

Brittin's Broadcasting Corporation: Lenny Henry meets the Beeb's new Director General | Black TV Before the Algorithm & Future Newsrooms for Journalists of Colour | The Split Up & Normalising the 'Other' | The Digital Divide Across Generations | The Far Right, DEI & Limits to Meritocracy | Westminster's 'Class Unit' | From the Caribbean to Butetown | Stuart Hall's Music Collection | Remembering Cable Street | Equator's first year | and Megan Nolan's cultural highlights

RE PRESENT OLOGY

The Journal of Media and Diversity

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REPRESENTOLOGY

The Journal of Media and Diversity

Editorial Mission Statement

Welcome to Representology, a journal dedicated to research and best-practice perspectives on how to make the media more representative of all sections of society.

A starting point for effective representation are the "protected characteristics" defined by the Equality Act 2010 including, but not limited to, race, gender, sexuality, and disability, as well as their intersections. We recognise that definitions of diversity and representation are dynamic and constantly evolving and our content will aim to reflect this.

Representology is a forum where academic researchers and media industry professionals can come together to pool expertise and experience. We seek to create a better understanding of the current barriers to media participation as well as examine and promote the most effective ways to overcome such barriers. We hope the journal will influence policy and practice in the media industry through a rigorous, evidence-based approach.

Our belief is that a more representative media workforce will enrich and improve media output, enabling media organisations to better serve their audiences, and encourage a more pluralistic and inclusive public discourse. This is vital for a healthy society and well-functioning democracy. We look forward to working with everyone who shares this vision.

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Representology is a collaboration between Birmingham City University and Cardiff University

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to Issue Ten of Representology: The Journal of Media and Diversity.

In August, I went to Trafalgar Square to attend a public vigil for Jason Arday, the Cambridge professor who died following weeks of media attention. I did not know Professor Arday but, like thousands of others, I felt sadness over his tragic death, moved to stand in solidarity alongside those contemplating the intense scrutiny that people of colour in the public eye frequently find themselves under.

In this issue, we include thoughtful pieces by Rozina Breen on the future of UK newsrooms in the wake of the tragedy, and Jo Littler on how the far right weaponises meritocracy to promote its interests. In the run-up to next year's BBC Charter renewal, we hear from new Director General Matt Brittin, in conversation with Lenny Henry, about his ambitions for the broadcaster; publish research on digital inclusion by Panayiota Tsatsou, and include reflections on Professor Stuart Hall's love of music by his friend Les Back.

I enjoyed speaking to Nina Robinson - who has written a piece on The Split Up and 'otherness' - for a new Representology podcast she hosts.

If you like what you hear, or have any ideas for our future issues, please send us an email: representologyjournal@gmail.com

K Biswas
Editor



BRITTIN'S BROADCASTING CORPORATION

Lenny Henry meets Matt Brittin, the new BBC Director General

Lenny:
You won a bronze medal for rowing at the Seoul Olympics. Are you quite competitive?

Matt:
Yeah, but I'm a *rowing competitive* guy, so I like to combine with other people..

Lenny:
You like working in a team. Did you get that at *The Mirror*? I remember *The Mirror* back in the day - I met Robert Maxwell and all those people. What was it like working there?

Matt:
Well, it was after Maxwell and they had merged with Local World. I liked working with the journalists. It was just as the internet was taking off, and we were trying to help them to write for the online world, so it was quite a big transition. Difficult times for the press, though I enjoyed it because I went all around the country. We owned lots of local newspapers.

Lenny:
So you were mainly doing digital stuff?

Matt:
I was doing digital stuff, so I was working with the journalists a lot and the commercial people. I'd go to the *Liverpool Post*, to the *South Wales Echo*, to the *Newcastle Chronicle and Journal*, to the *Scottish Daily Record*. I'd go all around the country, and I really enjoyed being close to those different communities.

I love to listen to what's going on and to really try to understand. For me, going around the country, before I started at the BBC, was a chance to do that and see how the BBC lands. Seeing dramas being made in Northumberland, in Shetland, seeing the news going out from Glasgow and from Cardiff - that made a big impression on me, seeing how it's all made across the country.

Lenny:
So you then worked for Google and you're looking at the BBC as the next stage of your life. What did you notice was happening at the Beeb that made you think: "I could do this" - what were the people on the inside missing that you noticed from an outsider's perspective?

Matt:
I'd spent just over 18 years at Google and before that at *The Mirror*, working on the digital transition. So I'd really seen what happens when people get these tools, they've got the whole internet on their phone and so on. But I'd always been fiercely proud of being British - maybe because of the sport. I grew up completely surrounded by the culture - all of the things that you did with Tiswas, those kinds of children's entertainment shows. It was all part of my upbringing. So, when I stopped working in that world, I had a little bit of a break, I spent time with my parents. My dad passed away last year at 92.

Lenny:
Wow.

Matt:
He'd grown up in the slums in London and the wireless and the BBC were his window on the world. It inspired him to work hard in education. He went and got a scholarship to a grammar school and it changed his life and I was the first person in my family to go to university. I think I was fuelled by that sort of spirit - watching and listening to the BBC in particular widened my horizons.

Lenny:
Do you have a specific programme that you watched or listened to as a family?

Matt:
Oh, all sorts of stuff. I remember, *Watch with Mother* as a little kid, in black and white.

Lenny:
***Andy Pandy*?**

Matt:
Andy Pandy and those things. I was absolutely one of those kids who hid behind a sofa aged about 4 or 5 watching Jon Pertwee turn into Tom Baker on *Doctor Who*. Then it was *Tomorrow's World* and *Match of the Day* and *Sports Night*. I suppose I'd always felt so strongly, connecting with my parents at that time in their lives. Then, suddenly, the BBC needed new leadership and I was approached. I was really surprised to be approached because, you know, I thought they would want to appoint a journalist or a programme-maker and I'm neither of those, although I've worked in adjacent worlds and I've worked in newspapers. But I think they felt that they needed somebody who had the experience of leading a large organisation.

I think that there was a sense that being an outsider could be an advantage.

People have made me feel quite welcome and said: "look, hold that outsider's mindset". I see what's amazing, like the programme-making and the craft that goes into it. The craft that goes into making great drama or great journalism, but we've got to change a lot faster to keep up with the world. I'm now over 5 months into the job, and what I can see really starkly is this genuine moment of jeopardy - for content creation, for access to information, because these chatbots are just taking off like crazy.

Lenny:
Could you explain that, for people who don't know what a chatbot is?

Matt:
Chat GPT and all of the AI tools that people use. So, the risk is that, instead of searching for something on Google or going to Netflix or iPlayer, a chatbot just recommends things to you, and that potentially takes you away from seeing the kinds of content that I think are important in defining who we are. Obviously, your work on representation keeps pushing further on this, but stories of who we are and where we come from are really important for a nation. They bring people together. We've just had *Celebrity Traitors* - the first episodes, 15 million in total audience.

Lenny:
Well, I think we do want to watch something together. One of the things that I remember very clearly from a few years ago was my entire family sitting down to watch *Walking With Dinosaurs*, and it got 21 million viewers or something when it first went out. I think that, nowadays, young people are just watching things randomly on their phones and not even really concentrating on them but definitely plugging into their phone all the time. Does the BBC, as a public service broadcaster, see this as a threat or as something to learn from?

Matt:
Well, I think a bit of both. British content is valued around the world. The World Service: every week, half a billion people rely on it. Half a billion people, and 75% of them are in countries where journalistic freedom is suppressed. What an amazing thing. Our storytelling - you mentioned *Walking with Dinosaurs*, but we just launched *Blue Planet 3*. On things like natural history around the world, BBC News around the world, we're the most trusted news organisation. We're in this moment where we've got this incredible storytelling talent, and yet the risk is that audiences are shifting really fast. The upside is there's six billion people connected. We could reach all of them. The downside is, increasingly, that other people's algorithms control what you see.

This is what I'm putting at the centre of my pitch for the BBC to government at the moment - we can be the antidote to the algorithm. When you come to iPlayer or you come to the BBC, you're only getting stuff that we make because we think it could be great for you.

It's not to make money, it's not to sell advertising. It's not to get your data. It's about public service. I used to come to the BBC to watch Generation Game and stay for David Attenborough.

What we need to do is the same with our iPlayer and our apps - we need to be able to offer you the best of British content. Stories about where we are, where we're from and who we are.

Many of those stories fly internationally - they really can be popular around the world as well.

The BBC is the cornerstone of our creative industries - and, of course, we've got ITV and others as well, but ITV and Sky are now merging under American ownership. So, it's only really BBC and Channel 4 that remain British at their hearts. It's a really important time for us to make sure that those things are secure for the future.

Lenny:
What does that 'Britishness' mean to you? You mentioned that a lot of times. Birmingham is one of the most diverse cities in the country - how does that Britishness, an acceptance of British life - relate to what the BBC is doing now? I see a lot of 'Made in Britain' - a lot of people speaking in different accents all over the country - but what about if you're not originally from Britain, but you live in Britain and you love being here and you want to work here?

How does that access work for people? If my mum and dad were coming here now, for instance, how would it work for them?

Matt:
There's a lot of voices that want to divide us and make us feel separated in today's world. But one of the essential parts of the BBC's Charter are its responsibilities to bring people together. It's important that we make local news and education and children's programmes. It is also important that we do the big stuff that brings people together.

If you think about BBC World Service - we're teaching languages around the world. We're in Afghanistan helping girls to get education where they can't get this from classrooms anymore. I think the same applies here, and what I love is, in a world where everyone's got infinite choice on their phone - in the palm of your hand, you've got infinite choice of content - 94% of households connect with the BBC every month.

So, it is 'broad reach', and you can feel part of something and, wherever you come from, I think there's a sense of being able to connect with our culture.

I used to run YouTube for years - the challenge with YouTube is that 85% of the time people are looking at content from outside their home country. So, on YouTube, you're watching international stuff.

That's wonderful, but you're losing the national stuff that connects you to your community, or to the culture, or to the values. And I do think that's an important thing. We punch above our weight in creative storytelling, but also in our values. That's why we're the world's most trusted news organisation.

Lenny:

Do you think that the free speech and the lack of censorship online make the content more attractive to certain audiences? Not all of them, but there is that sense of freedom with YouTube and with podcasts. Anything can be said, and Auntie Beeb has more control over its broadcasting.

Matt:

It's great that you've got this liberalisation, and anyone with a phone can express themselves. We've got a duty to be duly impartial, and that means there's a high bar on our content and how we present ourselves. That's often challenged by critics, but I think it's genuinely accepted. That's one of the reasons we're more trusted than other media, despite the last couple of years of challenges - but I also think that's one of the reasons why people come to see public service content which they can trust, made to a particular standard, that is not AI slop.

