Original Article

Curation as methodological enhancement in researching production cultures behind screen content about displaced children in Europe

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Abstract
This paper starts from the premise that research into how producers negotiate issues of diversity and multicultural content in Europe is rare and mostly relies on interviews and documents, and furthermore work on understanding those negotiation processes in relation to children's screen content is even rarer. The article seeks to reflect critically on an alternative hybrid research method, which aims to open up a space for dialogue about production processes and was applied in three workshops about children's content and forced migration that the authors ran with content creators and broadcasters of children's screen content in 2017–2018.

Keywords
Co-creation, children, diversity, methodology, migration, production

TV production studies face a methodological challenge which arises primarily from the teamwork nature of screen media production. This is because research needs to probe not

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only into individual decision-making or organisational constraints, but a whole web of interactions among creatives and their workplace communities and contexts. Scholars in the field acknowledge the challenge by seeking to study 'production culture/s' (Banks et al., 2016: x; Caldwell, 2008) and stressing that media industries and practitioners are subject to an increasingly complex array of larger 'socio-political forces and more local cultural manifestations' (Freeman, 2016: 67). The range of methods at their disposal for studying this interactive production process usually consists of interviews, ethnographic observation and scrutiny of documents such as publicity materials, company data and items in the trade press. Yet interviews and observations come with pitfalls as well as advantages. In recent years some of the pitfalls, discussed below, have been explored collectively, including at a University of Leeds conference on 'Advancing Media Production Research' in June 2013 and in material generated at the launch of the University of Nottingham's Institute for Screen Industries Research (ISIR) (Freeman, 2016).

For academic researchers, the task of developing trust and obtaining access looms large in any method involving personal contact with industry practitioners. As Amanda Lotz argued in a post on the original ISIR website, the nature of industry jobs, marked by 'day-to-day deadlines and extinguishing immediate fires', makes it hard for executives to find time for thinking at the 'broad level available to academics', which makes conversations difficult (Lotz, n.d.). Those difficulties can work both ways. Surveys show that industry practitioners who work in academia cannot expect a uniformly positive reception from non-practitioner colleagues (Mateer, 2019: 14). One survey respondent attributed this state of affairs to industry and the academy being 'two separate worlds with two separate languages and ways of understanding' (quoted in Mateer, 2019: 21).

In light of communication obstacles and industry complexities, there is good reason, as Lotz notes, to use aspects related to media industry operations as a 'lens for trying to make sense' (n.d.) of a particular phenomenon, rather than those operations themselves serving as the object of study. The phenomenon at the centre of research referred to in this article was the level of diversity and multicultural representation in children's screen media in Europe in the context of a surge in forced migration into Europe in 2015–2016. Our present contribution itself, however, addresses the methodological challenge of gaining insights into, and understanding of, the negotiation of regulatory, commissioning and production processes behind what made it to screen in this period. It starts from the premise that research on such negotiation processes has been rare even in the context of diverse and multicultural adult programming and has mostly relied on interviews and documents (see, for example Dhoest, 2014: 107; Leurdijk, 2006: 26). For children's programming it has been even rarer (Steemers, 2016: 126) and has again been conducted mostly through interviews with some participant observation (see, for example Buckingham et al., 1999: 147–174; Steemers, 2010: vii).

Yet negotiation over production for children is often too sensitive, because of commercial constraints and a lack of their participation (Sakr and Steemers, 2019: 114–120, 127–131), to be made transparent through interviews or even observation. Neither method can be relied upon to overcome the reticence instilled by industry hierarchies or expose what really takes place during the narrow pre-production window when key production parameters are determined. The aim of the article is to reflect critically on an

alternative hybrid method – one consisting of an extended group interview using screen content to stimulate reflection – applied in three workshops that the authors ran with producers and commissioning editors of children's screen content in 2017–2018. The paper starts by exploring arguments for a fundamentally multi-method approach to production studies.

