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BLACK IN FACT – BEYOND THE WHITE GAZE

The examination of Black representation
in documentaries for UK audiences

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FOREWORD

This study explores the types of documentaries that are made and platformed by the United Kingdom's (UK's) English-speaking Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs). Data was collected between April and May 2021 using the on-demand services of PSBs ranging from BBC iPlayer to ITV hub, 4oD and My5. Interviews were also conducted with Black factual programme makers to further explore representation in documentaries and the journey towards getting programmes that centre Black people produced.

The research was conducted by award-winning documentary producer and director Cherish Oteka. Cherish began their career in broadcasting, working across content selection, acquisitions and content curation for leading broadcasters.

Cherish has since made documentaries with a range of well-known brands and broadcasters including BBC, London Live, SBTv, Tate, Stonewall and most recently BFI and The Guardian.

Also selected on well-respected talent schemes including Edinburgh Television Festival's One's to Watch, Sheffield Documentary Festival's Doc Next and The Grierson Trust's Doc Lab.

In 2016, Cherish won UKTV's Rising Star Award. The following year they also won Best Documentary at the Movie Screen and Video Awards.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A data pool of 275 documentary programmes was collated using the Video-on-Demand (VoD) services across Public Service Broadcasters. Data was collected between 26th April and May 21st 2021. When programmes centred Black people, they often perpetuated well established racial tropes and stereotypes:

- Race and racism were the leading subject matters when a programme featured a Black person.
- Crime was the second most popular subject matter that centres Black people
- Music was the third leading subject matter of programmes that centre a Black person.

Qualitative data was also captured from eight Black professionals working within the documentary genre supporting the findings of the quantitative work. It also demonstrated a clear concern among practitioners that the commissioning of 'Black programming' is still predominantly seen through the interests of white commissioners, a situation compounded by a lack of career progression among Black media workers to positions of editorial control with commissioning power and final sign off. They concluded the following:

- The representation of Black people is not varied or nuanced enough
- Black documentary filmmakers are often having to push back at stereotypical representations of Black people on the projects they are working on
- While many of the filmmakers enjoy working on programmes that centre Black voices, they do feel they are being pigeon-holed and not offered roles that are outside of race
- Black documentary filmmakers are facing challenges with progressing in their careers
- Black production company owners are not being given the same opportunities as non-Black production company owners
- Interviewees would like to see more Black representation at senior levels of the industry. From commissioners, channel controllers, executives and production company owners.

INTRODUCTION



The global Black Lives Matter uprising of 2020 led major broadcasters and streaming platforms to create talent schemes, quotas and financial pledges to increase diversity and inclusion both onscreen and behind the camera, as well as in broader areas of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Sky committed £30m to “support the fight against racial injustice and invest more in diversity and inclusion” (Sky, 2020). YouTube pledged \$100million in aid of ‘amplifying and developing the voices of Black creators and artists and their stories’ (Youtube Official Blog, 2020). Whilst Channel 4 did not make any explicit financial pledges, they did make a six-point commitment to anti-racism and two of the six points related to representation. These points include their commitment to “commissioning relevant and authentic content – that reflects the lives of ethnically-diverse audiences on an ongoing basis” and their commitment to “fair ethnically-diverse representation on screen.” (Channel 4, 2020).

Similarly, ITV did not make an explicit financial pledge but did commit to ensuring they “accelerate change in diversity and inclusion” (ITV, 2020) which will see the broadcaster increase diversity amongst its highest rated shows. Viacom, the owners of Channel 5, introduced a “no diversity, no commission” policy (Kanter, 2021). Whilst the BBC announced a £100 million fund to address diversity on screen and behind the camera, along with “a mandatory target of 20% of off-screen talent that must come from under-represented groups, to include those with a disability or from a BAME or disadvantaged socio-economic background”(BBC, 2020). Based on the responses from some of the major broadcast companies as outlined above, there is an acknowledgement that change in the area of diversity and inclusion is needed across media companies however, specific pledges in regards to the quality of representation is needed.



¹BAME - Black Asian and Minority Ethnic

The pledges from media companies, as outlined above, came after the killing of George Floyd at the hands of US police officers and the global protests that ensued because of it. When the BBC announced its financial pledge to address diversity, the former BBC Director General, Tony Hall, said that “the senseless killing of George Floyd... made us question ourselves about what more we can do to help tackle racism - and drive inclusion within our organisation and in society as a whole.” There are three criteria that the BBC uses to assess diversity as defined by its £100m fund and programmes need to meet two of them to qualify as a “diverse production.” The BBC’s criteria include: diverse stories and portrayal on-screen, diverse production teams and talent and diverse-led production companies as a marker for diversity (BBC, 2020). The killing of George Floyd brought issues of systemic injustice faced by Black people into sharper focus on a global scale. Whilst many media companies pledged to tackle issues of diversity, Black representation is often not referred to specifically but is included in the diversity discussion under the BAME umbrella term. The issue, however, is that the conflation of Black representation with that of other underrepresented ethnic groups does not help to identify the specific type of racism that led to the senseless killing of George Floyd.

Ethnicity, class, gender, disability and in some cases sexuality and gender identity are referred to in many of the diversity and inclusion pledges from major media companies; however, it is important to address the specific needs of each underrepresented group. Representation for any underrepresented group is vital as it shapes identity and informs how wider society perceives underrepresented groups. For example, in exploring the case of George Floyd, he was not killed because he belonged to a homogenised ‘diverse’ community. He, along with many others, was killed at the hands of the police because he was Black. In fact, unarmed Black people in the US are more than three (3) times more likely to be fatally shot by the police than their white counterparts (BMJ, 2020). The specific disadvantage that Black people face at the hands of the police is mirrored in the UK where Black people are nine (9) times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police (Gov.uk, 2020). There are specific issues and disadvantages that are faced by the Black community. Therefore, this study will specifically examine Black representation in documentaries that are consumed by UK audiences.

Study Context

There is a two-fold problem with the on-screen representation of Black people. One of the issues is the lack of stories that feature Black voices, in fact 67% of Black Britons think there is not enough representation of Black people on TV and in film (CNN, 2020). The other issue relates to the lack of varied portrayals of Black experiences. A 2011 study exploring news coverage of both print and broadcast media, found that “close to 7 in 10 stories of Black young men and boys related in some form to crime – a comparatively higher figure than in coverage of young men and boys more generally.” The findings also highlighted that “violent crime, murders, and gun and knife crime accounted for the majority of crime coverage featuring black young men and boys in the mainstream news, with little context or explanation for the reasons why crime was committed” (Cushion, Moore and Jewell, 2011). A separate study of print media found that “ethnic minorities tend to be racialised in the press. Ethnic minorities receive proportionately very little coverage in the British press: but they have high salience in relation to specific news agendas, notably immigration, terrorism, and crime” (Firmstone, Georgiou, Husband et al, n.d.). At the moment, the qualities of representation are not factored into monitoring diversity. Instead, diversity is primarily numbers, quotas and target driven and according to Campion (2005) “they do not monitor how the number of Black gun-crime stories compares with the portrayal of Black people as professionals.”

Another content pillar when stories feature a Black person is racism. Because whiteness is depicted as the norm, Black people are often depicted in direct relation to the colour of their skin and often in relation to a problem that can only be explored through a Black lens. Campion (2005) argues that “Audiences are always assumed to be homogeneous and White and able-bodied so even the few programmes which specifically feature people from minorities are often designed to explain them to this imagined mainstream audience.” Although it is critical to highlight issues of systemic injustice and social injustice, when Black narratives are repeatedly positioned in trauma it can indirectly build an overarching narrative about the Black community and Black individuals. As a consequence, these negative narratives have the potential to skew perceptions of the Black community. They can affect how non-Black audiences engage with Black people and even how Black people see themselves. Black stories repeatedly being adjacent to crime and racism perpetuates the Black community as being a troubled and trauma ridden one and, crucially, reinforces Black people as being othered.

Another common positioning of Black people is in relation to athletics and music. One study on the UK television sector found that ethnic minorities were more than twice as likely than their white counterparts to appear on a television program within the music genre. The study suggested that these findings may “imply trivialisation of ethnic minority contributions.” (Commission for Racial Equality, 2001). Repeated portrayals of Black people as entertainers without three-dimensional representation can be negative in and of itself. Even if the representation of Black people in the field of music is a positive portrayal, it can be limiting on the ways in which Black people are viewed and how Black people view themselves and their prospects. This is especially true if there is an imbalance between the number of Black people who are positioned as entertainers and the number of Black people who are positioned as academics or have any other profession outside of entertainment. Evans (1993:10) criticised television for misleading young Black male viewers with the over-representation of Black men as athletes and entertainers. He feared this over-representation could mislead young Black men to think that success “is only a dribble or dance step away” and deter them from pursuing more attainable career paths.