It's going to be representative - you might not always agree with it, but it's going to do its best to represent who we are - to be duly impartial, to be fair and accurate, to include analysis - and we've got to keep working hard on that. Society's moving, so what it means to represent the spectrum of views is always changing. That makes it hard, but it's worth fighting for.

So, in front of the camera, presenting, hosting radio shows and podcasts - pretty good. Actually, above the representation in the country generally but - behind the scenes and leadership positions - still some way to go, Lenny.

Lenny:

When I started in the business, there was nobody that looked like me on television. I'm 68 now and it's clearly different. Clive Myrie hosting *Mastermind*. Amol Rajan hosting *University Challenge*. There's a different path now to television, but what would you say to some 15 year old kid on their phone dreaming of a career in broadcasting?

Matt:

Well, the first thing to say is that, just before I joined, the BBC took an updated view of how it's doing on portrayal and representation - are we doing a good job of reflecting what the country looks and sounds like? - and it made huge progress. The report was pretty clear: still a bit of a way to go, particularly on working-class backgrounds. On screen, pretty good. So, in front of the camera, presenting, hosting radio shows and podcasts - pretty good. Actually, above the representation in the country generally but - behind the scenes and leadership positions - still some way to go, Lenny.

Lenny:

That's always been the problem.

Matt:

And then, on your point about being a young kid, I do think they can see more people like them than ever before. You can start broadcasting a video and, on social media, you can reach anyone. Well, I think what the BBC's done, and I want to build on, is it's got a very good apprenticeship programme. There's over a thousand apprentices here, and I reckon I've met all of them.

Lenny:

Ha!

Matt:

They are super keen. I was just in Belfast last week and I met an apprentice who's working on the news team and she's doing their *TikTok* stuff, and it's flying. And it's really important, right? We're on *TikTok* because we've got to be where the misinformation is. So, *BBC News* is on *TikTok*, and it's talking about what's happening to bus fares, travel, student loans, all those kinds of things

Lenny:

I love that guy, Ros Atkins, who simplifies the news for us. He's brilliant.

Matt:

Of course, what those apprentices do is that they come with their own experience, and bring that together with what the BBC is brilliant at - so they can learn from Ros Atkins. They can learn from Clive Myrie. They can learn from our drama and comedy producers. What I want to do is build on that. We've got a partnership with the *National Film and Television School* and YouTube to try to bring next generation creators into the BBC.

Lenny:

That's a good idea.

Matt:

They want to join. They want to come and work with us, despite the fact they've got these audiences. I think it goes back to what I was saying earlier - it's a safe space, which is a British public service space.

It's not advertising driven, it's not fighting against all these other people, and I hope that can help us.

Lenny:

When I did the speech in 2016 at BAFTA, I talked about a few people leaving the country, and I mainly focused on Idris Elba becoming a massive star on *The Wire*, having had very little luck in Britain. He went to America because there was just no work here for him. I think David Harewood had a similar problem. Do you think there's enough being done about retaining British 'talent of colour'? They're all going to America for higher fees - isn't there a way we can fight back against that?

Matt:

I don't know whether there's a disproportionate talent drain on 'talent of colour' in Britain, or whether that's just the case for all our talent. Because it's quite attractive, isn't it - to go and have a bigger impact internationally? We're never going to have the big bucks in the BBC, in Channel 4 or in British broadcasting to match others.

Lenny:

You don't do so bad.

Matt:

What we can try to do, though, is make working here something that people want to do because they can do their best creative work here.

I was in Birmingham ten days ago and I met with Steve Knight, who created *Peaky Blinders*, and he said: "only the BBC would have commissioned that show at the start". I was in Belfast last week. I don't know if you've seen *Blue Lights*?

Lenny:

I love *Blue Lights*.

Matt:

A drama about the Northern Ireland police, written by a guy who was a *Panorama* reporter. He's got loads of stories from people in the police and in the communities over time, and he started to write them down. And *Blue Lights* - now it's in its fourth season - people on the streets say that they treat the police differently now because they understand that there are people behind those uniforms. I think that's a great example of where really understanding a community and portraying it on screen can lead to positive social change. That's obviously a very, very, difficult community in which to still be a police officer, but they show all sides - all sides of the debate and all sides of The Troubles.

Lenny:

Great drama can do that. People like Jimmy McGovern and Alan Bleasdale used to be able to present perspectives from a working-class point of view, or from an institutional point of view. You could actually understand what it's like to work on a council in Liverpool, or what it's like to work in the building trade and what effects that might have on your mental health, in terms of not having a job. All of these things are really important.

Matt:

There's definitely work to do, Lenny, I wouldn't pretend otherwise.

I'd say there's momentum, but also we're facing constraints on funding as well, which makes it harder to do all the things you want to do. One of the things that I have to do is work with our teams to try to make sure we continue to make progress.

We have to reshape the organisation, not just because of cost, but also because of how fast the audience is changing. Like I said, on *Blue Lights*, Declan [Lawn] said to me, "*The streamers all said. I'd love to have commissioned this, but I could never have done it*". So, we need to be doing stuff that's really distinctive - that's going to excite those people you just mentioned - that other people are not doing. I think if you could do that well, you would find universal stories that appeal to everyone. That's such a key part of what we need to do over the next few years, rather than just let people drift apart and be polarised by the bubbles they live in

Lenny:

People from diverse backgrounds often tell us they can get into the industry, but they don't necessarily progress. They're not retained. Why do you think progression is so much harder than recruitment?

Matt:

I've looked into this quite a lot. In my last job, I did some work with John Amaechi [psychologist] and others on this. Just like at the BBC, we had groups from different

backgrounds who were coming together and making sure that people didn't get lost in a large organisation. One of the challenges is the way that people's progression is decided. It is often not a very clear process - so it can depend on patronage, it can depend on who you know, it can depend on luck and chance and so on. I think sometimes that can result in bias against people from underrepresented groups.

I know that the best performing organisations are the most diverse organisations. I also know that when you're a manager, if you treat everyone as an individual, you'll retain all those different people. If you have a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, that can be problematic. It's difficult because managers want to be fair - "*I've got to treat everyone the same. I've got to be fair. I've got to help everyone perform to the best of their abilities*". That's a different equation. We need to make sure that managers - they're the people who determine progression, they're the people who determine who gets opportunities - understand that.

Lenny:

You're making some massive, hard choices - you did warn everybody about this - on jobs. How can you ensure that people who've only recently got their foot in the door aren't the first to leave?

Matt:

That's always difficult, isn't it? One of the things we've got to do here is look at the size and shape of the organisation, making sure that we create room for the next generation to come through. So, that's one of the things I'm looking at as people are proposing changes. We do have to reduce the number of senior managers, and we've said we're aiming to do that by more than the average. I also think, in a fast-changing world, every organisation needs to empower people closer to the frontline, if you want to call it that, since the only way you can understand what's changing and what's working is by being quick and nimble.

In this context, the people making the programmes, the journalists in the field, the technical people making decisions - we need to have a really clear system. It's about our system of values, where people are clear what their responsibilities are. Then we need to clear away the clutter that gets in the way of people doing their best work. I think one of the challenges for the BBC is that it can be a bit risk averse. It gets criticised very loudly for everything it does and you understand why - we're publicly funded. We should be held to a higher standard, but that can lead you to be a bit defensive. What you need to do is to learn from when things don't go right, but also be bold and back the frontline people, back the creative people, back the journalists, when they're doing well and when they're doing right.

Lenny:

A very well-respected, young, black commissioner [Danielle Scott-Haughton] died recently. It was very sudden. One of the things I remember is that I had a meeting about something and she followed me all the way - walked me out of the BBC - and said very nice things to me, wanting to meet up again to discuss more things, and then she died. I did feel like, if she's doing that for the people of colour that are coming into this building, that's really great. We feel represented by this person. When she passed away, one of the chills that went through a lot of the Black people and Brown people at the BBC was, who's going to be looking after people like us when we go in there, because the majority of the people that we go and take meetings with don't look like us.

There's a feeling, Matt, that if you're Black or Brown, you go into these big organisations and the first thing you have to do is translate whatever you're talking about so that the person on the other end of the desk understands what you're pitching. You have to express who you are, the way you're raised, what your culture is - when you work with people that, at least, look like you, that translation isn't needed.

I really like this idea of training somebody up who's working with you all the time - who sees what your job is, and could step in at a moment's notice if you were to be run over by a train.

Matt:

It links to what you were talking about earlier, Lenny, in terms of who decides who gets the next job. How does progression happen? Who gets the next opportunity? How does that happen? So, I think you're exactly right to point to that as being a risk and something that we actually need to train people to be aware of, and monitor how we're doing, and also having people who are champions of different communities. So, that's one of the things we want to look at - particularly in a world where there's a lot of change, it's not always possible to provide the continuity.

I'm sorry about your friend and colleague who passed away – hopefully, what she's done is to inspire a broader group of people through how she's interacted with you, so that they will continue that work.

Lenny:

I think she definitely did that. In terms of comedy drama, there are people now, which is good, but not very many. There's one or two and it's really heartening to go into meetings and see at least one. If a white guy goes into a meeting, everybody looks like them, but if a Black or a Brown person goes into a meeting, it's very rare to have that.

I know it's slow work. I remember going to see Tony Hall [former BBC Director General, 2013-2020] before, and talk about diversity, and Alan Yentob [former BBC Creative Director] was there. I said, "It must be bad if you've called me, because I'm a comedian. I've got the odd television series, but if you've asked me to come in and talk about this, it must be bad." Internally, you need your people who can really help you with this stuff.

Matt:

Yes, agree. I went and hosted an event for the South Asian community in the Radio Theatre last week, and it was full [see Nina Robinson's piece in this issue]. We were celebrating The *Split Up* and talking about how we're starting to push more of these kinds of shows, which are not about this struggle. They just happen to be a cast of characters from a diverse background, but the story's not about that - it's about humanity, family, life and all those struggles. What was interesting to me was to see that sort of community in the room. There were people who work in the sector who are commissioning, there are people who are producing and writing, but there are also next generation talent, and I think that's one of the most powerful things we can do with the BBC.

I'm a 58 year old white man who was lucky enough to go to university, and you've got to decide - I'm gonna be part of trying to address this or not.

Lenny:

The Split Up **is excellent as a way of evoking a sense of Britain being a community of not just people that look like you, but also people who don't look like you, but have the same concerns. This idea of universal humanity is a great thing to expound for the BBC, and they've always done it, but I think you're trying to do it more now and that's something to be encouraged.**

Matt:

I think that's right. It's our job. It's my obligation to do that. I'm a 58 year old white man who was lucky enough to go to university, and you've got to decide - I'm gonna be part of trying to address this or not. So, I have to make sure that I'm leaning into these conversations.

