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## **Children’s Documentaries: Distance and Ethics in European Storytelling about the Wider World**

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### **Abstract**

The material challenges of funding, commissioning and distribution that are well known to inhibit production of children’s factual content about other countries and cultures operate in parallel with challenges arising from the moral responsibilities inherent in what Roger Silverstone called “the problem of proper distance”. By that he signified a “moral category” requiring filmmakers to provide “context as well as imagination” and be willing to “recognise the other in her sameness and difference”. “Distance” and “difference” have become at once more significant but also more ambiguous at a time of mass forced migration, in which

traditions, religions and cultures from distant places are brought together in physical proximity. Based on input from cross-cultural dialogues, screenings and interviews involving European producers of children's documentaries, this article explores dilemmas and experiences faced in representing the backgrounds and stories of children who arrived in Europe from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the mid-2010s. It shows the resonance of Silverstone's thinking by revealing that many practitioners themselves apply notions of closeness and distance, both physically and metaphorically, in their choices about combining the familiar and unfamiliar and co-creating content with child participants.

**Keywords**

Traditions; religions; cultures; moral responsibility; migration; co-creation; producers

## **Children's Documentaries: Distance and Ethics in European Storytelling about the Wider World**

Making screen content that can familiarise young children with the lives of their counterparts in unfamiliar places is a minority activity. It is not that producers do not want to make this kind of material. TV series on the subject have been made in Europe and globally, for preschool children and children aged 8-12, after multiple challenges – including resistance to commissioning, language barriers, costs of filming abroad, doubts about children's interest in factual content – were overcome. Some acclaimed examples started life in the pre-digital era, such as *Open a Door* (1994-2003) in which broadcasters from 34 countries each produced and shared a five-minute story without words from a young child's point of view. More recent was *What Makes Me Happy*, a series of 12 short films produced internationally between 2005 and 2010 and promoted, like *Open a Door*, by Anne Wood, the founder of Ragdoll Productions (see Steemers et al., 2018, pp. 76-77).

It is hard to say definitively whether examples like these have become more or less rare in the past ten years, during which children have anyway increasingly turned away from linear television to online options for video-on-demand, from YouTube to Netflix. The authors worked on a project funded by the UK's Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in 2017-18,<sup>1</sup> which involved tracking down children's films and television shows across Europe that featured children from backgrounds other than the country where the item was made. This process revealed the crucial role of regulatory structures underpinning public service media funding and commissioning initiatives, as reflected in the overwhelming majority of the resulting database of content coming from public service media in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and UK (see Steemers et al., 2018, pp. 78-85). Of the 35 shows in the project sample, 22 or two-thirds were factual content including two news clips, and only one was commissioned by a commercial company. The search also underlined the key role of

longstanding European Broadcasting Union (EBU) documentary and drama exchanges, which are geared to maximising production and dissemination through an “offer one, take all” formula, which particularly benefits smaller countries, where funding for drama series may be lacking since drama in particular is expensive to make. The EBU’s preschool item exchange, hosted by the German children’s channel KiKa, is open to content and producers from Asia, Latin America and Africa (Sakr & Steemers 2019, pp. 63-64).

Findings like these from the AHRC project highlight funding, commissioning and distribution constraints on the creation of children’s screen content about children from other countries, cultures and background, which the authors explored in the project report (Steemers et al, 2018, pp. 32-33, 53-54). Since the purpose of the project was “impact and engagement” with non-academic partners, the project report was not primarily aimed at an academic readership. In this article we take the opportunity therefore to address in greater detail, and from a theoretical point of view, a particular set of ethical issues that emerged organically during discussions among European producers of shows in the project sample and their peers, which took place during the project’s three workshops in the UK, Denmark and Germany. Evidence from these discussions is supplemented with further comments transcribed during a film screening in Germany and recorded during post-workshop interviews with the same group of producers. The data collection process is considered in more detail below. The first task, however, in establishing the article’s context and setting out its structure, is to allude briefly to its theoretical underpinning and explain its rationale. We consider the ethical issues articulated by producers through the lens of what Roger Silverstone (2004) has called “the problem of proper distance”: “the problem of how we can behave responsibly in our dealings with mediated others” (p.488).<sup>2</sup> Silverstone’s work on media and morality, which further explored the notion of “proper distance” (2007, eg. p 47, pp 172-173) was at least partially stimulated by Europe’s changing demographics in the face