It is crucial to understand how audiences are affected by the content they consume. There have been various studies that explore how media consumption shapes perceptions. Whilst theories developed in 1920s and 1930s suggest that audiences are passive and take on the messages being sent through mass media without challenge (Nwabueze, Okonkwo, 2018), these theories were widely rejected as too simplistic and not acknowledging audiences' ability to formulate their own opinions. In a study by Stuart Hall, on *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* of 1973, he argued that messages in television are carefully encoded and, as a result, audiences have three routes or positions for interpreting those messages. The dominant position, Hall states, is taken when an audience member belongs to the same dominant group as the sender of the encoded message, and they share the same worldview and biases. Because the encoded message applies to the audience members' worldview, the message is accepted without challenge. The negotiated position is adopted when the audience member may not share the same worldview as the dominant group but is familiar enough with it to make sense of the messages being sent by the encoder. The oppositional position is taken by audiences who do not share the same viewpoints as the dominant culture and, whilst they can understand all the messages that are being sent by the encoder, they are able to reject those messages firmly (Hall, 1973). All three positions place audience members as being active viewers. A later study found that audiences can disregard the messages that are being sent to them through mass media if their lived experiences contradicted those messages (Merton, 1949). However, when consuming content from trusted media outlets and when those trusted outlets are portraying experiences that are far removed from the audience's lived experience, the ability to discern stereotypes and bias becomes a greater challenge.

A UK survey found that 78% of their respondents thought that the media's portrayal of ethnic minorities promotes racism. This was not just expressed by respondents who were from minority ethnic backgrounds, 76% of white British respondents thought that the media's representation of minority ethnic groups fuelled racism (Runnymede Trust, 2014). While there have been few studies into the effects of media in the UK on Black communities, much research has been conducted in the United States of America (USA). A qualitative study found that white audiences are influenced by imagery of racial difference (Entman and Rojecki, 2001). And white audiences are not the only people who are susceptible to distorted ideas about Black people. Another study found that African Americans who consume more television are more likely to grow contempt for their own community.

“Since blacks tend to watch more television overall, and tend to be especially attuned to representations of blacks (who are often framed negatively), their attitudes towards the people and community around them is negatively impacted, relative to white viewers” (Beaudoin and Thorson, 2006). As well as this, Black men are more likely to justify violence against Black women if they endorse stereotypical representations of Black women (Gillum, 2002).

By law, under the Communications Act, Public Service Broadcasters are required to provide content that reflects the experiences of different communities in the UK and broadly provide content that is for the benefit of the public. Within this framework, the PSBs are enlisted to make a set of value judgements. What communities do they highlight? And what experiences within those communities do they highlight? In addition, what experiences within which communities are deemed to be of benefit for the public? Studies within the American context have explored the overrepresentation of Black communities in adjacent narratives to crime and trauma. They suggested that one of the drivers for this could be a desire to make otherwise perceived niche stories appeal to broader white audiences. The appeal of negative stories is to either affirm fears that white people might have about Black criminals and, in the case of trauma ridden stories, to reassure white audiences that Black people are not enjoying an advantage over them and that they, the white audience, still hold privilege (Tucker, 2007, p. 103, drawing on Guerrero, 1993).

All media consumption has the potential to influence and shape how an audience views the world. However, this is particularly true in the factual genre - a genre that audience members consume under the supposition that they are engaging with the truth. This expectation is of particular importance when content is consumed on credible media platforms like that of the Public Service Broadcasters.

Factual stories are crafted through the lens of the filmmakers and, quite often, the most influential members of filmmaking teams are people who hold privileged positions in society. A 2015 report revealed that only 2.46% of British factual television is made by BAME directors (Directors UK, 2015), a stark contrast to the 14% BAME population in the UK (ONS Census data 2011). It is through this dynamic that the potential is created for whole judgements and narratives to be told about entire groups of people who often do not have the access to tell the stories for themselves. Whilst diversity off-screen is crucial, this report examines whether the diversity of stories told about marginalised communities also needs to be factored into actions to improve diversity in the media as a whole.

My positioning in this study is as a Black, queer and working class filmmaker, therefore, authentic representation is critical to me. When being considered for projects, I have found that I am more likely to be in the running or even discussed if the idea is about a Black issue and if that Black issue pertains to racism or crime. From that point, I began observing the perpetuation of Black stories that are told through these paradigms. While I had been meditating on this for a while, these observations culminated for me last year after the killing of George Floyd. The discourse that followed this horrific event allowed me to confront challenges from my own career and life as a Black person. What became more apparent is that universally, non-Black people as well as Black people are informed on what it is to be Black from the media and quite often, these portrayals are negative. We are continually viewed as villains or victims but rarely as equals.

Calls for change are nothing new and have in fact spanned decades. In recent times, celebrated Black performers made public calls for change within the British media. From Lenny Henry in 2014 to David Oyelowo in 2015 and Idris Elba in the House of Commons in 2016. And while schemes for new entrants were implemented, seismic structural change is yet to come. The fight to achieve true inclusion of Black people in British media is a nuanced and layered one. In a time when diversity discussions have been re-energised, it is important to take a closer look at the stories that are being overrepresented and call for new models to be adopted when making editorial decisions about diversity.

The purpose of this report is critical in exploring the factual stories that are being told about the Black community, how they could inform the ideas about the Black community and the experience Black documentary filmmakers have when challenging these stereotypes.



METHOD



Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in this study. For exploring the types of representation that exists for Black individuals, media content analysis was used. Media content analysis is the systematic exploration of themes, texts or views found within pieces of media. Through the use of media content analysis, one can quantify and analyse the existence, implications and connections of such themes, texts or views (Columbia Public Health, n.d.). Although it was initially devised to study propaganda in mass media, (Harold Lasswell, 1927), this methodological approach has become a leading tool used to study important topics such as “violence, racism and the representation of women in television and film” (Macnamara, 2005).

To collate the data pool, documentaries were selected using the VoD services of English-speaking Public Service Broadcasters. Once ‘Documentary’ or ‘Factual’ was selected as a category, the projects were examined in either alphabetical order or in order of popularity, depending on the selection options of the VoD service.

Thumbnails, titles and loglines were used to ascertain if the programme related to the Black community or centred Black individuals. Then, media content analysis was used in exploring the full programme description. When putting programmes into categories, the main theme or thread of the programme as described in the programme description was used as a guide. For example, if the main thread of the programme was about race or racism then it was put in the race category and if the main thread of the programme was about crime then it was put in the crime category. Data was collected between 26th April and May 21st 2021. Please note that this is a data pool based on programmes that were in the factual or documentary sections of the PSB’s. There may be other existing data that were in other categories that would need further exploration.

To further explore Black representation, qualitative data was gathered using semi-structured interviews. In using this interview approach “the same topics form the basis for questioning, yet interviewers’ sequencing of questions is participant-led” as well as this, “follow-up questions – also referred to as probes – are formulated relative to what the interviewees have already said” (Roulston and Choi, 2018). Once the semi-structured interviews were completed, thematic analysis was used to extrapolate themes and commonalities from the interviewees’ responses. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis is used to identify patterns of meaning in qualitative data.

The interviewees represented a range of roles within documentary but all of them have experience in making documentaries that centre Black people. It covered documentary programme makers who have worked across Public Service Broadcasters as well as the independent documentary sector and digital mediums. Interviewees also included people with a range of experience, from aspiring directors to seasoned industry veterans who have worked across commissioning, headed up Public Service Broadcasters and/or run their own production companies that make documentaries for Public Service Broadcasters.

Ethical considerations

This research included remote interviews with eight (8) documentary practitioners who are based in the United Kingdom. Practicing good ethics was critical to this study. Interviewees were offered the opportunity to remove any sensitive information they have shared that would result in reputational damage. Anonymity and confidentiality was offered to all interviewees, however, all of the interviewees opted to be identified because this study is important to them.

All interview recordings were compiled using a GDPR compliant platform and saved on Birmingham City University's secure OneDrive storage space in a password-protected folder with participants' consent.



QUANTITATIVE DATA



Media Content Analysis Findings

Using content analysis, the programmes that related to the Black community or that centred Black individuals were collated. From there and largely using programme synopses, the programmes were put into categories based on what the central theme of the programme was.

When looking at the top areas of Black representation across the PSBs in the UK, there were a number of emerging themes. Out of the 275 sample size of programmes across PSBs that feature Black people, 21% of them were directly about race with racism being a central theme, 16% were about crime, 14% were about lifestyles, 12% pertained to health and 11% was about music. Other smaller categories of representation ranged from sport to art, religion, history and science.

Whilst lifestyle is the third biggest area of Black representation, it is important to note that in some instances, the documentaries that are accessible on PSBs, feature a Black person in the programme's thumbnail to advertise the show but the Black person has no major contribution to the show itself. At this stage however, due to the lack of transparency around algorithms it is difficult to assess if everyone sees the same thumbnails. The issue of Netflix targeting Black audiences with the use of pictures of relatively minor Black characters in its thumbnails became an issue in 2018 (Iqbal, 2018).

