Authentic Portrayal in UK Media: Insights from Expert Panels on Race, Disability, and Class

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This work would not have been possible without the collective contributions of creatives, campaigners, researchers, and community practitioners committed to building a media landscape that reflects the full richness, diversity, and dignity of our society.

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a research project led by the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity (LHC) at Birmingham City University. The project explored the portrayal in UK media of three marginalised groups: racialised communities, disabled people, and working-class communities. Through a series of expert panel discussions, the project gathered insights, critiques, and recommendations from participants with lived experience, creative expertise, and sector knowledge.

Three expert panels were convened, one for each target group. Each panel met twice: the first meeting centred on the analysis of a selected media item, while the second evaluated the relevance and quality of existing guidance on media portrayal. The panels brought together creatives, campaigners, researchers, and policy professionals. Sessions were designed to be inclusive, trauma-informed, and participatory, offering space for collaborative reflection and critique.

Key Findings

Despite increased visibility in some areas, the portrayal of marginalised groups in the media remains limited, stereotypical, and reductive. Across all panels, participants described a media landscape in which their communities are either invisible or only visible in narrowly defined, often negative roles. Structural barriers, such as limited access to editorial decision-making, gatekeeping in commissioning, and extractive consultation practices, continue to shape who is represented, and how.

Race

Discussions highlighted the over-reliance on trauma narratives and the lack of genre diversity for racialised characters and creators. While programmes like Missing You were celebrated for portraying Black characters with nuance and without centring race-based suffering, these were seen as exceptions. Participants called for more content where racialised people can be joyful, complex, and creatively autonomous.

Disability

Disabled people particularly those with learning disabilities, neurodivergence, or non-visible and less visible conditions, remain underrepresented in media. When portrayed in media content, portrayals often rely on "inspiration" or victim tropes. The panel called for depictions that centre joy, humour, activism, and everyday life, and for disabled people to be involved in shaping content at all levels.

Class

Panelists critiqued media portrayals that reinforce "poverty porn" or frame working-class life as solely tragic. There was a strong emphasis on the need for stories that reflect the cultural richness, humour, and dignity of working-class people. Panelists also discussed barriers within funding and commissioning processes that favour those who understand institutional language and norms.

Recommendations

Across all three panels, participants put forward practical and value-driven recommendations for consideration and future action by media industry executives and stakeholders, as well as media and community organisations:

- Commission content that moves beyond deficit-based narratives and reflects genre diversity, cultural nuance, and joy.

- Support long-term pathways for marginalised creatives through mentorship, funding, and leadership roles.

- Centre co-production and community authorship in media development.

- Create and revise guidance that is actionable, context-specific, and developed with lived experience at its core.

- Shift from diversity optics to power-sharing, embedding structural change across commissioning and editorial practice.

Conclusion

This project highlights that authentic representation requires more than visibility; it demands a redistribution of power in media storytelling. The findings call for a fundamental shift in how marginalised communities are engaged: not as audiences, but as creative authorities and co-authors of the stories that shape public imagination.

To realise this, media institutions must invest in community-led change, commit to accountability, and design tools and frameworks that support inclusive and equitable storytelling for the long term.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Media representation holds enormous power in shaping public understanding, cultural norms, and policy discourse (Hoewe & Peacock, 2020). The way communities are portrayed, or omitted, has real consequences for how they are treated in society and how they see themselves. Yet despite increased attention to "diversity" in the UK media landscape, meaningful and authentic portrayals of marginalised communities remain inconsistent, under-resourced, and often superficial (Jamil & Retis, 2023).

In particular, people from racialised communities, disabled people, and those from working-class backgrounds continue to be misrepresented, reduced to tropes, or excluded altogether. While initiatives to increase on-screen visibility have made some progress - for example, the commissioning of Dreaming Whilst Black (BBC), Ralph & Katie (BBC One, led by two actors with Down's syndrome[1]), or the inclusion of working-class characters in shows like Alma's Not Normal (BBC Two) - deeper systemic issues remain: namely, who gets to tell stories, who controls narratives, and which forms of representation are valued.

This project, led by the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity (LHC) at Birmingham City University, was developed to better understand how these communities are portrayed in UK media, and to explore how sector guidelines and practices could be improved to support authentic, inclusive, and equitable storytelling.

1.2 Purpose and Aims

The purpose of this project was two-fold:

1. To capture the insights, critiques, and recommendations of people with lived experience and sector expertise regarding media portrayal of marginalised groups.

2. To inform future development of media portrayal guidelines, commissioning practices, and industry standards that are co-community-informed, and responsive to current structural challenges.