of migration and the experience of the “first- or second- or third-generation immigrant” in relation to “the presence of the elsewhere, the somewhere else” and the “present absence of home” (Silverstone 2007, p.98). In that context he linked distance to ideas about the “moral principle” of hospitality, which “in its pure and unconditional form, does not involve, nor is it dependent on, an invitation” (2007, p. 140). In the next section we review ways in which scholars have tested Silverstone’s conceptual framework in light of media practice and consider its applicability to documentaries aimed at children. After that we explore particular ethical issues articulated by practitioners in our sample in relation to making children’s documentaries about unfamiliar countries and cultures, doing so in light of existing scholarship on this issue and against the background of Silverstone’s conceptual contribution. Thirdly we highlight a particular exchange at one of the workshops where the notion of “appropriate distance” emerged organically, unwittingly echoing almost word for word Silverstone’s formulation – “close, but not too close, distant but not too distant” (Silverstone 2007, p. 172) – and operationalising its application to filming children from backgrounds other than those familiar to the film-makers. The article concludes by contemplating how notions of distance, as envisaged in both theory and practice, serve to calibrate the mediation process in specimens of media practice that are both responsible and effective.

### **Interpreting “proper distance” in portraying a child’s life on screen**

Certain film funds and advocacy groups have long argued in favour of increasing provision of factual content for children about other cultures (see Chalk, 2019) and, at least since around 2018, some market research (eg Evans, 2018) has indicated that this could be a growth area. The way in which advocacy is framed often resonates with Silverstone’s discourse on an “obligation to listen” to the “voices of the other” and the other’s “right to be heard” (2007, p.194 n2). Two annual international film festivals in the Netherlands, the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) and Cinekid, introduced dedicated children’s

documentary sections at the end of the 1990s, thereby stimulating interest in documentary as a genre for children which, according to Dutch promotional literature (Schmidt et al., 2012) can “expand” their “views of the world by giving insight into the lives of other children” and “prompt them to think about other people in different circumstances” (p. 4). Studies also show that children have an appetite for such content. The International Broadcasting Trust (IBT) published research in 2019 showing that: more than half of 1,000 UK children aged 9-14 polled online would like to see more TV or video about other countries; children’s views about the world outside the UK were strongly influenced by negative stories about gun crime in the US and charity advertisements showing starvation and poverty in Africa; yet explanations of global events had the “potential to allay children’s anxiety, encourage greater social cohesion, help children develop into democratically engaged adults and prepare them for the world of work which is increasingly international” (Chalk, 2019, pp. 9-11). Meanwhile a report prepared for the MIP Junior TV market in Cannes in 2018 noted the growth on YouTube of “short-form documentaries made by kids for kids” and quoted the creative director of a large studio remarking that “kids are interested in the lives of other kids from other cultures” (Evans, 2018, p. 14).

The IBT suggests that content about the wider world can promote social cohesion because of the “range of traditions, religions and cultures” that now “exist alongside each other in the UK” (Chalk, 2019, p.11). In a world marked by displacement on a massive scale across the globe, with the total international migrant population having increased by nearly 80 per cent to 272 million between 1990 and 2019 (Unicef, 2020), the rationale for social cohesion applies to other countries too. On the one hand are images on social media of children in cages, separated from their parents on the US-Mexican border under the Trump Administration. On the other is the realisation, described to us by a commissioning editor in Europe in the wake of a surge in migration from Syria in 2015-16, of children “having new

classmates in their class, who weren't speaking the same language as them easily", and a recognition of the "need to tell their stories, so that there is a background to these children" (BBC Commissioning Editor, 2018). The phenomenon of traditions, religions and cultures from distant places potentially existing alongside each other highlights the significance and ambiguity of distance. For Silverstone (2004, p. 474) "distance is not just a material, or geographical, or even a social category but, it is, by virtue of both and as a product of their interrelation, a moral category."

Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman and Emmanuel Levinas, Silverstone argues that "[T]he overcoming of distance requires more than technology ... It requires proximity ... the close at hand but also close to mind" (Silverstone, 2004, p. 474). As such it raises ethical concerns about the "ways in which the relationships between reporters, film-makers, storytellers and image producers and their subjects and their viewers and listeners are constructed or assumed" (Silverstone, 2006, p.7). "Proper distance requires context as well as imagination"; it is the "capacity to enlarge one's perspective and the willingness to recognise the other in her sameness and difference" (Silverstone, 2006, pp. 119, 121). As Lilie Chouliaraki notes (2011, p. 363), the "metaphorical vocabulary of space" in Silverstone's concept of proper distance gives it an analytical as well as normative dimension, making it an "important resource" in evaluating how mediation humanises or dehumanises those represented along a proximity-distance axis. The "vulnerable other" can be portrayed not as helpless but as an "historical agent – someone who actively strives to manage her life" under conditions constrained by "structures of injustice". Such portrayals can escape the "universalist" imageries of powerless destitution or hopeful self-determination, characteristic of the traditional stereotypes of humanitarian communication" (Chouliaraki, 2011, p. 375).

