



MEDIA INDUSTRY

The kids are alright

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As a child growing up in the UK, I was lucky enough to learn my Ps and Qs alongside such stereotypically British kids' favourites as Paddington Bear, Ivor the Engine and Bagpuss. Not so my Middle Eastern counterparts. For years the region's broadcast industry has dined out on a measly patchwork of low-budget local creations and a world of poorly-dubbed Western hits. But the digital age, regional prosperity and a realisation of the potential in catering to younger audiences, means that networks and content creators are queuing up to give the Arab world its next Mickey Mouse.

Of course, it's not just children who are craving local content. Consumers across the board are increasingly demanding high-quality Arabic shows that reflect their own history and culture. "There is a strong demand for local content, with nearly 80 per cent of respondents in our Arab Media Outlook preferring to watch TV in Arabic, with a vast majority - 63 per cent in Egypt - preferring to watch content from their own country," says Emanuel Durou, senior engagement partner at analysis firm Value Partners.

"Broadcasters have taken this appetite on board to increase the proportion of local programming," adds Durou. "With evidence that content closer to the region's values than western content, like Turkish Drama Noor on MBC, could attract significant audiences, broadcasters started to produce increasingly local content and formats. A good example of this is Pyramedia-produced Million's Poet - one of the most popular primetime shows in the Middle East with a strong anchor in UAE culture."

If there's a craving for locally-relevant programming in the Middle East, it has been helped by the likes of Jordan's Rubicon, and twofour54 in Abu Dhabi. Between them the pair are responsible for some of the region's most recognisable children's characters including Captain Karim (of Captain Karim Qitar Al Hekayat fame, adapted from the English Driver Dan's Story Train show). The ubiquitous Freej, created by the UAE's Lammtara, a tale of life in downtown Dubai, continues to lead the field.

Wayne Borg, COO at twofour54, sees the huge po-



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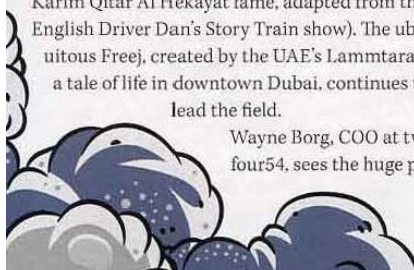
TAREK MOUNIR
COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR,
TBS ARABIA

tential successfully-marketed kid's content could, and should, have in the region. "When you look at the marketplace on a pan-Arab basis, with 60 per cent of the 240m people or so under the age of 25, and a significant number of those aged below 12, there should be a flourishing children's content market here as there is for the equivalent market of North America," he says. "So we do believe that there is a marketplace, both commercially and from a cultural perspective: why shouldn't this region have a burgeoning children's content industry, much the same as many smaller markets do in Europe and Asia-Pacific?"

Turner Broadcasting Systems (TBS)'s Cartoon Network, which launched its dedicated Arabic channel last October, has been quick to acknowledge the need for home-grown content creation, and has conceived of its own animation academy alongside twofour54, which will open this May. "The whole point of building an animation academy and trying to train people over here is, when you look at Japanese animation, Manga, you know immediately that it is Japanese," says TBS Arabia commercial director Tarek Mounir. "This is what we need to create: a certain animation style, not only of storytelling but a style that will be recognised as Middle Eastern in animation."

Mounir argues that until now, broadcasters have been happy to rush the dubbing of content at the expense of narrative, distancing content from its audience. "The procedure that everyone has been taking until now has been, 'We'll hire a studio to translate the show, bring the talent, do the video recording and sound editing,' and it's done at a very convenient price. But would that mean that these shows are actually keeping the real leaning behind them? I'd say sometimes yes, sometimes no depending on how well the translation is being done. What we've done is invest in really good writers, who read the English script, think about it and rewrite it in Arabic."

Rubicon, headquartered in Amman but with an office in Dubai's monolithic Business Central Towers, is one of the Middle East's most exciting production prospects. Continually keeping ahead of the game in terms of technology and content, its most popular offering is arguably Ben & Izzy, the story of two friends from Jordan and America who meet in Petra, and explore each other's respective history and culture. Executive director Ghassan S. Ayoubi is adamant that children's programming should both entertain and educate, and that building this culture of 'edutainment' is vital in nurtur-





twofour54 have recently undertaken a complete Arabic revisioning of popular British show Driver Dan's Story Train, which includes changes to the animation as well as language. The characters of Freej (opp. page) have been incredibly popular with local viewers.

ing brand loyalty and meaning.

"Responsible entertainment is not something that has been going on for a long time, and I guarantee you that naturally there was a heavy reliance on programmes from overseas," says Ayoubi. "Mind you, the industry was geared to that: there were companies and organisations that put out a lot of entertainment, and networks were relying on acquiring content from abroad.