Rather than produce another set of abstract research recommendations, this work aimed to centre the voices of those most knowledgeable of and affected by poor or tokenistic media portrayal. It prioritised collective reflection, dialogue, and critique as a foundation for future, more participatory interventions in the sector.

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[1] Leon Harrop as Ralph Wilson and Sarah Gordy as Katie Wilson.

1.3 Project Structure and Timeline

The project was delivered in early 2025 and structured around three expert panels, each focusing on one of the target communities:

💡 Panel 1: **Race and Media Portrayals**

💡 Panel 2: **Disability and Media Portrayals**

💡 Panel 3: **(Working)Class and Media Portrayals**

Each panel met twice, participating in 90-minute online discussions facilitated by the LHC team. The meetings were designed to build progressively, beginning with the review of selected media content (Panel Meeting 1), followed by critical engagement with existing sector guidelines or reports (Panel Meeting 2). Between meetings, panelists were invited to complete short pre-meeting tasks, such as viewing a media programme or reading a relevant policy or guidelines document, to ground the discussions in real-world examples.

1.4 Recruitment and Panel Composition

Panel members were recruited through a targeted outreach process that aimed to ensure a diverse mix of lived experience, sector expertise, and creative practice across the three panels: race, disability, and working-class representation. Recruitment focused on individual experts and organisations working across media, arts and culture, grassroots activism, community development, and academia, and across the UK nations. Panel members included[2]:

💡 Creatives with direct experience of working in or with the media industry.

💡 Individuals with lived experience of structural marginalisation.

💡 Representatives from community-based and advocacy organisations.

💡 Researchers, policy professionals, and educators focused on equity, inclusion, and cultural production.[3]

Each panel consisted of about 10 members and was designed to represent a broad spectrum of perspectives and positionalities within the relevant community. Where possible, recruitment prioritised those whose work spanned more than one identity or discipline, such as disabled creatives of colour, or working-class media producers, in recognition of the importance of intersectional analysis. Participation was voluntary and panelists were recruited via targeted outreach to ensure diversity of experience, sectoral perspective, and intersectional insight. All in all, as hinted above, representation included media professionals, grassroots activists, creatives, researchers, and those with lived experience of marginalisation.

[2] See the Appendix for the full list of panel members.

[3] While industry and community experts with lived experience have the relevant expertise, we considered it essential to also include members with research and policy expertise and, thus, with up-to-date knowledge on existing evidence on authentic portrayals and related policy initiatives.

1.5 Session Design and Facilitation Tools

To support focused, equitable, and engaging conversations, bespoke discussion guides were created for each panel. These were designed to scaffold dialogue across two 90-minute sessions per panel and tailored to the lived experience, media context, and creative practices of each group (race, disability, and working-class representation).

Each guide[4] included:

- A thematic focus for the session (e.g. analysis of a media item, or review of portrayal guidelines).
- Discussion prompts to encourage reflection, critique, and recommendation development.
- Facilitator tips to support inclusive participation and responsiveness to access needs.
- Time cues and structure to maintain flow while allowing flexibility.
- The guides were revised iteratively based on client and participant feedback, ensuring relevance and clarity.

1.6 Inclusive Practice and Accessibility

The design and delivery of the meetings aimed to reflect inclusive and accessible practice throughout. This included:

- Clear, jargon-free communication about the purpose and format of the meetings.
- The option for panelists to disclose access requirements in advance (e.g., live captioning, screen-reader-compatible materials, camera-off participation, frequent breaks).
- Sharing pre-meeting materials well in advance, including task material and information on meeting focus and purpose.
- Ensuring facilitation was open, flexible and trauma-informed, creating space for panelists to contribute in a range of ways (verbally, in the chat, via follow-up).
- Sharing meeting notes after each meeting, inviting panelists to approve or edit and complement.

Pre-meeting tasks, such as watching a short film or reviewing a guideline, were used to provide shared reference points for discussion, allowing panelists to engage at their own pace and come prepared with reflections.

All meetings were held online via Microsoft Teams to enable UK-wide participation and reduce logistical barriers such as travel or venue accessibility. Panelists were encouraged to keep cameras off if preferred and to contribute in ways that felt comfortable to them.

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[4] The full discussion guides are available on request for those interested in using or adapting them in similar participatory projects.

2. Findings From Panel Meetings

2.1 Disability Panel Meetings

2.1.1 First meeting

The first meeting of the Disability Panel focused on reviewing and responding to the documentary film *Crip Camp* (2020) as a starting point for discussing the authentic portrayal of disabled people in media. The meeting generated rich insights into how disability is commonly represented, what is often missing from mainstream narratives, and what alternative models could look like.

