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Sesame Street Goes Global: Let's All Count the Revenue

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PARIS, Dec. 11 - When a squeezable - and bankable - star named Elmo made a belated appearance in France this year, long after his Muppet birth in the United States, doubts emerged immediately about the puppet's proper French esprit.

Was Elmo too sweet? Did the google-eyed creature with a crimson shag and the voice of a child lack sufficient Gallic irony?

Thirty-six years after the original "Sesame Street" had its debut in the United States, Elmo has left his familiar neighborhood for a fresh wave of globalization, bound for countries that are discarding dubbed American versions for homegrown productions inhabited by characters with names like Nac, Khokha and Kami.

The makeovers - in places like Bollywood, Paris, Tokyo and South Africa - are transforming what it means to be a Muppet. One result is new licensing income from global co-productions that are subsidizing more treats for the Cookie Monster back in Sesame Workshop's New York headquarters. Revenue at Sesame Workshop, a nonprofit educational organization, increased 4 percent, to \$96 million, last year, primarily because of new income from international licensing.

France is the latest country to offer up its version, "5, Rue Sésame," a quaint street of tall buildings and bright blue skies, flower boxes and, of course, a tidy village bakery stocked with baguettes. But certain American puppets are gone, including one that you might expect could rattle French sensibilities: Sesame Street's floppy-armed front man, Kermit the Frog.

"It took us a year and a half to launch this show," said Alexandre [Michelin](#), programming director for France 5, a public television channel, and the co-producer, with Sesame Workshop, of the show, now two months old. "We had to adapt it to keep 'Sesame Street' values and ours, finding a way to make it work with French issues."

For Rue Sésame, that means there is a glancing scene of a tall suburban building laced with graffiti - a nod to suburbs around the country that were engulfed in riots a few weeks

ago. The bakery is run by Baya, an Arabic-looking woman, although - in another reflection of French sensibilities - her origins are never mentioned.

Big Bird has also vanished, replaced by an enormous yellow character, Nac, whose trumpet nose, vivid colors and whimsical nature were tested with children and reviewed by a French psychologist. The American bird disappeared because the French co-producer wanted a distinctive puppet star that could also be a mascot for the station.

Patricia Chalon, the psychologist, also helped the film's creators shape other new Muppet characters, like Griotte, a little girl in a wheelchair, and tweaked messages to help young viewers understand why a character was speaking in sign language.

The same sort of review is taking place now in India, where a co-production of a new "Sesame Street" version in Hindi is in development for a debut early next year. Miditech, a leading Indian television production company based in New Delhi, recently called a news conference to introduce new characters for the show, which will be broadcast on Turner International's cartoon network.

Big Bird was also eliminated in this version, replaced by a seven-foot lion named Boombah, who for now speaks in Hindi but eventually will master other tongues in a nation with 15 official languages, excluding English. Along this streetscape, an Internet cafe replaces the communal French bakery.

"If it is to work in India, the Indian kid watching it should not feel it is American or foreign," said Niret Alva, president of Miditech, who said that the American version never made the leap beyond a niche channel in India to reach an audience of children estimated at more than 157 million.

Miditech is a company better known for popular reality shows like "Indian Idol," and it already is laying plans to enlist stars from that show, along with Bollywood musical celebrities, to dance with the Muppets.

The new co-producers and Sesame Workshop offer many altruistic reasons for creating the shows, like spreading a message of tolerance and diversity in France, promoting unity between rural and urban areas in India and easing ethnic tensions in Kosovo. But beyond those motives, there are the important side benefits of new income from licensing and merchandising, particularly from new characters with distinctive national identities.

Last year, more than 68 percent of Sesame Street's revenues came from income from licensing of products. Japan started its own version of "Sesame Street" last year, and Sesame Workshop's 4 percent jump in revenue last year came largely from licensing agreements in Japan.

Today, "Sesame Street" appears in more than 120 countries, and about 25 of them are co-productions. France had a more American version of "Sesame Street" in the 1970's and early 1980's, but stronger local competition pushed it off the air.

A new wave of co-productions started in the last five years, among them the Arabic Egyptian broadcast, "Alam Simsim," which is now seeking to take a pan-Arab version to other Arabic-speaking countries.

The global merchandizing income is most important because it "is subsidizing the show in the U.S. and subsidizing the research that we do at the workshop," said Gary Knell, chief executive of Sesame Workshop in New York.

He added, though, that "there are many countries, like Bangladesh or Kosovo, where we go in where there is no expectation of making any money on ancillary income from product sales."

Such is the case with the new Cambodian version, "Sabai Sabai Sesame" ("Happy Happy Sesame"), which will be broadcast for the first time Tuesday, financed in part by the United States government. The show is basically an American version dubbed in Khmer, which is much less expensive than creating a local co-production.

But countries with large populations and high disposable income have a commercial incentive to develop their own versions. France 5's commercial arm, France Télévision Distribution, for example, is developing a two-stage strategy to bring merchandise to the market over the next nine months. Turner International has struck a licensing agreement with Sesame Workshop in India.

The efforts to develop new international versions of "Sesame Street" are documented in "The World According to Sesame Street," a feature-length film that will premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January, although its creators are still looking for a distributor.

The filmmakers, Linda Goldstein Knowlton and Linda Hawkins Costigan, said they set out to explore the backstage dramas of versions in South Africa, Bangladesh and Kosovo, where they found Muppets could be agents of social change and understanding. They point to Kami, an H.I.V. positive puppet on "Takalani Sesame" in South Africa.

"Talk to anyone under the age of 45 in the United States, and they all can relate to 'Sesame Street' because they grew up with it," Ms. Hawkins Costigan said. "And now you can expand it to all these countries."

In France, the creators of "Rue Sésame" are studying their completed shows and considering whether some cultural values need further adjusting.

"We had the feeling that it was a little bit too sweet, too nice," Mr. Michelin, of France 5, said. "We need some irony. It's very difficult to evaluate, but we have the feeling that in France we can be a little edgier."