It is worth noting that the lifestyle genre in some cases has tokenistic inclusion of Black people and can make programming appear to be more diverse than it really is. This finding is not new; a study conducted twenty years ago that explored popular TV shows broadcast to UK audiences found that "ethnic minority participants were far less likely to enjoy major roles." (Commission for Racial Equality, 2001). Therefore, further research is needed to ascertain the prevalence of this.

BBC

Of the public service broadcasters reviewed in this study, only the BBC made an explicit financial pledge in aid of increasing diversity on-screen and off-screen although even this pledge has been plagued with confusion as the broadcaster has not been explicit about the “additionality” of the money (Ryder, 2021). However, irrespective of any confusion around the financial support, the BBC included numerical targets on increasing diversity off-screen. While this move by the BBC demonstrates that the broadcaster has an intention to affect change, overall, the findings of the media content analysis of BBC iPlayer demonstrates a need to expand on the criteria for change and focus on the qualities of diverse representation for the Black community. The main findings of the media content analysis on the BBC will be outlined in the following paragraphs.

The BBC had the biggest sample size of 127 programmes that either featured Black people or were about Black experiences. Of the 127 programmes, 27% of them had race as the central premise of the show, making this the leading category for Black stories on the BBC iPlayer. Within the race category, most of the programmes were about racism. Subjects ranged from racism in the police force, religion, education, football, creative industries and racism throughout British history. A study on the UK press had similar findings “ethnic minorities tend to be racialised in the press” (Firmstone et al, n.d.). Highlighting these issues is crucial; however, when stories about the Black experience are repeatedly told through the prism of racism, it limits the breadth of experiences that Black people have and, as a consequence, the Black experience is positioned as one marked solely by trauma.

The BBC’s second biggest category of Black programming is crime. Despite it being at 17% and having a joint second place in percentages with music, there was one more programme in the crime category that made this an overall 22% as opposed to music’s 21%. Black stories have long been told in close relation to crime and criminality, the BBC’s representation of crime within Black contexts ranged from murder and knife crime to sexual assault and harassment, child abuse, drug dealing, gangs, and account scams. This creates a troubling association of fear and crime with the Black community. The BBC is viewed as a trustworthy source of information and, while the reporting of individual cases of crime may be trustworthy, the prevalence of the reporting of crime committed by Black people can create a distorted representation of Black people. In addition to this, there is no known procedure held by the broadcaster that assesses the percentage of Black people who are positioned as criminals in comparison to Black people who are represented as professionals (Campion, 2005).

The BBC's third biggest category for Black representation is music. From biographies of iconic Black musicians to documentaries that speak to wider themes of social history through the prism of music, this is a genre where Black people can be represented in more empowering roles. The contribution of Black people to the arts is undeniable. And, with departments of the BBC dedicated to commissioning art documentaries, representation of Black people in this space is natural. However, Black people contribute to many other areas of society outside of sports and music. The representation of Black people in relation to being academics or other specialists is lacking and, in this next stage of fighting for equality, it would be great to see more Black people taking up an array of informed positions for mainstream programming.

Another area where there is representation of Black people is health with 13%. Here, Black representation is layered and varied. From documentaries featuring NHS professionals to programmes exploring mental health, diet, and plastic surgery, the viewer gets to see Black people being featured in other categories and not solely being called to talk about racialized trauma or inhabiting stereotypical roles.

With the highest proportion of Black representation on the nation's flagship broadcaster falling into recognisable and well-trodden racial tropes, it is vital that the qualities of representation are factored into efforts to increase diversity. Failing this could increase Black representation on-screen whilst also increasing the representation of negative tropes about the Black community in factual programming.



Channel 4

With 30%, Lifestyle was Channel 4's biggest area for Black representation. Here, Black characters are featured in and amongst non-Black characters and are not necessarily speaking about race, crime or being an entertainer. From exploring future technologies to shopping secrets, dating, body image and luxury lifestyles, Black representation goes beyond speaking squarely to stereotypes in this category. However, it is important to note that there were a few programmes that did feature Black people and were technically in the lifestyle category but were problematic in their portrayal of Black people and Black cultures. For example, *Mel B Voodoo Princess*, *The British Tribe Next Door*, *Extreme Tribe: The last Pygmies* all presented African cultures as being impoverished and less civilised than British culture so even within the lifestyle category, it is important to reflect on stereotypical storylines when featuring Black people.

The second biggest area of Black representation on 4oD was race. Like the BBC, most programmes where race was a central theme related to racism. From institutional racism to how racism shapes politics and how racism affects self-image, there are many representations of racism on the platform. Again, it is important to highlight these issues, but it is also important to highlight Black experiences that are not solely shaped by their interactions with white people.

The joint third biggest areas of Black representation were crime and health. The crime category highlighted murderers and serial killers, child abuse, criminals who intimidate witnesses, drug dealers and card scammers. Whilst health topics ranged from weight loss, fitness, diet and maternity.

Channel 4's pledge that outlined its commitment to anti-racism made mention of "authentic...fair ethnically-diverse representation on screen." (Channel 4, 2020). 'Fair,' and 'authentic' are value judgments and therefore it is important that the broadcaster liaises with Black people to establish what fair and authentic representation means to Black people and includes this when commissioning and producing projects.

ITV

With a small sample size of 15 programmes, ITV's greatest representation of Black people was in the lifestyle category. From road trips to natural history and luxury getaways, Black representation is, in parts, woven into the fabric of regular television viewing. This is also true of one of ITV's joint second largest areas for Black representation – Reality TV. With programmes like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Marriage Bootcamp* and *Ibiza Weekender*, Black contributors are pulled in to shape broader narratives than ones solely about race.

ITV's other joint second biggest area for Black representation is race. Like BBC and Channel 4, the programmes that do explore race from a Black perspective, speak squarely to experiences of racism.

With just 15 programmes on ITV hub that appeared to feature Black individuals, ITV clearly has work to do in increasing representation. However, Black representation mainly being in the context of their popular programmes does speak to the pledge that the broadcaster made in 2020 to increase diversity amongst its highest rated shows. Further research is needed to explore the qualities of the representation in the actual programmes that Black people are in.



Channel 5

With a 22% lead, crime is the biggest area for representing Black stories on Channel 5. From programmes about young drug smugglers to prisoners, murderers and those wrongly convicted, crime is a key area of Black representation. Similar to BBC and Channel 4, crime is a leading category of Black representation for this broadcaster. This issue was reflected in a study that found “violent crime, murders, and gun and knife crime accounted for the majority of crime coverage featuring black young men and boys in the mainstream news, with little context or explanation for the reasons why crime was committed” (Cushion, Moore and Jewell, 2011).

Lifestyle is the second biggest area of Black representation for Channel 5. Here, there are a range of subject matters, from body image to dating and shopping deals.

The joint third biggest area of Black representation on Channel 5 are Health and Royals. The Royal category is solely driven by documentaries on Meghan Markle and Prince Harry. Health topics range from weight loss, medical conditions, plastic surgery, and diet.

While Viacom, the owner of Channel 5, boldly pledged that ‘no diversity’ would result in ‘no commission’ for production companies, they need to be mindful of the quality of their representation of Black people.



Assessing the Quality of Representation

The issue of trying to assess the quality of representation of underrepresented groups has been a serious academic concern for several decades, with the most notable attempt being the Bechdel-Wallace test examining representation of women.

The Bechdel Wallace test was devised in 1985 as a litmus test for the representation of women in film. To pass the test the film must have at least two (named) women in the film who engage in at least one conversation with one another that isn't about a man. In that way, production companies can be more cognisant of the tropes that female characters tend to fall into.

Over the years, several other tests have been devised to account for representation. The DuVernay test, named after acclaimed filmmaker Ava DuVernay, marks representation on characters of colour having three-dimensional lives instead of serving as the backdrop of the white characters' lives. The Waithe test, named after celebrated filmmaker Lena Waithe, tests successful representation based on whether there's a Black female character in the film that holds a position of power and is in a healthy relationship.

The diversity and representation tests that exist are largely geared towards fictional storytelling and rarely test the subject matters and harmful stereotypes in storytelling.

Without a clear industry accepted standard test for Black British representation at present, examining qualitative data through interviews with Black documentary filmmakers working in the industry is critical.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH



Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight self-identifying Black documentary filmmakers to explore their lived-experiences of making programmes that centre Black people.

The interviewees range in experience and roles within the industry and the following paragraphs provide a brief profile of each interviewee.

Andy Mundy-Castle – Managing Director, Doc Hearts Ltd

Andy is a self-identifying Black man of mixed heritage and a serial business owner and television and film producer with 15 years' experience in production and delivering creative content.

Since graduating from Goldsmiths with an MA in Documentary Film-making, Andy hasn't stopped shooting factual content. He has been involved with award winning documentaries, factual entertainment, current affairs, branded content and corporate work for the likes of the BBC, Netflix, Channel 4, Nike, British Airways and Footlocker.