Making the most of the methodological toolbox

As Philip Schlesinger (2016) points out, media production research commonly involves several methods used in conjunction with each other. Schlesinger describes observation, where the researcher is 'present in the settings to be investigated', as 'the most privileged' but notes that, where feasible, this is 'generally coupled with interviewing and also the gathering of documentation and other artefacts that conduce to the further understanding of the production process and the constitutive social relations in play' (2016: 25).

Observation is seen to represent the greatest privilege, because it may require permission from executives other than the practitioners who will be observed. Yet, as reflected in Schlesinger's phrase 'generally coupled with', there are questions about how much can truly be revealed through observation alone. The present authors, having over the years observed operations in the studios and studio control rooms of Arab satellite television networks and production companies (Sakr) and editorial meetings of UK and US entertainment companies (Steemers), know that real insights come when presence in production settings is complemented with knowledge about what goes on when team members are no longer playing safe in exchanges with senior executives, or when decisions are questioned or rescinded. John Caldwell's discussions (2008, 2009) around the various methods of data-gathering on screen production reflect his argument that multiple methods are needed not only because the interactions under study are multifaceted, but because knowledge about them takes diverse forms. Caldwell believes that a large part of observation in screen production settings involves '[u]nderstanding production talk', meaning that 'textual analysis of trade and worker artifacts' and interviews with screen production workers are as important as 'ethnographic field observation of production spaces and professional gatherings' and 'economic/industrial analysis' (2009: 201).

Caldwell sets out three tiers of 'deep texts and rituals' (2008: 247, 2009: 202) that can help to reveal 'just how complex and varied are the ways that contemporary film/video corporations and their personnel broach, barter, discuss, employ, explain, and contest ideas about the nature and meaning of film/television' (2009: 209). Having used this tripartite scheme in his book, *Production Culture*, Caldwell indicates how interdependent the various research methods are that underpin it. He cautions that the 'coded and inflected nature of overt practitioner explanations in interviews or trade accounts' should be considered alongside the 'deep industrial practices' of film/video production (2009: 202), to explore the 'industry's own self-representation, self-critique, and self-reflection' (2008: 5). Application of the tripartite scheme can usefully highlight differences and contradictions between the tiers, as demonstrated by a production study of the

2015 season of an Arabic version of the children's TV show *Sesame Street* (1969–) (Sakr, 2018). This showed that intra-group discourses and concerns expressed behind closed doors in what Caldwell calls 'bounded professional exchanges' (2009: 202) and occasionally intimated in modified form through inter-group exchanges with the trade press, differed from the narratives put out through what he (2009: 202) terms 'extra-group' texts, such as press releases intended for public consumption (Sakr, 2018: 13, 24).

Access of a kind that allows a researcher to deploy such a multi-method approach requires a high degree of collaboration with individuals in the industry. Anna Potter shows the crucial role of trust in building a 'close, ongoing collaboration' and 'sustained research dialogue with practitioners' (2018: 159–160). However, Potter also pinpoints the 'risk to the researcher of being captured (or appearing to be captured) by a stake-holder's agenda' and of 'appearing to lose objectivity and independence' (2018: 160, 169) and is candid about the trade-offs involved in fostering an ongoing dialogue. She respects interviewees' requests for anonymity, sends them interview transcripts for approval, which allows them to retract statements, and shares the resulting outputs with them to show how their contribution has been used. It is rare to find such practices placed at the centre of methodological discussions. Hanne Bruun notes that reflections on the use of the qualitative interview as a research method in media production research are generally 'very limited' (2016: 131).

