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This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Sakr, N. (2018) ‘Smarter, stronger, kinder’: Interests at stake in the remake of Iftah ya Simsim for Gulf children. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 11 (1), pp. 9-28, which has been published in final form at:

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1163/18739865-01101002>.

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## **‘Smarter, stronger, kinder’: Interests at stake in the remake of *Iftah ya Simsim* for Gulf children**

*Naomi Sakr*

When the 21st century Gulf co-production of *Sesame Street* was launched on air from Abu Dhabi in September 2015 it marked the culmination of many years of collaboration among several institutions in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the US. Called *Iftah ya Simsim* (Open Sesame), like its predecessor, which had first aired from Kuwait in 1979 and run to 130 episodes, the new series of educational programmes for pre-schoolers was described by the managing director of its Gulf production company, Bidaya Media, as reflecting the ‘passion and commitment’ of ‘dozens of individuals across international boundaries’ (Sesame Workshop 2014). Joint efforts of individuals and institutions on that scale imply shared objectives. For Sesame Workshop (SW), the US non-profit company behind *Sesame Street*, its proclaimed mission with all co-productions is to ‘help kids grow smarter, stronger, and kinder’. Bidaya Media, SW’s co-production partner, states on its website that it seeks to foster ‘care, creativity, and diversity, while focusing on empowering the Gulf region’s next generation’.

Set against realities of young children’s lives in the seven states — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen — covered by the *Iftah ya Simsim* initiative, these declared aims sound ambitious. They respond, at least implicitly, to a World Bank assessment that students’ poor educational performance across Arab countries, relative to international standards, is partially attributable to policymakers’ failure to recognise the importance of early childhood development. Even among the oil-rich countries of the Gulf, the quality of early childhood services was found insufficient to produce desired levels of educational attainment (World Bank 2010). A 2015 league table for attainment in maths and science among 15-year-olds put the UAE in 45<sup>th</sup> place out of 76 countries, Bahrain at 57<sup>th</sup>, Saudi Arabia 66<sup>th</sup>, Qatar 68<sup>th</sup> and Oman 72<sup>nd</sup>, with attainment in Kuwait not included (Hanushek and Woessmann 2015: 37).

Similarly, health statistics for the Gulf region show the urgency of efforts to make the region’s children stronger. In 2015, for example, 40-50 per cent of women and 30-40

per cent of men in five GCC countries were clinically obese (World Health Organization 2015: 103-109). While diet is partly to blame, lack of physical activity is another key factor, especially for women. Since cultural practices, along with climate, restrict Gulf women's access to sport and exercise, the ambition of making girls in the region healthier and physically stronger implies a departure from some local norms. Likewise a bid to make children kinder begs questions about harsh penal systems in some Gulf countries and cruel corporal punishments such as flogging, amputation or stoning, which international norms outlaw as contravening the UN Convention Against Torture (Rodley 2011: 437-448). It also raises the issue of child-rearing practices that involve heavy — and sometimes almost exclusive — reliance by parents on unqualified foreign care-givers (Dhal 2011).

This paper sees the regional status quo as a good reason to probe the interests at stake in the *Iftah ya Simsim* initiative. It explores how far the project challenges existing features of children's experience in Gulf countries and considers whether organizations behind it, which belong to existing power structures, are equipped to nurture reforms as fundamental as those inherent in the missions expressed by SW and Bidaya Media.<sup>1</sup>

### **Production vs reproduction: educational media and the potential for change**

Educational systems, like media systems, are sometimes seen as reproducing social injustice and inequality and other times as having the potential to challenge these and produce a different social order (Simon 1985: 18-30). Where media are the vehicle for education, the question of whether they are disrupting or reproducing social relations becomes doubly pertinent; any attempt to answer it involves finding out who media producers are and what they are trying to achieve (Garnham 2000: 86-87). Where diverse educational and media entities collaborate to create texts, as in the transnational efforts behind *Iftah ya Simsim*, the potential for breaking with customs and tradition may either be amplified, through the principle of strength in unity, or greatly reduced, through the principle of lowest common denominators, in

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork was carried out as part of a research project on screen media for Arabic-speaking children funded by the UK Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC, Grant No AH/J004545/1, 2013-16). The author is grateful to several individuals in Abu Dhabi and Dubai who facilitated and/or assisted with data collection.

the sense that collaboration may be forced to proceed at the pace of the slowest and least dynamic actor in the group.