Lyttanya Shannon – Producer/Director

Lyttanya Shannon self-identifies as a Black woman of Caribbean descent. Lyttanya began her creative journey as a journalist and, after going to film school, crossed over into documentary filmmaking. She works as a director on one-off singles, and high profile series for major broadcasters. Her latest work includes Subnormal: A British Scandal, for BBC 1 and iPlayer.

Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

Cassie Quarless self-identifies as a Black man and is a producer/director with a background in documentary and comedy shorts. His first BFI funded feature length film Generation Revolution was released in cinemas in the UK and toured the US and South America.

He is currently directing a new feature called Malcolm that is part-funded by IFP/HBO. He is also directing an hour-long TV documentary about Stokely Carmichael for PBS. Cassie is currently an Eccles Fellow at the British Library and his work has been featured in The Guardian, Teen Vogue and i-D Magazine amongst many others.

Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

Jason Ferguson self-identifies as a Black man and is an up and coming Director of Photography, working across Documentary and Drama. Having worked across a variety of documentaries including, the BAFTA award-winning Gun No. 6, 24hrs in Police Custody, One Borough, The Baby has Landed and a handful of Dramas, The Water, Headcleaner, Ties of the Ribbon, Leavers of London.

Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

Liana Stewart is a BAFTA award-winning filmmaker and self-identifies as a Black woman of mixed heritage. She is a self-shooting Producer/Director from Cardiff with over 10 years' experience producing factual, current affairs and documentary content for television. From landmark series to single documentaries and short form, recent credits as a self-shooting director include: Bafta award winning series Ambulance (BBC One), Get Your Knee Off My Neck (C4), Black and Welsh (BBC One Wales) and Stacey Dooley Sleeps Over (Sky).

Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

Maxine Watson self-identifies as a Black woman who has worked in the television industry for over twenty years both as an award winning Producer (RTS journalism winner for Why Stephen) and as a Commissioner for BBC Documentaries across One, Two and Three. She was also Director of Programmes for TwentyTwenty.

Commissions include award winning Who Do You Think You Are, Grumpy Old Men, Class of '92, Out Of Their League, Baby P: The Untold Story, The Week The Landlords Came to Stay, Lawful Killing: Mark Duggan Shooting, Reported Missing, Elizabeth at 90, Famous Rich and Homeless, (RTS winner) Gareth Malone's Invictus Choir. BAFTA winner Rio Ferdinand: Being Mum and Dad, Jamie Drag Queen at 16 (now a smash hit west-end musical)The Great Pottery Throw Down, Black is the new Black as well as fact-based drama commissions, which included Mrs Mandela for BBC Four, Shirley Bassey, The Scandalous Lady W and single drama Excluded for BBC Two.

Maxine is currently a freelance Executive Producer.

Patrick Younge – Co-Founder and Co-Managing Director, Cardiff Productions Ltd.

Pat self-identifies as a Black British man and is an award-winning journalist and creative leader with 29 years' experience, working at major broadcasters at home and abroad. He was a co-founder of Sugar Films, which he left to launch Cardiff Productions in May 2020.

He led the BBC Television Production studio, who create and deliver some of the world's biggest shows. Prior to that, he was President of US cable network, Travel Channel Media, introducing shows like Emmy award winning 'Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations' and global break-out hit, 'Man v Food'.

At BBC Sport, Pat led the transformation of 6 Nations rugby introducing prime-time kick-offs and the 'Super Saturday' climax. A digital evangelist, his recent Hack The Moon project was nominated for a Webby award.

Sian Guerra - Producer

Sian identifies as a Black woman of mixed-heritage and is an award-winning producer. She's worked across a range of high profile and sensitive documentaries for major broadcasters. These include: Acid Attack: My Story for BBC 3, (BAFTA award-winning series), Ambulance for BBC One, The Trouble with Women with Anne Robinson for BBC Two and (BAFTA nominated, Grierson nominated, RTS winner) Anton Ferdinand: Football Racism & Me for BBC One.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS



Qualitative Research Findings

When conducting the interviews, certain themes emerged. These were based around questions I asked and points that interviewees raised.

Themes are organised below:

Subject Matters

What is their perception of Black representation on UK Public Service Broadcasters and how do they feel about it?

"I find that a lot of it is Black trauma and I'm not happy with that because I want to be able to explore race and Black culture and Black people through a different perspective. To me, it shouldn't always be traumatic, it shouldn't always be police brutality, negativity and drugs. We have a lot more to offer so I turn down a lot of jobs because of that."

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

"Black stories are all horror stories at the moment. There's always something to do with race, it's either to do with poverty or it's to do with crime. It's never to do with things that are uplifting. We are constantly seeing things in the media that shows us how we are either dealing with trauma or how we are coming out of trauma."

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

"It's easy for people to deal with tropes about particular groups of people because that's what the media does. They believe the audience will understand crime and the urban music scene or sport and racism. It's not that you shouldn't cover those subjects but there's nuance and there's subtlety in all of it that is often missed and more than that there are so many untold stories that don't fall into those tropes we should be looking at."

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

“We still have a long way to go. I want it to become normal to see Black people on screen, in the many different spaces we occupy in real life, and for the stories that represent us to be as varied as the diaspora itself. At the moment I still think it is too easy to fall back into lazy storytelling and predictable tropes.”

- Lyttanya Shannon – Producer/Director

“You can put Black people on soap operas or a Black person on the panel of every panel show, the numbers can rise really easily, it’s not hard at all. But whose story are they telling and from what perspective? That hasn’t really changed.”

**- Patrick Younge – Co-Founder and Co-Managing Director,
Cardiff Productions Ltd.**

“When TV talks about a ‘broad audience’ they are really talking about the broad white audience. So that means making sure niche or targeted subjects are done in a way that will appeal to that audience.”

**- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former
BBC Commissioner**

The idea of Black people being placed in limited roles is backed up by research. A study that examined the representation of ethnic minorities on UK TV found that when comparing the contributions of white and non-white people to a range of programme topics, “17% of the White base made contributions to everyday subjects such as gardening, cookery, hobbies and interests, this was true of only 2% of the ethnic minority sample. Apart from the occasional cookery contribution, ethnic minorities were almost invisible in this domain.” (Commission for Racial Equality, 2001).

The perceptions of Black representation closely align with the quantitative research of this report which found that the leading areas for Black representation across PSBs are racism, music and crime.

Black stories being positioned in relation to criminality is in line with existing research. When examining the stories that appear in both print and media news, one study found that “Close to 7 in 10 stories of Black young men and boys related in some form to crime (Cushion, Moore and Jewell, 2011). In addition to criminality, a separate study found that when ethnic minorities feature in the press, they feature in a racialized way (Firmstone et al, n.d.) which continues to position whiteness as the norm and Blackness as other.

It is important to shine a light on injustice and expose often hidden ways the Black community are discriminated against. And, in equal measure, it is important to tell Black stories outside of stereotypical tropes.

When asked how they think audiences are shaped and informed by the representation they consume about Black people, their responses were similar.

“When there are news reports on crime, let’s say knife crime for example, you usually have a white presenter and you have Black criminals. It’s difficult for some people who live outside multicultural communities not to associate Black people with that image.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

“Most people in this country aren’t of colour. There’s a distinct responsibility with the media when it comes to representation, as that’s the source of a lot of people’s information. Representation is key, and every filmmaker should be thinking about that when they attempt to explain or give honest context to the world we live in.”

- Lyttanya Shannon – Producer/Director

“Those tropes can be damaging and that’s the reason why we are stuck in this cycle. People believe something that they’ve read in a book or that they’ve seen. We’re always being pit as this monolithic person. People still can’t view Black people as equal. We’re still viewed in this 3D version of ourselves and Black people play into that stereotype because we’re rewarded for those types of tropes.”

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

An American study found that white audiences are influenced by imagery of racial difference (Entman and Rojecki, 2001). 78% of respondents in a UK survey thought that the media’s portrayal of ethnic minorities promotes racism. This sentiment was true across ethnicities. 76% of White British respondents thought that the media’s representation of minority ethnic groups fuelled racism (Runnymede Trust, 2014). At a time when broadcasters in the UK have pledged to being anti-racist (Channel 4, 2020) and exploring ways that they can help in tackling racism (BBC, 2020), taking a much closer look at their representation of Black people is vital.

While academics of the 1920s and 1930s believed that audiences passively consume the messages that are sent through the media (Nwabueze, Okonkwo, 2018), others theorise that audiences are able to decode messages sent through the media but whether they accept, analyse or reject the messages depends on the social groups they belong to and the worldview they already have (Hall, 1973). Considering that Black audiences should, in theory, be able to discern stereotypes, how are they affected by the current representation of Black people on Public Service Broadcasters?

