

# Invisible Children: Migrant Arab Children & European Media

A UK-based research and engagement project makes the case for European and Arab content producers and policymakers to provide more pluralistic and inclusive screen content for migrant children who have fled to Europe.

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By Nadine El Sayed

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Waking up in new country with a drastically different culture, images of their war-torn constantly being blared on the news around them, Syria's 2.5 million displaced children—and millions of other Arab forced migrant children—are left to navigate through cultural and linguistic barriers in new places they're trying to call home. More often than not, they are also left feeling estranged as they try to see themselves in shows featuring people who speak and look different. Oftentimes, children find themselves turning to mobile phones to reach out to friends, family and a more familiar world.

And that's the message the project entitled "Children's Screen Content in an Era of Forced Migration: Facilitating Arab-European Dialogue" is trying to deliver; that there is an eminent need for more inclusive, pluralistic children screen content that reflects the millions of Arab refugees and helps them navigate their new lives, as well as help other children learn about their new colleagues. And while some producers have already responded to that need, there's still a significant gap to be bridged to cater to the needs of the millions of forced migrant children in Europe; including the 787,600 Syrian refugees in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark and Bulgaria.

Financed by public funding, the project is led by principal investigator Jeanette Steemers, a professor of culture, media and creative industries at King's College London, and co-investigator Naomi Sakr, a professor of media policy at the University of Westminster.

The one-year project looks at screen content for Arabic-speaking children to assist European broadcasters, policy-makers, producers and children's advocacy groups to better understand the informa-

tion and entertainment needs of Arabic-speaking children who fled to Europe from Arab countries. It aims to engage stakeholders by sharing the research results of a previous three-year research project on screen content for Arabic-speaking children. It calls for diversity in children's content to portray children from diverse backgrounds, not only in terms of where their parents come from, but also in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion and so on.

The project culminated in a symposium, held September 14, to discuss children's media, diversity and forced migration, and was attended by various independent production companies and consultancies, broadcasters and policy-makers. The symposium, like previous workshops under the project, included experts from the region, including practitioners from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria, to create dialogue between European and Arab media practitioners and help alert European producers to the media needs, wants and experiences of Arabic-speaking children who are now living in Europe.

"The grant was intended to allow us to engage with European producers and to bring Arab experts (producers, TV executives, rights advocates) to give feedback on what the Europeans have made so far," Steemers and Sakr tell *Egypt Today* in a joint interview.

The project is focused on children under the age of 12. "Children under 12 are trying to make sense of what they see around them and are forming their world views," they add, which is why the project focused on content dedicated to that age category. And while the common discussion is often about how much screen time is appropriate for young children, it is far less often about what children actually take from the shows they see. There is also more focus on





content dedicated to youth, but far less than that dedicated to young children.

“Our research suggests there should be more attention to early years’ screen content, not only in Arab countries, but also across the globe,” they say. “Even in rich countries where funding for quality content production for young children has been previously available, there is a risk that the funding sources will dry up as a result of changing spending priorities or a perception that big US-based conglomerates are meeting demand.”

### **The need for representation**

Bringing together media professionals, content producers and policymakers at three workshops held in Manchester, Copenhagen and Munich, Steemers and Sakr included material, for instance, that represents forced migration in the narrative. Not only are thematic topics like that essential for young migrants, but also for children who see them arrive to their countries but often don’t have a grasp of the issue.

The content, the researchers argue, doesn’t have to be in Arabic and reflect only the migrants’ culture. “Young children arriving in Europe pick up the language of the host country very quickly,” they say, adding that some of the shows they studied portray this process and how resourceful the children are. “Children also easily adjust to the culture. Indeed, one of the topics emerging from some of the content we watched was the occasional difference of opinion between migrant parents and their children about whether or not they want to return to the country they were forced to flee,” the researcher tell us.

The content Arabic-speaking migrant children need to see is the same as that produced to a general audience, but that is simply more inclusive of migrants and migrant issues. “If people of whatever age are going to feel a sense of belonging to a society, they have to see themselves, or people like them, portrayed fairly and accurately on screen,” they explain.

Several content creators have already responded to those needs; in fact, the project showcased 36 relevant films and shows from European countries, and could have shown more. But the response depends on commissioning and distribution, and almost all the content they found to represent migrant children had been commissioned by European public service broadcasters. “The commissioning depends on whether or not the European country in question has a robust system or statutory requirement for ensuring certain amounts of local programming are made for children, whether TV shows or films,” they add. But while such content is produced through public funds, there have been alternative sources of funding, as well as public funds available for commercial producers. Denmark, for instance, “operates a small public service fund that is available to commercial broadcasters, and at least 25 percent of which has to be spent on children’s content,” Sakr and Steemers say. “To be topical and relevant, at least some of that spending will be allocated to material that deals with forced migration in one way or another.”

At a time where children’s screen content is increasingly struggling to find funding, the researchers argue that there is a strong need to encourage low-cost innovative and interactive cultural production involving cross-border collaboration. The project also found a need for linear broadcasting to be combined with online distribution to cater to a growing trend where children are consuming screen time on the internet, rather than on television sets.

Several Arab content producers have also expressed interest in creating content “of the region, for the region and the rest of the world,” and we have already seen success cases like Karim and Noor, an animated short series featuring the adventures of a 7-year-old and his robot lantern.

The project’s final recommendations, which emerged from research and engagement with various stakeholders, deal with commissioning and distribution of relevant content, ethical concerns, children’s perspectives, showing diversity without naming it, avoiding tokenism and victimhood, and how to move forward in the future.

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