*Sesame Street* depended, from its inception in the US in the 1960s, on collaboration among specialists inside and outside the television industry. The show's originator, Joan Ganz Cooney, described it (2001: xi-xii) as a highly unusual 'arranged marriage' of educational advisors, audience researchers and television producers that 'went smoothly, if not always lovingly' because the collaborators were 'equal partners united by a shared vision'. Cooney's enthusiasm for educational television grew out of research she conducted for a television documentary in the 1960s that revealed an urgent need for quality preschool education for low income families. Cooney told a women's magazine in 1981 that she had 'wanted to make a difference' and that 'a thousand documentaries on poverty and poor people' were 'never really going to have an influence on my times' (quoted in Finucane 2005: 229). Michèle Mattelart implied recognition of this motivation and its significance when she wrote (1985:166) that *Sesame Street* seems to be 'the off-shoot of a tremendous effort on the part of society to "produce" itself and not merely to "reproduce" itself'. Another assessment of the series points to its subversion of an 'authority/subordinate' dichotomy. In this interpretation (Sartorius Kraidy 2002: 21), the show's diverse cast and its practice of portraying 'almost everyone in the teaching role at some point' provides a plurality of authorities, a presence of non-authoritarian teachers and helps to dethrone the 'authority imputed to the "knowledgeable"'.

In contrast, Monica Sims, head of BBC children's programmes in the early 1970s, famously took a dim view of *Sesame Street* aims, seeing them as authoritarian in trying to change children's behaviour. Sims said the project sounded like 'indoctrination, and a dangerous extension of television' (quoted in Geoghegan and Lane 2009). She explained: 'We're not trying to tie children to the television screen. If they go away and play halfway through our programs, that's fine' (quoted in Winn 2001: 29). Heather Hendershot (1999: 169) picked up on the irony of *Sesame Street* researchers and producers using audio techniques to keep children's attention and thereby overcome the distracted viewing that 'many cultural studies scholars have valorised' and which shows children to be 'independent little decision makers' who are far from 'unwitting victims' of TV. Hendershot (1999a: 162) characterised the

*Sesame Street* union of social science research and television production as a 'closed circuit' of testing and adjustment that objectifies children and defines knowledge and learning narrowly.

Doubts have meanwhile been raised about the relationship of *Sesame Street*'s US makers — previously Children's Television Workshop (CTW) but renamed Sesame Workshop (SW) in 2000 — with existing power structures. Hendershot (1999a: 142) reasoned that CTW output clearly 'had potential as a comparatively cheap alternative to structural school reform'. She noted that CTW routinely emphasized that it only sends the show to countries where it is invited, thereby 'absolv[ing] itself of imperialistic intent' while leaving it vague as to who did the inviting (Hendershot 1999b: 161). Political messages inherent in the programme's content are meanwhile open to interpretation. The introduction of a hungry muppet called Lily into the US series in 2011, during a special prime-time edition of *Sesame Street* called 'Growing Hope Against Hunger', was inspired by official estimates that 17 million US children, half of them under six years old, go hungry through family poverty (Adams 2011). While the move indicated concern about levels of deprivation, it could also be seen as normalizing under-privilege.

In order to investigate motives behind the SW co-production with Arab Gulf partners, this paper examines three of the main players<sup>2</sup>, all of them backed by, or dependent on, other bodies. It does so in light of the claim, quoted above, that collaboration is at the heart of their endeavours. Theories of collaboration that recognize its 'ambiguous and fluid' nature are helpful in unpacking various dimensions of a process that may involve actors who are not wholly autonomous, negotiations that may be informal as well as formal, and ideas about mutual concerns that may differ initially from actor to actor (Thomson et al 2009: 25; 51). In the worlds of media and education, different groups of actors interact all the time; the problem comes in seeking to uncover details of interactions and mutating alliances. Acknowledging this, John Caldwell proposes a research methodology that takes account of three levels at which media industry practices are represented textually, through: intra-group relations enacted within the proprietary worlds of work; inter-group exchanges that may be exposed to the public at press conferences or trade shows; and extra-group relations that occur

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<sup>2</sup> The players in question are Sesame Workshop, the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States and the production company Bidaya Media.

when content makers issue press releases or other texts explicitly for public consumption (Caldwell 2009: 202-04).

The following analysis draws on the idea that press releases may not tell exactly the same story as trade press interviews, which in turn may differ somewhat from private discourse inside specific professional communities. Data for the study were gathered during several days on site at Bidaya Media premises in Abu Dhabi, including observation there of an SW-run workshop on creating video to promote literacy, as well as through conversations and interviews with managers and producers, plus scrutiny of institutional documents, press releases and press reporting. Taking account of the different contexts in which objectives are articulated, the analysis seeks to understand each player's role and agenda in the project and the mechanics of their collaboration. It concludes by considering what the various narratives and agendas reveal about the project and the collaboration that went into it.

