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Children's TV and Digital Media in the Arab World

Childhood, Screen Culture and Education

Edited by
NAOMI SAKR AND JEANETTE STEEMERS



Naomi Sakr is Professor of Media Policy at the University of Westminster and former Director of the Arab Media Centre (part of the University of Westminster's Communication and Media Research Institute). Her publications include *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East*; *Arab Television Today*; *Transformations in Egyptian Journalism*; and, as editor, *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-Expression*; *Arab Media and Political Renewal: Community, Legitimacy and Public Life*; and *Arab Media Moguls* (all published by I.B.Tauris).

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‘This book provides a synthesis of research and policy reports as well as professional views on producing children’s media in the MENA region. As such, it sheds new light on the role of policy and ideology, as well as technology, on children’s media output, covering various genres and case studies. The authors cover an impressive array of topics, including media policies, representation of gender and national identity, and the choice of linguistic code used in children’s media. This is a well-written and well-argued book, which will be essential reading for students and scholars of Middle East studies.’

Noha Mellor, Professor of Media, University of Bedfordshire

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Culture and
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**EDITED BY
NAOMI SAKR AND JEANETTE
STEEMERS**

I.B. TAURIS

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Note on Names and Classification of Sources

The names of individuals and organizations mentioned in this book have been transliterated from Arabic into English according to the style they themselves choose or the style most current in media coverage. This inevitably leads to inconsistencies in transliteration but tends to make the text more accessible to readers unfamiliar with Arabic. For the same reason, diacritics and apostrophes have been minimized in the rendering of Arabic words and the Arabic letter *qaf* has sometimes been represented with the English letter 'k'.

Two methods have been adopted for citing sources, depending on their type. Primary sources, such as interviews, internal reports, newspaper or magazine articles, press releases, speeches and conference presentations are cited in full in the endnotes but not in the bibliography. Secondary sources, such as books, book chapters, monographs, journal articles, academic theses and published reports are cited in both the endnotes and the bibliography. Where online sources are concerned, dates of access and URLs are not given for items that can be retrieved from a recognized archive using the source citation details provided.

1

Children's Screen Content in the Arab World

An Introduction

Jeanette Steemers and Naomi Sakr

Who pays attention to children's screen content and media use in Arab countries, and with what results? Children, defined internationally as under-18s, make up nearly 40 per cent of the total population of 18 Arab countries and nearly one third of those under-18s are below 5 years of age.¹ According to UNICEF data, shown below in [Table 1](#), under-18s account for close to half the population in Iraq, Palestine, Sudan and Yemen, compared with a world average of just over 30 per cent. Yet local cultural production made especially for Arabic-speaking children has been slow to develop and expand. In spite of significant initiatives among Gulf-owned media companies and a regional mushrooming of animation studios, leading channels for children continue to rely heavily on imported animation. This situation may not be surprising. After years of conflict in countries across the region – Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Libya, Sudan and Yemen – and its effects in traumatizing children and denying them access to safe schooling, policy makers may regard concerns about children's access to beneficial media as secondary or even utopian. Yet, under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), signed by all Arab countries, children's rights to freedom of expression and information are guaranteed, as is their right to be protected from harmful content. Article 17 of the CRC affirms the

'important function' of mass media, including material of 'social and cultural benefit' from a 'diversity' of sources, in children's development.

Studies of children's media and child audiences in the region are as scarce as locally produced content that is specifically aimed at, and popular with, children. While many studies look at childhood, children's media and children's media experiences in the Global North, little has been written about these topics in the Arab world. This is despite rapid growth in the literature on wider Arab media and culture and despite the urgency of exploring influential factors in identity and worldview formation among the region's next generation of cultural and political players. The disparity in availability between research on this world region and others becomes increasingly important as globalizing forces expose tensions between different views about childhood and about the desirability of different types of media content. As communication technologies allow for ever greater diversity in what children can access and how they access it, the challenge for social science researchers becomes ever more urgent.