Given the sustained efforts required to build a research dialogue with individuals whom Bruun calls 'exclusive informants' (2016: 133) and Potter identifies as members of an 'industry elite' (2018: 169), the idea of recruiting media professionals from different organisations to take part in a group interview has not received much attention, no doubt because it multiplies many times over the same issues of trust and access generated by a one-to-one interview. Yet, in combining the benefits of interview and observation, the group interview would seem well suited to the multi-method, multi-faceted approach proposed by Schlesinger, Caldwell and others, because it offers insights into the way group members interact with each other and thereby into 'wider cultural and ideological frameworks' (King et al., 2019: 103). As Nigel King and his co-authors point out, the 'very nature of being part of a group can engage participants in a re-evaluation of their existing position', which makes the focus group an 'ideal method for gaining access to participants' own meanings' (King et al., 2019: 94–95). RAW Rhodes and Anne Tiernan (2015) have written up their experience of conducting focus groups with prime ministers' chiefs of staff as one tool in a methodological toolbox – used alongside ethnographic interviewing and other forms of observation – aimed at the 'recovery of meaning' (2015: 6). For them the advantage of focus groups with people 'more powerful than the researcher' is that the method is another way of observing 'elite actors' in action when observation is not possible at the workplace', 'another way of "being there" and side-stepping the problems of access and secrecy' (Rhodes and Tiernan, 2015: 5).

When it comes to getting focus group participants to reflect on a researcher's chosen topic, 'visual elicitation' methods, whereby images or video content are shared and discussed, have the potential to build rapport, stimulate different types of talk, disrupt the preconceived patterns of behaviour often linked to a question-and-answer format and encourage deeper reflection (King et al., 2019: 147–148). It is here that the term

'curation', which we apply to the research method set out in the remainder of this article, would seem to fit quite naturally, since curation usually involves the selection and display of creative work. However, as curators themselves attest, the curatorial task is more holistic than the words 'selection and display' indicate, and a holistic understanding of curation works equally well for the research method we describe. This is not to say that curation can be used loosely as a 'catchall' term to 'encompass almost any aspect of life that involves some form of considered organisation' (Mazière, 2017: 5). Instead, we mean holistic in the sense defined by renowned gallery and artistic director Maria Lind, editor of *Performing the Curatorial* (2012) and former director of the Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies graduate programme in the United States. Asked to describe the curator's task in today's environment, Lind replied that it is 'not only about selecting artists and putting up the show, but also how this invitation is happening, what the circumstances are in terms of the preparation period, production of new works, mediation activities and so on' (quoted in Kaverina, 2016: 2).

In what follows we recount the curatorial process within which our workshops took place, paying attention to the following: the circumstances of preparation in relation to our partner organisations and installation at the workshop venues; how the invitations happened; how we selected video clips as prompts for dialogue; and how we communicated our objectives to participants and mediated the dialogue when it took place. We do not claim that curation is the only acceptable term to describe the variation on the conventional focus group that we attempted. It might perhaps be seen as akin to a form of video reflexive ethnography, a hybrid method mostly used in health and clinical settings in which video content is used to elicit reactions from those who have been filmed. Advanced forms of this method exist in which ethnographic content is edited over time to respond to, and incorporate the reactions of, those filmed, as in Miguel Gaggiotti's documentary *Maquiladora* (2020) reflecting 3 years of interaction with workers at foreign-owned assembly plants on the Mexican border. Our workshops, in contrast, were one-offs and the films in question were not of participants but made by them. Instead, a stronger argument exists for comparing our curation method to 'action research', a label attached to research which, despite its long history in diverse fields, has two common features. First, it recognises 'the capacity of people living and working in particular settings to participate actively in all aspects of the research process'; and secondly, 'the research conducted by participants is oriented to making improvements in practices and their settings by the participants themselves' (Kemmis et al., 2014: 4). Advocates of action research also bring in a mix of stakeholder identification, surveys, interviews, focus groups and ongoing evaluation (Hearn et al., 2019: 128–129).

What we present below draws on a combination of methodological tools including focus groups, observation, visual elicitation and action research in a way captured by the five curatorial processes – preparation, installation, invitation, selection and mediation – outlined above. These processes are not normally associated with mainstream production study methods such as interviews and observation. We, then, consider what this mixed-method hybrid offers that other methods do not: for example, in terms of respondents' candour and reflexivity as well as some caveats about its use.