### **Sesame Workshop: No room for 'failure'**

As a non-profit organization with charitable, tax-exempt status, SW depends on income from three main sources: donations and sponsorship; distribution fees and royalties; and the licensing of products for merchandising. In 2015 these three categories accounted for 31, 29 and 40 per cent respectively of total revenue. Initially nearly one-half of CTW budget came from the state (Hendershot 1999a: 142) and a relationship was forged with the US public broadcaster PBS rather than commercial networks, because the makers of *Sesame Street* did not want their show interrupted by advertisements. Over time, however, economic and technological pressures affected income. In 2009, as donations and licensing suffered from the financial crash, SW laid off 17 per cent of its staff (Patten 2013) and in 2012 and 2013 more staff were let go as streaming and on-demand viewing increasingly replaced DVD sales. In 2015 SW sought to protect its future by striking a deal to make first-run episodes of *Sesame Street* exclusive to the premium cable network HBO for the first nine months, thereby ending the 45-year special relationship with PBS (Steel 2015). Negotiations for, and work on, a new Arab co-production in the Gulf took place during this period of pressure on SW to rethink its long-established formula.

The first Arab co-production of *Sesame Street* in the 1970s was funded by the Kuwait-based Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development through the Arabian Gulf States [later Gulf Cooperation Council] Joint Program Production Institution (Tracy 1979). In contrast, subsequent Arab co-productions in Palestine, Jordan and Egypt were funded by the US government agency USAID. US money was donated to promote particular social objectives through the programme content, such as providing positive role models for Palestinian boys and encouraging Egyptian girls not to drop out of school (Kuttab 2007; Kuttab 2017). But USAID backing also brought uncertainty. The Palestinian co-production, *Shara'a Simsim*, ran for five seasons from the mid-1990s to 2012, at which point US funding was frozen in protest at the Palestinian application to the UN for statehood. The Palestinian team making the show had to be disbanded and Cairo Arafat, Arab-American clinical psychologist and Education and Research Director of Pen Media, producer of *Shara'a Simsim*, eventually became Managing Director of Bidaya Media, producer of the new *Iftah ya Simsim*. Funding for the latter came from various sources linked to protracted stages of the project's initiation, gestation and production. SW's efforts to bring the project to fruition have to be seen in light of these sources and stages.

According to Robert Knezevic (2014), SW Senior Vice President, who first met Cairo Arafat in 1999 when working on the Palestinian and Jordanian co-productions, the 21<sup>st</sup> century *Iftah ya Simsim* came about through a 'chance meeting' at an event in Bahrain in 2008, when Knezevic himself and two other participants from the Kuwait-based Gulf Cooperation Council Joint Program Production Institution (GCCJPPI) and Riyadh-based Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS) jointly 'came up with the idea'. The idea was not entirely novel, however. Gary Knell, SW's president at the time, had visited Riyadh, as well as Cairo, Amman and Ramallah, in 2007 to drum up support for extending *Sesame Street*'s presence in the region (Kuttab 2007). Knell told a Saudi newspaper during the visit that SW was 'as committed as ever to do more in the Arab region' (Fareed 2007). He said his trip to Saudi Arabia had revealed 'huge interest in promoting education in the country .... and also encouraging regional pride' (quoted by Fareed 2007). 'Regional pride' was to become part of the rationale for reviving *Iftah ya Simsim*, and part of the revival's educational objectives, discussed below. For example, GCCJPPI Director General Ali Al-Rayess told the Emirates news agency (WAM 2015) that his organization had

'always been committed to creating Arabic TV content that truly reflects the traditions and heritage of the GCC, including the first ever *Iftah ya Simsim* back in 1979'.