I've got lots of things I could do, but going along and hosting that event and showing that we care and listening to what's being said makes a difference. My personal approach, we talked about this earlier, is very much to try to listen - genuinely listen - to what

people are saying. I won't be able to take everything you say to me on board, but it goes in and you're looking for those things as you go around. You're looking for who's in the room and you're looking for who's not in the room, and I think that's something I want to ensure - that the team that leads the BBC, whatever backgrounds they come from, are paying more attention because it's part of our duty. If we get it right, it can change lives and it can also make incredible programmes.

Lenny:

Yeah, I think that's right. Your willingness to go everywhere and listen to everybody is extraordinary, Matt. I don't think people quite understand how difficult this job is in the lead up - once your feet are under the table, it's a continuing assessment. It's a continuing conversation. In terms of where we are politically and industry-wise, it's a tough thing to take on, so I applaud you for that.

Matt:

Well, it's a difficult time for the industry, Lenny, isn't it? We see that ITV and Sky are merging. We've got to try to negotiate a Charter that gives us enough funding to sustain the kind of impact the BBC's had.

Lenny:

How's that going?

Matt:

We're in the really intense stage - you've seen some discussions about possible different funding models. I'd say the DCMS - Lisa Nandy, and her department, the department that is responsible for setting the new Charter - are really engaged with us. Ultimately, it will come down to the government's decision. The Prime Minister, the Treasury, DCMS - are they prepared to reform funding in a way that will allow a well-funded public service broadcast sector?

At the same time, we're seeing these other companies merge. ITV, Sky, both brilliant companies, play their role in public service broadcasting, but they become a US entity - how long does that role continue? Channel 4 is a bit out on its own - looking at how those two public service broadcasters continue. All the while, AI is in vertical takeoff. The big platforms like YouTube - I have got a lot of time for YouTube, I used to work there - but it's a juggernaut and it's driven by advertising.

Lenny:

How do you keep the BBC for everyone, including people who don't feel it's yet theirs? I just remember somebody saying, there's a lot of ethnic minority eyeballs deserting the BBC because they just don't feel it belongs to them. How do you combat that?

Matt:

I think there's a few things. One, we need to make sure we go where those audiences are. So, the BBC's rightly trying to focus on getting you to BBC One and to iPlayer. But, in some cases, those audiences have gone missing for us. So, we need to go where they are and engage them with content that is made for them. We have got an incredible array of content that speaks to those different diverse communities.

Secondly, we need to make our own apps much better. So, literally today, we're launching, for staff, an Alpha version of the new iPlayer. 'Alpha' means it's in testing but when you look at it, it's going, "Oh, my God, look at all this amazing entertainment." There's podcasts, there's radio, there's TV shows, there's lots of different things popping up and it helps you to discover stuff that's relevant for you. Certainly, we need to keep commissioning in ways that are representative of the best of our storytellers and the best of our communities. I think we've got to keep focused on that mission. So, there's some stuff we can do to modernise, to find audiences - to modernise how we show up for audiences on our own apps. But, then to keep making sure that the content we make is speaking to everyone - and that's part of the Charter - that's part of the requirement on us.

Lenny:

So, here we are, in this period where I just told you about me and my family, a Caribbean family but living in Britain, watching *Walking with Dinosaurs* and loving it. In ten years' time, do you think British families are going to be watching live broadcast television together in their living rooms?

Matt:

I think, potentially, yes - and the reason is, who'd have thought that we'd have a show on now that has reached 15 million people, right? In a world where you've got infinite choice in the palm of your hand. So, I think it's a big creative challenge.

We've got a social media backlash - there's a ban for under 16s. People, like my kids in their mid-20s, are going back to reading physical books and engaging in the physical world. So, I think the optimistic opportunity is to seize this moment, with brilliant content that's made for everyone. We're harder to reach for them, and I think that there is a chance that we can swing this the other way - and, actually we'll be in better shape in ten years. It depends a bit on your support. So, I just ask everyone watching - if you believe in this moment and the opportunity, then do speak up around the funding reform that's needed so that we can keep investing in making productions with you, and other people like you, across the UK.

Lenny:

Thank you very much for your time. Do you have a favourite joke, or do you want to leave it there?

Matt:

Well, you know what I was telling you about my dear dad, who died last year at 92? We had a little celebration of life and I did a reading - we had a photograph of him, and in front of it were four candles. His favourite show. His favourite joke was The Two Ronnies' 'Four Candles' sketch. So, I think it's the one that makes me smile the most, and brings a little bit of a tear to the eye.

Lenny:

I think, comedy… well, you know what? The BBC is part of all our lives and we mustn't forget that. You know, Frank Spencer, on the back of a bus on rollerskates is, for me, the one that always made me laugh very, very much. Eric and Ernie in bed - the fire engine going by and Eric saying: "He'll never sell ice creams at that speed". All of these things are things that are embedded in my heart, in terms of the BBC. If your job is to maintain that, and keep carrying a flag for that, and training people from all over to do that job, then more power to you.

Matt:

Well, then, thanks for your support. I'm here to do the best I can, but it'll only work if we work as a team, so thank you.

Matt Brittin is the new Director General of the BBC.

We've got to try to negotiate a Charter that gives us enough funding to sustain the kind of impact the BBC's had.

BEFORE THE ALGORITHM: HOW BLACK BRITISH TELEVISION FOUND A WAY THROUGH

Annika Allen Gray explores how Black creatives, in an era before YouTube and TikTok, dealt with broadcasting's gatekeepers.



A moment in my chat with Trix Worrell, creator of the hit comedy series Desmond's, feels almost too cinematic to be real.

It's the mid-1980s. Worrell sits on a double-decker bus, rattling through Peckham. He's on his way to meet veteran comedy producer Humphrey Barclay. Channel 4, still in its energetic, disruptive infancy, is looking for a new sitcom. There is only one problem: Worrell does not have one.

Glancing out the window as the bus slows along Queens Road, he catches sight of a local barbershop. The barbers stand on the pavement, scissors momentarily idle, chatting with girls heading home from school. Inside, a line of customers waits, some resigned, for the clippers to start again.

. . . this was television before the algorithm. Reaching millions meant passing through a narrow corridor of institutional gatekeepers.

Worrell didn't just see a shop; he saw an entire social cosmos. When Barclay asked for his pitch, Worrell proposed a comedy set in a barbershop. Barclay was initially lukewarm - he had heard half a dozen salon pitches before. However, Worrell explained that the show was never really about haircuts:

"This is a community centre. This is the first Black business that's specifically about Black people. You walk through the door, and it's the only time you feel Black in England, and you can just be."

Then came the comedic kicker: the barber, Desmond Ambrose, is actually terrible at cutting hair. Barclay laughed. The idea that would evolve into *Desmond's*, the longest-running, Black-led sitcom in British television history, was born.

Today, that trajectory would look radically different. Worrell might have shot a sketch on a phone, dropped a character reel onto TikTok, or crowdfunded a pilot on YouTube, leveraging viral engagement metrics to prove that an underserved audience existed before a single commissioner had opened their inbox.

Instead, this was television before the algorithm. Reaching millions meant passing through a narrow corridor of institutional gatekeepers.

While making my eight-part audio documentary series *Then, Now, Next*, I explored over 70 years of Black British television history. I focused on the first-hand stories of those who shaped it. I was fascinated not just by what aired, but also by the unique processes that brought it to life. The testimonies showed a different history of British broadcasting. It was shaped by talent schemes, apprentice wages, specialist units, chance meetings, boardroom conflicts, and creatives who learned to navigate institutions not designed for them.

Visibility Without Protection: The Lesson of Barbara Blake-Hannah

To grasp why institutional infrastructure was so important in the 1980s, we need to look at what occurred when Black talent appeared on British screens without it.

In the summer of 1968, Barbara Blake-Hannah, a journalist from Jamaica, made history. She joined Thames Television's evening magazine programme Today, hosted by Eamonn Andrews. Following the six o'clock ITN bulletin, Blake-Hannah was on the frontline of hard news: standing outside the Russian Embassy when Czechoslovakia was invaded, reporting on political shifts, and conducting serious interviews. She predated the on-screen debuts of Sir Trevor McDonald and Moira Stuart by years.

At that time, Black faces on British TV mostly appeared in singing, dancing, or exaggerated minstrel acts. To have a dark-skinned Black woman delivering current affairs was unprecedented.

Her arrival coincided with a moment of fierce national tension. In 1968, Parliament passed the second Race Relations Act. However, that same year, Enoch Powell gave his inflammatory, and divisive 'Rivers of Blood' speech in Birmingham. Though Thames bosses praised Blake-Hannah's work in private, the station received a flood of letters and calls from viewers urging management to *"get that [N-word] off our screens."*

The legislation that had supposedly made racial discrimination unlawful did not protect her. After just nine months, Thames, yielding to racist complaints, terminated her contract. She moved to ATV in Birmingham but found the environment very hostile. Hotels refused her lodgings, so she had to commute from London every day until she got a room at the YWCA. When Powell came to ATV for a live studio interview, he refused to enter the building unless "that Black girl" was kept out of sight.

Reflecting decades later, Blake-Hannah observed the stark vulnerability of being the first:

"There was no one. There was no organisation for me to complain to and say, 'Will you champion my cause?' The station didn't say, 'The law says we shouldn't, she's doing a good job.' They said to the racists: 'Okay, we hear you. We will do what you say.'"

Her career as a British broadcast journalist was effectively extinguished, prompting her return to Jamaica in 1972, where she built an illustrious career as an author, cultural historian and public figure.

Blake-Hannah's experience exposed the fundamental hazard of representation without structure. Being granted a temporary spot in front of the camera was meaningless if the executive suites and production corridors behind it remained an unyielding wall.

Winning Wasn't Getting Through

Even Worrell's route to *Desmond's* dismantles the comforting industry myth that talent naturally rises to the top on merit alone.

Worrell trained at the National Film School. He enrolled there because, as a young Black dramatist in a tough environment, he needed strong credentials. He focused on theatre, seeing it as the true voice of the Black British working-class experience in the 1970s. When the cast of his stage play, The Mohicans, submitted the script to Channel 4's Debut 84 competition without his knowledge, it won.

Yet the victory did not translate into a greenlight. Channel 4 initially balked at funding the television adaptation. Worrell quickly pointed out the hypocrisy: what's the point of an initiative to find Black dramatists if the work ends up ignored?:

"I said, 'I'm going to go to the press", he recalls.

The broadcaster relented, but when production loomed, executives claimed they could not find a single Black drama director. A documentary filmmaker was brought in. Worrell had to lead rehearsals himself to keep the acting authentic. His summary of surviving that challenge is clear:

"I was a bit aggressive, but I knew I could do it instead of just waiting."

The door had swung ajar, but it still required an active shoulder against the wood.

