

Creating serialised live action drama for children

Talent development, affordable volume fiction, and portable brand characters at DR

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the production strategies of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) when making live action fiction for its children's channel and brand DR Ramasjang, targeting pre-schoolers. Based on a case study of the serial *Oda Omvendt* [*Oda Upside Down*], the chapter begins by discussing the reasons behind DR's decision to produce more national live action fiction for the youngest audience members. Following this, the case study of *Oda Upside Down* demonstrates how the commissioning, writing, and production of the series can be regarded as the result of clear institutional strategies for working with talent development, with notions of affordable volume fiction, and with portable brand characters.

KEYWORDS: serial fiction for children, DR Ramasjang, talent development, affordable volume fiction, portable brand characters, *Oda omvendt*, *Oda Upside Down*

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Introduction

In the late 2010s and early 2020s, having a wide range of fictional content and “original series” became increasingly important in a television landscape marked by still more online viewing and on-demand players. This was the case for legacy broadcasters as well as subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) services, which had to accept the fact that many viewers considered strong fiction a crucial element when deciding which subscriptions to buy and where to invest their time (Lotz, 2014: 12). The 2010s thus saw a boom in the number of series being produced, since new players such as Netflix and HBO Nordic (later HBO Max) regarded fictional content – preferably not only in English but also as local originals to cater to many different audiences – as an essential part of their distribution strategy (e.g., Jenner, 2018; Lobato, 2019).

This development primarily initially focused on fiction for adult audiences. However, due to the wide variety of content and services on offer in many Scandinavian homes, producing more fiction for children and youth also became a necessity (Redvall & Christensen, 2021; Sundet, 2021). The competition for the youngest national viewers was suddenly fierce, and combined with YouTube, TikTok, gaming, and a range of social media, Scandinavian public service broadcasters had to find an appropriate response in the rapidly changing media landscape to attract, appeal to, and keep the youngest viewers.

In this chapter, I investigate how part of this response consisted of having an even more specialised approach when making children’s content for very specific audiences and offering more live action fiction in the national languages. I analyse these changes by focusing on the development at the Danish public service broadcaster DR’s children’s channel Ramasjang. Specifically, this case illustrates a focus on how to produce more Danish live action fiction for the youngest audience members prevalent since the late 2010s.

The chapter begins with an outline of major structural changes in the overall approach in the content set-up, such as changing the age span of the target audiences for the children’s channel Ramasjang and the tween channel DR Ultra and introducing a new brand, Minisjang, producing content aimed at 1–3-year-old viewers. Following the introductory contextual framing, I zoom in on a case study of the serial *Oda Omvendt* [*Oda Upside Down*] (Scott & Sabroe, 2018–2020) (henceforth referred to as *Oda*), with three seasons and 30 twelve-minute episodes produced by SAM Productions for DR Ramasjang, which was a new attempt to create fun and engaging fiction for 3–6-year-olds.

The case is used to answer exploratory research questions about what DR commissioners currently consider crucial when writing and developing strong live action fiction for their youngest viewers, and how screenwriters navigate in and adapt to these perceptions. The chapter thus identifies fundamental ideas of how to write and produce a specific kind of fiction within the DR Ramasjang framework as well as the creative constraints associated with doing so for the screenwriters. The case study hypothesises that developing

low-budget ideas is crucial in this framework. The inductive analysis reveals additional elements in the creation and production of niche content, which I also discuss. Accordingly, my analysis highlights how *Oda* is an example of talent development, affordable volume fiction, and portable brand characters (used in different ways), in television, online, and in real-life settings. In terms of empirical data, the exploratory case study (Yin, 2017) draws on semistructured qualitative interviews with four “exclusive informants” (Bruun, 2014). These interviews are supplemented with data from e-mail correspondence with the producer of *Oda*; pitch documents, bibles, screenplay examples, and other written documents on *Oda*; and a range of material from industry events such as the DR pitch sessions for independent producers, The Children’s Media Conference, and observational studies of a writing workshop focusing on teaching new talent to write children’s fiction. Table 4.1 presents a detailed overview of this empirical material.