What we do know is that regional conflicts have disrupted children's education on a massive scale. A UNICEF report in September 2015 calculated that 13.7 million children were being denied schooling, including 3 million in Iraq, 2 million in Libya, 3.1 million in Sudan and 2.9 million in Yemen.² In Syria, the number of children out of school inside the country was put at 2 million with a further 0.7 million refugee children out of school in the main refugee host countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, despite efforts launched in 2013 to respond to this particular aspect of the refugee crisis.³ Six-year-old Palestinian children in the Gaza Strip in 2015 had already lived through three major military confrontations with mounting impact each time; at least 551 Palestinian children were killed during the summer of 2014 and a further 3,370 injured, while nearly 0.5 million were unable to return to learning for several weeks because of damage to buildings.⁴ Many who recognize the magnitude of this phenomenon are also aware of the potential for e-learning. But they rarely draw crucial links between e-learning and children's media, even though research shows not only that children in the region are adept in navigating through complex offerings on whatever platform is at hand to find what they want, but also that socio-economic background and context are factors influencing children's preferences.⁵

Table 1 Children as a proportion of the population

	<i>Population</i> (<i>'000s</i>)	<i>Under-18s</i> (<i>%</i>)	<i>Under-5s</i> (<i>%</i>)
Algeria	39,208	32.7	11.6
Bahrain	1,332	24.6	7.7
Egypt	82,056	36.7	11.3
Iraq	33,765	46.7	14.5
Jordan	7,274	39.9	13.1
Kuwait	3,369	28.9	9.6
Lebanon	4,822	26.4	6.3
Libya	6,202	34.6	10.3
Morocco	33,008	33.4	10.4
Oman	3,632	28.3	9.7
Palestine	4,326	47.4	14.2
Qatar	2,169	16.0	5.0
Saudi Arabia	28,829	33.6	10.1
Sudan	37,964	47.8	15.1
Syria	21,898	41.5	11.8
Tunisia	10,997	27.7	8.4
United Arab Emirates	9,346	17.8	7.1
Yemen	24,407	47.5	14.1
Total Arab	354,604	37.8	11.8
Middle East & North Africa	432,925	36.1	11.3
World	7,122,691	31.2	9.2

Source: UNICEF, *State of the World's Children 2015*

Perhaps for the same reasons that children's lives in so many countries have been so badly affected, studies of their media worlds in these politically charged environments are lacking in English and Arabic, compounding a long-standing dearth of research in this field. How much is known, for example, about who, if anyone, controls content and advertising in areas of the internet and social media that are reached by Arabic-speaking children? And how should we understand the media worlds of preschool children or the so-called tweens, between the ages of around seven to 12? With a few noteworthy exceptions,⁶ the number of studies on Arab youth culture far outweighs those on young children,⁷ while work on Arab countries that appears in dedicated publications, such as those issued by Nordicom's International Clearing House on Children, Youth and Media, or the *World Yearbook of Education*,⁸ tend to focus more on the dimensions of child-media interactions that have to do with intentions rather than outcomes.

IZI, the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television in the German state of Bavaria, conducts regular empirical research with child audiences; its work in the Arab region is often quantitative and has concentrated mainly on Egypt.⁹

We dare to say then that this edited collection is the first in English to probe both the state of Arab media for children and how Arabic-speaking children produce and consume media. It responds to the gap in research with a holistic investigation of institutions and individuals, the practices and media experiences of children, and an examination of some iconic media texts. Three core themes of the book are as follows: regulation and policy; emerging trends in production; and representations of gender, ethnicity and language. The book is interdisciplinary and wide-ranging. It seeks to compare notions of childhood, and looks at changes in children's media through the lens of political economy, policy studies, sociology, ethnography, linguistics, management and marketing, gender studies and technology, with some short contributions alongside three of the chapters to add a further perspective. Initially focused on television, it also considers children's uses of online media platforms in the region.

The book took shape in parallel with research undertaken by the editors as part of a three-year project, entitled 'Orientations in the Development of Pan-Arab Television for Children', funded between 2013 and 2016 by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Most of the chapters started out as presentations at the project's first outreach symposium, 'New Horizons in Pan-Arab Children's Television', which was held at the University of Westminster on 10 May 2013. There we first heard presentations on methodological approaches to research with children in the Arab diaspora, definitions of childhood, the Arab animation industry, the Egyptian series *Bakkar* and Arab children's video sharing practices. It was at this event that we discussed the 2011–2013 collapse of children's content origination in Egypt, a collapse which has since befallen Syria, another contributor to children's production before 2011. In the period between the symposium and publication of this book, we have deepened our understanding of the political economy of production and distribution of children's screen-based media, the purposes of these media as negotiated between competing elites and the cultures of reception among Arabic-speaking children.