Table 1. Key themes and arguments of meeting one

Theme	Key Arguments
Authenticity and agency in media	*Crip Camp* was praised for its co-produced format and refusal to fall into "inspiration porn" tropes. Its political framing offered a rare example of media centering disabled people as agents of change, rather than passive recipients of care or exceptional figures who "overcome" disability. Panelists contrasted this with mainstream UK media, where disabled people are rarely shown as having full agency, or as part of broader social movements.
Narratives of individual struggle vs systemic injustice	Participants noted that UK media tends to focus on disabled individuals as isolated, tragic, or dependent. *Crip Camp* offered a systemic lens, which felt both refreshing and necessary. There was discussion of how the medical model still dominates representations, subtly reinforcing the idea that the "problem" lies within the disabled person, not society.
Limited visibility of authentic portrayals	Even when good content is produced, it often fails to reach wider audiences. *Crip Camp* was viewed as an "insider" film, circulated within activist and disability-led spaces, but not visible in mainstream channels. Panelists highlighted the importance of platforming this kind of work in high-traffic, popular outlets, not just in festivals or specialist screenings[5].

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[5] This was a more general remark made by the panel and not referring strictly to *Crip Camp*, whch was released on 25 March 2020 by Netflix.

Under-representation of invisible and neurodivergent disabilities	Physical disabilities are most often represented, often through mobility aids or visual cues. Other forms of disability, such as chronic illness, neurodivergence, or learning disabilities, are either absent or shown through over-simplified or inaccurate lenses. This lack of diversity in portrayal contributes to a limited and skewed public understanding of what disability looks like.
Lack of genre diversity in representation	Disability is typically portrayed through social realism or documentary. There was a strong desire to see disabled people in other genres, particularly comedy, family drama, period drama, and reality TV. Participants discussed how genre expansion would normalise disability and open up more creative opportunities.

Recommendations

In assessing existing guidelines on portrayal of disability, the panelists made the following recommendations:

- Commission and platform more work by and about disabled people that moves beyond "inspirational" tropes and centres joy, humour, everyday life, and systemic injustice.

- Invest in intersectional portrayals, particularly the experiences of disabled people of colour, queer disabled people, and others that are marginalised within mainstream narratives.

- Expand the portrayal of disability in genre formats, including reality TV, period drama, and scripted entertainment, where representation is especially thin.

- Shift commissioning models to value co-production and collaboration with disabled creators as essential, not optional.

2.1.2 Second meeting

The second meeting focused on the review of two sets of media portrayal guidelines: Channel 4's in-house guidance (2023) and a more generic set of guidelines from GOV.UK (2021). This conversation raised vital questions about what makes guidance effective, and whether such documents have meaningful influence on production practice, culture, or outcomes.

Table 2. Key themes and arguments of meeting two

Theme	Key Arguments
Effectiveness and tone of guidance documents	The Channel 4 guidance was generally received as a well-intentioned and thoughtful starting point, referencing the social model of disability and including prompts on inclusive production. However, the government guidelines were seen as overly generic, compliance-driven, and culturally disengaged. There was frustration that both lacked depth in terms of editorial nuance, creativity, and disabled leadership in authorship.
Language and framing	Particular attention was paid to the tone and terminology used in both documents. Phrases such as "empowerment" and "empathy" were challenged for reinforcing passive or paternalistic dynamics. Several participants preferred a shift towards terms like "acceptance" and "normalisation," which centre disabled people as part of everyday life rather than as problems to be solved or stories to be 'uplifted'. Regional preferences (e.g. in Northern Ireland and Scotland) were also noted, emphasising that inclusive language is not universal and must be locally informed.
Performative consultation and exclusion from authorship	Although Channel 4 guidelines were written by a disabled expert in the sector, panelists raised broader concerns about being invited into conversations only once decisions have been made or drafts written. To them, this reflects a wider pattern in media of consulting disabled people for sign-off or "lived experience" quotes, rather than as co-authors. Contributors stressed that genuine inclusion must start from the beginning and be embedded structurally, including in guideline development.

Genre-specific needs and editorial flexibility	Participants found the reviewed guidance lacking in genre sensitivity. News, comedy, reality TV, drama and advertising all carry different representational risks, yet the reviewed guidance offered blanket statements that couldn't address these distinctions. Several panelists called for future guidelines to allow for greater editorial flexibility and sector specificity while still upholding consistent values[6].
Risk of surface-level change and institutional inertia	A key tension was the role of guidelines in supporting actual change. Panelists questioned how guidance is implemented, by whom, and what mechanisms are in place to hold organisations accountable. Without meaningful structural commitments, including funding, commissioning power, and leadership representation, guidance risks becoming a form of symbolic performance that ultimately protects institutions from scrutiny rather than driving transformation.