Proper distance for Silverstone is inextricably linked to notions of difference, otherness and "a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding" (2007,

p 47). He emphasises the need to “accept the otherness of the other: his or her implacable difference from us, and his or her immeasurable sameness to us” (2007, p. 140) and the function of proper distance in “preserv[ing] the other through difference as well as shared identity.” He sees it as a moral principle which underpins professional ethics (2007, p. 7). His approach has relevance to media content aimed at children not so much because of its implications in terms of “responsibility for the condition of the other” (p. 152) but insofar as it promotes “[i]magination, the Kantian enlargement of mentality beyond the individual and the solitary self” as opening the “doors to understanding” and – in much the same way as the Dutch brochure about children’s documentaries cited above (Schmidt et al. 2012, p. 4) suggested – requiring one to take “the position of the other” (2007, p. 46). Kate Wright, in questioning whether proper distance can work in the intimacy created by radio journalism, highlighted the concept’s emphasis on “otherness” when she pointed out a particular journalist’s intention in reporting an interview with a Congolese woman: the journalist had not wanted “the audience to discover how *like* them Mongane was, but *what it would be like to be Mongane* – a very different moral stance, and one far more in keeping with ‘proper distance’” (Wright 2012, p. 291, emphasis in original).

How far it is possible to produce such an outcome through media content is a question that has been considered both theoretically and empirically. “Proper distance is not a thing to be had or achieved”, according to Benjamin Ball (2016, p. 435), but a “process based on an ideal that allows us to think critically about our own place, and work, in media”. Proper distance, he writes, is “vital precisely because it is unattainable”; it is about “engaging the audience intellectually and emotionally” (p. 435-436). However, studies of what Ahva and Pantti (2014) call “emotional proximity” suggest that media users may respond to emotional appeals in foreign imagery without thereby experiencing a “particular increase in cultural proximity” and may even feel further distanced if proximity fails to add to their

understanding of a situation (Ahva and Pantti 2014, pp, 329-330). Khulekani Ndlovu examined how far coverage of child abuse in Zimbabwean tabloids succeeded in creating the “proper distance needed for the enactment of an ethics of care for suffering others” and found that journalists’ approach to doing so ranged from a sense of “professional obligation and commercial imperatives” in some cases to an ethic of care in others (Ndlovu 2019, pp. 9, 155). Unlike daily news journalism, however, experienced makers of documentary-style film are more often presumed to exercise what Silverstone would call a duty of care and responsibility. Roger Graef, pioneer of the “fly-on-the-wall” approach in the UK, expressed his sense of the documentary maker’s responsibility when he said, on accepting a Lifetime Achievement award at the Sheffield Doc/Fest 2014: “when we take people’s pictures, we capture their souls”. Graef operationalises his philosophy through a two-stage consent process that can lead to hours of footage becoming unusable and a film being scrapped (Townend, 2014, p. 26). But his articulation of moral responsibility is not unusual. Interviews with 154 professional documentary makers in Israel showed the salience of dilemmas over whether or not to include footage (Butchart & Har-Gil, 2019, p. 58). A survey based on interviews with 45 nonfiction filmmakers in the US, published in 2009, found them to be “acutely aware of moral dimensions of their craft”, with “ethical conflicts” looming large in their work because they wanted to “behave conscientiously within a ruthlessly bottom-line business environment” (Aufderheide et al., 2009, pp. 2, 20). They claimed to interviewees that they wanted to “tell important truths” that are “often ignored or hidden” and believe they “come into a situation where their subjects ... are relatively powerless and they – as media makers – hold some power” (Aufderheide et al, 2009, p. 20).

