

Muppets on a peace mission

By Sarah Richards

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America has long been emotionally, practically and politically involved in the Northern Ireland peace process but not until now has it sent in a crack squad of its finest furriest puppets, the Muppets, to keep it on track.

Today, BBC2 Northern Ireland will air its first local version of *Sesame Street*, the world's most successful children's television show. But this is no wholesale American export. The usual cast of Cookie Monster and Grover will be joined by two new, Celtic companions: Potto, a mop-topped monster, and Hilda, a curious Irish hare, who says, "That's beezer!" and sprints around the countryside in search of answers to children's questions. And the show has been renamed *Sesame Tree* because, well, it's easier to have children hanging around a tree than decide if the street is in a Catholic or Protestant neighbourhood.

Much has been invested in *Sesame Tree*: five years in the making, the show has been vetted by psychologists and educators. The Muppets have been set the task of not just helping the province's 89,000 three- to six-year-olds to learn their alphabet and numbers but also of imparting a message of cultural diversity and respect for others. The hope is that, post-The Troubles, a new generation will see the world less divisively.

With its live-action segments showing children's lives throughout Northern Ireland, the show "celebrates difference". The scenes are, indeed, charming: one tells the story of a five-year-old boy learning to play the drum with his older brother at an Orange march, traditionally seen as a Protestant event. Another focuses on a young boy who must wait until he is old enough to join a hurling team, a game associated with nationalist Catholics.

The appeal, say the show's producers, is that children see other youngsters in real-life situations. The little drummer boy just happens to be at a band parade that just happens to have a violent history. The real story

is that the boy learns to persevere in his drum practice and is rewarded with an ice-cream.

But the question remains whether filming such a boy in an Orange march will help children to see such events divorced from negative news coverage. Can taking Northern Irish children on a TV tour of the lives of their peers really help to reverse decades of entrenched sentiment?

Or is this the latest version of a sentimentally idealistic American icon spreading its mission of social morality around the world while creating new licensing opportunities at every conflict? Does the show go too far - or not far enough - by sugar-coating reality?

The producers have certainly set themselves a substantial task. A 2002 survey by the University of Ulster found that young children were well aware of sectarian divisions. By age six, nearly 90 percent had some awareness of the cultural and political significance of symbols and events such as parades, flags or football shirts. One in six six-year-olds had made sectarian comments. According to one Protestant boy: "Catholics are different from ordinary human beings because they are badder . . . They make petrol bombs . . . throw them and they blow up." A Catholic girl the same age says she does not like Orange marchers because "they're Protestants, and they're bad because they want to kill the Catholics."

Enter the well-meaning folks at Sesame Workshop (formerly known as the Children's Television Workshop), the non-profit educational organisation behind the show. Gary Knell, the workshop's chief executive and president, says he was attending a symposium in Jerusalem in 1999 after the first Israeli-Palestinian co-production of *Sesame Street*, which had been launched the year before. He wondered whether Northern Ireland, too, might benefit from the *Sesame* touch. So he talked to politicians, broadcasters and education experts. "There was a good deal of scepticism and cynicism [as in], 'Here's another Yank trying to tell us what's good for us,' " says Knell. But he emphasises how the show will be a joint effort, using Northern Irish producers, consultants and Muppeteers. The BBC agreed to broadcast it, and backers, including the Fund for Reconciliation and the American Ireland Fund, signed on. The US, the European Union, Canada and New Zealand also contributed funds.

Local participation was obviously needed to give the show a sense of authenticity but New York executives also wanted a Northern Irish perspective on just what the province was ready for. For example, religious

themes were out. To promote a positive sense of the other to Protestant and Catholic children, footage of traditional community activities, such as band parades, hurling, Irish dancing and the boys' brigade were in. They also wanted to make the point that cultural diversity extends beyond Catholics and Protestants, so the 20 15-minute shows feature immigrant Polish and Chinese communities as well as Irish travellers. There's also a hefty dose of generic " *Sesame* values" such as sharing and taking turns. "We were careful . . . we weren't just focusing on the religious divide," explains Glenda Walsh, a Northern Irish educational consultant. She oversaw the shows to make sure they were in line with the government's new educational curriculum, which includes a component on "mutual understanding". "We've gone as far as we can," adds Colin Williams of Belfast-based production company Sixteen South. "The films don't push messages. There's no agenda apart from showing the broadest range of life kids have here."

It may not matter. For, even if the show attempts to promote social tolerance, that message may be hard for children to practise. According to Eamonn McCann, a political activist and columnist for the Belfast Telegraph, children don't often come into contact with anyone from outside their communities. Most Protestant and Catholic children tend to go to separate schools and live in separate neighbourhoods. "[*Sesame Tree*] can do no harm. It will do some good but its impact will be minimal," says McCann. "Other factors will continue to create a separate consciousness."

This criticism of the show for being lofty and unrealistic isn't new to its producers. The original *Sesame Street* , created in 1969 by the Children's Television Workshop, has long been mocked for portraying a supposedly working-class, gritty urban block, where African Americans, whites and Hispanics all live happily with intact families, clean streets, good government and polite children. The show's producers hoped that, by helping disadvantaged kids to start school at the same educational level as their more well-off peers, the show might address some of the social ills of the civil rights era. (When it started broadcasting, the show's racial integration so rankled Mississippi officials that the state television commission temporarily banned the series.)

And, over the following years, *Sesame Street* has been blamed, variously, for causing short attention spans with its fast format, for encouraging obesity because Cookie Monster binged on cookies, and for promoting homosexuality because Bert and Ernie were two grown male Muppets who shared a bedroom.