Recommendations

In assessing existing guidelines on portrayal of disability, the panelists made the following recommendations:

- Develop media portrayal guidelines that is *flexible, context-responsive, and co-designed with disabled people and DPOs* (Disabled People's Organisations).

- Use guidelines as a tool for editorial thinking, not just compliance, encouraging meaningful conversations in production teams.

- Avoid language that reinforces binaries of empowerment/victimhood and instead promote terms shaped by disabled communities themselves.

  Make guidelines accessible, concise, and accompanied by *practical tools* (e.g. casting templates, consultation checklists, inclusive commissioning tips).

- Recognise disabled people as a cultural community, not just a category of access needs or legal risk.

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[6] While fundamental principles need to apply across the board, different genres and the distinction between factual and fictional context do invite future guidelines to contain nuances that highlight increased risks or enhanced opportunities for authentic portrayals of disability.

2.1.3 Reflections: what worked well, what didn't and panel feedback

The Disability Panel demonstrated a high level of engagement and criticality across both meetings. The balance of panelists, including those with lived experience, policy knowledge, media expertise, and advocacy backgrounds, was widely praised. Panelists appreciated that the panel space was inclusive and intentional, and several remarked that it was rare to be in a discussion that took disability as a cultural, political and creative issue rather than only a matter of access or compliance.

The pre-meeting content (*Crip Camp*) was a strength. Panelists said it offered a shared starting point for discussion and modelled the kind of storytelling that is currently missing from British screens. However, the second meeting's focus on guidelines was more divisive. While most agreed it was necessary, some felt it was hard to engage deeply with documents that felt abstract or disconnected from production realities. A few also noted that the documents reviewed were not well-matched in scope or quality, making comparative discussion difficult.

Language was another site of tension. While all panelists acknowledged the necessity for an overarching terminology as a baseline and agreed on the importance of respectful and community-defined terms, there were differing views on specific terms and tone. This highlighted a need for media guidance that doesn't enforce uniform language, but instead encourages dialogue and adaptability, while recognising regional, community, cultural and personal preferences.

There was a strong appetite for the panel discussions to continue beyond these two meetings. Panelists expressed interest in co-developing resources, offering deeper input into future iterations of guidelines, and supporting training and outreach work.

2.2 Race Panel Meetings

2.2.1 First meeting

The first meeting of the Race Panel focused on reviewing and responding to the film *Missing You* (2025), a TV mini-series made for the streaming service Netflix, as a starting point for discussing the authentic portrayal of race in the media. The meeting generated rich insights into how race is commonly represented, what is often missing from mainstream narratives, and what alternative models could look like.

Table 3. Key themes and arguments of meeting one

Theme	Key Arguments
Incidental and integrated representation	*Missing You* was widely praised for its understated approach to race. Black characters were presented as fully realised individuals, with race woven into their characterisation without being the plot's focus. This was seen as an example of incidental representation, where racialised characters are central without being defined solely by identity-based struggle. Panelists described this as rare and valuable in UK media.
Dominance of whiteness in UK media narratives	While *Missing You* was welcomed, participants were quick to note it is an exception. They described how UK media continues to centre whiteness, with racialised people either entirely absent or added on as markers of "diversity." Even when present, racialised characters are often marginalised in storylines or serve narrative functions that reinforce dominant perspectives. The underlying critique was that representation without narrative power is not meaningful.
Stereotyping and limited roles for racialised characters	A recurring concern was the narrow range of roles available to racialised characters. Participants noted the persistent association with trauma, criminality, or conflict, particularly for Black and Muslim men. Positive stories are rare, and when they do exist, are often framed as exceptional or tokenistic rather than part of a broader shift. The emotional and professional toll this takes on racialised creatives, who are expected to "bring the pain", was also noted.

Barriers to authorship and creative control	The panel emphasised that representation on screen is insufficient without representation behind the scenes. Black and South Asian writers, producers, and directors often struggle to access opportunities to shape narratives authentically. When involved, their contributions are frequently filtered through white-led editorial structures that limit creative freedom or reframe stories to meet expectations of "relevance" or marketability.
Need for genre expansion and narrative joy	Several panelists challenged the assumption that stories featuring racialised communities must be issue-based. There was a strong call to invest in content where racialised people exist joyfully, creatively, or ordinarily, including in comedy, family drama, period pieces, and fantasy. The group urged commissioners to support more genre-diverse storytelling, allowing racialised creatives to explore the full artistic range rather than be confined to autobiographical or trauma-centred work.