The power imbalance would seem to be accentuated in the case of nonfiction producers and children, with significant implications for representations of “difference” and “otherness”. Some of the competing pressures that raise issues of ethical and moral

responsibility in the production of content about children were identified by Kehily and Maybin (2011) in their account of filming children in Bangladesh, South Africa and the US to support teaching about childhood in higher education. They include: telling a compelling story but respecting privacy and avoiding telling it from a particular cultural viewpoint; finding colourful child protagonists without exoticizing them; and providing explanatory context without didacticism, misery or information overload. Kehily and Maybin (2011, p. 8) highlighted many dilemmas of power, control and representation they and the filming directors encountered, including some where children did exert power by providing input that changed the filming or challenged assumptions. The latter examples accord with scholarly work that theorises documentary participants as “co-creators”, since they contribute to their own representation, including by “contributing unsolicited content and the taking on of production responsibilities, such as arranging for locations and recruiting additional participants” (Sanders, 2016, p. 200). However, even though young children might do some of these things, Laura Grindstaff has pointed out in the context of reality television (2009, p. 74) that “to consider everyone a potential producer is to minimize both the power and responsibility traditional production staff exercise”.

In what follows, dilemmas of how to handle difference and otherness thrown up in the making of documentary footage for children are examined in light of the notion of proper distance and the issue of power relations between producers and child participants. Silverstone himself reportedly retained an “acute sense of the difficulties of dialogue and the inevitable failures of communication” (Gillespie 2007, p. 155). It is thus worth exploring the difficulties and considering what might count as failure or success.

### **Handling Difference and Otherness: Tales from the Frontline of Production**

The workshops mentioned above took place in the UK, Denmark and Germany as part of an AHRC-funded one-year (2017-18) project for “impact and engagement”. They were intended – in what we have characterised elsewhere as a “curation” process (Sakr and Steemers, 2021) – to alert European media practitioners to the media needs of young Arab children, hundreds of thousands of whom had recently arrived in Europe through forced migration from Syria, Iraq and elsewhere (Steemers et al., 2018, pp 3-4). The workshop organisers had previously completed a three-year (2013-16) AHRC-funded study of pan-Arab screen media for children. So the aim was to share findings about Arab children’s media experiences while also creating a space for critical reflection and dialogue between European and Arab stakeholders about issues of diversity and forced migration as represented in current European screen content for young children, samples of which were shown in the workshops. In effect, therefore, although the 2017-18 funding was not intended for research, the resulting workshops co-created findings through a form of action research (Sakr and Steemers, 2021, p. 5). Arab production and advocacy practitioners from Dubai, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria were invited, along with other participants, to offer their views on the samples, which prompted European producers taking part in the workshops to share their reflections on how and why they made the content the way they did. Producers taking part in the dialogue came from the three countries hosting the workshops as well as Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Serbia, Slovenia, Switzerland, Uruguay and the US. In keeping with research team undertakings to participants, the accounts presented below are not attributed to named individuals, except where those people consented to be identified.

In terms of the volume of relevant content and experience in making it, two countries represented at the workshops – Denmark and the Netherlands – stand out. One-quarter of the small public fund Denmark makes available to commercial broadcasters has to be spent on

content for children, while the Danish Film Institute (DFI) is also obliged to spend 25 per cent of its programming budget on children's content. According to a DFI representative speaking at the Copenhagen workshop, this structural underpinning has resulted in building up a critical mass not only of children's films but of expertise. The Netherlands Film Fund, proud of the country's "golden years" of children's filmmaking in the decade to 2016, when 25 per cent of all Dutch releases were children's films and 44 per cent of all Netherlands cinema admissions were for Dutch children's films, measures the success of films not necessarily in "good box office numbers" but in terms of "education or other impact" (Kellich-Jensen, 2018). In both countries, locally made children's films are distributed not only on local television and online but also in schools. However, volume of content does not necessarily correlate with filming that empowers child subjects or familiarises child audiences with the wider world. That starts with commissioning decisions, as can be seen with the long-running Dutch series *Mensjesrechten*, a title that uses a diminutive form of "human" in the Dutch for "human rights". The series started life in 2007-08 as three-minute films, the first ones made by Maartje Bakers, each one centred on an article of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Scheduled next to the evening news on public TV, NPO (Nederlandse Publieke Omroep), these were initially targeted at adults (E van Driel, personal communication, October 23, 2018). From 2011 the concept was transformed with longer films directed at child viewers and a new initiative of filming some productions outside the Netherlands. It was an ambitious move, given the budget needed for overseas filming and a hand-to-mouth arrangement for financing each film individually rather than the series as a whole. In 2016 the process was complicated when IKON (Interkerkelijk Omroep Nederland), the ecumenical broadcaster and original commissioner, was incorporated into the conservative religious broadcaster EO (Evangelische Omroep), one of

12 member-based broadcasting associations, as part of changes in the Dutch broadcasting system.