“Here in the UK, Black people are often only associated with hip hop, hoodies, drugs or knife crime and that’s what people are used to seeing us being a part of. It’s a massive negative stereotype. It’s very hard to see us as a barrister for example. Why aren’t we highlighted in roles like science or as professors? A lot of young people have seen themselves portrayed as violent young Black boys or Black girls with attitude and that’s it. It’s a narrative society puts on you and sometimes it can be difficult to change that narrative.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

“As a Black man, my 3D projection of myself is based on what white people view of me. So when I walk down the street I’m very conscious of how white people view me. White people don’t have the same thing, they don’t care about how people view them because they don’t have that trope.”

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

“I diversified into children’s telly because being a father of two young children for me it’s important to have an impact at that level.”

- Andy Mundy-Castle – Managing Director, Doc Hearts Ltd

“I have a son and nephews. I often wonder about how they see themselves in the way young Black men are often portrayed across the media. It’s refreshing that they are listening to podcasts and can go elsewhere for news and information and don’t have to be bombarded with negative images and stories. I think it bothers us more than a mainstream audience because it impacts us the most.”

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

This notion that the stereotypical representation affects Black audiences is supported by research. An American study found that African Americans who watch more TV are more likely to grow a contempt for their own community (Gillum, 2002).

Broadcasters are not monitoring the prevalence of Black criminal representation in comparison to the portrayals of Black people as professionals (Campion, 2005). This is important in shaping a Black person's sense of self and it is an issue that must be addressed.



RESPONSIBILITY TO THE BLACK COMMUNITY



Responsibility to the Black Community

With this understanding that representation matters, what pressures exist for Black filmmakers when telling stories about Black people?

Whilst some of the interviewees expressed their interest in telling broad ranging stories, they also expressed the value and importance in taking on projects about Black people as there are nuances and sensitivities that a non-Black filmmaker will not bring to the project.

The theme of feeling a responsibility to the Black community as a Black filmmaker was a recurring one. When making programmes about Black people, Black filmmakers not only feel the creative and journalistic pressures that many filmmakers have, there is an added pressure – the pressure and responsibility of representing your community, an often misrepresented community, well.

“I have taken a job specifically because I thought this needs to be told correctly and the only way is if a Black director does it. This is going to be told in a different way if a non-Black filmmaker does it. I think that’s a pressure that people in the industry don’t understand.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

“There are definitely some films which are about Black people but you can tell that they are not by Black people just in the sense that it doesn’t attack some of the issues that Black people feel are important.”

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

“You have experiences where had you not been in the room, the nuance needed when considering representation of black people, would probably have been non-existent. There are obvious blindspots.”

- Lyttanya Shannon – Producer/Director

“Being a filmmaker comes with responsibility, particularly Black filmmakers. I don’t think people realise that we have a responsibility to our own communities in terms of how we represent them. Being selective is important in knowing what you will and won’t do.

- Sian Guerra - Producer

“Are you representing your community, the people who look like you, are you representing them in the best light possible? That’s a massive pressure and something that I think people who are not making things about a race or sexuality in which they are part of will understand at all.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

Because of the responsibility they have to the Black community and to themselves as Black filmmakers, many of the interviewees expressed their need to make sure the production crews have good intentions when dealing with Black subjects.

“I interview them as much as they have a chat with me. Is it the right team and what is your motivation for doing it? I also asked who developed the idea.”

- Sian Guerra – Producer

“Now I’m more so like ‘who’s the exec? Do you have a Black series producer? Who’s the commissioner?’ I need to know these things.”

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

“When I have these meetings with people about projects, they ask you why you want to do something ... I always ask ‘so why do you want to make it?’ It’s very interesting and very funny. I haven’t had one where they haven’t been flustered and have known how to answer it which to me means that it’s not coming out of passion and real interest. It’s indicative of how tokenistic a lot of it is. They’re doing the right thing because it’s the right thing to do but they don’t necessarily have a full deep understanding of why it’s the right thing to do.”

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

Pushing Back

Many of the filmmakers mentioned difficult conversations they have had whilst making projects about the Black community. Especially if they are working with predominantly white production crews.

“I’m confident in what I’m saying and if they can’t understand that, that’s their problem but it shouldn’t affect the programme. The message doesn’t always need to be standardised for what they think is correct.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

“When you’re taking experiences to a predominantly white world you have to fight and hold your own. If you feel like something doesn’t feel right, sometimes it can be done unconsciously someone might say something or do something and that’s when it’s my responsibility to step in and fight and be like ‘no, how about we try it like this because this is why this is problematic’.”

- Sian Guerra - Producer

“The self-censoring is a problem. It’s exhausting in TV sometimes when you have to explain your position. When you have to explain why certain things may be problematic. I call it the “Black-radar”. It’s like I need an invisible pair of glasses on that allows me to see through the fog – but then voicing any concerns about what I can clearly see but others may not, becomes work in itself.”

- Lyttanya Shannon – Producer/Director

“It’s about being able to say these things and not feeling like you will be penalised or laughed at or dismissed. And that fear of being dismissed runs deep because it hurts you. They’re not just talking about contributors, they’re talking about you.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

"It's always very difficult when you're in these spaces to push back. From their point of view it's like 'this is the story, we're editorial, you need to understand that this is how we want to make the film' and you're there just thinking 'but we've seen this before, this isn't what this community represents, we're not monolithic'."

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

"At Sugar Films we had a row with Channel 4. Gary (Younge) did a film called Angry White and American. Now, when it was first pitched there was a working title The Klan is Back. It got their attention and then we did the development and through the development the idea morphed it into a different film about the white anger and fragility that swept Trump to victory. Throughout the process we kept saying to Channel 4 that we need to change the name and they said 'look, let's just use this name so that we can get the contracts done so you can get paid and get going'. As usual we were under real time pressure so we moved forward thinking we'd made our point. When we finished filming we went back to them and said we need to have a discussion about the title. Nothing happened. This continued until we got to the end of the edit.

"We finally got a phone call from a senior figure in commissioning from the previous regime, and they said 'we like the name The Klan is Back' and I said 'well it doesn't reflect the film and we agreed at the beginning that we would change it' and this person said 'you don't understand.. the word Klan is like catnip for Channel 4 viewers, and my job is to get an audience to your film.' It didn't dawn on them that I'd actually run a channel myself, so I explained that I knew you had to bring in an audience and how to do it, but not by misrepresenting the film. Eventually I said 'if you insist on using this name we will take our company credit off of the film and Gary will spend the next two weeks writing about how you guys just don't get it instead of promoting the film.' Their response was to agree the change, but also to move the film from 9pm to 10pm, just because of the title. Now I'm in the position where I can have that argument from a position of strength, but a lot of people can't. Those are the subtle bits of bullshit that derail people or force them to cave, fearing they'd be on some sort of 'too difficult' list."

**- Patrick Younge – Co-Founder and Co-Managing Director,
Cardiff Productions Ltd.**

“If you don’t feel like you have the right to say ‘actually I don’t feel that’s the best representation’ or ‘I think this is a really narrow viewpoint’ and you’re the only Black person in the room, if you don’t feel free to say something then, then when will you? When I’m being asked to make stories about people who look like me then I should be listened to about what is appropriate and what isn’t. I don’t have all the answers because Blackness is not a monolith. But feeling empowered to engage in these conversations without repercussion is imperative.”

- Lyttanya Shannon – Producer/Director

“I’ve had one situation where I had to say ‘I don’t care if you don’t hire me again in this company, you cannot do this. It’s not the right portrayal for Black people.’ I shouldn’t have to make a statement like that, that I’m prepared to not work again because of my opinions or people more junior to me are not being listened to. This is my livelihood and career and I am willing to sacrifice that because I feel that that’s what I have to do for you to listen to me. That’s not okay.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

It is clear from this and existing research that Black stories are more likely to be pigeon-holed into often negative tropes and Black filmmakers often feel the pressure to fight against those tropes but do those tropes affect the opportunities that Black filmmakers are afforded? Are there limitations placed on what projects Black filmmakers are asked to work on?

“Before George Floyd was murdered, I actually wasn’t hardly ever offered jobs in regards to Black people or Black culture. There’s two sides to this coin, it’s fantastic to be offered opportunities, it shows that people are listening but at the same time then you feel like you’re only being offered these jobs because of the colour of your skin and you’re not being offered anything else. If my body of work has not been about race, why am I now only being offered stuff about race? It has been a year where I can say probably 80% of jobs I’m being offered are that when before it was the complete opposite. I’ve found it very hard to deal with, being offered multiple job roles which are about racism. You’re facing a lot of trauma that you’ve suppressed from the industry and from life and then you’re asking me to make a programme about it.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

“After Black Lives Matter I did feel like I got more calls to do with race topics. It’s all so on the nose that we are getting called for race-related subjects. But I also take that to my advantage because who better to tell those stories but us?”

- Sian Guerra - Producer

“A lot of the projects that I’m getting offered at the moment have been... pre-George Floyd it wasn’t as busy and people weren’t calling off the hook. Post-George Floyd, there’s definitely been an increase in work calls but predominantly it’s very rare that I get a call that’s not easy to associate with me. Like doing a Nigerian show or music game show or urban game show.”