TABLE 4.1 Overview of empirical material

Source	Format	Date
Ida Mule Scott & Iben Albinus Sabroe (creators and screenwriters of <i>Oda</i>)	In-person interview, Copenhagen	20 October 2020
	5-page synopsis for <i>Oda omvendt</i>	28 September 2017
	<i>Oda omvendt</i> , final short bible (12 pages)	10 November 2017
	THE ONE – <i>Oda Omvendt</i> , short bible (14 pages)	12 January 2018
Iben Albinus Sabroe (creator and screenwriter of <i>Oda</i>)	Writing workshop for DR in Aarhus	2–4 December 2020
Ida Mule Scott (creator and screenwriter of <i>Oda</i>)	Workshop notes. Personal notes by Scott from the workshops on children’s content in Copenhagen	2017
Niels Lindberg, DR Head of Content (2019–2022)	Zoom interview	11 February 2022
Pelle Møller, DR Head of Content (2015–2019)	Zoom interview	18 February 2022
Meta Louise Foldager Sørensen, Producer of <i>Oda</i> , SAM Productions	E-mail correspondence	4 November 2020

Børnemediekonferencen [The Children's Media Conference]	Children's media conference, organised by DR and the Buster Film Festival	7 October 2021
DR	Børneproducenterne dag [DR pitch day for producers of children's content]	5 September 2019
	Børneproducenterne dag [DR pitch day for producers of children's content]	18 August 2020
	Børneproducenterne dag [DR pitch day for producers of children's content]	19 August 2021

The case study thus focuses on “deep texts” of the industry (Caldwell, 2009) as well as industry research interviews. The latter involve certain risks, particularly in terms of remaining critical and impartial when also aiming for a sustained dialogue across a long-running research project (Potter, 2018a). I have been aware of this during the gathering and analysis of data and when presenting the findings to the industry informants.

Based on the varied empirical material, I investigate how writing and producing television fiction for children within a public service framework is currently marked by specific ideas of what this particular audience wants and needs (see Christensen, Chapter 2 in this volume). Moreover, I analyse what is considered to be the ideal production strategies for providing this kind of content in a highly competitive television landscape, where the national public service broadcasters have the ambition to make quality content, but have limited budgets to do so.

Rethinking the structures for children's television content in the 2020s

Denmark has a long tradition of producing television in a wide variety of genres for children (Christensen, 2013), and this “special audience” is regarded as particular and important in the public service television context (Buckingham, 2005; Potter & Steemers, 2021). Children's fiction is popular content, but it is expensive to produce, making it vulnerable in times of political, platform, and production transition (Potter & Steemers, 2017). This is particularly the case for live action fiction, which has been under pressure in many public service contexts since the 2010s. Animated children's content can more easily be dubbed, and can thus more easily cross borders (e.g., Potter, 2018b, 2020). Moreover, it can be difficult to make live action

fiction which appeals to a wide age span, since there are big differences, for example, between preschoolers and tweens, both in terms of basic cognitive competencies and main interests.

While the national broadcasting landscape has seen still more competition in content for children and young audiences, the Danish broadcasters have become increasingly specialised in their offers to the youngest viewers. In 2020, DR redefined their target audience for the two channels DR Ramasjang and DR Ultra: DR Ramasjang would now be for 4–8-year-olds (rather than 3–6-year-olds), while DR Ultra would extend its age range and offer content for 9–14-year-olds. Thereby, DR actively started reaching out to the teenage segment which had basically been ignored for many years, with Ultra previously defining its audiences as 7–12-year-olds. This change was accompanied by the launch of a new Minisjang universe, targeting 1–3-year-olds, based on acknowledging that even “viewers in diapers” were watching screens, and thus public service broadcasters ought to also produce quality content for them (Christensen, 2020).

For many years, DR was the only broadcaster focusing on children in the Danish national arena, with the one possible competitor, TV 2, producing only the occasional advent calendar for family audiences, but otherwise not trying to compete for the youngest viewers. This changed in the 2020s. TV 2 then launched the children’s universe Oiii for their TV 2 Play platform in 2020, focusing on 3–9-year-old children, with international programmes as well as national originals. As argued by the head of content for Oiii, Kirstine Vinderskov, an important ambition for Oiii is to offer content that Danish children can mirror themselves in, meaning content which is recognisable and close to their everyday life (as cited in TV 2, 2021). Part of doing this is moving into live action fiction in combination with having the rights for popular animated brands such as *Gurli Gris* [*Peppa Pig*], *Barbapapa*, or *Alfons Åberg*.