When Gatekeepers Became Door-Openers

Blake-Hannah lacked internal allies, while Worrell showed the strength of an outsider. In contrast, Farrukh Dhondy highlights how insiders can transform situations. He had both a mandate and the financial power to use it.

As Commissioning Editor of Channel 4's Multicultural Programming from 1984 to 1997, Dhondy, a former British Black Panther and writer who had worked on Race Today, became one of the defining architects of multicultural broadcasting. Crucially, Dhondy was armed with an annual budget of roughly £8 million and a structural remit to cultivate independent production companies led by people of colour.

The pre-digital television industry was heavily institutionalised, but institutions are ultimately operated by individuals. The presence of someone willing to spend political capital on an unproven voice fundamentally altered what Britain saw of itself.

During the development of *Desmond's*, network notes suggested that Desmond's eldest son, Michael, should sport dreadlocks and speak with an exaggerated Jamaican patois. Drawing on his Saint Lucian upbringing, Worrell pushed back, refusing to reduce Black British identity to a monolithic trope. As Dhondy understood nuance and cultural specificity, he protected Worrell's vision.

What materialised across 71 episodes was not tokenistic visibility, but multidimensional life: a Guyanese family negotiating generational friction, class aspiration, marital warmth, community solidarity and ordinary joy. Crucially, Blackness was no longer a social problem the narrative felt obliged to solve.

Infrastructure Over Aesthetics

Tamara Howe entered television from a different angle, yet her career maps that exact same institutional ecosystem.

Now Managing Director of 22 Summers, Howe has spent over four decades in the business. Growing up with *Love Thy Neighbour* and *The Black and White Minstrel Show* at primetime, it was hard to imagine a Black woman in production. Her window into the industry came via her father, the activist and broadcaster Darcus Howe. At 19, she got an apprenticeship on *The Bandung File*, made by an independent company for Channel 4's multicultural programme unit.

What distinguishes Howe's entry is not merely that an opening existed, but the institutional scaffolding sustaining it. Howe worked with a diverse team of Black, Asian and white programme-makers in investigative journalism. They covered topics like voter suppression in the UK and international stories from Jamaica and the US. Over four and a half years, Howe grew from trainee to production manager through hands-on training.

This was the foundation building a path to success, not just a quick on-screen gesture. A dedicated commissioning editor, secured funding, a network of independent suppliers and a retention pipeline were all in place.

Worrell cultivated an identical ecosystem on the studio floor of *Desmond's*. Initially, he wrote Desmond's solo but was inspired by his time on *The Cosby Show* in New York where they had a writers' room. So, he included emerging writers in script development. He also supported Black technical crew in cameras, sound and lighting. A young man who started as a runner on Desmond's went on to spend decades as a senior BBC cameraman; junior writers graduated to staff positions on *EastEnders*, *Emmerdale* and *Coronation Street*. *Desmond's* was not simply a hit sitcom pulling in five million viewers - it was an incubator.

"Everybody Responsible, Nobody Responsible"

Today, many see designated multicultural units as outdated. They view them as training wheels from a more segregated time. The modern industry prefers "mainstreaming" diversity instead.

Tamara Howe agrees with the theory: in a perfect broadcasting environment, fairness would be part of every genre. However, she lived through the reality of what happened when that dedicated infrastructure was dismantled.

Following the 1996 statutory change requiring Channel 4 to sell its own advertising, commercial imperatives squeezed specialist output. By 2002, Channel 4's multicultural unit was cut. Its duties moved to individual genre departments with non-binding targets. Within twelve months, the proportion of ethnic minority programme-makers at the channel fell from 13.5% to 6.6%. Independent Black and Asian owned production outfits, which peaked at roughly twenty in the late 1980s, plummeted to a resilient handful:

> *"Everybody responsible, but nobody responsible'. You take away the ring-fenced budget, you take away dedicated commissioning power and you end up with a bit of a soup."*

The consequences of this decentralisation were immediate: the talent pipeline evaporated. When Howe joined the BBC Current Affairs department, *Black Britain* had just ended. She saw many talented Black journalists leave the building, without being moved to other strands like *Panorama*. The structural flaw in the "diversity initiative" is clear: once the tailored programme ends, the talent leaves too.

From the Commissioning Desk to the Platform Algorithm

Long before we could check someone's credibility online, authority had to be established face-to-face. Howe remembers going to senior board meetings as a Director of Production. Visiting executives would hand her their coats, thinking she was the PA.

The digital revolution undeniably altered that reality. Platforms like YouTube and social media broke the monopoly of terrestrial distribution. This change provided an important correction. Creators are no longer held hostage by the imaginative limitations of a single commissioning editor.

We see this lineage in Adjani Salmon, who, faced with the persistent barrier of not knowing which broadcast doors to knock on, self-funded *Dreaming Whilst Black* as an independent web series. This effort built a strong following, eventually leading to a commission from the BBC. We see it in Rapman, whose viral YouTube epic *Shiro's Story* bypassed traditional development slates entirely, paving the way for Netflix's international phenomenon *Supacell*. We also see it in Joivan Wade and Percelle Scott's *Wall of Entertainment*, turning digital-first comedy sketches into an independent production studio that owns its formats and brand relationships.

Yet, celebrating the democratisation of distribution can obscure an uncomfortable structural truth: an algorithmic platform is not public service infrastructure.

Bypassing the traditional commissioner just puts the creator into a new gatekeeping system. This system relies on engagement metrics, programmatic ads and hidden recommendation engines. It commodifies culture but doesn't nurture its creators. When digital creators move to linear broadcast or high-end SVOD [Subscription Video on Demand], the key question arises: Who owns the underlying IP? Who controls the marketing spend? Who gets granted the luxury of a second season when ratings wobble? And who controls the ultimate greenlight?

. . . in a perfect broadcasting environment, fairness would be part of every genre. However, she lived through the reality of what happened when that dedicated infrastructure was dismantled.

As Howe notes, shifting from freelance creative to production company founder shows a big change in agency:

> *"You're not just trying to ask permission and work around a system. You create the system."*

The Blueprint for What Comes Next

From Barbara Blake-Hannah standing alone before an ATV camera in 1968 to Trix Worrell gazing out of a bus window in Peckham, the pioneers of terrestrial television worked without the safety net of an upload button or a vast online community.

Yet their history carries an indispensable warning for the contemporary creative economy. When Blake-Hannah was forced off screen, it was because she had no institutional scaffolding to withstand the pressure of a hostile public. When *Desmond's* ran for six seasons, it succeeded because someone inside the building held the purse strings and shared the vision.

Technology has changed, but the power dynamics in British media are still very much the same. True equity isn't just about whether a big institution decides to welcome an underrepresented person.

The lesson from our TV history is clear: real cultural change happens when we create the space, fund the projects and control the keys ourselves.

Annika Allen Gray is the host of Then, Now, Next, an eight-part audio documentary series exploring 70 years of Black British television history, streaming now on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and all major platforms.



THE FUTURE OF THE NEWSROOM FOR JOURNALISTS OF COLOUR

Rozina Breen

Data, evidence and context are crucial in qualifying judgement and facts. They are what make a newsroom do its best work. As does a newsroom that is diverse in thinking, background and commissioning.

Reflections

I'll be honest. I'm trepidatious about writing on this issue. The conversations around Professor Jason Arday's death over summer became such a toxic debate - with much heat, little light and a lack of deep and data-led analysis about what had happened, or how and why we got to this terrible and saddening place.

I read a lot at the time of Arday's death - from across the spectrum of debate, opinion and sentiment - about why people thought that what had happened did happen. People will draw their own conclusions. As a journalist with a long and strong track record in impartial, public service journalism, I'm minded that I do not have all the facts, so this is not a piece of writing that offers any categorical conclusion.

Whilst there will be many varying and opposing views, a Substack article, *Witch-hunt or legitimate reporting?* by Professor Matt Walsh, Head of the School of Journalism, Media and Culture, at Cardiff University, which looks into the media coverage around Professor Arday, is worth reflecting upon:

> *"Was [the coverage] proportionate? I hope editors will reflect on that at some length. But as I pointed out at the beginning, the newspaper coverage is only part of the volume created. All of those who've contributed to the firehose of comment need to reflect on their part in it.*
>
> *The victim in all of this is unquestionably Professor Arday. There may have been questions that he needed to answer about his life and work. But the penalty he paid for being caught at the heart of this firestorm was out of all proportion to any offence he may have committed."*

Data, evidence and context are crucial in qualifying judgement and facts. They are what make a newsroom do its best work. As does a newsroom that is diverse in thinking, background and commissioning.

Commissioning

Commissioning is central to every newsroom operation. Who decides the agenda, where to news-gather, how to tell the story and which voices to carry - these are all vital components.

I was struck by a speech given by Sir Lenny Henry when he addressed the Royal Television Society back in 2008 - and then again in his 2014 BAFTA Television lecture - because of what he called 'gatekeepers' of commissioning. The lens through which we commission is, of course, going to contribute to what shapes the news agenda. Editors are individuals with their own lines of judgement. What one editor judges to be a top story may fall lower down the scale in the eyes of another editor. It should always come down to what is in the public interest and, critically, who the audiences are that we are aiming to reach.

The fact that there is a lack of journalists of colour in UK newsrooms is well-documented. Take note of Breaking, a report published earlier this year from the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity, compiled by Rohit Kachroo, ITN's Global Security Editor, and Dr Ellie Tomsett, Senior Lecturer in Media at Birmingham City University. A piece by Jacob Granger, via Journalism.co.uk, about why access does not equal change, is also worth a read.

Why does this matter? Because you get a different nuance when there is a lack of diversity in newsrooms, including diversity among the commissioning editors and senior editorial leaders. Diverse newsrooms are vital in reflecting the lifeblood and the people of a nation. If you're a news organisation serving audiences in the UK, then you need to ensure you reflect those audiences - be it geographically, with regard to class, ethnicity, disability and so on, because this is what will give you a fuller perspective on any number of stories.

Crucially, the commissioning process should be an open process in which journalists of colour, from every background, have a seat at the table - otherwise, what's the point of making strides in diversifying the newsroom in the first place?

Why Representation Matters

The role of journalism is to help the public make sense of what's happening and why it is happening. We are not here to be political, to contribute to divisiveness or to chase clicks.

Newsrooms are here to serve in the public's interest.