The memorandum of understanding to relaunch *Iftah ya Simsim* was eventually signed between SW and ABEGS in June 2010, after which SW representatives collected data on early childhood issues in the region from ministries and elsewhere (Arafat 2013). In June 2011 ABEGS hosted a curriculum seminar in Riyadh, bringing together people from education ministries, preschool services and the cultural industries to discuss how the new *Iftah ya Simsim* could 'best convey culturally relevant messages' (Almaddah 2011). Despite Gary Knell's earlier emphasis on partnerships with the private sector (Fareed 2007), later repeated by Knezevic (e.g. Hamid 2013), the push for 'culturally relevant' messages was largely overseen by government-run bodies. GCCJPPI, a co-sponsor of the seminar, was created in 1976 by Gulf ministries of information as a non-profit body that would develop creative talent and make content, such as documentaries, about the region's heritage, culture and social development (Tracy 1979). After a number of successes, that mission faded in the face of wars and invasions in the Gulf in 1980-88, 1990-91 and 2003. ABEGS was created by Gulf ministries of education in 1975 to promote cooperation among official representatives of Gulf countries and Yemen (ABEGS nd). Funding for the June 2011 seminar came from Saudi Arabian petrochemicals company SABIC, which is 70 per cent government owned. ABEGS, SW, GCCJPPI, the Gulf Radio and Television Organization and SABIC all had their logos on the cover of the *Iftah ya Simsim Statement of Educational Objectives*, released in November 2011, and introduced by ABEGS Director General, Ali Al Karni.

When it came to actually making the revived programme's first series, GCCJPPI was assigned to produce live action films and dubbed materials (WAM 2015). But the main patron was the Abu Dhabi state investment company Mubadala. Mubadala provided the finance and SW the intellectual property for a non-profit joint venture called the Abu Dhabi Children's Educational Trust, with SW in a minority on the Trust's Board of Directors (Knezevic 2014). The Trust in turn created Bidaya Media as its subsidiary with rights to the program. Knezevic says (2014) that SW learned, when making *Alam Simsim* in Egypt, that the local producer should have ownership and brand management rights over the content they create. But, since any failure by



Bidaya would be a 'failure for us too' (Knezevic 2014), SW takes responsibility for providing training and guidance. Its determination to do so was evident in the number of visits and workshops by SW personnel in 2014, motivated, according to one close observer, by a 'fear of failure' and a search for a failure-proof format (Anonymous 2014). The show, given away free to any broadcaster ready to air it on a non-exclusive basis, (Knezevic 2014) initially ran on two private channels and seven state-run channels, four in the UAE and three in Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar.

When SW executives explain the project's aims in the Gulf, they talk not of financial gains but of bringing benefits to the region through capacity building. The previous *Iftah ya Simsim*, made in Kuwait, is widely regarded with something approaching reverence by adults who watched it as children. One said: 'There has been nothing like that show since then — nothing produced on that quality and that level for Arab children' (quoted in Ghazal 2013). Episodes of the old show were still being sold in Riyadh in 2007, which, for SW executives, indicated 'brand recognition' (Fareed 2007). SW's mission, according to Knezevic, was to create something that 'is as it was to the kids who grew up on it 30 years ago' (quoted by Sinclair 2013). At a New York workshop for Gulf writers in December 2013, he said SW wanted to create the 'capacity for quality programming that *Sesame Street* is known for' (Sinclair 2013) and local content that is 'relevant to parents as well as children' (Hamid 2013). Children learn better through 'co-viewing with parents', Knezevic said (2014), with parents likely to be attracted to watch the show because of its humour and celebrity appearances. These elements are part of the *Sesame Street* model.

How far the model would be compatible with elements required by SW's Gulf partners remained to be discovered. Press reports let it be known in 2013 that it was proving a challenge to make *Iftah ya Simsim* 'relevant' to Arab Gulf audiences by looking at culture and history, without deviating from the show's model (Sinclair 2013). Cairo Arafat acknowledged the challenge by contrasting the new *Iftah ya Simsim* with its predecessor. She said the previous one was 'set in an Arab culture, but a very neutral culture'. 'This time', she said, 'we are not going to be shy about showing Dubai, or Abu Dhabi, or Riyadh. They'll see the Gulf, the sea, the sand dunes, the tents, so it'll be very much grounded in their culture, their geography'. She continued: 'We're definitely not going to be giving history lessons but [the show] will

represent the growth that has happened in their lives and their surroundings' (Arafat 2014).

SW conveyed the 'fun' ingredient of the Sesame Street model to scriptwriters, animators and others through workshops in Abu Dhabi and New York (Arafat 2014). Another essential ingredient of the model, highlighted in press releases and the SW website, is evaluation of 'measurable' educational gains. The measurability of SW's impact in any location is directly linked to the curriculum document agreed for that particular co-production, which sets out the programme's educational objectives and drives all script-writing, even of the shortest sketches, which have to address a specified numbered objective listed in the curriculum document (Kuttab 2017:203). Objectives have to be framed so that the impact of content can be measured, raising the question of whether some objectives might be avoided because of difficulties of measurement. Quoting CTW executives in the 1970s, Mattelart noted (1985: 172-3) that they had chosen cognitive developmental goals over affective ones for that reason. SW today however believes content dealing with emotions can also be measured for impact and that it makes children not only stronger and kinder but happier too.