The main reason for the TV 2 move into children’s content was acknowledging that this content is needed in an on-demand universe where broadcasters and streaming services need to offer content for all members of a family. As stated by the head of content for TV 2 Play, Sune Roland, TV 2 Play should offer content for *all* Danes, including children (as cited in TV 2, 2021). However, another reason for moving into children’s content is the fact that children and young audiences are the adult audiences of the future. Strong children’s content can be a way to attract the audience of tomorrow, teach children to expect good content from certain platforms, and hopefully even build some sense of loyalty to certain broadcasters or brands. With new players offering a huge catalogue of children’s content for Danish subscribers – such as Disney+ from September 2020 – the competition has become fierce in this market, and public service television commissioners are trying to navigate and content calibrate accordingly, possibly rethinking children as audience members in this process (see Christensen, Chapter 2 in this volume).

Part of the challenge of reaching young audiences is that they don't necessarily watch what their parents or television commissioners and producers would like them to watch. There's a lot of viewing "up the age range" (Brown, 2014: 163; see also Jensen & Mitric, Chapter 8 in this volume), with children watching content intended for much older viewers. Since many Danish children now have their own smartphones from around the age of eight or nine, a substantial amount of their viewing time is spent on their private screens rather than as shared family viewing (Jensen et al., 2021). This is particularly the case in the realm of fiction. This development led DR to focus more on producing live action children's fiction during the late 2010s. As an example, DR Ultra offered 257 episodes of scripted fiction in 2020, compared with 23 episodes in 2015 (DR pitch day for producers of children's content, 2020).

This new focus on fiction led to the creation of the popular *Klassen* [*The Class*] for DR Ultra, which actively involved children during the making of the series (Redvall & Christensen, 2021), as well as a wide range of other Ultra productions. But the focus on live action fiction also led to producing fictional content for the even younger Ramasjang audiences. This is the focus of this chapter: analysing how Ramasjang approached the making of one of these series – *Oda Upside Down*. The chapter identifies central notions among commissioners attached to making children's content within the Ramasjang framework since the late 2010s, such as working with talent development, creating affordable volume fiction, and developing portable brand characters.

Children's fiction as talent development

According to Pelle Møller, head of content for DR Ramasjang, one of his main missions when hired in 2015 was to develop more live action fiction for the Ramasjang brand. DR had a clear idea that this was needed in the Ramasjang universe; the question was, however, where to find strong writers for this kind of content. Møller argued that it can be hard finding talent with an ambition to work in children's fiction, since this content has traditionally been regarded as less prestigious and artistic than working with, for instance, prime time drama. As a result, writers working with children's content often quickly move to other more prestigious formats and genres, making it hard to build on the experiences from one production to the next and creating a strong and sustainable production environment for children's content, according to Møller.

There is also an economic side to the scarcity of writers for children's content. As addressed in the next section, children's drama has remarkably lower budgets than television fiction for adults, meaning that the pay is generally lower. Talent can be afraid of getting pigeonholed in what is regarded as a less prestigious form of content, with, for instance, screenwriters fearing that

certain credits can make commissioners regard them as writers for children's programming only, making it hard to move on if you write children's content for too long (see, e.g., B. Johnson & Peirse, 2021 for a discussion of this in relation to issues of gender). Where people train for working in the film and television industries also matters in terms of generating an interest in working with particular kinds of content. The traditional film schools have historically not prioritised children's content, even though, in the Danish context, 25 per cent of the national film funding has in fact been earmarked for the production of children's films since 1982, and children are also an important part of the public service remit (Redvall, 2021).