Economic Challenges of Media for Children

Arab television for children does not exist in a vacuum. Both historically and today its operations have to be understood in relation to a particular set of economics. These inevitably mirror the economics of media industries in general. Thus population size is crucial, because children in national markets with small populations, such as many of those in the Gulf, or countries like Lebanon, Jordan or Tunisia, do not constitute a lucrative target audience for content that is funded through advertising. Where children are concerned, however, and even in societies with high levels of disposable income, the challenge of small markets is exacerbated by the fact that age brackets within the national audience are narrow. What works for pre-schoolers may not interest a child of six or above, while content that suits a 9-year-old is not interesting to someone aged 15 and so on. For viability, therefore, content needs to be designed to cross borders. But narrow age brackets also limit the economic viability of imported material that depends on subtitles, since children need to be fully literate to cope with them. The alternative, dubbing, works for cartoon characters where there is mostly no need to synchronize lip movements with speech. Cartoons are consequently much easier to trade than other genres of children's programming, leaving production of live action and factual shows at an economic disadvantage.

In the Arab world in particular, dubbing is chosen in preference to subtitles, not only for reasons of literacy but also censorship, since dubbing gives broadcasters an opportunity to remove any reference to offending material.¹⁰ Animation specialists in the region have been known to comment on the way references to alcoholic drinks in imported content are replaced with references to 'juice' for the benefit of Arab children. As shown in [Table 1](#) on page 3, under-5s account for 10–12 per cent of the population of many Arab countries. Yet economic pressures mean that broadcasters and advertisers want to reach under-5s across the whole region to gain a reasonably sized market. The same applies to other ages. This is where transnational players, mostly from the US, can operate almost seamlessly across borders, offering Arab broadcasters a steady diet of mostly dubbed US animation shows and sitcoms, whose costs have already been amortized over repeated showings in the US and other profitable markets. The

impact of US dominance has increased with the rise in children's channels, as Alessandro d'Arma and Jeanette Steemers observed in 2013:

Investment in children's programmes has hardly ever been profitable for domestic commercial broadcasters because of the small size of the children's advertising market. But it has become even less attractive in recent years because of the competition from transnational players.¹¹

The size of child audiences in national markets is one strand in the economics of children's media; children's purchasing power and spending habits constitute another. Programmes for adults can carry advertising for everything from detergent to coffee to banking services to luxury goods. Where children are concerned the possibilities are mainly limited to toys, snacks and drinks. Various countries have seen this as a problem, especially in the case of sugary drinks and snacks that are high in fat, salt and sugar, leading to certain types of bans on advertising to children in Australia, Germany, Greece, Norway, Sweden and the UK. In the Gulf, where levels of obesity and diabetes have rocketed alarmingly and prices for soft drinks are exceptionally low, health ministers have considered imposing a 50 per cent tax on drinks. It would not be a big step from there to limiting advertising. But to limit what can be advertised is to limit the advertising revenue that can fund content creation, as UK producers discovered to their cost after a ban on 'junk food' advertising in certain slots in the television schedules took effect in 2007.¹² Why would local broadcasters, faced with depleted resources, spend on local production when they can acquire cheap animation off the shelf?¹³

Limitations on advertising, whether resulting from regulation and/or from the limited scope of children's shopping lists, mean that income from this source is frequently supplemented through sales of merchandise related to a particular film or television series – such as figurines, pencil cases, backpacks and even whole theme parks. The need to arrange for licensing and merchandizing of toys, games and other goods again favours large vertically integrated conglomerates¹⁴ like Disney, Time Warner (owner of Cartoon Network and Boomerang) and Viacom (owner of Nickelodeon). Again it tends to diminish the range of content offered, because certain programme genres and character representations, above all animated characters, have greater retail potential than others.¹⁵

Policy Responses

Questions about how national authorities respond to the economic challenges of providing suitable content for their child populations are key to any analysis of regulatory and policy approaches, even though the authorities themselves may rationalize their policy choices in terms of culture and ideology rather than economics. Public subsidies are an obvious option, in return for which national broadcasters may be required to provide a specified amount of children's programming and, within this, to commission a specified quantity of first-run originations of children's programmes. Where such quotas are in place they have proved an important safeguard against shrinking output of originations.¹⁶ Indeed, where public service broadcasters in Europe have created children's channels, these have often proved the most popular children's channels in their respective countries.¹⁷