'Putting up the show': Curating the workshop experience

The collaborative research encounters considered were part of a project that stemmed from a three-year (2013–2016) study of pan-Arab screen media for children, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC, see funding) and included research into policy, production and reception. In 2017, the AHRC funded a further one-year project for 'impact and engagement', entitled 'Collaborative Development of Children's Screen Content in an Era of Forced Migration Flows: Facilitating Arab-European Dialogue', designed to share findings from the original research with new non-academic beneficiaries (https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/euroarabchildrensmedia). As this 'follow-on' project revolved around the implications of hundreds of thousands of Syrian and other Arab refugees arriving in Europe, in terms of rethinking the information and screen content needs of Europe's increasingly diverse child audiences, the non-academic stakeholders it addressed included both European and Arab broadcasters, content creators, civil society representatives, children's advocates and policymakers.

The aim of the project was to inform European participants about earlier research findings on the media experiences of young Arab children and to create a space for critical reflection and dialogue between European and Arab stakeholders about current European screen content for young children (Steemers et al., 2018). This reflection and dialogue generated new co-produced research findings around issues of diversity and forced migration, which could never have been anticipated when the original grant was agreed in 2012. Cross-cultural encounters among Arab and European practitioners gave Arab participants an opportunity to voice their opinions within spaces and in ways that are not possible in most Arab countries, where media policy is run by elites and determined by authoritarian regimes. Thus, experts from Dubai, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria with backgrounds in production and advocacy, some with experience of academic research and some with their own experience as refugees from the recent Syrian conflict or past violence in Lebanon and Palestine, were able to offer informed views on European screen content that featured children of non-European and especially Arab heritage. This was in marked contrast to the usual one-way transfers of programming and media training from North America and Europe to the Middle East (see, for example Awan, 2016: 118–122). It made the workshop encounters very different from the more usual business dealings at international markets like MIP Junior in Cannes, where Europeans seek to sell their content and production expertise to Arab counterparts, with little expertise or sales flowing in the opposite direction.

The follow-on project comprised three one-day workshops, each with 22–33 participants, in the United Kingdom, Denmark and Germany, starting in December 2017 and finishing with a more formal symposium in London for 70 participants in September 2018. Each workshop was held as a free event attached to a bigger international conference or festival in the children's media calendar that attracts large numbers of participants from industry and children's advocacy groups. The first workshop was hosted by the BBC in Salford (Greater Manchester) in the United Kingdom on 4 December, immediately before the triennial World Summit on Media for Children, which in 2017 was entitled Children's Global Media Summit (CGMS). The second, hosted by the

Danish Film Institute, took place on the mornings of 19 and 20 March 2018 as part of the Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival (CPH: DOX). The third workshop in Munich, on 24 May 2018, was hosted by Prix Jeunesse and the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) immediately before the biennial Prix Jeunesse international children's television festival.

A specific outcome of the dialogue workshops was to co-create new knowledge and findings with academic and non-academic participants. The methods for defining, sharing and problem-solving that generated this outcome had been piloted by the authors at the 2014 World Summit on Media for Children (WSMC) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in a one-day pre-summit workshop sponsored by the Public Media Alliance (PMA), an international advocacy body for public service media, later a partner on the AHRC-funded follow-on project. The Kuala Lumpur workshop, entitled 'Children's Content at the Core of Public Service Media in a Multi-platform Era', gave 40 broadcasters and regulators from countries with and without any history of public service broadcasting a chance to outline their local constraints and priorities in dialogue with each other (Steemers, 2016). Through careful curation of themes and video clips, real-time transcription of key comments from participants onto a big screen, and group work, a model was developed that enabled recording and tracking of key issues raised by practitioners, thereby creating the wherewithal for reflection, altering perceptions and action. The authors found this method conducive to achieving new insights because participants tended to engage with each other with more honesty and less 'spin' than would be forthcoming in a research interview.