Recommendations

In assessing the above example of portrayal and within a broader context of trends and issues in existing portrayals of race, the panelists made the following recommendations:

- Normalise *incidental and complex representation* across genres, moving beyond stories of trauma or identity struggle.

- Invest in long-term development for racialised creatives, including writing labs, mentorships and co-production models that centre creative autonomy.

- Prioritise *representation behind the scenes*, not just in casting, but also in writing rooms, commissioning teams, and decision-making roles.

- Shift commissioning values to embrace cultural nuance and specificity, rather than relying on tokenism or box-ticking.

2.2.2 Second meeting

The second meeting focused on two existing sets of media portrayal guidelines, one from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the USA and the other from the UK's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP), to explore how guidance is currently used and what is missing.

Table 4. Key themes and arguments of meeting two

Theme	Key Arguments
Limitations of existing guidance documents	The NAACP guidelines were recognised for their strong values and moral clarity but were critiqued for being US-centric and lacking direct applicability to the UK context. They offered inspiration but not practical tools for navigating the complexities of UK media production. The ASA & CAP guidelines, while UK-specific, were seen as vague and regulatory in tone, offering minimal engagement with the lived realities of representation or the nuances of media production. Both were described as offering limited value without mechanisms for implementation or accountability.
Superficial inclusion and unchecked editorial control	Panelists expressed frustration that many organisations rely on surface-level diversity indicators, such as headcounts or visual representation, to demonstrate inclusion, while continuing to centralise editorial decision-making in white-majority leadership. Representation without power was described as a persistent barrier, with racialised creatives often brought in after key decisions have been made or expected to "bring diversity" without shaping the creative process.
Failure to reflect intersectional experiences	Existing portrayal guidance was criticised for its lack of intersectional attention. Certain racialised groups, notably East and Southeast Asian, Muslim, and mixed-heritage communities, were described as largely absent from casting, storylines, and diversity efforts. Participants highlighted how "diverse" strategies often limit themselves to only some important types of representation (e.g. Black British, Caribbean heritage), ignoring others and disregarding the complexity and plurality of UK racialised experiences.

Narrative marginalisation and framing of race as 'niche'	The group reflected on how stories about racialised communities are often positioned as niche, high-risk, or only viable when framed around trauma or social commentary. This reinforces the idea that mainstream storytelling belongs to whiteness, while everything else is "special interest." Panelists challenged commissioners to invest in racialised stories not only as acts of equity, but as sources of broader creative richness, innovation, and audience engagement.
Power, risk and responsibility in the industry	A key area of concern was how responsibility for inclusive representation is distributed. Guidelines tend to emphasise individual awareness or behaviour, rather than holding organisations accountable for systemic exclusion. The group argued that guidance must address structural power, including who controls budgets, editorial sign-off, casting decisions, and commissioning.

Recommendations

In assessing these two sets of guidelines on portrayal of race, the panelists made the following recommendations:

- Ensure media guidelines are co-designed with racialised creatives, grounded in lived experience, and tailored to UK contexts.
- Include clear accountability structures: how progress is measured, who enforces change, and how communities can challenge misrepresentation.
- Develop *genre-specific and format-sensitive guidance*, recognising that the pressures in advertising differ from those in longform drama, for example.
- Avoid checklist approaches, guidelines should be designed to spark dialogue, not compliance.

2.2.3 Reflections: what worked well, what didn't and panel feedback

Across both meetings, panelists spoke highly of the space created to share insights, challenge norms, and connect across sectors and lived experiences. The setting prior to first meeting of the task of looking into the media portrayal example of *Missing You* was appreciated as a route to ground the conversation in practical examples, rather than developing a purely generic or theoretical discussion.

The balance of experience in the panel, spanning grassroots activism, creative production, policy, and academia, was cited as a strength. Panelists felt that the discussion managed to hold complexity and challenge constructively, particularly around the differences between visible vs behind-the-scenes representation, and between inclusion and true power-sharing.

However, some limitations were noted. Several panelists expressed a desire for more time to engage critically with the media guidelines, noting that the chosen examples were too disparate (one regulatory and one cultural) to allow for a coherent comparison. A few also highlighted the difficulty of discussing race and representation without reference to intersectional dynamics, including class, gender, religion and immigration status, all of which profoundly shape how racialised people are represented.