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

“There have been times where my Blackness has felt like a prerequisite to be on the job and although this is totally appropriate for certain films I’ve made, it can also be a very negative thing. For example if your blackness is used by someone more senior in order to get access to places a white person would struggle to win trust, in order to facilitate voyeurism. In those situations, you have to first spot what is happening, and then say no.”

- Lyttanya Shannon – Producer/Director

The findings of the quantitative part of this report found that racism is a leading topic for Black stories in UK documentaries on public service broadcasters. While that is limiting and troubling, it is equally as troubling that Black filmmakers are being often racialized in the jobs they are being offered and are not yet treated as filmmakers who can tell any story.

Beyond Blackness

The idea of offering Black filmmakers documentaries about the Black community is nuanced. Many of the Black filmmakers expressed a desire and a responsibility to tell Black stories but, at the same time, they also want the freedom to tell any story and do not solely want to work on Black stories.

"I don't limit myself if a subject interests me whether it is factual entertainment or specialist factual. I do think I am more comfortable and I'm better when it comes to things that are close to my heart, particularly ones that affect our community but I don't want to tell the story in a traumatic way."

- Sian Guerra - Producer

"Although I think we should be leading the conversations in these films, we also aren't monolithic. We shouldn't have a category that everyone gets picked for. As a white filmmaker, they don't have any of the isms that come along with making films. It's just like 'If I'm a white filmmaker and I'm good enough I can get into any situation' whereas if you're a Black filmmaker you have to have some kind of leverage to be in that situation."

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

"I'm a storyteller, and the stories I chose to tell don't necessarily have to be about Blackness or the Black experience, but then because I am Black and I care about Black things obviously that's going to be a natural draw. I feel the responsibility of telling Black stories in a beautiful and creative way, and have questioned myself on a fundamental level when I feel I've failed to do that. However, the choice to tell the stories you feel drawn to should exist outside of your race, because concentrating solely on that can be exhausting and sometimes traumatic."

- Lyttanya Shannon – Producer/Director

"I definitely started making films because I wanted to speak about the Black experience. I want to be making challenging content about Black lives. I could see how you'd be like "I feel like I'm being pigeonholed into only making Black things." I could understand if you were a completely committed TV documentary director why it would annoy you because there's only so many projects that get commissioned about race, politics and music for example and it definitely feels like we're in a moment but if you get pigeon-holed as the person who makes that and then next year all the energy that the activism around George Floyd's death dissipates and commissioners are no longer interested in this kind of thing I can see how because you've been pigeon-holed as that type of director, there's just less energy around you and less interest in what you've got to say."

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

Research into this area is limited and the responses above are important. It is key that the industry creates more opportunities for Black stories to be told with variety and that Black filmmakers are hired based on the merit of their talent and seen as capable of telling stories that are multi-dimensional and that aren't stereotypical but how does this change happen? Many of the interviewees indicated that it starts from the top.



Whose story is it?

When speaking about the process of making films as a Black person, the themes of cultural translation and the need for deep structural change within the industry emerged. Quite often, a Black producer or director is brought on board to tell a Black story but no real structural change happens. The production company is still white-owned and white led, the crew is still predominantly white, the commissioner is white and the story is being shaped and primed to please a white audience.

“You really want people who are not part of your community to understand it, which can be really tricky because it needs to translate but you also want to remain true to yourself and your community.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

“It definitely feels like we are trying to speak a language that they don’t completely understand.”

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

“It’s like a consistent translation thing. First of all, you have to pitch it in a way in which they understand it, which often means compromising your vision. Then, often you’ve got to get your white crew to get it because we’re not blessed with tons of professional Black crew. And then even in the edit you’re often negotiating again. Now this happens with every story but especially with a Black story. And even if you manage to persuade a commissioner of a version of your story that you can live with and that they understand, they then often don’t trust you to make it and they often send you to go and work with a white production company to get it done.”

- Patrick Younge – Co-Founder and Co-Managing Director, Cardiff Productions Ltd.

“As a leader of a creative organisation you are often having to defend your cultural sensitivities in certain nuanced ways. You might take an idea and you’d have to explain to the nth degree just to give someone a basic premise of what you are trying to sell.”

- Andy Mundy-Castle – Managing Director, Doc Hearts Ltd

“How often in TV do execs give up the power to people to tell stories that the execs themselves don’t necessarily fully understand? How often does that happen when you have a Black documentarist making a film and somebody doesn’t understand the nuances around colourism? So we want to cast a dark skinned Black character in favour of somebody else. Even if the two people are saying the same thing, we instinctively know the issues around colourism makes casting the dark skinned person important. It doesn’t necessarily change the story, but we have an awareness that by doing that we are moving things forward. But we only get that power if the execs give up power.”

**- Patrick Younge – Co-Founder and Co-Managing Director,
Cardiff Productions Ltd.**



A Seat at The Table

The most senior people involved in any project have the greatest impact on that project and have the authority to shape narratives. Beyond having Black producers and directors, the interviewees all indicated the need to have Black executives, series producers, commissioners, channel controllers and Black owned and led production companies working on projects.

“When it’s not a Black exec of a Black production company I think it’s very hard to call it a Black film. For me it boils down to who the lead editorial voice is ... the alternative and norm; you’re going to have the white exec, they’re going to have the white commissioners and adhere to the ideals of a white mainstream corporation. So if you’re telling me the last bastion of Blackness is the producer/director, which in most cases is the glass ceiling. Let’s not get it twisted, the Black PD can get overlooked at any moment in the film’s journey, it’s not entirely your story, that will change when the hue at senior level changes.”

- Andy Mundy-Castle – Managing Director, Doc Hearts Ltd

“There’s a lot of white companies making things about Black people and the Black experience but I’m not seeing channels really working with Black or PoC led companies to make things and that would have a massive impact on the kinds of things that are chosen to be made and the kinds of ways projects are shaped and the films end up being. For me, that has a huge impact on the types of representation that gets to the screen. Even if you do have a Black director, if you’re doing it within a mostly white infrastructure that’s also going to have a massive impact on the ways the images are produced and formed.”

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

“It’s weird because they get the commissions for it but they don’t understand what it is that they’re making and they need us to make it but they don’t respect our opinion and we don’t have any final say or serious input about how things turn out but are asked to get all of the contributors on board to make the programme that they want to make.”

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

“The Black members of the team, those getting the access, are often researchers and APs or generally more junior. The most senior members of the team, the people actually making the decisions about what the story is, the focus of the story and where attention should be placed, have in my experience, mostly been white.”

- Lyttanya Shannon – Producer/Director

“We mustn’t miss the irony that it is still mostly white commissioners that are deciding which Black ideas they support and what should and should not be commissioned.”

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

“At the BBC, I used to think that quick wins would be if we could tell our own stories. Films about Black icons or key moments in history. For a long time those stories never seemed to be made by Black companies. I got into a heated discussion with a senior Exec about this some years ago. That person ended up shouting ...”are you trying to say that only Black people should make programmes about Black subjects?” That wasn’t at all what I was saying. It was about giving us the opportunity to tell our own stories.”

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

“The industry is not Black and more importantly they are less educated about things that could be interesting to people outside of their immediate community. That’s really indicative of it and that also has to do with there not being many Black executives or Black people in positions of power.”

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

“A lot of the times there are no Black senior people in the production company or supporting you. If there are white executive and white commissioners, then it is really difficult because you don’t have anyone to back you and I think that in itself is quite stressful.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

“If you had the company behind you, you had the creatives behind you so that you don’t have to fight those battles by yourself. You may not even have to fight them at all.”

**- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former
BBC Commissioner**



Giving Up Power

The importance of having senior Black people in the industry who are able to influence how stories are told is undeniable but where are the senior Black people and what prevents those who want to take senior seats from progressing?

“My projects that I am doing through my company that is all Black focused things, it’s all been a super long slog. I’ve had conversations with one broadcaster in particular just being like ‘you guys are claiming that you’re supporting new talent, Black talent, PoC talent, underrepresented talent, I can’t get these things made with you guys but when I’m working with these white companies and they’ve got these Black projects and I’m just the director for their company it’s green lights everywhere.”

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

“When it comes to the commitment of series offerings of longevous returning quality, channels, broadcasters, commissioners are less open to giving you, a Black organisation, that chance. By and large what tends to happen is you’re constantly having to prove yourself. Trust is the thing. There’s a lack of trust and that stunts the growth both ways, people trying to climb up the ladder and then those trying to win commissions. You know they want the content but do they trust me to deliver it?”

- Andy Mundy-Castle – Managing Director, Doc Hearts Ltd

“If I’m absolutely honest of course it’s a conversation. It’s not just about how brilliant the idea is, it’s about ‘can the company make it?’ or ‘are you confident the company can make it?’ so those conversations do take place.”