The Kuala Lumpur model demonstrated the importance of the curatorial elements which we, to paraphrase Lind (Kaverina, 2016: 2), summarise as preparation, installation, invitation, selection and mediation. Preparation is obviously key, not only to establish institutional partnerships needed to secure venues and participants, as well as preparing the workshop content, but also to guarantee the installation process by ensuring the facilities would enable selected materials to be screened effectively and discussed with smooth and equitable participation. Two of our partnerships (BBC and Prix Jeunesse) were put in place with agreed contributions (related to the provision of time, workshop spaces and promotion) at the AHRC proposal stage, when we also secured partnerships for promotion and advice with the PMA and BBC Media Action, the BBC's international development charity. The project was supported by a board of UK and Arab advisers, drawn from industry (Children's Media Foundation; Gallup) and academia, to test ideas and stimulus materials before each workshop.

Securing partners and workshop venues was not straightforward, however, especially given the logistical necessity of 'piggy-backing' on an existing international event in the limited annual calendar of children's screen media gatherings. At the project proposal stage, in January 2017, our plan was to partner with the Global Kids Media Congress (GKMC) to hold the second workshop in Angoulême, France, in March 2018 as part of the GKMC event for children's broadcasters that had hitherto been held each spring since 2015. By September 2017, after the authors had attended that year's GKMC, it became clear there would be no GKMC in 2018 and that, in view of the extensive preparation involved, a replacement was needed urgently. After reaching out to contacts

first in Italy and then Denmark, we established a partnership with CPH: DOX in mid-October 2017 and managed to agree dates and venue before our direct contact went on maternity leave. There is no space here to elaborate on every practical challenge that cropped up in the process of ensuring venues were equipped with screens, sound and wifi, furniture was arranged for informal group and plenary discussions, catering for all dietary requirements was provided, and so on. Yet, since practical challenges were an essential aspect of workshop curation, it is relevant to note two travel disruptions that called for quick responses and flexibility. On the day the three-person research team had reserved rail travel from London to Manchester with three workshop guests – Jordanian, Palestinian and Syrian – who had arrived in the United Kingdom the previous day, a major incident put the railway line out of action, leaving us to contemplate a long and complicated road journey until train services resumed in the afternoon. In March 2018, when snow forecast for the United Kingdom meant the research team ran the risk of not arriving in Copenhagen on time, we forfeited our budget airline tickets and re-booked flights and hotels for a pre-snow day.

Preparation for each workshop also had an intellectual component, in the sense of aligning workshop themes with those of the event to which the workshop was attached. These themes underpinned a structure for the dialogue and guided our selection of video clips to use as prompts for discussion. Organisers of the CGMS in Manchester chose the themes of empowerment, freedom, education and entertainment, which we encouraged participants to interrogate through clips from drama, factual and animation programmes for young children and family audiences. In line with the documentary focus of CPH: DOX, the Copenhagen workshop concentrated on factual formats using the two themes of 'escaping' (*på flugt*) and 'democracy' (*demokrati*) adopted by the CPH: DOX Children and Youth section. As in Manchester, the themes generated diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations. The Munich workshop explored the 2018 Prix Jeunesse theme of 'Strong Stories for Strong Children', looking at narratives of migration and diversity within young children's fiction. There discussions critiqued notions of strength, suggesting they can transcend individual resilience and bravery to encompass the ability to express emotion and vulnerability.

The invitation process was partly facilitated by each workshop's link to a much larger event with wide participation. But this worked only up to a point. For every workshop the researchers also reached out to potential attendees through personal contacts and snowballing. In Manchester and Munich invitations to attend the pre-event workshops were incorporated into online registration documents for the CGMS and Prix Jeunesse respectively. This was not possible for the CPH: DOX, so much more individual effort was required, drawing on existing relationships. We invited European producers whose work we planned to show at the workshops and many accepted, even though the project budget could provide only limited subsidies for travel and hotel costs. In the case of Arab attendees, recruited through contact lists the authors compiled during the 2013–2016 project, their costs were met in full by the project since part of the rationale for inviting them was that they would otherwise almost certainly not attend the event, through lack of interest from employers, scarcity of funds and the difficulty and expense of obtaining visas. Across the three workshops, 18 participants came from NGOs including our