But the show kept going and, in the course of the past 39 years, *Sesame Street* has been seen by more than 120m viewers in more than 130 countries. In most cases, what viewers have seen has been a dubbed version of the American show but in recent years foreign co-productions, featuring local children, characters and content, have been a growing trend. Besides Northern Ireland, recent additions include Indonesia and Tanzania. Afghanistan may be next, which Knell describes as a "brave project".

The co-production movement really took off after the highly ambitious Israeli-Palestinian joint production of 1998, five years after the Oslo Accords. "We needed to prepare kids for what was happening on the ground," explains Shari Rosenfeld, vice-president of international projects. The show was called *Rechov Sumsum* and *Shara'a Simsim*, and featured separate Israeli and Palestinian streets because it was improbable to have a shared street.

The Muppets could visit each other's street if they were invited. In the live-action segments, Arab and Jewish children were shown brushing their teeth or visiting their relatives.

But as the region's fragile peace crumbled, so too did the project. Quite apart from the fact that the show's producers couldn't travel freely, it didn't make sense to pretend that peace existed on television in the middle of a war zone.

So, in 2003, *Sesame Stories*, which allowed Israeli, Palestinian and now Jordanian versions of the show to be produced using segments "humanising the other" from a communal library, was born. Now, they all have their own shows and focus on diversity within their own societies.

Sesame Street executives are convinced their approach works. A 2001 report found that children who had watched the Israeli-Palestinian co-production were more likely to provide positive descriptions of people from other cultures. And, if it worked there, what effect, the executives wondered, might *Sesame Street* have in Kosovo, where challenges include Serbian and Albanian schools with classes conducted in different languages?

The divide was so wide that, during a planning meeting, when a *Sesame* executive asked a mix of Serbian and Albanian producers how they planned to introduce the concept of empathy, the room fell silent. So far

they've made 52 episodes for a dual-language version, with live-action segments showcasing Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox religious rituals, such as making Serbian *slava* bread with a hidden coin.

"We're trying to push the envelope," says Shari Rosenfeld. "That is the power of *Sesame Street*. You have a trusted brand that gives us licence to go further than another media property could go." They used that licence in 2002 when Kami, a Muppet Aids orphan, made her debut on the South African *Takalani Sesame*. Intended to reduce the stigma of HIV in a country where one in nine children is infected, plotlines involving Kami have been used to explain complicated subjects such as Aids transmission and the death of parents.

But the programme has its limits. Rosenfeld rejected the Kosovo producers' idea of tackling the topic of landmines, saying it was hard to avoid making children more curious about them. Besides, she says, it's a lot for a three-year-old to digest. And then there's the inevitable clash between local and American sensibilities. The content may be home-created and inspired but New York gets final approval.

"We try to facilitate, not dictate," says Rosenfeld, as she talks about the problems that arose with another Palestinian segment in which a boy looking for a gardening container picks up a discarded can by the side of the road. Rosenfeld said it was too dangerous to show a child picking up random objects. The next suggestion was to use a clear plastic bottle with the top cut off, but she didn't want to encourage pre-schoolers using scissors. Finally, they all agreed that his mother could cut it and tape over the rough edges, and the boy planted and grew a flower.

But then the Jordanians objected, asking if planting a garden symbolised giving up the right of return to contested land. The Palestinians stood by their storyline, insisting it was story about creating beauty and self-empowerment.

No matter how often its makers insist that the programme does not have a political agenda, *Sesame Street* is still an American show that receives government funding and the American First Lady Laura Bush has appeared on the South African, Egyptian and Indian versions. While the US Agency for International Development contributes to co-productions in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Egypt, Gary Knell says such funding - from the US as well as other foreign governments - is often leveraged to elicit private contributions. "I can't think of a single instance when USAID

interfered with editorial content," he says.

Knell also plays down the suggestion that, by expanding the international market for licensing revenue, funding the show could be seen to be in America's commercial interest. Licensing and intellectual property make up two-thirds of *Sesame*'s \$129m operating revenues - up 27 per cent from the year before - and the rest of the funding comes from a hodgepodge of sources. One of the biggest challenges, says Knell, is finding money after all the fanfare of the launch has waned. *Sesame* executives have yet to secure funding for a second season of *Sesame Tree*, which so far cost in the "low seven figures", says Knell. And for all the show's attempts to transcend politics, politics still can get in the way. Palestinian producer Daoud Kuttub says the latest battles with Israel have forced him to refocus just on Palestinian society. "You have to be honest with children," he says. "It would be counter-productive to talk about peace when people are being killed."

The rest of *Sesame*'s global social mission is hardly controversial. Throughout the world, Muppets tout the benefits of hand-washing, eating fruits and vegetables and wearing seatbelts. In Egypt, where girls' literacy is low, a girl Muppet named Khokha encourages girls to dream of future careers. But what impact does the show have if Egyptian girls don't get more than a third-grade education? The Indian show features a utopian multicultural cast of people from different parts of India and different religions, including a Punjabi and a Muslim-Hindu couple - which may be untenable in a society still riven by caste and class conflicts.

But if the world of *Sesame* often doesn't look much like the real world, that may be part of the point: to encourage children to see and dream of an alternative world, a world that includes an awareness and - it is to be hoped - appreciation of others who live in it.

"[*Sesame Tree*] is the only opportunity they'll get to engage with the other side," says the Belfast journalist Barry White. "If it's fun and [children] identify with characters, it's a very good way of putting that message across."

'Sesame Tree' will be shown on BBC2 Northern Ireland this weekend at 7.15am