Background stories like this illustrate how pressure to get a commission may compete with the imperative of telling a compelling story and the moral duty to promote imagination and understanding of what it might be like to be a child living in a different country or culture far away. UK producer, Anne Wood, who worked with several children's charities to make the series *Open a Door* and *What Makes Me Happy*, mentioned above in the introduction to this article, alluded to the pressures when she addressed a workshop in London at the University of Westminster in 2014. When one charity had asked "why can't we get our programmes on television?", she said she had told them "they're too miserable".<sup>3</sup> A Copenhagen workshop participant recalled difficult negotiations with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), who "don't necessarily know about media, how it works, and documentaries". "They want to be in it and wave their banners," she said, "so you have a huge problem of making a real documentary without them being on top of it." Another mentioned the need to demonstrate "impact" to certain funding bodies before any film had even been made. But one whose organisation had "completely given up on looking for any funds" said there were "huge" drawbacks to getting corporate sponsors because "then the message gets diluted."

Discussions also revealed examples of conflict between the desire to engender an understanding of others' lives and the constraints of deciding what is suitable for young viewers. The series *Where in the World?* (Evans Woolfe 2017), shown on the BBC pre-school channel CBeebies, was born of a desire to reassure anxious children in stable European countries that their counterparts further afield also live "normal" lives. But in emphasising sameness, the series also encountered challenges that come with showing cultural differences to pre-schoolers who might want to imitate what they see. Its aim was to

show “the wider context” of “children living ordinary lives, just getting on with it” (Sant 2017) in eight countries around the globe. Yet, in India, those normal children were filmed cycling with no helmets, in stark contrast to norms in the viewing country, where children are expected to don a helmet before they get on a bicycle. Meanwhile, some distant everyday realities are considered too harsh to show young children. One interviewee mentioned a film shot in Tibet of a child with a disease that left him with “all kind of scars and he was looking very sad”; the film was ultimately deemed “too confronting for pre-schoolers”. It also happens that objections get raised to material that is assumed to emphasise distance, by showing local costume, for fear that it exoticizes children. The same interviewee was surprised that a film of children wearing traditional Kenyan clothes provoked a negative reaction from other professionals. She found the images showed the children “in strength” and “empowered”, not the “cliché image” of “suffering”, but others said it was “too framing” and should not be shown, because children in African countries also “wear jeans and T-shirt.”

That production decision about costume – the choice between jeans and T-shirts or local traditional clothing – illustrates the tension pinpointed by Silverstone between “sameness” and “difference” in his observation that proper distance “preserves the other through difference as well as through shared identity” (Silverstone, 2007, pp. 47). The same tension emerged in several clips we showed in the workshops, in which children from non-European backgrounds were shown sharing activities familiar to European children during which glimpses of their unfamiliar backgrounds emerge. The producers of *Berlin und Wir* (Berlin and Us, IMAGO TV, 2016), an award-winning non-fiction reality series featuring four refugee teenagers exploring Berlin with four Berlin-born counterparts, encouraged the children to take part in each other’s pastimes, such as boating, trampolining, football and self-defence. The producers indicated that their approach was to keep adults at a distance in the sense that the programme should be “driven by the children”. In one sequence involving a

rowing boat, an Afghan boy, Seyid, reveals nerves about going on the water because the last time he did so was in a dangerous sea-crossing. Far from being portrayed as vulnerable, however, Seyid is shown in another scene excelling at football, unlike his German opposite number, Oscar, who is not keen on the sport. Similarly, an 11-year-old Syrian girl, Rashad, is shown on one occasion enjoying judo and on another praying at home, wrapped in a prayer shawl, watched by her 12-year-old German friend Malina. The producers wanted the shared activities to be a chance to “let everybody be him or herself”, showing that “with a little bit of tolerance and a little bit of curiosity, there’s possibility to live together and everybody feels comfortable.” Talking about the first season of *Berlin und Wir*, the producers often mentioned the word “respect”, as in “everybody’s respectful to the other”, or “we take [the children] seriously; we respect all they say.”