Lived experience and diversity of thought should help newsrooms relate to their audiences in deeper and more relevant ways. Diverse newsrooms do, of course, mean that you have more angles, approaches and stories to go at and that, at their best, serve many audiences. There is no singular approach, and neither should there be. News judgement may vary, but the facts must never be compromised nor should the public interest test, as Hugh Muir, Executive Editor of Opinion at The Guardian wrote:

"And so, if it appears that a prominent figure – be they black or white – is being less than honest in ways that meet the test of public interest, those black journalists have a right, indeed a duty, to interrogate that. I know well some of those who did so in the case of Prof Arday, carefully and professionally, and are now, amid the anger, confusion and rage, being abused and castigated for it. They were not responsible for what Lord Chris Smith, the Cambridge University chancellor, called the "racist feeding frenzy". They, in interrogating all the claims in a way we would expect professional, responsible, empathetic journalists to do, just did their jobs. As journalists. Even the bits that made them sad, that were unpalatable."

Following a story in the public interest is - or should be - vital to any journalist, regardless of her/his colour. We are here to shine a light on truth. What Muir, in my opinion, doesn't point to is the sheer volume of stories written about Arday.

Proportionality is key and, according to Professor Matt Walsh, there were 242 articles across 14 publications published about Arday. Reaching audiences is critical to any metric of success, but I would argue we should all be focused on value over volume. I come back to the role of commissioning and decision-making and ask how diverse those newsroom teams driving the coverage of that particular story were.

How do news stories with a racial dimension affect journalists of colour in the workplace?

In the wake of the coverage around Professor Arday, there is no singular answer to this question. It's complex and we journalists of colour are not a homogenous group.

From my own experience as a senior leader in news, stories that relate to race usually come with an impact. Lived experience, seeing life through a different lens, understanding the nature of inequality and struggle - and being in an industry where diverse groups are still woefully underrepresented - are all challenging factors that we face.

Back in 2014, on the back of his RTS speech, Sir Lenny Henry urged Members of Parliament to act on the lack of diversity in the television industry. In what was dubbed the 'Henry Plan', the idea was for funds to be ring-fenced to increase Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) representation, in the same way that budgets are reserved for regional programmes. Henry told MPs: "If you talk to any BAME person in the industry, there is a sense of fatigue. People have lost hope and don't think one more initiative will achieve true diversity."

How the Henry Plan would have made a difference

According to this year's Breaking report, one respondent says:

"I work for one of the biggest news broadcasters in the UK. I've seen a succession of young, diverse talent leave in recent years with no attempts made by management to keep them. Not only is young, diverse talent leaving; there is a glaring lack of diversity and range in the editorial output."

Diversity in editorial output is the thing. If there is no seat at the decision-making table, then where do journalists of colour go?

Among my own networks, fatigue is a consistent theme for journalists of colour. On the back of the Professor Arday coverage, you were damned for whatever you said or thought, for being too partial or too impartial, for wearing the colour of your skin too overtly or not overtly enough, for challenging where the narrative should go or what it should be.

On so many levels and in so many ways, the struggle for journalists of colour is constant - and also fatiguing. It has been for decades.

Best Practice

What can newsrooms do to ensure that you value and retain great talent? This list is not exclusive to journalists of colour, nor is it exhaustive. It is about having a strong, values-led culture that respects all voices in the newsroom.

- Talk to colleagues about what they think: Having an open dialogue sounds obvious, but newsrooms are dynamic places with little room or time for reflection. It's necessary, especially where there has been, or is, so much heat over a story.
- Always discuss the commissioning process: Go to your newsroom, staff networks, and to your audiences to get a sense of where you and they are going with a story and ask them what they think.

- Assess different perspectives and lenses: Bring in a variety of views and perspectives on the story and ask in whose interest the story is.

- Offer a space to decompress: Journalists will be affected by any number of stories. For journalists of colour, there are additional pressures. Allow them the time and resources to reflect. Nobody needs the extra pressure in an already tough place.

- Ensure diversity at all levels of a newsroom: It helps, for sure, to have leaders of colour. That's not to say that we all think the same, but representation definitely helps the conversation. There is commonality, plus the fact of being seen is itself invaluable.

- Always articulate the public interest test/ rationale: Being clear about why a story is being pursued and in whose interest the story is, is vital. Regardless of the outcome, there has to be a clear and well-defined purpose for following the story.

- Always follow the facts: It's back to having a clear 'North Star', clarity and purpose of decision-making, serving in the public interest and ensuring that the reporting always follows the facts.

- Remember we are not all the same: There is no 'one size fits all'. The answer to the question of this essay is an almost impossible one to answer, but I'm glad we are having this conversation.

"... Not only is young, diverse talent leaving; there is a glaring lack of diversity and range in the editorial output."

Conclusion

I don't claim to have any answers. In fact, I have more questions about which I feel frustrated. There are certainly uncomfortable truths in what happened, and about why and how it happened.

Journalism is a vocation and a purpose for so many - if not all - journalists.

So, my advice is that journalists of colour should continue to hold high the flame of truth and transparency, to know that journalism is, and can be, a force for good, and to understand that audiences need your lens, your talents and your voice.

Seek out the truth.

Be bold.

Be unwavering and courageous in your endeavours.

Find your go-to people for advice and trust your own instinct.

Be proud to represent, because it matters more than you know.

Understand your superpowers.

Rozina Breen is an award-winning former Editor-in-Chief and CEO at The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, who ran the U.K.'s largest network newsroom outside of London as Head of News at BBC 5 Live. She is currently Director of Editorial at The Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting.

How the far right are weaponising DEI and meritocracy

Jo Littler

One key feature that marks much of the current crop of far-right ideologues in Europe and the United States is their energetic use and abuse of the idea of meritocracy.

Take the public pronouncements of Nathan Cofnas, the Belgian-based American postdoctoral philosophy researcher who led the media inquisition into Jason Arday's work this summer. Cofnas is a self-described 'race realist' who wrote on his blog:

"In a meritocracy, Harvard faculty would be recruited from the best of the best students, which means the number of black professors would approach 0%. Blacks would disappear from almost all high-profile positions outside of sports and entertainment."
(Cofnas 2024)

Cofnas has had absolutely no compunction about asserting his beliefs in the superiority of a 'white race' and the inferiority of a 'black race'. He talks of there being no future for multiculturalism, of the 'necessity' for increased bordering, and is a campaigner for a 'hereditarian revolution' -- or the belief that only eugenics can and should determine your achievements and social position. These combined racist beliefs fuelled Cofnas's relentless attack aiming to bring Arday down from his position as Professor at the University of Cambridge through continual and lengthy plagiarism accusations. Cofnas, of course, had absolutely no interest whatsoever in chasing other white professors at Cambridge (such as Dr William O'Reilly) who had been accused of exactly the same kind of bad practice. This was a targeted attack on the basis of skin colour, one made to undermine both an individual Black professor and DEI policies in general. We will all be aware of the pile-on by the British media towards Jason Arday, day after day, in the summer, and the tragedy that ensued.

Cofnas is not alone in dreaming of a right-wing white supremacist 'meritocracy'. Over in the US, right wing journalists, activists and politicians have used the word as a key term in their race to dismantle public provision and democratic structures, and to extend corporate power for the few. At his father's fraud trial back in 2023, Donald Trump Jr incredibly defended his own astronomical rise through his father's business by suggesting he was not in any way a 'nepobaby'. Rather, he said, he worked his way up from humble beginnings bartending in Colorado to become Executive Vice-President of the Trump Organisation simply because it 'operated as a meritocracy'. Two years later, his father signed a Presidential Order called 'Restoring equality of opportunity and meritocracy'. This piece of legislation not only outlawed affirmative action but also possibilities for legal challenges to discriminatory hiring criteria which had been in place since the civil rights laws of the 1960s and 1970s.

'Meritocracy' as a word has a long history of being used by the right to make power grabs sound fair and balanced. It suggests that anyone can make it if only they pull their finger out. Its persuasiveness as an ideology comes from the entirely laudable principle of being against feudal hereditary systems and in-crowd privileges. However, the 'level playing field' that the image conjures up does not exist. This is, to no small degree, because our contemporary ideas of meritocracy, in terms of heaping big economic rewards onto those who 'make it', makes it much less level. The use of the term in public policy has historically been used by the right to sound fair, whilst it pushes policies which simultaneously make the societal playing field even more uneven.

The word 'meritocracy' itself was brought into being in English in the 1950s as a means to critique competitive forms of education stratification. As sociologists and thinkers from Hannah Arendt to Raymond Williams recognised at the time, giving people far greater economic rewards for being deemed intellectually 'smart' was simply not a healthy basis around which to organise society. At this time, the term was used critically – almost akin to a swear word. Yet from the 1980s, it was energetically adopted by the free market radicals of the right as a useful disguise for all forms of marketisations - from schools to universities to the wider social world – and to make this process sound empowering and fair. In the 1990s, neoliberalism embraced meritocracy as its mantra and diversified itself - under Blair and Clinton, Cool Britannia and Oprah, women and people of culture were encouraged to 'make it' too, and were also blamed – either implicitly or explicitly - if they didn't (Littler 2019).

Now, the new right has energetically adopted the ideology of meritocracy once again, ditching their tenuous commitments to diversity in the process. As Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor's new book *End Times Fascism* points out, the alliance between the Republican far right and Silicon Valley's edgelords shows that there is big money to be made by ripping up environmental commitments and embracing AI by any means necessary. Dumping diversity policy, scapegoating migrants and multiculturalism, and embracing ethnonationalism has become both collateral damage and a handy way to ease the path to billionaire and trillionaire profits. To those for whom the corporate bottom line is king, neoliberal 'carewashing' and DEI is out; proto-fascist 'care-stripping' is in (Bakan et al 2026). As part of this process, merit and meritocracy have become reactivated and weaponised. These words have been used to try to lever out and crush attempts to redress longstanding forms of discrimination. In the world of business, this includes dumping DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) programmes in favour of 'MEI' (merit, excellence, intelligence), an acronym and strategy initiated and promoted by Alexandr Wang, founder of Scale AI and now, at 29, a multi-billionaire and chief AI officer at Meta.

'Merit' is being used by the right today in two different and apparently contradictory ways. The first is to pretend to push aside any consideration of the demographics of who is being hired or favoured. Instead, as Elon Musk's argument goes, selection should be made on an 'individual' basis. Yet 'merit' is rarely defined - it is a vague, mushy term, the result being the hiring and favouring of a lot of people who look and sound like their boss and hold the same views. Perhaps the clearest example of this trend is the viral photograph of Donald Trump's first term cabinet: all white men with only one single Black figure (Ben Carson). It is an image which illustrates only too vividly how what I term 'far-right meritocracy' is today being used in practice to further the interests of primarily (if not exclusively) rich, white, far-right men. The US civil rights attorney Charles Coleman has memorably described this as 'meritocracy for the MAGA movement' (Coleman 2025).

. . . giving people far greater economic rewards for being deemed intellectually 'smart' was simply not a healthy basis around which to organise society.