Beyond instituting provisions for children through public service media, the range of regulatory options is not wide and the consequences can be unintended, as demonstrated by different approaches taken in the Global North. The impact of the intervention on junk food advertising in the UK, mentioned above, is just one example. In the US, the Children's Television Act of 1990 imposed time limits on advertising during broadcast programmes for under-12s. Yet other well-intentioned elements of the same law, notably the requirement for commercial broadcasters to provide educational content, had limited success: broadcasters simply used loose, self-serving definitions of 'educational' that were not shared by parents or children's media advocates.¹⁸ The Philippines passed a Children's Television Act in 1997, requiring broadcasters to allocate 15 per cent of airtime to 'child-friendly' shows and creating a National Council for Children's Television, mandated to promote content aimed at developing local children's 'critical thinking and communication skills, moral values and strong sense of national identity', along with a National Endowment Fund to finance culturally relevant programmes for Filipino children. Yet it took 15 years to hammer out the implementing rules and regulations of the 1997 Act,¹⁹ during which time only a tiny fraction of funding for new programmes was disbursed.²⁰

Meanwhile struggles to compensate for market failure in relation to children's content on broadcast channels pale into insignificance compared

with policy challenges vis-à-vis screen content and advertising online. On the internet, distinctions between editorial content and product placement are readily erased, as demonstrated by 'unboxing' videos on YouTube, in which people film themselves unwrapping toys or gadgets. Yet regulation has failed to keep pace with new services. Commenting on the YouTube Kids app, launched in 2015, US communications professor Dale Kunkel called it 'the most hyper-commercialized media environment for children' because it mixes promotion and content in ways that would not be allowed in broadcast television. Despite a promise from YouTube owner Google that only 'child-safe, family-friendly' content would be available, Kunkel found 'entire channels devoted to LEGO, Barbie, Play-Doh and even McDonald's' among the 100 or so channels offered by YouTube Kids.²¹ In the broadcast environment many countries would regard such practices as unfair and illegal. In the online sphere, in contrast, commercial players are often able to pursue their own perceived interests with impunity, practically untrammelled by regulatory interventions.

In the Arabic-speaking world, the first breakthroughs in transnational television for children came as an afterthought to the initial growth of pan-Arab satellite channels and seemed to reflect commercial interests and regional political rivalries as much as concern for children's needs. Today children's provision is regional, international and increasingly multiplatform, with evidence that children are able to access screen content from sources and providers other than those subject to national regulation. Before pan-Arab children's channels appeared, state-owned television channels had transmitted limited hours of children's programming, much of it openly didactic and moralizing with minimal children's participation.²² The first free-to-air pan-Arab initiative, Spacetoon Arabic, a satellite channel that started in the United Arab Emirates in 2000, grew out of a commercial dubbing operation in Syria, and its cartoons were predominantly purchased from overseas. MBC Group's creation of MBC3 for children in 2004 established a Saudi-owned channel ahead of the Qatari one that followed in 2005 in the shape of Al-Jazeera Children's Channel (JCC). The highly conservative Al-Majd network, created for Saudi and other Gulf families who considered conventional television to be forbidden by Islam,²³ arranged for satellite transmission of its dedicated children's channel in 2004.

Such was the momentum in the mid-2000s that Dubai's Arab Media Group outbid MBC in 2006 for a licence from Viacom for Nickelodeon Arabia and MTV Arabia. After the Arab Media Group venture was hit by the 2008 financial crisis, the Nickelodeon licence eventually went to MBC. For a time, initiatives in children's programming continued to multiply. The privately-owned pan-Arab *Tuyur al-Jannah* (Birds of Paradise) channel started life in Jordan in 2008, quickly gaining a wide audience for its characteristic brand of children's songs and chants. Abu Dhabi promised in 2008 to nurture production of new content for children at its media free zone, *twofour54*, and in 2009 Qatar's JCC spawned a pre-school channel, *Baraem*, and educational website with video-on-demand. Turner Broadcasting launched its Cartoon Network free-to-air in Arabic from Dubai in 2010 and opened an animation academy in Abu Dhabi. Saudi Arabia introduced its own national children's channel, *Ajyal* (meaning 'generations'), as part of a facelift for the Saudi TV network initiated in 2010. Doha Film Institute in Qatar started the *Ajyal* Youth Film Festival series in 2013 and in September 2015 the long-running *Majid* magazine for children, owned by Abu Dhabi Media Group, went on air and online as *Majid TV*. *Majid* Entertainment, the company set up to create and manage the channel, drew on characters from the magazine to produce more than 150 hours of content in a period of just six months, including 70 hours of animation.²⁴