There are times when an emphasis on otherness can come at the expense of communicating a shared identity. *Brave*, a non-fiction film for 7-10-year-olds made by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, NRK, which was a runner-up in the Prix Jeunesse 2018 awards, was mostly praised by producers who watched a screening in Munich at the Prix Jeunesse 2018. It showed interactions between Norwegian children and two refugee children, one of whom was from Afghanistan, where females are subject to strict rules on dress and adornment. But one commentator, from neither Norway nor a Muslim country, was disturbed that, in their view, the “camera is looking down on the [refugee] children” because the “Norwegian kids say it was awful that they couldn’t paint their nails.” The founder of an independent Norwegian production company said he felt the film “left a slightly bad taste in the mouth” because it was “too black and white” about “there” and “here”, sending a message that the refugees were “so happy to be in Norway where everything is perfect.”

Ironically, perhaps, in terms of the axis of proximity and distance, viewers in northern Europe felt they could readily identify with children living inside Afghanistan as portrayed in

the five-part series *Faith-Hope-Afghanistan*, directed by Jens Pedersen of Denmark in 2013. After watching *Layla's Melody*, about 11-year-old Layla who prefers to stay in a Kabul orphanage rather than return to her village where she would see her mother, but would have to give up playing music and risk being forced into marriage, a Swedish adult said that, even though she had “never been in an orphanage”, she identified with Layla on many levels, remembering things from her past, what she wanted to become, and “fights with adults or other children.” Each of the five children in the series, despite having lost their parents or having to support their families by, for example, making bricks or selling chewing gum on Kabul streets, believes in the possibility of a better life. Pedersen said the series, made with the help of Afghan filmmaker Taj Mohammed Bakhtari, focused

“on the children's ability to make a place for themselves in the world by taking charge and refusing to play the obvious victim role. ... I hope we have succeeded in bringing it home to children in every part of the world what day-to-day life is like for kids in a country they mainly hear about as a place where soldiers get killed. The children in these films give you a completely different picture. In their resilience, they hold hope for the country's future (quoted in Boysen, 2013).”

A representative of DFI, which helped to finance the film, said that Danish school children had appreciated the series because “they could actually feel these children were children like them, not children in Afghanistan, but children with their own rights, thoughts and dreams.” In common with several of the films selected for the workshops, *Layla's Melody* featured music and football as activities familiar to children across the world to reduce the sense of cultural distance between the children on screen and those watching the film.

Yet there must be a question as to whether, in using such tropes to help European children to identify with their non-European counterparts, the distance risks being narrowed

by “sameness” in a way that does less than justice to the reality of “difference”. A Danish editor implicitly highlighted tension between the two as key to understanding the success of a series called *Hassan og Ramadanen* (Hassan and Ramadan), shown by the Danish public service network Danmarks Radio (DR) online and on its Ultra channel for 7-12-year-olds in 2017. The series of short episodes unfolds from the perspective of ten-year-old Hassan, from an Iraqi family settled in Denmark, who wants to try fasting during Ramadan like his older brothers, even though some family members try to dissuade him because, according to Muslim custom, he is still too young. Other producers watching clips from *Hassan og Ramadanen* in the Copenhagen workshop were positive about the portrayal because of the way it gives glimpses of religious practice without focusing on religion, centring instead on the likeable character of the charismatic Hassan, who admires the footballer Ronaldo, and just happens to have set himself a tough “will he, won’t he?” challenge when it comes to fasting. The editor said a lot of DR Ultra factual shows “go very well on demand if you give access to an environment that is highly fascinating, and you can relate to, but you don’t get to see in everyday life”. He suggested the episodes were “snackable”, meaning the entry-level investment on the viewer’s part was “pretty low” because they could test the appeal knowing that the viewing experience is “not going to be a mission.” In this case difference was respectfully featured while proximity was offered not only through the relatability of the central character but also through the content’s short length.

### **“Doing” Distance: Too Near, Too Far, Just Right**

The language of closeness and distance in filming came up at the Copenhagen workshop in both a literal and figurative sense – the latter reflecting a “metaphorical vocabulary of space” (Chouliaraki, 2011, p. 363) whereby “distance” can be “proper” if it signifies a “willingness to recognise the other in her sameness and difference” (Silverstone, 2006, p. 121). Dutch documentary maker Els van Driel used the word “distance” in a way that could be interpreted