The second way merit is used by the contemporary far and near right is by reactivating the language of eugenics and IQ. As Angela Saini's book *Superior* painstakingly points out, entirely discredited colonial categories of race have been actively boosted and reworked in recent years (Sani, 2019).

Such discourses have been rendered mainstream through the interlinked phenomena of social media algorithms and a media ecology largely owned by the right (Mondon and Winter 2020). 'Race realists' mobilise discredited categories of race and develop arguments about which 'races' supposedly have higher IQs. There are numerous ways to comprehend the multifaceted capacity we call 'intelligence' – as is shown by the gesturing towards well-publicised ideas of emotional intelligence and spatial intelligence - and any academic theorisations of intelligence begin with the premise of its very multiplicity. By contrast, the IQ test - first popularised through its use in US army selection - offers a narrow, single, fixed number. (Or, in the case of Donald Trump, a fictional number that is off the scale). These IQ-fetishists, who author Quinn Slobodian calls 'neurocastes', form an important component of the new populist right: they are people who promote 'hard-wired human nature, hard borders and hard money' (Slobodian 2025).

These two very different ways of understanding merit -- one suggesting it is only individual, and blind to skin colour or gender; the other professing a scientific specificity that can be applied to an entire 'race' of people -- converge through their shared commitment to white supremacy and turbo capitalism at any cost. Tellingly, what people who hold these frames of understanding hate most of all is the idea of equity and public provision. It is a political equation which is neatly summed up in the title of US conservative commentator Heather Mac Donald's book: *When Race Trumps Merit: How the pursuit of equity sacrifices excellence, destroys beauty, and threatens lives* (Mac Donald 2023).

Neoliberal diversity politics and DEI policies always had their weaknesses. They could be wielded as gestural buzzwords; act as a sticking-plaster for deeper structural problems; used as a band-aid for the legacies of racism and the inequalities of capitalism that they alone could not solve. Today, the far right is exploiting these weaknesses and linking them to 'meritocracy' in order to push a racist agenda of extreme private profit at any cost. It is, once again, wielding the idea of meritocracy to try to make the 'level playing field' it gestures towards more, rather than less, uneven – and to attempt to whitewash it. The alternative to this toxic worldview involves a democratic commitment to diversity, to a plural understanding of merit, and to strenuous attempts to share, rather than hoard, the wealth – the kind of politics that we can see promoted by New York's Mayor Zohran Mamdani.

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A Kind of Blues: Stuart Hall and the Gift of Black Music

Les Back

Professor Stuart Hall enjoyed music but rarely wrote about it in public. His friend and student, Les Back, Professor of Sociology at the University of Glasgow, reflects on what music charting the Black experience might have meant to the godfather of cultural studies

It was the winter of 2007. I remember waiting on that cold morning for Stuart Hall to pick me up from the station near his north London home. He agreed to let me interview him for an edited book on his writing about race and racism. Under my arm I had a six-CD boxed set of Miles Davis's Complete Columbia Recordings, because I knew from Stuart's interview with Sue Lawley on BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs that he loved the sound of Miles Davis's trumpet.

Stuart Hall, the cultural theorist and sociologist, arrived in the UK from Jamaica, where he was born in 1951, as a Rhodes Scholar at Merton College, University of Oxford. A key public intellectual and defining figure of cultural studies in Britain, he helped establish the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, and he was also Professor of Sociology at the Open University. In that interview, which was published under the title At Home and Not At Home, Stuart generously shared reflections on his life and the state of multicultural Britain. The CD box was a thank you gift. At the end of that long, inspiring talk, we planned to have another conversation about jazz and the importance of music in his thinking.

Years passed - other, less important things got in the way, largely from the distractions of my academic day job. Then, in February 2014, I emailed Stuart to arrange what we called our 'jazz talk'. I had no idea of how gravely ill he was. His wife, Catherine, emailed me back saying Stuart was in hospital and that he hoped to be in touch with friends soon. Then the following week he passed away.

During the Desert Island Discs appearance in 2000, he told journalist Sue Lawley that listening to modern jazz filled him with:

"a regret for the loss of a life I might have lived, but didn't live. I could have gone back, I could have been a Caribbean person, and I am not that anymore. I can't ever be English, in the full sense, although I know and understand the British from the inside like the back of my hand. So, I am a sort of diaspora person and the uncertainty, the restlessness - and some of the nostalgia for what cannot be is in the sound of Miles Davis's trumpet."

Fittingly, in line with the conceits of the programme, where guests are asked which luxury they would take with them, Stuart chose, on that lonely desert island, a piano to keep him company.

John Akomfrah's 2013 documentary film, The Stuart Hall Project, which was completed a year before Stuart died, constructs a portrait of his life as a public intellectual from television broadcasts, radio appearances, home movies and archival footage spanning over 50 years. The stunning visual archive is set to a jazz soundtrack featuring music by Miles Davis. What is missing in the film is Stuart's generous capacity to think with others and his sociability. We never had our 'jazz talk' and, in a way, I want to attempt, in this article, to construct what it might have been. I have spoken with some of Stuart's oldest friends and collaborators about their memories of music's place in his life and thought.

Stuart was not a jazz purist by any means. This photograph of him in a sleeveless T-shirt at the club is a case in point. Pictured with Lynne Segal, it was taken at a gig by Latin Quarter at the Town and Country Club 2 in the Spring of 1989. Latin Quarter had a top 20 hit with their song 'Radio Africa', and its lead singer Steve Skaith, then as now, lived in a shared house with Lynne in north London. The drummer Richie Stevens had played with the British reggae legend Dennis Bovell, and also played on Linton Kwesi Johnson's 1984 album Making History. Steve Skaith recalled in an email: "Richie was a skinny, very young white boy but, out of love for the style, could really play reggae". The photo of Lynne Segal with Stuart was taken by James Swinson, another of Lynne's housemates in the 1970s and 1980s.

Stuart loved to dance, a passion he developed as a young person in Jamaica. The first music he was aware of was mento folk songs in Jamaica like 'Carry Mi Donkey Down There' and 'Daylight Come and Mi Wan Go Home', later popularised by Harry Belafonte. He learned to play the piano and played in jazz bands in the Caribbean. He recounts a story of a more experienced electric guitar player admonishing him for his late arrival and would just shout "count". At Oxford, he played with a small jazz band, a Bajan bass player, and a Jamaican drummer and sax player who worked on the buses. Although he characterised himself as "virtually illiterate in terms of music" and disavowed any expert understanding - not unlike W. E. B. Du Bois - both men were students of the music as bearing "the articulate message of the slave to the world."

He enjoyed parties, and students and colleagues remember him dancing, whether in New York City or at the University of York, where he attended the National Deviancy Conference. Laurie Taylor commented:

"They were wonderful occasions. You know, I can remember Stuart Hall saying to me once - Stuart used to come along as a sort of amused observer - Stuart would say to me, 'These are the best parties I've ever been to'."

Modern jazz mattered to him, and in his memoir with Bill Schwarz, Familiar Stranger, he explains that, in modern jazz, there is a Black modernism in which there is a tension between structure and improvisation – the openness to a new kind of subjectivity that transcends colonial confinements and yet carries the trace of history, albeit in code. He commented: "I loved this tension between structure and freedom… the almost unbearable emotional depths the music seemed able to plumb without yielding an inch to sentimentality". This was what he recognised in Edward Said's idea of a contrapuntal quality, where distinct cultural and historical experiences are interwoven. There is a strong resonance here with James Baldwin, too. Baldwin once commented that he wanted to write as Miles Davis or Ray Charles sounded.

I don't think Stuart ever went that far, but there was something musical in the way that he spoke and expressed himself. For Baldwin, the music carried the trace of the history of enslavement and white supremacy. Stuart called this a "new reservoir of feeling", one that contained "the promise of freedom and the celebratory shout of 'jubilee' embedded in its cadences." He commented on the blues in Familiar Stranger: "It often takes us to a dark place, but in some mysterious way and without easy consolation, it never leaves us there."

In 1968, after living for a period in the US, Stuart published a review of Baldwin's novel Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone in the New Statesman. He reflected on his experience of hearing jazz in New York:

"My most authentic experience of the ghetto mood was the night when, for three hours or more, four avant-garde 'muslins' in a jazz club in the East Village played the message straight at a mixed audience in a series of absolutely unstructured, free-form jazz improvisations. It was a sustained, uncompromising piece of musical provocation."

That sound, he reflected, contained a message that was still yet to be transposed into literature, even literature by the greatest of African American writers.

James Baldwin himself understood this. In his 1951 essay 'Many Thousands Gone' he wrote:

"It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a proactive sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear."

It is not only that white America is able to hear Black experience. In Baldwin's mind, music, jazz and blues tell the story of Black life, albeit in code that is not easily accessible, even to Black listeners.

By the end of the 1960s, Baldwin saw the assassination of three of his close political allies: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. He feared for his life and the cumulative effects on him brought him to the edge of a nervous breakdown. He took up refuge in a hilltop village in southern France called St. Paul de Vence, near Nice, where he lived for the last seventeen years of his life. Black artistic luminaries, like Ray Charles, Josephine Baker, Maya Angelou and Nina Simone visited him there. Miles Davis wrote in his autobiography:

"I remember being in awe of him because he was so goddamn heavy, all those great books he was writing, and so I didn't know what to say to him. Later, I found out that he felt the same way about me. I thought we looked like brothers. I had read his books and loved and respected what he had to say. As I got to know Jimmy, we opened up to each other and became great friends. Every time I went to play Antibes, I would always spend a day or two out at Jimmy's house in St. Paul de Vence. We would just sit in that great big beautiful house of his telling all kinds of stories, lying our asses off."

"It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a proactive sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story." **James Baldwin**

It was in St. Paul in 1979 that Baldwin wrote the essay 'Of Sorrow Songs: the Cross of Redemption'. It is his most searching contemplation on the meaning of jazz. The essay purports to be a review of white American historian James Lincoln Collier's The Making of Jazz, but the book is dismissed summarily for its remoteness from Black experience and critical distance. Baldwin insists that jazz is the medium through which the social death of slavery is confronted and reanimated in sound. He

writes with searing clarity: "This music begins on the auction block." The Atlantic slave trade stripped Africans of their humanity and reduced them to property without history or culture. It is for this reason that Baldwin writes: "whoever cannot face this can never pay the price for the beat which is the key to music, and the key to life."

To truly hear this music, we need to confront the conditions in which it is made and its purpose in restoring a history and an experience to those who have been denied it in the name of the interests of 'civilisation'. Baldwin concludes, prophetically:

"Music is our witness, and our ally. The beat is the confession which recognises, changes, and conquers time. Then, history becomes a garment we can wear, and share, and not a cloak in which to hide; time becomes a friend."