There was a strong appetite for continued collaboration. Many panelists called for working groups, pilot schemes, and collaborative authorship of UK-specific guidance, co-created by media professionals and racialised communities.

2.3 Class Panel Meetings

2.3.1 First meeting

The initial class panel meeting focused on the pre-meeting task of watching *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), a drama film selected to prompt reflect on the common themes, styles, and narratives used when portraying working-class lives in UK media.[7]

Table 5. Key themes and arguments of meeting one

Theme	Key Arguments
Recognition of Loach's contribution and limitations	The group acknowledged Ken Loach's longstanding role in drawing attention to working-class injustice through social realism. *Sorry We Missed You* was valued for its portrayal of economic precarity, family strain and the consequences of zero-hour work. However, there was also a critical view that while it captured structural oppression, it did so in a way that lacked emotional nuance and reinforced a vision of working-class life as uniformly bleak. The absence of agency or joy left some panelists questioning whether such portrayals contribute to public empathy or simply entrench voyeuristic narratives.
Narrative framing and the problem of 'poverty porn'	Several contributors expressed concern about portrayals that rely on relentless suffering, describing *Sorry We Missed You* as evoking a "poverty-porn" aesthetic. The film's characters were described as passive and voiceless, trapped in cycles of harm with little scope for resistance or resilience. This led to wider critique of how working-class life is often framed in UK media, where complexity and diversity of experience are flattened into hardship or failure.

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[7] The panel acknowledged the existence of challenges in defining working-class people and whether people are to be labelled as working-class on the basis of their family and parents' socio-economic background or their social mobility and whether they stay working-class or become middle- or higher-class during adulthood.

Barriers to authorship and creative control	The panel emphasised that representation on screen is insufficient without representation behind the scenes. Black and South Asian writers, producers, and directors often struggle to access opportunities to shape narratives authentically. When involved, their contributions are frequently filtered through white-led editorial structures that limit creative freedom or reframe stories to meet expectations of "relevance" or marketability.
Need for genre expansion and narrative joy	Several panelists challenged the assumption that stories featuring racialised communities must be issue-based. There was a strong call to invest in content where racialised people exist joyfully, creatively, or ordinarily, including in comedy, family drama, period pieces, and fantasy. The group urged commissioners to support more genre-diverse storytelling, allowing racialised creatives to explore the full artistic range rather than be confined to autobiographical or trauma-centred work.

Recommendations

In assessing the above example of portrayal and within a broader context of trends and issues in existing portrayals of class, particularly working class, the panelists made the following recommendations:

- Commission more joyful, genre-diverse stories about working-class lives, including comedy, family drama, and fantasy, to reflect the full scope of experience.

- Challenge the dominance of trauma-focused narratives, particularly those written or directed by people outside of the community.

- Fund and platform working-class-led production companies, collectives, and creative networks to increase autonomy and reduce reliance on elite gatekeepers.

- Avoid character arcs that demand escape as a success metric, recognising that staying, surviving, and thriving within working-class communities are also meaningful outcomes.

2.3.2 Second meeting

The second meeting focused on media portrayal guidelines and reports, including the BAFTA (2023) guidance to support individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds to sustain a career and a Social Mobility Commission report (2021) on class in the creative industries. These texts were used to prompt reflection on how working-class people are constructed, categorised, and included (or excluded) through media policy, language, and practice..

Table 6. Key themes and arguments of meeting two

Theme	Key Arguments
Fatigue with repetitive reporting and lack of structural action	Panelists expressed deep frustration with the volume of reports on class inequality in the creative industries that offer little in the way of implementation or long-term change. Reports were often seen as circular, reinforcing what is already known without confronting structural power imbalances. There was particular concern around the way class is defined and measured, with panelists noting that institutional understandings of class often fail to capture lived experience or reflect cultural identity.
Funding systems and exclusion through language	Access to funding was described as one of the most significant barriers to working-class inclusion in media and creative work. Participants highlighted how funding applications require people to adopt institutional language, exaggerate hardship, or conform to deficit-based narratives in order to be taken seriously. Bid writing was described as a cultural barrier in itself, favouring those who know how to perform legitimacy. Several panelists reflected on how this process forces working-class applicants to distance themselves from their own voice and values in order to be funded.

Theme	Key Arguments
Harmful labelling and institutional language	The panel critiqued recent efforts to target working-class audiences or applicants through terms like "benefit class", "underclass", or "WBCU"[8]. While often introduced with the intention of being inclusive, such labels were experienced as stigmatising, flattening and offensive. Panelists noted that these terms tend to reflect the discomfort or anxieties of institutions more than the language or identity of working-class people themselves. The group called for institutions to avoid imposing terminology and instead centre self-definition, cultural pride, and the diversity within working-class communities.