Film education and talent training is an obvious place to try to change mindsets and impact the perceptions of children's content among upcoming talent before they even start their professional careers. As discussed in the scholarly literature on educating filmmakers, where people train and what they are taught matter for how they become “a particular *kind* of filmmaker, where ‘kind’ encompasses skills, as well as narrative and aesthetic priorities, preferred modes of practice, and understandings of what the ideal roles and *contributions* of film would be [emphasis added]” (Hjort, 2013b: 1). And there are many discussions of how particular structures of such “sites of becoming” can have great impact, not least in small film and television industries (see, e.g., Petrie, 2010 or Petrie & Stoneman, 2014 for a discussion of the UK; and Hjort, 2013a, 2013b for a global perspective).

In Danish prime time drama, the so-called TV-term – where the DR drama department ventured into a collaboration with the National Film School of Denmark to help train talent to be showrunners and episode writers of long-running high-end drama series – is an excellent example of a broadcaster taking an active part in ensuring the emergence of a special kind of writers. During the TV-term, students of screenwriting, production, and production design spent half a year developing a potential television series for DR, helping to create interest in writing serial drama among screenwriters while still at film school and giving DR an opportunity to meet strong talent at an early point in their career and influence their direction and career choices (Redvall, 2015).

The making of *Oda* points to a similar – although small-scale – attempt to interest new talent in writing for children and helping them develop original ideas. Specifically, *Oda* grew out of a series of workshops about making fiction for young children, organised by Pelle Møller and DR Ramasjang in collaboration with a production company in 2017. The DR Ramasjang universe was presented to participants, but writers were encouraged to develop all kinds of ideas and were told they would own the intellectual property rights for anything that might come out of the process. In the interview, Møller argued that a main mission was to identify talented writers and directors with an interest in writing for children and strengthen the children's writing and producing community.

Oda emerged from this initiative, based on an original idea by Ida Mule Scott, developed and co-written by her and Iben Albinus Sabroe in collaboration with director Oliver Ussing. According to Scott and Sabroe, they had just finished a screenwriting programme at the University of Southern Denmark with little specific teaching on children's content. Having small children of their own, however, they were naturally interested in telling stories to children. In addition, they found children's content to be suitable for developing what researchers of children's fiction define as a double or "dual address" (Brown, 2017: 21) – that is, creating content which is engaging and entertaining for children as well as adults. In the case of *Oda*, the main character turns the world "upside down", inviting children as well as adults to question classic definitions of "the right way" to do things and be more imaginative and playful in their approach to life.

According to Møller, the workshop leading up to the production was made possible by a special allowance for more Danish fiction. As limited budgets are often an issue when working with children's fiction, it was crucial for Møller to have an early dialogue with talent about what is possible, or not, in a DR Ramasjang production framework. In the case of *Oda*, this meant having many iterations of how to make *Oda* and her magical universe come alive in an affordable way that could be sustained for many episodes and over many seasons.

Affordable fiction and creative constraints

During the interviews with Pelle Møller and Niels Lindberg about DR Ramasjang, they often referred to insights coming from the DR media researchers about preferences or feedback from children as well as parents. The commissioning decisions are clearly marked by continuous input from the target audience and their rapidly changing preferences, interests, and media use. This is common in the world of television, and points to a high degree of professionalisation of the DR children's universe (Ramasjang launched in 2009, as the first specialised children's niche channel from DR).

Among many other things, DR media researchers have researched "the ingredients of a streaming hit" for children, which – besides general advice on creating strong drama, such as working with both identification and fascination or having a strong cast – pointed to the importance of having many episodes (Redvall & Christensen, 2021: 169–170). Children are accustomed to an abundance of content on other platforms, and they often follow certain YouTubers or TikTokers closely on a regular basis. In a similar vein, children appreciate having many episodes of a series to engage with. As Lindberg explained, having several episodes also makes it easier to build a brand, resulting in the DR channels Ramasjang and Ultra increasing focus on serialised content with more and shorter episodes, preferably also additional material

to accompany the series (such as music videos or different forms of social media challenges). Lindberg denoted this “volume fiction” [volumenfiktion]. As it is expensive to produce fiction, having a high-volume demands finding a productional set-up where one can make affordable fiction (similar to the set-up of *The Class*), for example, using few locations, a limited cast, and a simple episode structure (Redvall & Christensen, 2021).