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

“Definitely the idea of commissioners and broadcasters wanting to work with people who have delivered things to them before and that they trust is clearly important. In a logical way it makes sense, you’re giving someone £200-300k to make something and you want to know that they’re not going to mess it up. The broadcasters need to have a holistic view of it and I don’t think that that’s necessarily going on at the moment. When we’re talking about historical and structural disadvantages, what we see is that actually at the same period in their lives or their time in the industry, Black doc makers or Black companies will have less things under their belt by virtue of having had less commissions because of structural forms of racism. So if you’re a company that’s been trying to make Black things and Black things aren’t hot until 2020 even though you’ve been going since 2016, obviously you’re going to have less to show.”

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

“Success in this industry is predicated on the profile that you have and it’s harder for us to have that kind of profile. Loads of us have done a huge amount, I don’t think that’s recognised in the same way.”

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

“One thing I’ve noticed with our bigger docs is that they do get placed into slots that are slightly more challenging so post ten o’clock or well after the watershed so they’re not getting the big 9 o’clock billing.”

- Andy Mundy-Castle – Managing Director, Doc Hearts Ltd

The sentiment that broadcasters are in some ways reluctant to commission Black owned companies has been echoed throughout time. A study that collated the interviews of several senior Black television executives and programme makers concluded that there is a “lack of faith amongst many broadcasting executives that Black companies are able to deliver commercially viable programmes to appropriate professional standards.” (Watson, 2001). This issue is echoed in a recent study of the American film industry found that “Black professionals are also severely underrepresented in executive decision-making roles throughout the industry (department heads or top management, for example).” (Dunn, Lyn, Onyeador & Zegeye, 2021).

Is it cos' I'm Black?

Career progression is key for authentic representation. More Black people in senior positions will create the space for more Black people to have influence in shaping Black stories. When asked about the differences in career progression for Black and non-Black filmmakers, the responses were varied.

"Sometimes it boils down to people thinking you're not going to fit in because you don't look like us. So that creates a barrier and I think a lot of the time it's unconscious. I'm pretty sure that a lot of the time that has gotten in the way of career progression for me."

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

"When I was an Assistant Producer looking for my next job, I used to get frustrated because I noticed other APs, some who were my white colleagues, getting the calls for jobs, some would progress up the career ladder, and I struggled to get another job, let alone move up the ladder. It was really upsetting for me, as I felt I did as much work so what else would it be? It does make you wonder whether it's down to the way you look or the way you speak. So, is it because I don't look like you or sound like you - you're not identifying with me, could this be the reason why? I thought it could be down to that."

- Sian Guerra - Producer

"I think people are more willing to give non-Black people and specifically white people more opportunities and more trust. In my experience I have to really prove myself above and beyond where I find even now seeing people who have less experience are given the same opportunities as me considering they have maybe five years less experience. You don't want to think that I'm not getting an opportunity because of the colour of my skin or somebody else is getting it because they are white but sometimes it's just so apparent."

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

The anecdotal stories of being at a disadvantage in their career and believing that race contributes to it is reflected in a study that found only 2.46% of British factual television is made by BAME directors (Directors UK, 2015).

Race and Class

In the conversation of career progression for Black filmmakers, many interviewees spoke to the intersectionality of race and class.

“If you’re in negotiation, you only get strength if you’re always prepared to walk away; as in walk away from a commission, or walk away from a commissioning relationship. It’s easy if you believe in the quality of your ideas and if you believe in your creative approach, but it’s even easier if your mortgage is paid off and you’re not reliant on that commission. This is why rich people can walk away from things. That’s where class comes in. If you’re a working class kid who has only come to London to get work, are you going to die on the hill of whether the person is dark skinned or light skinned or are you going to take the commission and do what’s been asked so you can get paid and get another job?”

- Patrick Younge – Co-Founder and Co-Managing Director, Cardiff Productions Ltd.

“Access to funds is always an issue. Predominantly Black filmmakers are from underprivileged backgrounds and come up against harder obstacles when we’re trying to either start businesses or teach ourselves a trade or get into these higher learning opportunities. The only way you can get in is when people open up a special door for you and then you become the special door person.”

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

“What I’ve come to realise over the years is that a lot of documentary filmmakers and a lot of white documentary filmmakers are coming from backgrounds where you have the financial support to allow you to make documentaries just because it’s not a super lucrative thing and is resource intensive but there aren’t necessarily those resources going into it. I say all of that with a massive caveat that I consider myself to be privileged in that respect. I don’t think that is necessarily the case of the majority of the Black filmmakers that I know. Class is a massive thing in documentary.”

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

Class is a key element in a filmmakers' success. A survey of independent film producers found that 75% of early career filmmakers earn less than £6,000 a year. While 67% of more experienced independent filmmakers, who have made between five to 10 feature films, earn less than £15,000 a year (PACT, 2020).

The picture becomes bleaker when taking into account the pay gaps between non-white and white people working within the television industry. Dissimilar to data around gender pay differences, it is not a legal requirement for companies to disclose the pay differences between ethnic or racial groups. However, pressure has been mounting in recent years for companies to disclose this information and all of the English-speaking public service broadcasters have published the ethnic pay gap in 2020. From the 2020 reports by public service broadcasters, it is clear that non-white people are being paid less than their white counterparts. The mean pay gap between non-white and white employees 3% at the BBC, 15.3% at Channel 4, 1.7% at ITV and Viacom, the owners of Channel 5 reported their mean pay gap at 23.1% in addition, non-white employees are less likely to receive a bonus and when they do it is on average 39.5% lower than their white counterparts.

There is clearly a combination of challenges that face Black filmmakers in sustaining a career in the industry. This has a knock-on effect that prevents Black people from either being offered more senior roles or facing financial set-backs that makes staying in the industry almost impossible.

Things do appear to be changing however, some of the broadcasters most recent pay reports suggested improvements on their mean BAME pay gap. Channel 4 reduced its mean pay gap in 2020 by 3.7% (Channel 4, 2020) and ITV reduced its mean pay gap by 5% when compared to 2019.

In the Wake of George Floyd

When exploring how the landscape has changed for Black filmmakers since the killing of George Floyd, many described feeling more empowered to speak up for themselves and feeling a sense that change is happening.

“There’s a huge responsibility to portray and represent people in a certain type of way. Gone are the days where we just go with the flow. Now, especially with Black Lives Matter movement, I feel like we have more confidence to speak up. Not that it wasn’t there but we felt like we weren’t listened to. Now, we are being listened to. I feel like that is happening more and more so it’s definitely a time to take a seat at the table and challenge the status quo.”

- Sian Guerra – Producer

“I’m loving the fact that I’m seeing so much more young diverse talent than I ever knew was out there. As a commissioner you would often be told that they couldn’t be found. Now, all of sudden, you have brilliant reporters, journalists, presenters, writers, filmmakers all making their mark.”

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

“I do feel that TV is trying to change the perceptions of Black people and crime and Black people and poverty, Black people being ‘urban.’ I think they are trying to look at Black people in different parts of society.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

“In the end, mainstream television is going to serve the broadest audience. You are seeing Producers look at colour blind casting and the range of diverse stories still to be told. I think Broadcasters are all taking notice.”

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

“Since last year I’ve had more conversations and there have been more opportunities and all part of the sweeping environment of the post George Floyd world had an interesting knock-on effect in the UK and all of these institutions being forced to look at themselves. There is a lot of performance and theatre in that. There’s a broader willingness to engage but I think that willingness to engage is completely self interested. There’s this directive of ‘we need to be more diverse’ so instead of production companies being like we genuinely need to be engaging and supporting new talent , I feel like it’s much more like ‘this is where there is going to be profit centres. The BBC has said they are ring fencing £100million, Sky has made some promises and Channel 4 so we identify that there will be money in these places, we need to think about how we get access to that money. How do we get access to that money? If we get a Black director on board. Our core team is the same but if we get a Black director we are ticking the diversity box.”

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

“Post George Floyd the calls are coming in way quicker but I know they are just trying to fill diversity quotas. What has changed for me is the influx of people trying to offer me work but not offering me career progression. I’m still coming up with the same hurdles that I was before. It’s nice to be called more often but I feel like we are still negotiating our power position. If I get the job to shoot, I want the edit. If I can’t get the edit I want some other type of opportunity or I want my rate to be the standardised rate. I don’t see why I should be fighting so hard when my white counterparts who have less experience than me are way further in their career.”

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

“If you look at commissioning now, they’re falling over themselves to find those ideas. All of a sudden they understand them. Before there was not the same economic, cultural or political imperative to understand these ideas so they didn’t need to.”

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

"I'm about to direct my first one-hour and I hand on heart know that this wouldn't have happened if George Floyd wasn't murdered last year. To me, it's complicated and it's difficult to stomach."

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

"This past year I've had a lot more conversations directly with broadcasters and commissioners which I'd say would have been much more of a struggle in 2019 but I think it's also like 'has that resulted in anything super useful?'"

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

"If you're just hiring me by numbers and then everyone else is white but you're like 'oh we have one Black director on the team because we couldn't get anyone else' and all the Black people in the roles aren't senior then we're in the same position."