Recommendations

In assessing existing reporting and guidance on portrayal of race, the panelists made the following recommendations:

- Reject deficit-based frameworks that define working-class people only by deprivation or hardship, instead centre community knowledge, strength and creativity.

- Avoid contested and stigmatising terminology such as "underclass"; instead, use self-identified terms and ensure working-class voices lead on language.

- Create alternative models for funding and commissioning that don't rely on bid writing or networks of privilege, including supported applications, direct outreach, and ring-fenced funding for working-class creatives.

- Encourage structural reform in hiring and decision-making by publishing class pay gap data, ending unpaid internships, and building routes to leadership roles.

8   WBCU: working class, benefit class, criminal class and underclass.

2.3.3 Reflections: what worked well, what didn't and panel feedback

The Class Panel brought together a range of panelists across sectors, including artists, academics, campaigners and those with community and lived experience backgrounds. The meetings were described by panelists as candid, generous and energising, with strong agreement that the space allowed for truth-telling and critical reflection without judgement.

As for what worked well, the panel suggested that the balance of panelists created a mutually respectful and non-performative space, with room to challenge ideas constructively, while the tone of the panel discussion was praised for avoiding extractiveness, with the panelists noting that they felt consulted as experts, not tokens. Also, the panel suggested that the inclusion of specific material and examples, such as the *Sorry We Missed You* and the guideline documents, provided useful stimulus for discussion, especially when paired with personal reflection.

On the other hand, some panelists felt that the reports discussed in the second meeting were too repetitive and reflective of previous failures, there was a desire for more forward-thinking, radical alternatives. Also, in its feedback, the panelists suggested that the discussion about language, while important, took up significant time, and they were of the view that future meetings may benefit from clearer framing around contested terms and more space to build consensus. Finally, a few panelists suggested that intersectionality was under-explored in the meetings, particularly around how race, disability and migration intersect with class identity and portrayal.

3. Conclusion

These series of expert panel discussions offered a rare opportunity to examine how media portrays marginalised communities in the UK, specifically racialised groups, disabled people, and those from lower-income and/or working-class backgrounds. Across six meetings and three panels, panelists with lived experience, sector knowledge, and creative expertise came together to interrogate dominant portrayals, critique current industry practices, and begin envisioning meaningful alternatives.

What emerged was a complex but consistent picture:

While diversity is increasingly visible on screen, authentic, equitable, and meaningful representation remains the exception, not the rule.

In all three panels, panelists described a media landscape in which their communities are either hyper-visible in negative or stereotypical roles or rendered invisible entirely. While the forms and histories of exclusion differed across panels, common themes cut across the discussions.

3.1 Shared themes and structural barriers

Panelists across all three panels identified deep-rooted structural issues in the UK media sector that restrict both who gets represented and who gets to be in charge of representations. These included:

- Gatekeeping and lack of access to decision-making roles for marginalised creatives.
- Over-reliance on deficit narratives of racialised characters as traumatised, disabled people as inspirational, and working-class people as victims.
- A lack of co-produced content, with many stories shaped by people outside the communities depicted.
- Generic and ineffectual media guidelines, which lack enforceability and fail to reflect the complexity of lived experience or the diversity of media formats.

Panelists also challenged the prevailing assumption that inclusion is primarily a matter of on-screen visibility, arguing instead for a shift in power, authorship, and editorial control. According to this, without structural change, representation risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

3.2 Intersectionality and context

Although each panel focused on a specific marginalised group, there was regular reflection on how identities intersect, and how media often fails to acknowledge or represent this complexity. Many panelists felt that intersectionality is routinely flattened in media outputs, resulting in erasure of people who sit at multiple margins (e.g., disabled people of colour, working-class migrants, queer Muslim women).

This was especially evident in the discussion around who is allowed to be visible, what kinds of stories are considered "universal", and how "diversity" continues to be narrowly defined. Future work in this space must ensure that guidance and creative output is inclusive not only across but also within marginalised groups, making space for nuance, contradiction and specificity.

3.3 Final reflections and future work

What was striking across the panels was not simply the critique of media portrayals, but, equally significantly, the clear appetite for building alternatives. Panelists did not simply claim the need for better representation, as they expressed the need for transformation of: who holds power, how stories are made, and what values drive creative industries.