The demand for serialised, affordable volume fiction has several constraints attached to it that the team developing an idea for a new Ramasjang series had to deal with: 1) finding an intriguing and yet affordable and practical arena, 2) creating a cast with multi-season potential, and 3) working with certain storytelling structures and visual repetition. From the outset, writing fiction for children is accompanied by several quite specific demands in terms of what is regarded as appropriate content for the target audience at a public service children’s channel (which, at the time of creating *Oda*, targeted 3–6-year-olds). While there is much to analyse in this regard, the focus here is on the logistical and practical demands and creative implications related to the final choices of arena, cast, and storytelling structure. *Oda* went through several iterations. Notes from the talent workshops by Ida Mule Scott point to how there was quite concrete advice in terms of what signified good Ramasjang fiction, such as aiming for the following:

- several seasons
- low-budget concepts (e.g., few locations)
- creating a new character or a whole new universe
- facilitating user involvement
- having possibilities for learning outcomes
- possibly mixing fantasy or magic and realism
- always remembering that the series is for small children and the Ramasjang motto that one hour of watching Ramasjang should lead to 100 hours of play in the real world

(translated and condensed based on workshop notes from Scott)

The main idea behind *Oda* was to create a character that could be like Pippi Longstocking as a grownup, fighting for children’s rights and the importance of being playful and imaginative. According to Møller, this premise fit the Ramasjang notions of mixing fantasy or magic and realism and encouraging play. Early pitch documents open with questions of whether children’s lives of today are being too controlled, focusing on how all activities should be related to certain learning outcomes, even in kindergarten. In the pitch documents, the writers argue that free play and experimenting is under pressure, which is why there is a need for a character such as Oda who tries to liberate children from being small “control freaks” in an everyday life marked by the busy and all-efficient agendas of adults. The premise for the series asks whether “free childhoods” are endangered today and wants to explore this in episodes

where Oda helps challenge boring notions of, for instance, having to draw things in a correct manner (synopsis and short bibles by Scott & Sabroe).

In the first episode of *Oda*, Oda helps the boy Karl protect his right to paint a whale exactly the way he wants to. In later episodes, Oda helps children challenge widespread parenting principles like learning to sit still and be quiet, not making a mess, or sewing, building, and cooking traditional rather than non-traditional things (see Figure 4.1).

FIGURE 4.1 Screenshot from *Oda Upside Down*



Comments: In the first episode of *Oda Upside Down*, “Karl maler” [“Karl paints”], Oda helps the boy Karl paint a whale exactly the way he wants to. In later episodes, she helps children challenge other widespread parenting principles.

Source: DRTV, 2023

While the main character and premise for the series remain the same in the different versions of the short bible for the series, many things changed while screenwriters Scott and Sabroe developed the final concept for *Oda* in dialogue with Pelle Møller from DR, producer Meta Louise Foldager Sørensen from SAM Productions, and director Oliver Ussing. As for the main arena of the story, the first idea was to have a town called Regelsted [Rulestown] where the mayor at the town hall is stealing people’s imaginations. Some of the notes on this idea were that the town hall setting didn’t really have anything to do with children. It was an expensive set-up with several city locations. And then there was the fact that Oda had a traveling ice cream parlour in the early versions: probably a lot of fun, but a potential production nightmare – besides the fact that ice cream melts, making it difficult to work with for continuity reasons, as Scott and Sabroe explained.

Production-related comments such as these led to rethinking the arena, based on an idea from Møller to make the main setting a kindergarten. Kindergartens – and private homes – are where children frequently encounter

rules and conflicts about what they can do and how to do it in their everyday lives. This choice of setting led to the villain becoming the kindergarten teacher, Balder, who has strict ideas about what children should and shouldn't do and how they should spend their time. For authors Scott and Sabroe, this was an inspiring setting that they both knew from having children and an arena with the potential of encompassing different conflicts as well as activities. For the production, this meant zooming in on kindergarten interiors, individual (but very similar) homes of children living in a suburban environment, and the colourful home of Oda, who went from living in a small ice cream truck to owning an orange bubble where everything is upside down and with space for having children come over and visit. The three main locations thus became centred on reusable interiors rather than working with a whole city and substantial exterior shooting.