project partners and Europe-based bodies working with refugees. Another 34 were producers, including 17 whose programming was under discussion. Another 16 came from institutions that commission, fund, produce and distribute children's content, including the DFI, public broadcasters (BBC, DR, RTV Slovenia, Swiss Broadcasting, ZDF, WDR, NRK), film festivals and professional bodies. Academics, not counting the research team, made up eight participants. Very few of the European participants came from a minority ethnic background, reflecting a lack of diversity among practitioners generally (Dhoest, 2014). A comment made at the Copenhagen workshop indicated that those who did found it more difficult to 'talk about minorities' with those in power: namely, commissioners without a minority background, who 'are in the position to pick and choose content'.

When it came to tracking down and selecting stimulus material accessible in English as well as the original language, we referred not only to project partners, notably the BBC, Prix Jeunesse and DFI, but also to contacts at the European Broadcasting Union's Children's Drama Exchange, the Dutch Cinekid film festival and broadcasters including the Flemish VRT, DR in Denmark, ZDF and WDR in Germany and NPO in the Netherlands. It soon became apparent that public service broadcasters, particularly those in wealthier northern European countries (Denmark) and/or wealthier countries with large immigrant communities (Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, the United Kingdom), were virtually the only commissioners of children's programming addressing issues of diversity and migration because of their obligations around universality and diversity in content as well as casting and employment practices (Sakr and Steemers, 2019: 102–104). Subtitling issues made it complicated to show content from France, but we found little of relevance to show anyway in the catalogues and archives we consulted to locate material. Of the 35 clips shown in total, the largest number were from the United Kingdom (10) and Netherlands (7), followed by Germany (6) and Denmark (5), with single items from Belgium, Serbia, Slovenia, Switzerland, as well as others from Canada, the United States and Malaysia/Yemen that had been screened in Europe. While 23 of these dealt directly with the migration crisis that had unfolded from 2015, 12 dealt more broadly with diversity issues. Just under two-thirds of clips were factual, half were live action drama, and five clips were animated fiction. The presence of programme creators, both Arab and European, was crucial in stimulating dialogue. In feedback, several producers said how valuable it had been to simply discuss how their shows worked to achieve diversity without the pressure of pitching to a commissioning editor.

As regards mediation, the research team took on the role of participant observers, introducing the discussion themes and video clips and moderating exchanges but taking a backseat whenever possible. Although the project was designed under the AHRC heading of 'impact and engagement' rather than research, it generated a raft of research materials that documented the development of dialogue through workshop transcripts, post-event evaluation forms and 23 subsequent interviews, primarily with producers, which took place by telephone, video-conferencing and face-to-face. Central to workshop mediation was a bottom-up approach which encouraged participants to offer their insights into commissioning, production, funding and distribution at the level of their practical experience. This allowed those who are rarely heard in policy forums, such as

producers, to interact and negotiate 'with each other' and with broadcasters and other commissioners as they would in what Kingdon calls a 'policy community' (2011: 117). It provided a marked contrast to the emphasis on top-down macro-level issues such as child protection and media literacy that tend to dominate regulatory and policy debates (Sakr and Steemers, 2019: 45ff).

Takeaways from the curation process

The workshop encounters afforded insights beyond those that could be expected from the main production research methods of interviews and ethnography. This section considers benefits and challenges of the method, from practical issues that could be remedied between one workshop and the next, to issues of social interaction that are probably not susceptible to instant remedy.

Selection of video clips was critical to generating meaningful and vibrant discussion and keeping it focused. But it threw up two challenges. One was to find the optimum length of a clip. We needed excerpts that were thought-provoking but, shown in isolation, a few controversial minutes of a longer programme can give a misleading impression. We thought short clips would save time for discussion but, as moderators, we found ourselves wasting time because we had to fill in background information to do justice to the item as a whole. We learned from the first workshop to prioritise clips produced by those in the room, as producers themselves are best placed to provide context and fill in gaps for other participants. A second challenge, which limited the generalisability of findings from the workshops, was that, despite trying, we failed to find relevant clips from the commercial sector during this period.