in both senses when discussing a scene in her film *Een jaar zonder mijn ouders* (A year without my parents), a 23-minute film that won prizes in the short documentary category from both the child and adult juries at the Chicago International Children's Film Festival in 2016 and was shown in 2017 on NPO Zapp, a children's channel run by Dutch public service broadcaster, Nederlands Publieke Omroep (NPO). Made as one of several documentaries Van Driel has contributed to the *Mensjesrechten* series referred to above, the theme of the film, as Van Driel told the workshop, is the right to family reunification, inscribed in Articles 9 and 10 of the CRC. It follows 11-year-old Tareq, who has fled Syria to the Netherlands with his uncle and cousin and has to cope in a new environment without his parents while waiting for them to join him. He is seen running in the school sports lesson and talking in a teacher-led circle with his starkly contrasting blond and apparently less independent classmates, who admit how much they rely on their parents. He films his surroundings to show his mother, father and sister and talks to them on a frustratingly unreliable telephone line. In a scene shown to workshop participants, Tareq and his cousin Usama are eating an ice cream beside a swimming pool, in a scenario familiar to Dutch children who are used to enjoying themselves at the swimming pool away from adult company. Chatting together in Arabic, Tareq and Usama compare Dutch pools with Syrian ones and intimate, through their shared recollection of bombing raids, how they are acclimatising to the absence of war in the Netherlands.

That conversation was felt by Arabic-speakers and others (who read the subtitles) to be so genuine, natural and engaging for any viewer, Syrian, Dutch or other, that Van Driel was asked how she had set it up. She revealed that Tareq and Usama had taken over "a little bit in this scene." They had said "we want to talk like this", meaning that they wanted to be treated to a second ice cream so the conversation could be shot all over again. Van Driel said she "deliberately took the camera very far from them." Using a gesture to indicate how far, she said: "We had a big lens and they were in that distance, so they had the feeling they could

do their own conversation, which is what we agreed on.” The fact that Tareq and Usama had been “co-creators” (Sanders, 2016, p. 200) with Van Driel in this scene, taking an initiative that provided “context” and evoked “imagination” (Silverstone, 20076, p. 46), was expressed by others in the room with the notion that Tareq had been put “in the position of power.” One said: “The position of power is so simple, in child terms as well – he can run and swim and be without his mother while the others want their mother to wash their dental braces.”

In contrast, in further spontaneous references to a spectrum of distance and closeness, workshop participants expressed disquiet at what were seen as intrusive scenes in two films – one Dutch, one Danish – about children in refugee camps in Greece, in which refugee children were portrayed in a position of powerlessness and did not appear to have been co-creators in the production process. Commentators objected to scenes of discarded lifejackets and rubber dinghies and children seen among tents without their parents, because of the way these seemed to emphasise difference without understanding, suggesting “these kids don’t have family”, and failed to give any hint of the cultural richness of the children’s former lives at home and their families’ previous living standards. One media practitioner who had experienced the camps as a refugee herself said that focusing on this short period in refugees’ lives emphasised distance without empathy. She said this period is

“just what makes the gap between us more actually. ... Anybody in this situation will look miserable. ... Maybe you feel sad as a European about these people, but you will not feel similar. When we look like each other, you can’t imagine that maybe I will [have been] in the same situation, but when I let you see an image very far from you, it makes a gap.”

Another said she did not think “it’s a good idea to assume that you have the right to go with a camera just because it’s a refugee camp” and asked rhetorically: “You wouldn’t go to your

friend's house with a camera without asking them, right?" A Lebanese producer felt the same, saying that "it's like you being naked or in hospital, not really looking like you usually look. Wouldn't you like to be asked?"

More evidence that subjects can feature in camera close-ups but still feel very remote to the viewer came from a two-minute package made in 2017 for a UK children's TV news programme, containing short interviews conducted by a reporter with displaced youths waiting for resettlement whose faces are concealed and whose background stories are not recounted. The item was critiqued as "dehumanizing", "superficial", treating people as "objects, not subjects", a perfunctory box-ticking treatment. Comparing the various approaches, a Danish producer and advisor calibrated them in terms of dilemmas over distance. He said:

"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. ... You need to find the right balance."

## **Conclusion**

The examples of content production discussed here demonstrate that distance in its moral and ethical sense (Silverstone 2004, 2007) is a real issue that faces producers of children's screen content about unfamiliar places and people. It clearly matters to the industry to get it right, if only for purposes of professional recognition, as films that look at the lives of children from other backgrounds and other countries have won prestigious prizes from organisations like the German-based Prix Jeunesse (e.g. *Brave*), the UK's children's BAFTAs (e.g. *My Life*), and the US-based International Emmys (e.g. *Berlin und Wir*). In reality these awards belie the true reach of these programmes, which may have rather small audiences. Yet they are important as a yardstick for demonstrating that the public service broadcasters who made

them are fulfilling their obligations to provide a range of children's output that educates and informs.