Meanwhile, Oda went from being a magical ice cream seller to having a magical zapper that can make parents want to play and be more fun. The magical element in the story had caused quite some headaches in early pitches; Oda is a superhero with magical powers, but how would she execute her magic and what does magic look like – on a reasonable budget? Part of finding the solution was talking with producer Meta Louise Foldager Sørensen about keeping it simple, like Astrid Lindgren's character Karlsson på taket [Karlsson on the roof], who can fly without anyone really explaining why. Magic should be naturally embedded, but not necessarily explained. Children accept this kind of premise, and the solution ended up being that Oda has a magical zapper – where this comes from or how she got it doesn't matter. What matters is the effect it has in making the world a more fun and imaginative place, according to Scott and Sabroe.

In terms of the cast, it was quickly decided that Oda should be the main character for all seasons while the children and adults around her change. This was partly because it is hard to shoot several seasons with children, since they grow up. Either a series evolves and grows up *with* its characters (like the Harry Potter franchise) or finds a set-up where one can replace the children (like the set-up in *The Class*, starting with new pupils in the fictional sixth grade of the series for every season). Scott and Sabroe wanted to stay in the kindergarten universe and thus decided to have new children around Oda for the different seasons. They also decided to make these children and their families diverse, with different family constellations in terms of ethnicity and gender. According to Scott, Sabroe, and Møller, this was not because of any diversity concerns from DR, but rather a decision of the writers supported by the producer.

As for the storytelling, the decision was to combine episodic and serial storytelling, meaning that Oda has a case to “solve” for a child in each episode, but there is also an overall arc for the season, with Oda having to defeat Balder the kindergarten teacher as the ever more frustrated villain. This

represents a break with most Ramasjang series, where episodes can be seen independently. In terms of storytelling, there is a recurring structure for each episode of *Oda*, starting at the kindergarten, where a child is picked up by their parent before going home, finding the parental take on things boring, and then looking up Oda for assistance. The opening credit sequence (with a popular theme song) is the same for each episode, as is a short midpoint song about how no one should steal a child's imagination. These elements are important for keeping the costs of episodes down and catering to children aged 3–6 years old who appreciate repetitions, not least with music.

The development process illustrates how all ideas for film and television naturally go through many stages and iterations, and how many of these are linked to specific budgetary constraints where writers have to find affordable ways in which to tell what they would like to tell without changing the core idea. All in all, the choices made during writing and development turned the original idea for *Oda* into a concept that was affordable to produce. Finally, Ramasjang commissioned a first season and later two more, adding up to 30 episodes.

Scott and Sabroe both found the process constructive and appreciated the input from the collaborators along the way. They argued that even though there were numerous constraints for the process, they didn't feel limited from the outset. Møller expressed that part of the reason for this may be that the workshops focused on exploring the original ideas of new talent wanting to write for children and then trying to shape them into a fitting Ramasjang concept in a collaborative process. Møller said that, as a commissioner, he liked the original *Oda* idea and wanted it to find the right Ramasjang format. The main ingredient was there from the very start, namely a potential "portable" main character that could be a brand character, able to be used beyond the specific series in the Ramasjang universe.

Portable brand characters and creating the Ramasjang Universe

An important part of the work as head of content for Ramasjang during 2015–2019 was acting as a brand manager. Particularly, that meant developing and nurturing the Ramasjang island, a fictional country which is home to all the characters in the Ramasjang universe (established in 2009). Most of the Ramasjang original Danish content involves these characters, who represent different aspects of children's lives and offer points of identification (see Figure 4.2).

FIGURE 4.2 Ramasjang characters from the content carousel



Comments: On the Ramasjang website, pictures of main characters are used as the entry point for many kinds of content, both foreign or animated content and original Ramasjang content. On the far far right is Oda as part of the Ramasjang content carousel on the Ramasjang website.