The palpable presence of producers in the workshops created an atmosphere of mutual support: responses to the work shown were honest and mostly constructive. It was clear to participants from the invitations and workshop agendas that the focus was on exploring and improving representations of children caught up in forced migration. This created a very different milieu from industry settings, such as conferences and festivals, where producers from small companies do not always feel comfortable about expressing their opinions in front of powerful commissioning editors. In soundings led by the UK regulator, Ofcom, such as its 2018 consultation on the children's screen media industry or 2019 consultation on the BBC's *Newsround*, independent producers made their submissions anonymously to avoid being associated with criticism of the BBC, which is the dominant commissioner of children's content in the United Kingdom. Independent producers usually refrain from questioning commissioning strategies when these are presented in forums like the annual Children's Media Conference in Sheffield, sharing their reactions later in private.

The research team's aim with the workshops, in contrast, was to create a safe space where open discussion could take place without fear of consequence, in response to comments invited from Arab participants, children's advocates and other producers. Some programmes created discomfort, particularly where it was felt they were portraying newly arrived children as victims and somehow different from European-born children. Unease was expressed about one or two documentary films showing refugee

children in the Greek camps, such as the Dutch *Hello Salaam* (NPO Zapp, 2017), or the Danish *Ferie på Flygtningeøen* (*Vacation on Refugee Island*, DR Ultra, 2017), because of concerns that they depicted Arab children as dependent on hand-outs and omitted to acknowledge their pre-flight family lives and culture. Questions came up around perceived intrusions on privacy in the camps and the ethics of care. European producers were equally candid in recounting their difficulties in reaching out to or casting minority ethnic characters, as well as struggling against racist attitudes that prevent casting children of colour in some online content targeting audiences in North America and Europe.

Perspectives were articulated that reflected differences not between groups of participants but across all of them, regardless of their professional, geographic or cultural background. It was a Jordanian female television executive who commented on the treatment of gender in a UK-made preschool documentary that showed an eight-year-old Jordanian boy at home with his family in Amman. The documentary series was made to help young children see normal life in other countries and lessen their anxiety about the world. When the Jordanian executive said a scene showing the boy in the kitchen with his mother reminded her of stereotypical portrayals of women in the kitchen in local textbooks, the series producer revealed just how challenging the filming had been for the series as whole, not least in reconciling time and budget constraints with finding the child and their family and negotiating with all involved. Stereotyping was raised in relation to a children's live action comedy drama set in a fanciful version of eighth-century Baghdad. The show was made as entertainment to appeal to a UK audience because, as was pointed out in the workshop, it had 'lots of sunshine, lots of colour . . . and lots of different faces that are not white' in a spirit of 'inclusion, adventure and fantasy'. Some participants were concerned that an educational opportunity had been lost in neglecting to portray the impressive art and architecture of Baghdad at that time and the fact that some of its inhabitants did have white skin and blue eyes. Others still argued that the show would only be interpreted as Orientalist if it were the sole portrayal of the subject matter and did not exist in a context where they were plenty of other programmes as well.

A powerfully captured scene in a German series, in which a young Syrian girl expresses on camera her feelings about covering her hair when she is older, attracted almost as many opinions as there were people in the room. Concerns included: the choice of clip, given the very large range of issues raised in all episodes of more than one season of the series; the implied coupling of religion and identity; a perceived failure to interrogate German religious beliefs with the same intimacy; the suspicion that the girl was simply parroting her mother's preference; and so on. Participants disagreed about whether the scene showed the girl to be empowered or disempowered and whether this was a case of one child being assumed to represent a whole group.

Moderating and mediating these exchanges was one of the most demanding elements of the workshop experience. Thought-provoking and enlightening discussions generally occurred when there was some element of controversy and assumptions were challenged, but these also created moments of discomfort, depending on the response of individual producers. The headscarf discussion outlined above, elicited by a scene from the Emmy-award-winning series *Berlin und Wir* (*Berlin and Us*) (2019–), risked giving a wrong

impression of the show as a whole. Two producers from the show, present at the Munich workshop, had reservations about the choice of clip but responded constructively to the comments and were open to further discussions with participants on the day and later with the research team. As a result, we gained greater insight into how the show's storylines were determined in large part by the series' young protagonists as active participants in the production, who met off screen, chose their own topics and activities, and negotiated the terms of their portrayal with the producers (Sakr and Steemers, 2019: 119–120).