Of six sets of educational objectives listed in the curriculum document agreed for *Iftah ya Simsim*, the first three deal with 'Learning, Language and Literacy', 'Mathematics, Science and Cognition', and 'Health, Hygiene and Nutrition'. The remaining three move into the realm of emotions and values. Section 4 is entitled 'Child, Family and Social Relations' and covers 'socio-emotional skills', 'character development', 'family and home' and 'social relations'. Section 5 is called 'Understanding, Respect, and Diversity' while Section 6 is on 'Citizenship, Cultural Heritage and the Arts'. These latter sections refer explicitly to life, culture and customs in the Gulf. In some respects they seem designed to make a significant difference to the lives of Gulf children, thereby 'producing' rather than 'reproducing' society — and incurring risks not lost on those connected with the show. As one said of Knezevic's role:

'he's the one who managed to make the deal and get the Sesame curriculum document accepted and agreed to by that number of people, ministers of different countries. That was very hard to do and it takes a certain type of

person ... At the end of the day there has to be a reason why they are always changing [the scripts] and checking again and again, [such as] the worry of not pleasing seven states and not getting their broadcasters to agree to a non-exclusive deal ... I think SW are using *Iftah* to test something new' (Anonymous 2014).

To gauge the balance between 'production' and 'reproduction' in the curriculum document, the focus now shifts to ABEGS, the Arab body that oversaw its compilation.

### **ABEGS: Fusing reform with 'tradition'**

ABEGS affirms in its *Handbook* (nd: 9) that it is a financially and administratively independent legal entity. Yet this claim is somewhat contradicted in the same sentence of the *Handbook*, which states that it is under the 'auspices' of the General Conference, consisting of the education ministries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Yemen. The General Conference makes the general policies of ABEGS, approves its budget and work plan, and appoints its Director General. ABEGS is based in the biggest of its member states, Saudi Arabia, and its Director General, Ali bin Abdel-Khaliq Al Karni, has Saudi Arabian nationality. A former teacher and specialist in educational testing and evaluation, Karni gained a PhD in the US and worked at the Saudi Ministry of Education before becoming General Supervisor of Saudi Arabian schools.<sup>3</sup>

In the same way that SW was created for collaborative purposes, ABEGS was given a remit to 'achieve coordination, integration and unification among member states'. It was mandated to strengthen ties with 'specialized regional and international organizations', while emphasizing Arab and Islamic thought at different stages of education (ABEGS nd: 11). Introducing the *Statement of Educational Objectives* released in 2011, Al Karni stressed Arab and Islamic cultural values. He wrote that ABEGS was coordinating with all Gulf States so that a new generation of children would be raised who 'cherish the Arabic language, are enthralled with scientific methods and seek to investigate the mysteries of the universe, and realize that they

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.kaeic.com/speakers/dr-ali-bin-abdul-khaliq-al-karni/>

are confident and respected members of their family, society, and global community' (ABEGS et al 211: 7). At the same time he seemed to identify nostalgia for the previous *Iftah ya Simsim* as a unifying force and rallying symbol capable of disarming ministerial resistance to change. After praising Gulf states' achievements in early childhood education, he wrote:

'Yet much remains to be done. Investments in programs for children 0-3 years of age continue to be limited and uncoordinated across various ministries, making it difficult to assess the amount of funding specifically focused on children in this age group...[...]

The region shares a common language, religion, heritage, and culture – and a fond memory of the way *Iftah Ya Simsim* engaged our imaginations when we were children. By working together to redevelop a proven and successful media education initiative that addresses the educational needs of the 21st century child, we gain an educational platform, tools and resources that can be shared and adapted by all countries in the region and provide a forum for cooperation to achieve our common goal of making our children's lives better' (ABEGS et al 2011: 8).

SW's role vis-à-vis the 'proven and successful' previous *Iftah ya Simsim*, and its position as what Al Karni had previously described as a 'a renowned media organization with some of the most memorable characters in television history' (ME Newswire 2010), seems to have made it an alibi for efforts at educational reform. The fact that *Iftah ya Simsim* had been made in the 1970s-80s seemed taken to imply that it was part of Gulf traditions. Speaking of the new collaboration with SW, Al Karni said that it fused 'new technologies' with 'tradition'; he described *Iftah ya Simsim* as 'one of our proud traditions celebrating our respect for education and our love for children' (Hamid 2013, *Saudi Gazette* 2013).