When it comes to discussing how producers deal with ethical issues in making screen content, our workshops revealed that their output may do the job of providing insights for European children into the lives of children who live elsewhere, or who have recently arrived in Europe, but serious questions still need to be asked about who is telling the story, who it is being told to, and how "proper distance" is negotiated. The latter question arises in part because of producers' propensity to rely on settings and activities that are familiar to European children to reduce their sense of cultural distance from the children featured on screen. Avoiding the unfamiliar often involves watering down any treatment of "difference" so as to be able to tell a compelling story without exoticism, didacticism and cultural preconceptions. Silverstone (2007, pp.119) writes about "the willingness to recognise the other in her sameness and difference." Yet the brief glimpse into European-made documentaries presented here demonstrates that filmmakers find it easier to achieve "sameness" if they reference the universal. The most commonly used references are sport (usually football), music or cooking and eating together, where dietary differences are made relatable by the common denominator of family experiences. The greater challenge for filmmakers is in respectfully portraying difference, as for example in cultural and religious practices, without implying that European host countries are somehow better than children's countries of origin just because they mark birthdays with a party (whereas birthdays may not be celebrated at all in a child's country of origin) or because, as a girl, you are allowed to paint your nails and go to the swimming pool. Showing difference is inevitably harder and more controversial because it could imply that children from "other" backgrounds may not be fitting in or adjusting in ways that are felt to be acceptable to the host culture.

When producers have a chance to think through the issues raised by factual programming about children in difficult or unfamiliar settings, our workshops showed that they tend to come to the same conclusions as Silverstone, spontaneously seeking to calibrate “distance” when discussing the filming of refugee children, for example. Many practitioners also recognise that the solution to achieving appropriate degrees of proximity and distance is to involve children themselves in determining how they want to be represented. Examples emerged of co-creation with child participants providing opportunities to combine the familiar and unfamiliar. They include *A Year without my Parents*, when Tareq was consulted about how certain scenes should be filmed, and *Berlin und Wir*, where the participants chose shared activities and themes and also filmed their own footage. Techniques of co-creation were seen to lead to media outputs that are not only responsible but also effective in terms of media practice. However, these considerations are not always easy to align with commercial considerations about audience size and appreciation. At the same time, in the case of child participants, co-creation does not signify an equal partnership because adults always make the most important decisions about the scope of a project.

Finally, in considering how documentaries combine the familiar and unfamiliar, the overall conclusion must be that perceptions of what is different and unfamiliar are inevitably influenced by the relatively small volume of children’s screen content that portrays other countries and cultures. The more such programming gets commissioned and – crucially – seen, the less unfamiliar it becomes. Ironically, in today’s media landscape, where children have myriad choices on multiple delivery platforms, evidence that they have ample opportunity to see unfamiliar aspects of the wider world is far from conclusive. On the contrary, commissioning of long-form and factual content by European public service broadcasters is declining as audiences for traditional channel broadcasting shrink and budgets are cut. At the same time content about children’s everyday lives in the wider world remains

steadfastly unfamiliar because transnational commercial channels (Disney, Nickelodeon, Turner) or subscription video-on-demand services (Netflix, Amazon, Disney+) are more focused on globally attractive entertainment including animation and drama, rather than one-off documentaries that are hard to promote. Our samples of factual content about children from other backgrounds included only one item of content from a commercial broadcaster; everything else was publicly funded. Since then, Apple TV has released its 2020 series *Becoming You*, a series of documentaries about children's progress from birth to five, told through the eyes of over 100 children from across the globe, but targeted at adults. Although elements of the series are potentially appealing to young children, they are not the series' primary audience. Meanwhile, there has been no second season of the CBeebies show by Evans Woolfe, *Where in the World?*, which also featured children from different countries in a format specifically for preschool viewers. The situation around the production of long-form factual content is likely to become more complex and difficult as increasing numbers of public service broadcasters in Europe (Denmark, Finland, Switzerland) make children's content an online only proposition, and downscale long-form commissions in favour of shorter material that one of our Danish interviewees described as "snackable". From this perspective, accessibility in terms of content length is seen as having the potential to reduce distance between the viewer and show a "different" environment that they would not normally encounter in everyday life.

"Distance" and "difference" have become at once more significant but also more ambiguous at a time of mass forced migration, in which diverse traditions, religions and cultures from distant places are brought together in physical proximity. Programmes for children that portray diversity and difference with empathy and respect have been shown to be successful with the diverse child audience in countries and regions that have witnessed the

results of large-scale displacement between continents. As such they also contribute to social cohesion.

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