Source: DRTV, 2021

At the DR pitch day for independent producers in 2020, Ramasjang presented their target audience (now 4–8-year-olds) as seeing the whole world as an invitation to play. The presentation explained how children don’t distinguish clearly between fantasy and reality: What they see on screen has a character of “reality, just in a different place”, and they find their own imaginative and wondrous logic in things. The intended target audience was presented as having extensive knowledge of the Ramasjang country and its characters:

Each child has his or her own favourite character and the thought that the Ramasjang country might exist in reality fascinates particularly the younger part of the target audience. (Condensation and translation based on DR Ramasjang slides, DR pitch day for independent producers)

Møller recognised *Oda* as an intriguing addition to the existing Ramasjang characters. Most of the existing characters focused on teaching something specific in a fun way – for example, a language, numbers, or baking – and they were all quite straightforward in their approach. The idea of having a character who can turn things upside down was fascinating, not least from a visual perspective. Møller argued that Ramasjang is about making something crazy and quirky: Children should learn something, but in a different way.

Both Møller and his commissioning successor Lindberg compared the Ramasjang island and its fictional characters to the Marvel cinematic universe and to having a group of superheroes such as The Avengers. According to Lindberg, part of the Ramasjang strategy moving forward is to combine some of these characters in different storylines, as children like to see what happens when they interact. However, according to Møller, this requires a strong sense of the core idea of the Ramasjang universe and its characters.

As illustrated by the notes from screenwriter Ida Mule Scott from the DR talent workshop for writing children’s content, workshop participants were encouraged to think about potential new characters for the Ramasjang brand. However, Møller explained in his interview that this was not a strict requirement, and there were other paths to pursue (e.g., based on input from a DR media research analysis on the main interests of children in the target

audience, which are also present in Scott's workshop notes). Developing particular traits or properties is always important when trying to create engaging characters (Smith, 2022). However, developing a series with what film and media scholars discuss as cross-media characters (Freeman, 2015), or portable characters (Smith, 2021), can be regarded as a great advantage in many contexts, since it potentially expands the fictional universe in different ways. As discussed by Derek Johnson (2008), most successful franchises build on strong characters, some having "trademarked, corporate-owned characters" that can be played by different actors over time, since the fictional franchise character is more important than the star.

The media landscape of the 2020s has been marked by popular character-based franchises (such as the many Marvel and Star Wars productions for both film and television), but also by examples of engaging characters moving between commercials and series (such as Ted Lasso) as well as characters getting spin-off series. Most often, portable characters have certain easily identifiable visual or character traits with some sort of cross-media appeal. In the case of Oda, the colourful universe, her eye-catching hairstyle, her backwards clothing, and her zipper make her easily recognisable, and one can imagine many "upside-down" scenarios with her, as television programming or as other real-life events. Moreover, this character's recognisability makes it easier to change the character actor if needed, since the most important aspect of Oda is the core and iconic identity of the character rather than the individual actor embodying her. In *Oda* there ended up being a new main actor for season 2 and season 3, which wasn't regarded as a major challenge from the Ramasjang perspective.

According to Møller, a criterion of success for any Ramasjang character is to be part of the summer circus live shows, where the actress Coco Hjørdemaal (who plays Oda in season 2 and 3) got to participate as Oda for the first time in 2021 (with delay because of the Covid-19 pandemic). The live events of the Ramasjang universe are considered an important part of the brand, and having characters that work on screen as well as off screen is thus a gift. Møller also argues that the live events are a productive way for commissioners to meet the audience and see how they react to content and characters. When *Oda* premiered, it was thus inspiring for him to see images on social media of how children watched the series upside down in their homes. However, it is even better to see how children respond to and engage with Ramasjang characters in real life settings, also as a source of inspiration for new productions and commissioning strategies, according to Møller.

In this way, *Oda*'s premise of defending children's right to be imaginative and playful; the final choice of the kindergarten arena, the cast, and the storytelling structure; and the character of Oda were all a good match with the Ramasjang brand. The series did not have high viewing figures when premiering, but all three seasons are still being watched online, and Oda is

still an integrated part of the Ramasjang character gallery. *Oda* appealed to 3–6-year-olds, but also to slightly older children who could, for instance, be spotted dressed up as Oda in the streets or at DR events, Scott and Sabroe pointed out in their interview. The series stopped after three seasons and has travelled outside of the Nordics following its Danish run, being shown in a dubbed version on the French pay television channel Piwi+ (owned by the Canal+ Group) (e-mail correspondence with Sørensen). It is rare for live action series targeting pre-schoolers to travel, and it would be interesting to know how French children and parents responded to the series, but this is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Concluding remarks