When Al Karni had said in 2010 that educational reform was needed to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges (ME Newswire 2010), he seemed to be summarising a 2009 ABEGS document discussing a report that had compared US students' performance in maths and science internationally and ranked Saudi Arabia near the bottom for eighth-grade mathematics and Qatar even lower, with similarly poor results for science (Khan 2009). ABEGS had described the findings as a wake-up call for GCC

policy-makers, while Al Karni himself said that Gulf states needed to raise the quality of education by 'improving the skills of teachers and managing the overall performance of their school systems' (quoted by Khan 2009). For ABEGS to help with this, its strategy document for 2015-20 indicated an urgent need for the bureau to attract 'qualified and experienced staff' and resolve issues of 'replacement and succession' (ABEGS 2014: 40).

Meanwhile, explicit expectations of educators and parents were written into the November 2011 statement of educational objectives for *Iftah ya Simsim*. Its anonymous overview stresses the 'key role of the family and educators as positive role models for young children' and pledges that the program's educational framework will place the Gulf child 'at the center of attention for families, society, and the region' (ABEGS et al 2011: 9). Whereas most of the document's numbered objectives start with phrases like 'teach children that ...' or 'encourage children to ...' or 'promote children's understanding of ...', there are instances throughout the text where this is replaced by 'encourage parents to ...', or 'encourage parental support for ...'. These reflect findings of Gulf authorities' research into parental involvement in early childhood care (Arafat 2013) that implied a need for change. Section 4 on 'Child, Family and Social Relations' contains a particularly strong message to parents about not leaving childcare to domestic helpers; while emphasizing the importance of respecting domestic helpers, it includes the following objective: 'Promote parental responsibility of direct care for child - bathing, eating, dressing, and playing with children' (ABEGS et al 2011: 30). Parents are the primary target of four items in Section 3, on Health and Hygiene, all of them urging the importance of listening to children and speaking openly with them about 'Body Awareness' and other topics (ABEGS et al 2011: 21). Section 5, on 'Understanding, respect and diversity', contains a subsection entitled 'Gender parity' in the English version, although the same subtitle in the Arabic version, '*Al-moussawa bayn al-jinsayn*' (ABEGS et al 2011: 35) could arguably be translated as 'Equality between the sexes'. In this section parents are encouraged to support 'boys and girls participating in cultural and recreational events and activities' and to include and integrate children with special needs into all family routines and events (ABEGS et al 2011: 37).

The fact that sport is not mentioned explicitly in relation to ‘cultural and recreational events’ is partly redressed by ‘Health and Hygiene’ messages aimed at children generally about the necessity of physical exercise. As for gender equality, the series is intended to ‘ensure that boys and girls realise that they all have equal rights to grow, develop and excel in all aspects of life and learning’ and they all have ‘equal duties and responsibilities within the home and community’ (ABEGS et al 2011: 37). In the section on ‘Child, Family and Social Relations’, certain messages on ‘Coping with death and dying’ also appear to override local customs, especially in Saudi Arabia, such as excluding women from funerals. Under the *Iftah ya Simsim* educational objectives, children should learn that they ‘have the right to ask permission to go to the funeral of their caregivers, parents, relatives, siblings and friends’ (ABEGS et al 2011: 29). Similarly, a section on religious diversity warns against taking part in the celebrations of other religions, but says children should ‘know that they can play with other children whose family practices a different religion from their own’ (Ibid: 37).

For those not party to production processes for the first 28-episode series of the *Iftah ya Simsim* that started airing in 2015, it would take detailed textual analysis to discover how many of the educational objectives that apparently challenge local customs were incorporated into the scripts. Yet the above close reading of the stated objectives does offer a counterweight to the rhetoric of valuing and adhering to unspecified Gulf customs and traditions. In order to probe realities of the production and scriptwriting process, the next task is to examine the role and positioning of Bidaya Media.

