model for children when he did not immediately clap his successor enthusiastically at the point of handing the position over to her, his facial expression revealing his disappointment that his time as mayor had come to an end. But a Danish participant pointed out that it was entirely natural for a child not to feel good about another child winning. And a Lebanese producer said: ‘Some people don’t understand that we are filmmakers and we choose one interpretation and one angle. We cannot do everything you ask for’.

A Danish producer with an immigrant background found that responses to the film revealed conflicting conceptions of childhood, with some people believing that children need protection (a dominant perception in Arab countries) or others believing first and foremost in children’s agency (a more dominant perception in European countries).

## 6 UNDER-REPRESENTATION OF GIRLS

### 6.1. Gender gap in numbers

The films discussed in the workshop focused predominantly on boys. In the 14 clips shown during the two mornings, only four featured girls as the main characters (*One Minutes Jr: Aya; Marwa; Laylas Melodi; Asylbarn: Jamila*), three featured both boys and girls (*BBC Newsround; Nuzuh; #JegErDansk*), one can be described as “unisex” (*ZDF Logo!*) and seven featured boys (*Hello Salaam; Ferie på Flygtningeøen; Een jaar zonder mijn ouders; Heijplaters; De Kinderburgemeester; Het Haar van Ahmad, and Hassan og Ramadan*).

The total screen time of the films shown in the workshops was 197 minutes, of which films with boys as main characters take up 160 minutes. Films featuring girls accounted for 28 of the 197 minutes, while films featuring boys and girls were only 9 minutes long.

### 6.2 Layla: a strong story

Workshop participants responded overwhelmingly positively to *Laylas Melodi*, from 2013, a short documentary about eleven-year-old Layla, who lives in a Kabul orphanage. *Laylas Melodi* is part of a series of five films about different children in Afghanistan and their daily lives. Participants noted that Layla is a strong and independent character who resists societal and cultural norms by playing music (forbidden under the Taliban), going to school, and deciding that she prefers to live in an orphanage rather than returning to her home village where she risks having to get married. Layla’s strong will and courage are indicative in statements she makes throughout the film, such as ‘I’d rather be in prison than stop playing [music]’ and ‘if I find a man he has to let me do what I want’.

*Laylas Melodi* was seen as a positive example of filmmaking because it allows the audience to connect with the main character on an emotional and personal level, which one person described as ‘eye level’. A Swedish participant said: ‘When I see her, I remember things from my past and growing up, what I wanted to become and the fights with adults or other children. Even though I have never been at a child orphanage, she awoke so many human strings and this is what I think a director should go for’.

A representative from the DFI, which had provided financial backing for the series, said that Danish children were also very engaged by the films, because Jens Pederson, the director, chose children who are ‘so strong and so powerful in the way they speak’.

She added:

**I talked to one teacher using this [series] and he told us that the children were very much involved in the stories, and they could actually feel these children were children like them, not children in Afghanistan, but children with their own rights, thoughts and dreams. I know that Jens said that he always tries to make films about children who don't see themselves as victims. They are defining themselves as children and not as victims.**



## 7 RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Establish a well-planned, multi-media distribution strategy.** Directors and producers need to think beyond 'traditional' broadcast, educational, community and digital outlets, in order to build audiences from an early stage. This is also necessary to secure funding.
- **Diversify production processes.** More children (and adults) from minority groups need to participate in the production and distribution of screen content, not only as subjects but also as producers, directors, and exhibitors.
- Focus on **strong characters** that generate audience interest by establishing a personal connection with the main characters on an emotional level, rather than focusing on children as victims.
- **Be mindful of ethics.** Filmmakers should seek permission from children before filming them, and take time to get to know, and gain trust from, their subjects. Children should not be forced to speak about subjects they feel ashamed of in front of a camera, in order to avoid harm and distress.
- **Be conscious of different conceptions of childhood in different regions.** The dominant approach to childhood and children in the Arab world is to see them as subordinate to adults and in need of protection. This contrasts with European conceptions across the media and education, which place greater emphasis on children's agency as well as the need to protect them from harm.
- **Show diversity, don't name it.** Avoid making difference the focus of the narrative, and try to identify similarities and connections between newly arrived children and children of the host community.
- **Foster exchanges** of cultural, religious, and political knowledge among European children and refugee or immigrant children. Films dealing with these issues should do so in ways that are respectful of other cultures.
- **Take opportunities to put forced migration into historical perspective,** so that children become aware that mass displacement has happened at different times and places and that migration flows have followed routes from north to south as well as the reverse.
- **Address the gender gap.** More films are required about girls' experiences of migration. In particular, strong female characters will enable more young viewers to establish a personal connection with the main characters in films.



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This briefing summarises the proceedings of the second 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? Public Service Media, Diversity and Forced Migration'.

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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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](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk)

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