The case study of *Oda* points to how making television fiction for the youngest viewers at DR Ramasjang is marked by several specific ideas about what signifies the Ramasjang brand and core audience. Several of these ideas are based on findings of media scholars who have researched DR and who continuously try to track the interests and media use of the young audiences across genres and platforms. The idea of a best practice for the brand and new commissions are clearly communicated at industry events, such as the annual pitching days for independent producers. At those events, commissioners at the DR children's brands now ask for certain ideas or formats based on the DR analysis of what is needed to appeal to children today (DR pitch day for producers of children's content, 2019, 2020, 2021). These content ideas have certain productional notions and constraints attached. As an example, having many episodes and seasons means working with affordable volume fiction, and keeping the Ramasjang island relevant and interesting involves working with portable brand characters who can play active parts outside the series themselves. DR wants to satisfy the appetite for Danish live action fiction among the target audience, but this involves finding strategies for producing many hours of content on limited budgets, compared with the money being spent on fiction for an adult audience.

The *Oda* case study also illustrates how DR tries to be actively involved in encouraging new talent to take an interest in children's fiction. The workshop that led to the making of *Oda* is one example of this, and Lindberg explained in his interview that, in the 2020s, Ramasjang has been collaborating with the state-funded film workshops [filmværkstederne] as well as the newly established Cross-Media School for Children's Fiction [Manuskriptskolen for børnefiktion] to meet new talent and try to orient them towards writing and producing content for DR. Another initiative has been trying to teach DR in-house talent working with entertainment and factual content for children and young audiences at DR B&U (DR/Children and Young Audiences) to possibly move into writing fiction based on their intimate knowledge of the target audience. Observation studies at a workshop on dramaturgy for

DR B&U in Aarhus in 2020 pointed to interesting perspectives in trying to reorient talent with an interest in children to work with fiction rather than the more traditional approach of trying to make fiction writers take an interest in telling stories for children. According to Møller, another strength of trying to build upon in-house talent in DR B&U is to hopefully create a strong production environment with talent who stays on from one production to the next, ensuring the continuity and knowledge-sharing in children's fiction that he considers missing, and which he wanted to encourage with the workshop that led to *Oda* in 2017.

Screenwriters Scott and Sabroe enjoyed creating and writing *Oda*, and they described how they found the process of developing and making the series constructive, not least since they managed to incorporate a clear political agenda of criticising the performance society where children should learn to be efficient and plan for their careers already in kindergarten, (rather than “wasting” their time on playing and having fun) in an entertaining universe for 3–6-year-olds and their parents. They said they might go back to writing for young children, but as noted by both the DR commissioners and media scholars (such as B. Johnson & Peirse, 2021), there is traditionally more prestige and better pay in other genres and formats, as Scott and Sabroe also discussed.

Since the making of *Oda*, DR has ventured into producing still more fiction for children, and they plan to continue in the years to come, Lindberg said. This makes it even more relevant to explore the guiding commissioning ideas as well as the screenwriting and productional practices behind the making of new fictional content for younger audiences, since the institutional framework naturally influences what moves into production and shapes the final result. As an example, in the late 1990s and 2000s, when DR decided to prioritise the one-hour drama series for mainstream audiences on Sunday nights at 20:00, this led to the emergence of strong content in this particular genre and timeslot, but at the expense of other genres and more experimental or niche productions with narrower appeal. The *Oda* case illustrates how the making of current Danish public service television children's content is marked by a similar interplay of different notions of quality, relevance, and best practice among different players. This influences what is available for Danish children on the national screens, and this also has an impact on which Nordic co-productions and collaborations DR decides to pursue. It is important to continuously track and analyse the approach to making content targeting young audiences to achieve a nuanced understanding of the constant negotiations and productive, and potentially unproductive, consequences of different constraints in the current landscape for making television fiction for the youngest viewers. Hopefully, the findings of this chapter offer interesting points – and points of comparison – regarding the writing and production of publicly funded, serial live action fiction for children in other national contexts or production frameworks.

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