### **Bidaya Media: embedded in an Emirati ‘eco-system’**

The word *bidaya* in Arabic means ‘beginning’. After SW and Mubadala created Bidaya Media in 2013, official statements about it regularly noted its ties, not to pan-Gulf institutions but to Mubadala and the Abu Dhabi media free zone authority, twofour54. A Mubadala press release of July 2013 said it had been established at twofour54, where it would be using twofour54’s broadcasting and production facilities, and that twofour54’s ‘creative lab community’ would support Bidaya by identifying and sourcing local talent. It explained that financial support would come through sponsorship from Mubadala Development Company and that Bidaya’s first

project, *Iftah ya Simsim*, would be 'supported' by an Educational Advisory Council (Mubadala 2013). As Bidaya geared up for production in September 2014, the eight Council members were named, comprising two Gulf institutions, ABEGS and the GCCJPPI, and six from Abu Dhabi (Tago 2014). Besides Mubadala and twofour54, these were the Abu Dhabi Education Council, Health Authority of Abu Dhabi, Zayed University, and the Poetry Academy, which was created by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage before its 2012 merger into the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority.

Officials from these Abu Dhabi bodies saw *Iftah ya Simsim* as having benefits specifically for Abu Dhabi and the UAE. Amina Taher, head of Mubadala's community engagement programme, said sponsoring Bidaya was a perfect fit with Mubadala's commitment to youth and community engagement. Noura Al Kaabi, chief executive officer of twofour54, described the previous *Iftah ya Simsim* as a 'very dear show to our generation' (Sesame Workshop 2015). She stressed that the new one would offer media jobs to young Emiratis (Mubadala 2013). According to Al Kaabi, when the government of Abu Dhabi created twofour54 in 2008 its purpose was to 'help establish a media hub within Abu Dhabi, to get media to be commercially viable, to grow the sector, to increase the GDP and also to encourage Emiratis to be part of the sector' (Al Kaabi 2014). If twofour54 invests in content, she said, its purpose is to invest in talent, thereby 'supporting the eco-system' that has raised the proportion of Emiratis in twofour54 from 20 per cent to 40 percent. Noting that Bidaya's project in this eco-system had given opportunities to Emirati women scriptwriters, Al Kaabi asked rhetorically: 'Was that available before in any other show?' (Al Kaabi 2014). As for focusing on Abu Dhabi, she explained:

'I think each emirate and each country has the right to look into ... what will help their sector, whether from an economic perspective or strategic perspective or from a cultural perspective. We see it in two dimensions, competition and collaboration. When we say competition, we try our best not to repeat what other environments or media cities do' (Al Kaabi 2014).

Senior figures involved with Bidaya Media reflect the emphasis on local development. They include Abdulla Al Sharhan as creative director and Fatima Al Breiki as the lead advisor on the Arabic language curriculum. Al Sharhan, from Ras

al-Khaimah and a graduate of Emirates University (Khaleel 2010), was the illustrator and director behind animation hit *Hamdoon*, which aired in 15 eleven-minute episodes on Abu Dhabi TV in 2012. Al Braiki, Chair of the Emirates University Arabic Department, has her own publishing house for children's books, Al-Alam Al-Arabi l'il-Nashr wa-'l Tawzea (Arab World Publishing and Distribution), some of which she wrote herself (Al Braiki 2014). Sadeq al-Midraj, Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Zayed University, worked with Bidaya on formative research for the series, much of it novel in the UAE in using mixed methods with children aged around 4-6, most of them Emirati nationals, one aim being to discover how children responded to the muppet characters, old and new (Midraj 2014).

Studios working with Bidaya Media were also UAE-based. Blink, a content production company with premises in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, was brought in by Mubadala, through twofour54, even before Bidaya was officially set up. Blink had previously worked with twofour54 on an English-Arabic coproduction with the BBC called *Driver Dan's Story Train*, for which Blink General Manager Nathalie Habib had avoided the conventional 'dated, boring, poetic, emotional' approach to story-writing for Arab children and worked instead on story scripts with local 'Arab women, who are sitting at home surrounded by children and love to write' (Habib 2013). In December 2012 Blink was invited to a workshop in New York, only to discover that there could be no immediate direct cooperation between Blink and SW because SW and Mubadala had agreed to create their own production venture, Bidaya. Eventually, however, in May 2014, Blink was formally commissioned to produce all studio segments of the show, bringing in a team of seven writers, shooting on a set made by Dubai-based Mint Creative Production at twofour54 studios (Field 2015) and leading post-production with a twofour54 team. When it came to accolades at the launch, SW Chief Operating Officer Steve Youngwood congratulated Blink Studios by name along with Bidaya and twofour54 (twofour54 2015). Illustrations and animation for the storytime segment in each episode were assigned to Lammtara Studio, the Dubai-based company that had helped to put UAE animation on the map some years previously with *Freej*, featuring four elderly Emirati women characters.