In this direction, and if meaningful transformation is to take root, several areas offer a particular promise. These are not only opportunities for change but also preconditions for more authentic and equitable representation across the media landscape. They include:

💡 Developing community-authored guidelines that reflect lived experience and cultural specificity.

💡 Supporting grassroots-led content creation and production through sustained investment and access to platforms.

💡 Creating mechanisms and platforms for ongoing dialogue between media organisations, regulators, and communities, ensuring accountability, shared learning, and co-creation.

However, achieving authentic and equitable media portrayal cannot rely on symbolic gestures or one-off initiatives. What this project has shown, across race, disability and class, is that meaningful change requires the media industry to shift power, not just representation. It means investing in the creative authority of those historically excluded, embedding community leadership in editorial and commissioning processes, and building long-term infrastructure for accountability and co-creation. Anything less risks repeating cycles of superficial inclusion while leaving the structures of exclusion intact.

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Appendix: Panel Membership

Panel on Media Portrayals of Disability

Organisation OR Individual expert	Name of organisation	Name of panelist and email address
Organisation	Creative Access (UK)	Mel Rodrigues mel@creativeaccess.org.uk
Organisation	TAP (TV Access Project, UK)	Heloise Beaton tvaccessproject@gmail.com
Organisation	Autistic Rights Group Highlands (ARGH, Scotland)	Kabie Brook kb@arghighland.co.uk
Organisation	Ideally Consulting Ltd	Ally Castle, Director ally@ideallyconsulting.com
Organisation	Disability Resource Centre (Birmingham)	Louise Mckiernan lmckiernan@disability.co.uk
Organisation	TripleC (UK)	Melissa Johns melissa.triplec@gmail.com
Individual expert	ToyBox Diversity Lab, Queen Margaret University (Edinburgh)	Clare Uytman CUytman@qmu.ac.uk
Organisation	Disability Action Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland)	Nuala Toman NualaToman@Disabilityaction.org First meeting was deputised by Greta Gurklyte GretaGurklyte@Disabilityaction.org
Organisation	Disability Rights UK (UK)	Kamran Mallick Kamran.Mallick@disabilityrightsuk.org

Panel on Media Portrayals of Race

Organisation OR Individual expert	Name of organisation	Name of panelist and email address
Organisation	British Arab Writers Group (BAWG) (UK)	Tamer Akeil info@bawg.org
Organisation	Black Equity Organisation (UK)	Timi Okuwa Timi.Okuwa@blackequityorg.com
Individual expert	N/A	Daniel York Loh billyaustin55@hotmail.com
Organisation	Aberdeen Ethnic Minority Women's Group (Scotland)	Elizabeth Spencer info@abdn-emwomen.org.uk
Organisation	ROTA (UK)	Matthew Johnson matthew@rota.org.uk
Organisation	Runnymede Trust (UK)	Carol Sidney carol@runnymedetrust.org
Organisation	Smartlyte - Get Families Talking (Birmingham)	Hafsha Dadabhai Shaikh Hafsha@smartlyte.co.uk
Organisation	Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (Scotland)	Kimberley Wong kimberley@crer.org.uk
Organisation	Race Council Cymru (Wales)	Uzo Iwobi uzo@racecouncilcymru.org.uk
Organisation	Diverse Cymru (Wales)	Michael Flynn michael.flynn@diverse.cymru
Organisation	Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team Wales (EYST Wales)	Selima Bahadur selima@eyst.org.uk 2nd meeting was attended by Hajer Newman, Policy Officer hajer@eyst.org.uk

Panel on Media Portrayals of Class

Organisation OR Individual expert	Name of organisation	Name of panelist and email address
Individual expert	N/A	Alicia Vernalls alicatz@outlook.com
Organisation	Northfield Community Partnership (Birmingham)	Pauline Roche Pauline@northfieldcommunity.org
Individual expert	Consultant for RECLAIM	April Preston April.preston@icloud.com
Organisation	Working Class Collective (UK)	Lisa Mckenzie contact@workingclasscollective.co.uk First meeting was deputised by Amber Hall amber_m_hall@outlook.com
Individual expert	Edinburgh Napier University	Dr Stevie Marsden S.Marsden@napier.ac.uk
Organisation	Equity's Class Network (UK)	Stephanie Greer, Chair classnetwork@equity.org.uk
Individual expert	N/A	Prof Beth Johnson B.L.Johnson@leeds.ac.uk
Organisation	Social Mobility Foundation (UK)	Rosalind Goates rosalind.goates@socialmobility.org.uk First meeting to be attended by Sophie Gregory sophie.gregory@socialmobility.org.uk

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