Stuart discovered the blues of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey in Britain, as well as Gospel singers like Mahalia Jackson. Baldwin himself couldn't bear to listen to Bessie Smith in Harlem and had to wait to leave for Europe before really hearing the blues. Stuart liked other music too – 'white' rock music, the Beatles, the Stones, and the Clash, and he loved orchestral music, Beethoven and Brahms, and particularly Vivaldi, Bach, Mozart and Handel and later operas by Mozart, Puccini and Britten.

Gregor McLellan was a student of Stuart's at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham from 1975. In an email, dated 23rd May, 2026, Gregor recalled his first meeting with his supervisor:

"Stuart twinkled somewhat when he heard about [my interest in] Archie Shepp and the politics of avant-garde jazz, mentioning his own love of Miles. But he wasn't too wowed by way out sax screeching and didn't seem to favour, or even follow the likes of Shepp, Albert Ayler, later Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, et al. In fact (if I recollect correctly) he didn't like, possibly didn't even know about, Miles himself, when it came to anything after In a Silent Way, maybe not even that."

Stuart did not broadcast his musicality, Greg remembered:

"I only came across (he kept it quiet) Stuart's own piano playing at a couple of summer parties at his and Cath's house in Prospect Road (Mosely/King's Heath, Birmingham). With a cigarette in his mouth or burning away in an ashtray by his piano, he would do bluesy background tunes whilst students and colleagues either had over-earnest conversations or piled into the grog in the garden, or both. On that instrument, he liked Art Tatum, Bud Powell, Oscar Peterson and Bill Evans best. Before them, Ellington and Basie, naturally; after them, Monk, who of course quickly came to seem rather traditional as 'contemporary' jazzers seared their way through and past the melodic."

Greg remembered his surprise that Stuart was as interested in the prosaic aspects of the jazz lives. He commented on the gigs they went to together in Birmingham during those days:

"As with his tastes in theory and Thinkers, he seemed most at home with 'middle periods', accessible-soulful numbers, and later-career slowdowns and compromises, as with his later affection for the elderly Shepp, settling down for smokey, wistful, classic blues items. We went a couple of times together to the Strathallan (Hotel) jazz venue in Brum, following travelling back to Birmingham from Milton Keynes in Stuart's (and my own) early Open University days. Eddie Lockjaw Davis was one such gig, maybe Hank Mobley the other, both of whom I found unexciting and just treading the boards, no doubt just to keep the rent man from the door... but that was exactly why Stuart found them enjoyable, chuckling away at their evident wide-boy, old-lag tales of more famous people that they had known and indeed had, oh yes, my dear English friends, 'made'; spinning such yarns so as to keep from pushing ahead with the next easy-play number, winking their way through the (short) set."

"Music is our witness, and our ally. The beat is the confession which recognises, changes, and conquers time." **James Baldwin**

In those heady days of the beginning of cultural studies in Birmingham, there was lots of other music too. Greg explained:

"Other than jazz (I'm thinking again of mainly Birmingham days; parties that quite a few Centre people went to), there was reggae (Steel Pulse, Bob Marley of course), and the Soul/Tamla greats of the 60s/early 70s, especially Marvin Gaye's 'Grapevine'. Stuart would often dance with the rest of us at such gatherings, at least for a while. When he was starting to shoot up the recognition ladder in the USA, doing a star turn at some big conference. He returned home, wow, with what I saw, enviously, as something very like that magnificent coat worn on the cover/sleeves of What's Going On? (which possibly was another 'recent' classic that I gave him as indispensable to appreciate...)". What a spectacle indeed of the theorist and interpreter of British society dressed like Marvin Gaye in wide collars, a full-length leather coat."

The only piece that Stuart wrote about music was an album review called 'Calypso Kings', published in The Guardian in 2002. The piece traces how Trinidadian calypso pioneers like Lord Kitchener and Lord Beginner laid the musical and cultural groundwork for subsequent Black British genres, while serving as a vital medium for diaspora identity and socio-political commentary. Stuart wrote:

"Since West Indians first began to settle in Britain in large numbers after the Second World War, a succession of Black musics have transformed the British music scene. Ska, bluebeat and, of course, reggae were followed by rap, dancehall, "jungle", techno and house. But the oldest of these musical forms is the calypso - the music and lyrics associated with the Trinidad Carnival."

The music documented the realities of life in Britain and the quotidian realities of racism and life on the other side of the colour bar:

"nosy English landladies; putting money in the geezer for hot water for a bath; English housewives; dogs; riding the underground; Lyons Corner Houses; the weather."

Stuart Hall might not have written much about music, but he knew that in music the truth of Britain's multicultural life was recorded and encoded.

Stuart wrote a very beautiful piece on the West Indian Front Room, in response to Michael McMillan's art installation. Stuart casts it as a Durkheimian sacred space that, on the one hand, has a spiritual and ritual quality but that also has a disciplining respectability. He wrote:

"I live in a very different sort of space, but the influence of the West Indian Front Room isn't absent from it. The object that most reminds me of it is my piano, the top of which is packed out with photos of other family members and occasions and events."

Greg McLellan, who stayed in touch, remembers the music he gave Stuart through the years of their long friendship.

"I bought 2 or 3 albums for him on certain occasions, such as when I stayed over at the Halls' houses in Mowbray Road (Kilburn) or Ulysses Road, and once when visiting him in St. Mary's Paddington when his kidneys were very bad and he had to stay in to have frequent dialysis. These would either have been LPs, such as one Tatum output that Stuart hadn't heard before, or 'newer' people like Wayne Shorter in his Weather Report phase that I figured Stuart would find satisfying. No doubt he would have 'kept up' a bit had he any kind of leisure time to study and enjoy such developments, but he never did have the time, especially at the Open University when he still lived in Birmingham, working ridiculously long days and nights, and then later after his illness(es) began to wear him out."

Not long after our email exchange, Greg died tragically in a climbing accident in Wales, giving these personal recollections an extra poignancy.

David Morley and I worked together at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he was Professor of Media and Communications, for many years. Dave and Stuart were close friends, and I asked him if he remembered talking to Stuart about music. "Music was a topic which I never discussed with him", Dave recalled:

"I always vaguely knew that he had a Miles Davis fetish, and somebody (though I can't remember who) once told me that Stuart had been known to occasionally do a nice line in jazz piano at home - but I have no idea really what that might mean. The photograph of him, in his T-shirt, did remind me of one occasion when I bumped into him in a late-night club in Hoxton called 'The Bass Clef', at some point in the mid-1980s, when he was there for a Dudu Pukwana gig, so he did have ears. But beyond that, I never saw any sign of music being a big part of his life. In all the many times I visited him at home/had supper there, neither he nor Catherine ever put on any music to listen to."

Music wasn't really at the centre of Stuart Hall's life, but I have often wondered about his access to those reservoirs of feeling and his musicianship. I feel a sadness and deep blues now about that opportunity missed, and I never made time for that conversation about Miles Davis. I imagine him listening to those CDs at the end of his life, those Miles Davis CDs, gifted to him in the Boxed Set, as a way of reciprocating his generous wisdom, because I learned more about Englishness and the chequered tapestry of my own life from Stuart Hall than from anyone else.

The lesson is that we should never wait, or presume that we will be able, to finish a conversation, particularly with the people we admire and are inspired by. He was passionate about taking popular culture as seriously as elite high culture. It is here, in songs and sounds, that the traces of those reservoirs of unconscious feelings about empire can be accessed, as well as what multicultural Britain is becoming. This is the gift of music, particularly the Black music of the African diasporas, be it in any of the major cities of the Black Atlantic - Kingston, New York City or London. For it is in the seemingly ordinary popular arts that culture's blind or silent field can be found. Stuart Hall knew that the double-edged, encoded cyphers of popular culture and music offer a way to comprehend both a barbaric imperial past and assert more convivial postcolonial possibilities now.

Special thanks to Lynne Segal, Steve Skaith, Laurie Taylor, David Morley, Nick Beech and the late Gregor McLellan for sharing their memories of Stuart's music.

Les Back is a writer, sociologist, broadcaster and musician. Next year, in 2027, he will collaborate with Tomorrow's Warriors on a screening of John Akomfrah's film The Stuart Hall Project, with a live soundtrack performance of Miles Davis' music.



Equality and Class: Closing the Disadvantage Gap

Karon Monaghan KC

Can Westminister address Britain's class structure? Barrister Karon Monaghan KC provides an explainer on the socio-economic duty and the government's proposals for a new 'Class Unit'.

The Equality Act 2010 was passed during the final few days of the last Labour government. It had a long gestation with numerous papers and consultations preceding it, but its birth was in the event hurried. Most of its provisions did not come into force until after the incoming coalition government took office and some have not been brought into force at all. One of those not brought fully into force is that which contains the socio-economic duty.

Despite its limitations, the public sector equality duty has proved to be an important means of mainstreaming equality considerations into the functions of public authorities.

The socio-economic duty, or the "class duty", as it has come to be known, is found in the very first section of the Act. The duty requires that when making "decisions of a strategic nature" about how to exercise their functions, specified authorities must have "due regard to the desirability of exercising them in a way that is designed to reduce the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage." The authorities subject to the duty are largely central and local government bodies but vary over the three nations. The duty was brought into force for Scotland in 2018 and for Wales in 2021 but not yet for England. If it were brought into force, it would apply to, among other bodies, government ministers, government departments and local authorities across England.

The Scottish and Welsh governments have issued statutory guidance to authorities on how the duty should be implemented. Scotland's *Fairer Scotland Duty: Guidance for Public Authorities* and Wales' *The Socio-Economic Duty: Statutory Guidance* advise authorities to actively consider at an appropriate level what more they can do to reduce the inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage in any strategic decision-making or policy development context. This must be done well before any decision is made and any decision must be evidence based. Authorities are advised to record their decisions and should publish a written assessment demonstrating compliance with the duty. An important aspect of the guidance contained in both documents is the recognition that the protected characteristics (including race, sex and disability) can interact with class. Intersectional disadvantage, caused by the unique experience of being, for example, a Black woman, is something that is lost in the Act as it presently stands. I come back to this below.