"There have been voices in the last three to five years, and in particular if you look at leadership in countries like the UAE, with the Sheikhs and people in responsible positions, they have been commendable in asking for content that addresses the region's history and culture," adds Ayoubi. "This provides children in the region with content they can identify with. It's great to have Mickey Mouse, Sinbad, Spiderman and other characters that are highly entertaining. But there's also that balance that needs to be in place where you can use technology to create content, to reflect the region's rich culture and history."

Movements like Rubicon's have resulted in

50%
FREEJ SEASON THREE
REVENUES, FROM
NON-BROADCAST
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partnerships such as theirs with UAE telco Etisalat, whereby Etisalat's customers can enjoy Rubicon cartoons, games and applications via mobile, TV or the internet. And it is the uniquely strong periphery market in children's content which everyone agrees is its biggest advantage – not least because advertisers are still waiting on reliable measurement platforms before they can be sure they are reaching their target audiences. "In a way children's content has been the spearhead of quality local TV programming with Freej attracting huge primetime audiences, and also very significant ancillary revenues from merchandising, DVDs, live shows etc – 50 per cent of the revenues of the 3rd season of Freej came from non broadcasting sources," says Durou.

"Amongst all genres, Freej remains probably the best example of local (GCC) content from a monetisation, appeal and quality standpoint," adds Durou. "To a lesser extent, (ADMC cartoon) Majid is also a successful example in the region of children's content which has also managed a transition multiplatform, including a videogame,



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and even augmented reality applications."

Cartoon Network's English offering was, and still is, available via pay TV platform OSN. But the company decided to air Cartoon Network Arabic on FTA: a move Tarek Mounir cites as fundamental in the monetisation of children's content in the modern, diversifying market. "(Pay TV) is a viable option, but it's not necessarily the best option. It was going for a while in a stagnant line and not moving anywhere, so when you watch the likes of Fox Movies and MBC getting movies right after release, in a short space of time, you realise that the region has been going in a different direction. The worldwide norm is to have the releases at cinema before pay TV, and then FTA gets it way down the line. Here that's going in completely the opposite way." Cartoon Network has focused on the web in its own efforts: in January, just three months after launching, its site posted 5m page views.

It is essential, therefore, for children's content creators and distributors to reach as many viewers as possible, so franchises can be nurtured and translated into web page views, toys bought or mobile apps downloaded. "More than any other type of content, children's programming has an enormous monetisation potential beyond traditional broadcasting - i.e. toys, merchandising, live performances, character licensing etc," says Durou. "This is particularly important for the region where ad dollars per pop are low and pay TV remains a challenge due to high piracy."

To get this desired revenue, programs have to be durable, culturally sensitive and sustainable, says Ghassan S. Ayoubi. "As awkward as this may sound, a lot of (the business) does not, and cannot be driven by profit, I know nobody's in it purely for fun, but there has to be a longer vision, a foresight. What we do with partners like Turner and Etisalat, there's a lot of work that happens before, during and after that has nothing to do with the commercial aspect. But it has to do with making sure the offering and the service is correct.

"The money will come later, one way or another. It's not about the quick buck: it's about continuity and sustainability, and the integrity of your content," adds Ayoubi. "You can easily make content and sell it to an organisation, but the actual content might be as far from responsible as possible." Hastily-developed Kuwaiti cartoon Bu Qutada wa Bu Nabeel, which aired last year, is a case in

point, which caused controversy for a derogatory portrayal of Moroccan women.

There is no doubt, however, that despite the fragile nature of pan-Arab broadcasting, and the expense of making original content, the region possesses some unique characteristics which make it a mouth-watering prospect for broadcasters. "Something that happens over here, that doesn't really happen in the Western world, is that a lot of kids actually watch with their parents and family," argues Mounir. "Hence the appeal of shows like Freej, which are skewed a little more for those a little older than the target age group of Cartoon Network. Maybe mums in the Western world watch TV with their kids, but the whole family wouldn't sit together and watch." This, of course, carries its own advertising prospects.

Wayne Borg also cites the huge proliferation of new technology in the Gulf as a huge ancillary market. "If you look at smart devices, and tablets like the iPad, there's a great opportunity there in terms of the penetration that is to be expected with devices already in the region. Looking at the penetration rates of a country like the UAE alone, where you're running at 200 per cent, and across the region it's nearly 100 per cent. There are great new vehicles to provide content to young people on."



With the likes of Lammtara, Cartoon Network, twofour54, Rubicon and others seemingly flourishing, can children's content continue to fuel the trend for broadcasters to air local content instead of simply securing the rights to Western shows? "The opportunity is significant, definitely," surmises Durou. "There is a huge monetisation gap currently between western markets and Arabic TV. But the gap exists also with markets or regions with more comparable GDP per capita, like Brazil or Turkey.

"In the long run, there is no doubt that this gap will decrease," adds Durou, "but for this a virtuous circle must be started, with more money flowing to invest and fund quality local content which is much more relevant for viewers than dubbed western content, which in turn will attract higher ad dollars flowing back to the broadcasting industry." With the rise of Freej, Ben & Izzy and others, that gap will surely be closing sooner rather than later. ■