However, as conflict in the region intensified and media content became increasingly polarized, the cause of local production for local children seemed to take a backseat in most other Arab countries, while debate focused on children's vulnerability to radicalization through social media content circulated by so-called 'Islamic State'. A constant refrain of contributions to the present volume is that, despite Arab producers' persistent pleas for more home-grown material to be made and promoted, it is not yet clear whether the regulatory and academic communities in Arab countries have any consensus view on the desirable balance between local and imported programming or even effective policy responses to promote sustainable production that reflects a range of worldviews and not only those of various Islamist groups. That is even before the thorny issue of online digital media is broached.

Regulatory and policy issues addressed in this book are set against the backdrop of [Chapter 2](#), in which Feryal Awan and Jeanette Steemers

consider how childhood has been conceptualized in different parts of the world through the ages. They concur that there is no fixed universal concept of what it means to be a child, or even of how long childhood is supposed to last. Instead it is a social and cultural construct, always shaped by 'the social, moral and political preoccupations of a particular time and place',²⁵ and even the historiography of childhood is constantly being modified to address changing approaches to gender, class and ethnicity.²⁶ Yet conceptions of childhood matter, not least because they help us to understand why media are regulated and media texts crafted in certain ways.²⁷ Notions of children as vulnerable, innocent, under threat or even deviant and uncontrolled tend to lead more directly to a perceived need for negative interventions, involving bans and prohibitions, intended to mitigate harmful effects of media commercialization or propaganda. The negative effects discourse is often employed by those who fear the impact of foreign, mainly US, content on local culture. In contrast, conceptualizations that focus on child agency look more for 'positive' forms of regulation, designed to stimulate quality content for children, including content that might encourage children to see themselves as budding citizens rather than consumers. Between these two poles there are degrees of intervention that underscore the importance of context for each situation, and the fluidity of political and economic factors that determine degrees of intervention.

The spectrum of attitudes to childhood and child agency raises the question of how far values and standards relating to children's media and participation are really shared among what has been described as a 'world-wide professional network of creative leaders of children's television'.²⁸ These are people who work for international media companies and NGOs, and who meet at industry events such as MIP Junior and Kidscreen, but also at global conferences such as the three-yearly World Summit on Media for Children (WSMC) or festivals like the Prix Jeunesse, held in Munich every two years. Assumptions in circulation at these events are not unproblematic because they tend to be influenced by a small, usually Western-dominated, core of actors and stakeholders, whose concerns are focused on the media experiences of children in rich countries of the Global North, rather than those in developing media economies, including Arabic-speaking countries.²⁹ In a chapter exploring how policy ideas about children's media are transferred within and between communities,

Naomi Sakr uncovers the crucial role of some highly motivated individuals from the Global South, including Egypt and Qatar, who became actively involved in international initiatives and processes, including the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the WSMC, the Children and Broadcasting Foundation for Africa and the Giffoni Festival.

Sakr shows how these individuals engaged with the international policy community while pushing agendas specific to their own national or regional circumstances. Where the resulting policies were made centrally, however, without genuine engagement of independent companies and local non-governmental groups, their longevity was uncertain and they proved vulnerable to changes in government-appointed personnel and political priorities. A short 'Insight' piece alongside the chapter shows how policy can also be influenced through deliberations among national representatives meeting under the auspices of regional broadcasting bodies. Writing about a brief episode in the history of the European Broadcasting Union, which also encompasses Arab members, Helle Strandgaard Jensen traces the evidence documenting how the stance taken by a particular department head within the BBC affected the take-up of a model of preschool television coming from the US in other European countries.

Emerging Trends in Production

An understanding of policy-making in Arab countries thus depends, as in many contexts, on the shifting influence of key individuals within ruling national elites, who may develop a personal interest in children's welfare. The importance of these elites is a theme developed in Omar Sayfo's analysis of animation production in the region, which, according to his findings, operates within a policy environment that is 'primarily nation-bound' in terms of regulation, programming and power structures and is often shaped by the personal preferences of decision-makers within governments, state-owned broadcasters and production entities. Producers have therefore always had to pay attention to relationships within local hierarchies in order to access funding, overseas promotional possibilities, government contracts for licensing and access to the better-funded channels such as Saudi's MBC 3 and those in Qatar's Al-Jazeera network. According to Sayfo, the region's most successful animation companies have close links