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

Meaningful Change

Last year, the industry responded to calls for change. Many pledges for change came from the same structures that haven't supported Black talent in the past. Because of that, it is vital that we understand what meaningful change looks like to Black filmmakers and what they hope for in this stage of change.

"They are trying hard but ultimately they have to decide that they do want to give up some power. They have to want people to bring them stories that they may not fully understand and trust the filmmaker to go and do it. Secondly, we need more diversity in decision making roles, that's the biggest single change that we could make. We need more diversity amongst the people who make the decisions. Much more, across the board. And those people who make decisions have to be prepared to give up power."

**- Patrick Younge – Co-Founder and Co-Managing Director,
Cardiff Productions Ltd**

"Loads of Black and brown people are struggling to break the glass ceiling. What needs improving is representation. We need more Black execs. That's what I want to see next."

- Sian Guerra – Producer

"When people are going to make a programme about Black trauma, I think they really need to seriously think about the executive producers who are overseeing that production because there are a lot of experiences where Black directors and producers are not feeling valued or heard. Their excuse is that there aren't many Black execs or none of them are available. Okay, well you can either step someone up or find a way for someone Black to consult on the programme. That shouldn't be compromised at all especially when you're making a programme about police brutality or the whole cast of your programme is Black and you're going to have senior people who are all white and they don't understand the nuances there. That needs a lot of work because I don't think they've thought about series producers and execs."

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

“Black independent production companies have to be supported and strengthened, I mean those that are owned and run by Black creatives. They have to be taken seriously. They have to be built up and treated in the same way that other companies have been in order to thrive and flourish in this sector. Black indies are still way behind and there needs to be a concerted effort to make sure that they get the big opportunities.”

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

“It is changing, I do feel that there would be more of a change if more of the players that are in TV like commissioners and controllers were Black. And I’m not saying completely change the landscape and make everyone Black but I think even if there was one Black controller. How can they understand the perception of Black people if they don’t even have one to speak to? They have no one to go ‘what do you think of this?’.”

- Liana Stewart – Producer/Director

“I would like to see Black production companies being given the opportunity to have a development budget and make programmes completely of their own volition and put it out. I’d love to see somebody say “here’s an imprint, we’re going to give this Black director money to do what they want to do and start their own company. Yes, we’ll give them guidance along the way about how to set up business but we’re not going to get involved in the editorial like we would do normally.”

- Jason Ferguson – Director of Photography

When asked what the next stage of change is for Black filmmakers and the industry as it tries to be more inclusive, the answer for some filmmakers is not to focus on the traditional industry at all.

“There’s a promise of opportunities but are the opportunities going to be there? I don’t want it to feel tokenistic. We’re seeing more people being offered opportunities, there are more Black people on screen. It seems like some people maybe are getting opportunities within the industry, I don’t think it’s happening on a massive scale. I’m more interested in building an infrastructure where you can have power because ultimately there are a few broadcasters in the UK, they hold an inordinate amount of power, they are mostly white infrastructures and institutions and it kind of feels like we are being allowed in.”

- Cassie Quarless – Producer/Director

“We have been so under-served for so long, we deserve better. I think there are so many avenues now. The fact that you can go straight to an audience is going to change the game and broadcasters know this. I think we need to have a different attitude. It’s not about what we are allowed to do or who allows us to do it anymore.”

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

“As much as we want our stories to be told, we’ve got to remember that these are commercial juggernauts and they are not going to feed 5% of the population over the 95% so I’ve personally taken the route that we have to look to non-traditional methods of getting stories out there.”

- Andy Mundy-Castle – Managing Director, Doc Hearts Ltd

“I love that we have a generation that doesn’t apologise, who find a way to create and get their stories to an audience. They don’t have to rely on terrestrial television channels. They can be creative on their own terms. It’s a revolution and it’s brilliant.”

- Maxine Watson – Executive Producer and Former BBC Commissioner

“If you look at the SVODs they are breaking those rules because they play in the global market, Amazon – global platform, Netflix – global platform so they know they are speaking to an audience of 1 billion in Africa. They’re speaking to 600 million African Americans and others so they’re not about colour because subscription is what matters.”

- Andy Mundy-Castle – Managing Director, Doc Hearts Ltd

“For me, can I run a successful business and people be inspired by that rather than the content I put out. That’s almost more important for me looking at the likes of Oprah Winfrey, Jay Z, Lee Daniels, and Tyler Perry. What they did was change the game by being able to give other people the power to create. I want to be in the position where we don’t have to rely on channels to tell our stories or finance them.”

- Andy Mundy-Castle – Managing Director, Doc Hearts Ltd

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Conclusions and Recommendations

The murder of George Floyd set in motion a global call for real, long-lasting and genuine change across industries including the media. In response, many broadcasters pledged to facilitate change and represent underrepresented groups. Since then, there have been more on-screen representation and stories that speak to the Black experience but the hope is that Black experiences are not shaped by white ideas of what Black experiences are but actually shaped by Black people.

1. BROADCASTERS NEED TO MONITOR GENRES AND ISSUES INVOLVING BLACK REPRESENTATION

Speaking about crime and racism is important. However, when crime and racism are content pillars through which the Black experience is shared it can do more harm than good. The overrepresentation of Black people in association with crime reinforces the cloak of suspicion that many Black people have to navigate the world with. Racism being the number one central theme explored when the central contributor is Black reinforces Black people as other, who are only called upon to speak about their experiences in relation to the trauma of being Black.

As well as these subject areas being damaging for how non-Black people perceive the Black community, it is damaging to how Black people view themselves. In this current cycle of the media making amends, a more holistic view must be taken.

2.

While there are more Black people on screen and according to some metrics more Black people directing and producing, we are yet to see structural change that would mean an end to the calls for change that have spanned decades. The next step to ensure that more meaningful change occurs is to genuinely empower Black people to tell their own stories, work with Black owned production companies, have more Black commissioners, executives and channel controllers who are also willing to facilitate authentic storytelling.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF A BLACK BECHDEL-WALLACE TEST

To tackle some of the issues that pertain to authentic representation and leaning on a tradition to tackle misrepresentation, the Bechdel-Wallace test needs to be adapted to test Black representation.

The diversity and representation tests that exist are largely geared towards fictional storytelling and rarely measure subject matters and stereotypes as a key area of representation. However, it is critical that tests are used in the factual space and outline tropes in storytelling, especially with the increased potential for factual programming to inform and shape audience members' perceptions of the world and the people in it.

Building on these tests for diversity and applying them to a British documentary context, I propose that a Black Factual Representation Test be developed as a matter of urgency – something I would be very keen to do.

Based on my research I would argue that any test developed should include and address the following issues:

- Does the central theme of the programme pertain to a crime that has been committed by a Black person?
- Does the central theme of the programme solely pertain to Black people being the victims of racism without highlighting Black people who have empowered themselves and their communities?
- Does this film present Black people in stereotypical roles?

Finally, it is the intention of this report to inform some frameworks around Black representation and encourage programme makers to take a holistic view in responding to the calls for change while finding meaningful metrics to make both quantitative and qualitative progress.

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Appendix

	BBC (BBC iPlayer) (n=127)	Channel 4 (4oD) (n=79)	ITV (ITV Hub) (n=15)	Channel 5 (My5) (n=54)
Race	27% (n=34)	18% (n=14)	20% (n=3)	11% (n=6)
Crime	17% (n=22)	13% (n=10)	0%	22% (n=12)
Music	17% (n=21)	6% (n=5)	0%	6% (n=3)
Sport	4% (n=5)	0%	0%	0%
Health	13% (n=17)	13% (n=10)	0%	13% (n=7)
Religion	2% (n=3)	1% (n=1)	0%	0%
Lifestyle	4% (n=5)	30% (n=24)	27% (n=4)	19% (n=10)
Food	0%	0%	13% (n=2)	2% (n=1)
Arts	5% (n=6)	3% (n=2)	0%	2% (n=1)
History	2% (n=3)	3% (n=2)	7% (n=1)	2% (n=1)
Class	2% (n=3)	1% (n=1)	0%	0%
Environment	2% (n=3)	0%	0%	0%
Natural History	1% (n=1)	1% (n=1)	0%	0%
Feminism	1% (n=1)	0%	0%	0%
Politics	1% (n=1)	1% (n=1)	0%	0%
Science	1% (n=1)	0%	0%	0%
Royals	0%	0%	0%	13% (n=7)
LGBT	1% (n=1)	4% (n=3)	0%	0%
Education	0%	1% (n=1)	0%	2% (n=1)
Drugs	0%	3% (n=2)	0%	0%
Disability	0%	1% (n=1)	0%	0%
Technology	0%	1% (n=1)	0%	0%
Reality TV	0%	0%	20% (n=3)	9% (n=5)
Current Affairs	0%	0%	7% (n=1)	0%
Finance	0%	0%	7% (n=1)	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%