At other times feelings of hurt by individual producers were harder to deal with, especially when they were intimated to the research team after the event. Out of 16 producer and 17 institutional (including broadcaster) participants, only two such communications were received, and one of these pertained not to a workshop but the London symposium. However, we took time to talk through the episode with the persons concerned because we recognise how important it is to acknowledge the huge personal and emotional investment that producers commit and the many months it can take to secure a commission and funding. This, in turn, means understanding their sensitivity to critique, however moderate it might appear to others. In one workshop we had to mediate in a case of verbal bullying on the sidelines by one participant towards a younger one, which brought home to us the importance of recognising power dynamics. We found that, despite the challenges, it is important in a curated workshop not to shy away from difficult issues because these can be the stepping-stones to key research findings.

Conclusion

The hybrid extended group interview method with its 'visual elicitation' stimuli proved to be an effective research tool, as findings from the three workshops described here attest. Producers' candour, encouraged by an atmosphere of mutual deliberative support in a space safe from the pressures of pitching and selling, offered rare insights into sensitive production decisions. But the account also shows that the effort involved was such that a term like 'curation' is needed to encapsulate the multiple processes which brought each workshop about, as well as the interactive nature of these processes, such as preparation, selection and invitation, whereby producers and broadcasters took more interest in our project when we sought their advice on relevant content.

In view of the extensive research findings (Sakr and Steemers, 2019; Steemers et al., 2018), it is ironic that funding was provided for the workshops under the heading not of research but 'impact and engagement'. The distinction is important because funding, which was essential to cover administrative assistance, travel, hotels and catering, might not have been forthcoming had we applied for a research grant. In other words, the workshop encounters were ones we would have wanted to arrange as part of normal research activities but, as it happened, they took place within a 'coercive' regime whereby 'knowledge exchange' beyond academia has to be demonstrated publicly (Schlesinger, 2016: 23). It is also ironic that whatever impact the project had in allowing knowledge from Arab practitioners to be shared with Europeans, rather than the reverse, is difficult to measure beyond positive comments offered on workshop evaluation forms.

But we do know that, despite some differences over ways of representing children from migrant backgrounds, there were many shared expectations among Arab and European participants about the best way to represent diversity and forced migration, how to tackle institutional weaknesses and find better ways of responding to and engaging with children's own articulated needs and knowledge. Policy and practice recommendations from the workshop were published (Steemers et al., 2018) and uploaded to the project website (euroarabchildrensmedia.org). Research team members have subsequently maintained a research dialogue with industry participants and been invited to share findings at industry events, including Cinekid, the Children's Media Conference and an internal VRT workshop.

Caveats about this mixed-method hybrid research tool potentially stem from the funding issue: it is an expensive method although the international participation achieved in our workshops is not an essential element of the method itself. It is conceivable that producers from different independent companies clustered in regional towns (in the United Kingdom one such cluster is found in Bristol) might accept invitations to discuss their work over half a day, which would dramatically reduce costs. It would not be less labour intensive, however, and would still require a suitably equipped venue, institutional umbrella capable of inspiring confidence in invitees and a post-Covid19 environment. Curating workshops like these cannot be other than a team effort, with the team effectively extending beyond the researchers to encompass facilitators in partner institutions. Participants are ultimately self-selecting, in the sense that most industry practitioners willing to give up time for shared reflection are pre-disposed to contribute constructively to a research dialogue. But their honest exchanges confirmed the benefits for everyone of participants taking part in group discussion (King et al., 2019: 94–95), as they revealed more about anxieties regarding future commissioning, funding and distribution of children's screen content than might have emerged from either single interviews or observations.

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