The above roll call gives some indication of the pool of talent available in the Bidaya Media milieu, as well as an insight into the novelty of opportunities for people with



talent to gain experience in applying it. It also reveals a slow, hesitant process marked by a tendency to defer decisions about whom to trust with key tasks. This hesitancy was reflected in the production timetable. After Bidaya's launch in 2013, the plan was to start broadcasting in the 'fall of 2014' (Arafat 2013). Then it was said shooting would start in October 2014. Instead, that month saw the call for auditions for the main non-puppet characters, Rashid and Amal — roles filled by actors from Saudi Arabia and the UAE — and shooting finally started in January 2015. According to one estimate (Anonymous 2015), delays helped to double the cost of the first season to \$12 million, prompting doubts about raising finance for the next one.<sup>4</sup> Concern to avoid controversy was also evident in the level of oversight. Board members, including SW, Bidaya and Mubadala 'sat together on a weekly basis' to discuss progress (Field 2015). Although twofour54 (2015) implied in a press release that SW was keen to ensure the 'international standards' of its brand were met, the learning process was two-way. For example, producers in Abu Dhabi reportedly had a hard time explaining to SW staff in New York that Christmas and Halloween are not customary festivals in the Gulf (Anonymous 2015). Meanwhile, according to Abu Dhabi Education Council Director General Amal Al Qubaisi, her organization put 'immense work and hours into research, planning and organizing the educational curriculum' (Sesame Workshop 2015).

Nevertheless, several public and inter-industry statements about the first series indicated that it would not attempt to cover all six areas listed in the November 2011 curriculum document, but would stick to the three themes of health and nutrition, family and society, and Arabic language (Field 2015). An ADEC press release summarised the focus as 'Health and Wellbeing' (Abu Dhabi Education Council 2015), although this observation was omitted from a press release with the same heading issued by Sesame Workshop (2015). A German news agency reported Cairo Arafat saying that children would learn about differences of dress and speech across the Gulf but that issues of tolerance and diversity would be tackled at a later stage (Al-A'sar and Gold 2015). The Health Authority of Abu Dhabi highlighted the health challenge when it co-hosted a live *Iftah ya Simsim* show at the Abu Dhabi Science Festival in November 2015 on the theme of 'Eat right and get active'.

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<sup>4</sup> Season 2 started production in Abu Dhabi in February 2017.

## Conclusion

On the face of it, many different interest groups did indeed collaborate across national and sectoral boundaries over about eight years to produce the *Iftah ya Simsim* season that aired in September 2015. Pan-Gulf educational and media institutions, based in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait respectively, came together with SW from the US, itself an endeavour aimed at combining education, media and research. SW's proactive dealings with Gulf bodies may be explained in part by its need to stay relevant internationally at a time of mounting economic and technological pressures on SW formats and formulae. As in a previous decade (Hendershot 1999b: 161), here again there was ambiguity about where the initiative came from. But people involved certainly believed that SW executives invested sustained efforts to push the project forward, first in Saudi Arabia and then Abu Dhabi. Significantly, the challenge of collaboration was somewhat mitigated by its sequential nature. Funding imperatives resulted in the SW partnership shifting to Abu Dhabi, where state-run bodies with a shared Abu Dhabi government agenda took over a different set of tasks than those overseen by ABEGS.

Each actor in the collaboration brought with them different concerns (Thomson et al 2009: 25). ABEGS and SW drafted the curriculum document to incorporate concerns about nutrition, physical exercise and parenting that had emerged from data collated by SW's local representatives and Gulf ministries. However, public narratives about the programme rarely articulated these concerns as such. Instead, they stressed notions of regional pride and Gulf heritage, culture and values that were, in some instances, at odds with the small print of the educational objectives and realities of preschool provision set out in the November 2011 curriculum document. By repeatedly emphasizing respect for Gulf values and traditions in their statements to the public, officials found a way of emphasizing shared norms underlying the *Iftah ya Simsim* project.

In this they were greatly helped by the status of *Iftah ya Simsim* as a show that was already prized by a generation of Gulf adults. Some discourse around the previous series even seemed to imply that the programme itself belonged with Gulf traditions. Reverence for the 1970s-80s *Iftah ya Simsim* among Gulf executives and officials

was possibly enhanced by the limited number of episodes produced at that time and nostalgia for a period perceived as one of hope and possibility before the debilitating effects of a series of wars. Belief in the power of something that people felt they already knew can be seen to have helped to neutralise difficulties and setbacks encountered during the collaboration process.

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