The socio-economic duty is not the only equality duty placed upon public authorities under the Equality Act. Its more muscular counterpart is the better-known public sector equality duty found in section 149 of the Equality Act, brought into force in April 2011. It applies to those authorities falling within the scope of the socio-economic duty but also to very many other public authorities across England, Scotland and Wales. These include, in respect of many of their functions, the BBC, Channel 4 and Ofcom. The public sector equality duty requires the public authorities to which it applies to have "due regard" to the "need" to achieve certain equality outcomes. These outcomes include the advancement of equality of opportunity. This requires that public authorities have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages experienced by racially minoritised people, women, disabled people and members of other protected groups, and the need to encourage members of those groups, and others, to participate in activities in which they are underrepresented. The duty also requires those public authorities to have due regard to the need to foster good relations by tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

The public sector equality duty has its weaknesses. While it is written in a way that might suggest to a casual reader that it requires a public authority to achieve certain outcomes, such as equality of opportunity, like the socio-economic duty, it requires only that "due regard" be given to those aims. "Due regard" encourages a process driven approach to meeting the requirements of the duty. So long as a public authority can convincingly show that it has given proportionate consideration to the impact of its decisions on protected groups, and made some effort to gather evidence, it is likely to establish that it has discharged its duty. Further, like the socio-economic duty, the public sector equality duty does not refer in terms to intersectional discrimination. Nevertheless, the public sector equality duty is much wider and more robust than the socio-economic duty. It requires that due regard be given to the need to achieve the enumerated equality objectives, rather than the more wishful thinking *desirability* aspired to by the socio-economic duty.

Given the differences in scope and content, integrating the two duties is structurally and practically complex. The risk is that the duties operate in silos and both then fail to capture some forms and causes of disadvantage, particularly where that arises from multiple or intersecting characteristics.

Despite its limitations, the public sector equality duty has proved to be an important means of mainstreaming equality considerations into the functions of public authorities. When the duty has been properly implemented, it has caused public authorities to focus on the impact of their decisions on protected groups, positively and negatively. It has also resulted in the near universal introduction of equality impact assessments by public authorities. Equality impact assessments, if properly devised and utilised, require public authorities to follow a rigorous and systematic process for gathering and weighing evidence, and for assessing the equality impact of their policies. The effectiveness of the public sector equality duty is evident from the number of legal cases in which decisions of various public authorities have been quashed, and public authorities made to consider them again in compliance with the duty. The public sector equality duty has, then, proved its weight in bringing public authorities into line.

In September 2026, Bridget Phillipson announced the opening of a new "Class Unit" in government, and the closure of the Social Mobility Commission. The Social Mobility Commission is an independent statutory body established to monitor and promote social mobility. According to Phillipson, bringing the work in-house, so to speak, will ensure greater focus on tackling class and socio-economic disadvantage and result in more resources being available to do so. Phillipson has also said that the government will lead on bringing fully into force the socio-economic duty. Importantly, the Class Unit is to sit within the government's Office for Equality and Opportunity. This office leads on the government's work on equality policy, including women's equality, race equality, disability equality and socio-economic equality. This could be a positive development. It provides an opportunity to bring the need for socio-economic equality to the centre of government policy - making. It also allows for a more integrated approach to the public sector equality and socio-economic duties. There is much evidence demonstrating the relationship between certain protected characteristics – for example, race, sex and disability – and socio-economic disadvantage. This means that coordinating measures to address equality connected with the protected characteristics and socio-economic disadvantage can only be positive. However, the Act itself leaves out of the count intersectional discrimination.

Section 14 of the Equality Act enacts protection against "combined discrimination". Combined discrimination occurs when a person is less favourably treated because of "a combination" of two characteristics. On its face the Act makes combined discrimination unlawful in certain circumstances. Section 14 is not a perfect model for protection against intersectional discrimination, particularly because it is less than comprehensive. Apart from anything else, it only covers two characteristics. This means that a complaint by a man of less favourable treatment because of a combination of his maleness, race and mental ill-health would not be covered by this provision, and nor would a complaint by a woman of less favourable treatment because of a combination of her age, sex and wheelchair use. Nonetheless, it would cover some forms of intersectional discrimination if it were brought into force. However, it has not been brought into force and on 29 October 2026, the government announced that it did not intend to do so. In its present state, then, the Equality Act presumes that we are all mono-characteristic and bringing claims on the basis of our whole selves, class included, is complex if not impossible.

All that said, the proposals to mainstream class disadvantage and bring into force the socio-economic duty are positive. We must hope that it will have a beneficial impact both on socially disadvantaged and working-class people who work in the media and on the portrayal of social disadvantage and working-class life in the media. There is no doubt that this is necessary.

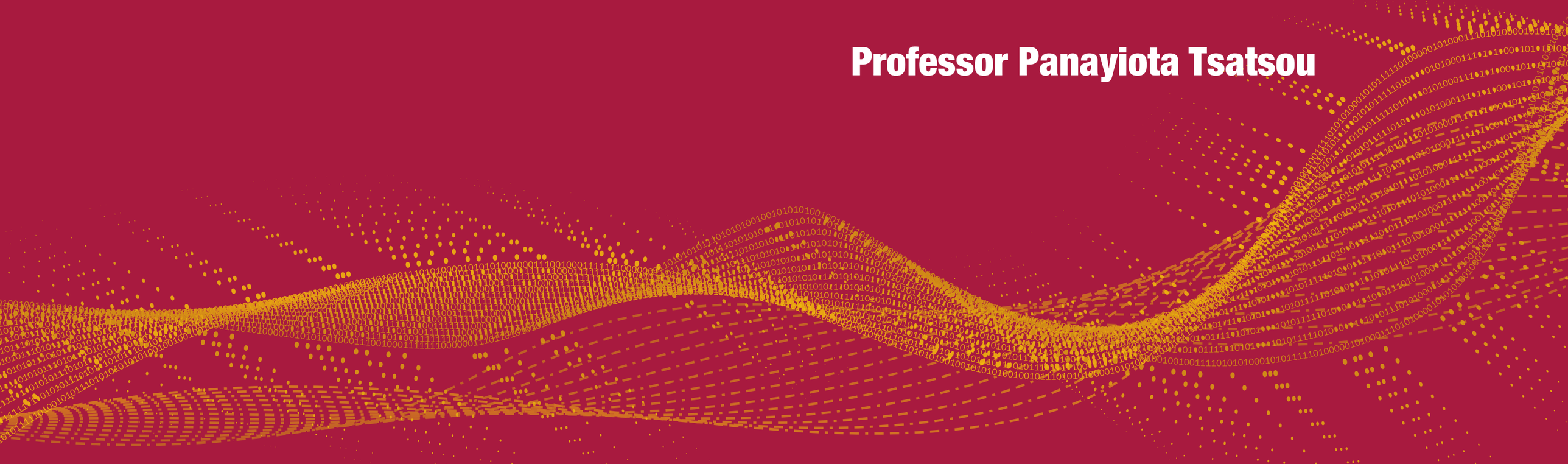
Research commissioned by the Sir Lenny Henry Centre has shown that women of colour, particularly those from working class backgrounds, sometimes face the most severe obstacles, as well as bullying, in UK TV newsrooms (*Breaking: The Experience of Racially Minoritised People Working in UK TV Newsrooms* (Feb 2026), R. Kachroo and E. Tomsett). Research has also shown that the portrayal of marginalised groups, including of working-class people, remains limited, stereotypical, and reductive (*Authentic Portrayal in UK Media Insights from Expert Panels on Race, Disability, and Class* (2025), S. Bristol-Abbott, P. Tsatsou, N.M. Emmanuel). There is no doubt that the media needs to change and a comprehensive and intersectional approach to disadvantage and discrimination could help achieve that. There is some way travelled but some way to go.

Karon Monaghan KC is a barrister and on the Advisory Board for the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity.

BEYOND THE DIGITAL DEFAULT:

Why Media Diversity Fails Without Intersectional Digital Inclusion

Professor Panayiota Tsatsou



Introduction: The Invisible Exclusion

When we talk about diversity in UK media, our industry conversations naturally focus on representation: who is on screen, who is in the newsrooms, and who controls the production budgets. Thanks to the tireless work of advocacy networks and journals like Representology, media executives are required to understand that diversity is not a numbers game, but a core structural imperative. Yet a massive, systemic blind spot remains right at the centre of the industry's digital revolution (and evolution).

As broadcasters, streaming platforms and public service providers move in favour of a "digital-by-default" future, millions of citizens are being quietly locked out of the socio-technical and culturally sounding conversation. Indicatively, in its response to the public consultation on DCMS's *Watch this Space: A New Strategic Direction for UK media*, the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity stresses the likely adverse impact on marginalised communities, including older people. In our rush to innovate, the media industry has built its new digital ecosystem around a high-risk aspiration: the universal, default user standard. We design content pipelines, user interfaces, app updates and audience engagement strategies under the assumption that the consumer is young, tech-savvy, fully sighted and physically able.

This oversight is causing an unprecedented crisis of exclusion for our oldest and most vulnerable populations. According to recent evidence from the Good Things Foundation (2026), 34 million adults are online with some barriers or vulnerabilities and a staggering 2.2 million are offline, with 66% of those left offline being aged 65 and over and 48% of those left offline being in ill health. When a public service broadcaster or commercial television network makes services and new forms of content increasingly accessible through complex, un-optimised digital applications, it is not merely changing its delivery format. If our audience cannot seamlessly navigate the digital gateway, our industry's broader commitments to creative diversity and social inclusion are rendered meaningless.

The Danger of the Single Category: Why Intersectionality Matters

To act in the direction of addressing these risks, media professionals must discard reductive, single-layered approaches to audience demographics. Too often, industry diversity toolkits treat "the elderly" or "the disabled" as separate, tidy boxes to be checked off independently. In the real world, human vulnerability does not operate in silos - it compounds.

Our long-standing research at the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity demonstrates the importance of research being anchored to intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), as inequalities are shaped by the sharp intersection of multiple identity traits — including ethnic minority background, physical or mental disability, age, social class, gender and others (Bristol-Abbott et al., 2025; Butt & Tomsett, 2025; Emmanuel & Tsatsou, 2025; Jones & Tomsett, 2024; Kachroo & Tomsett, 2026; Tsatsou et al., 2024). When an individual embodies multiple layers of marginalisation, their exclusion from the digital realm deepens exponentially.

Consider the everyday reality of audiences facing interesting vulnerabilities. For these citizens, interacting with a modern streaming service or a local authority news portal is often an exhausting, multi-layered hurdle. An older person dealing with age-related cognitive decline or fine-motor limits cannot easily interact with a cluttered mobile interface. If they also face place-based stigma, low socio-economic status or language barriers, their ability to find informal support diminishes. By ignoring these intersecting realities, technology developers and media organisations are continuously faced with a deeply exclusionary hierarchy.

Mapping the Empirical Reality: Duality Across Four Life Domains

I, with colleagues, engaged in a 2024 qualitative social lab study (Tsatsou et all, 2026, in press) with adults aged between 61 and 84, living with intersecting visible and non-visible disabilities (such as severe visual impairments, hearing loss or dyslexia), and who come from diverse, non-white ethnic backgrounds, including Asian and Black Caribbean communities.

This study found that older adults with intersecting vulnerabilities do not experience the "digital good" as a fixed or universal condition. Instead, their relationship with digital systems is defined by an intense, context-dependent duality — a constant, painful negotiation between online convenience and severe socio-technical risks. When we mapped their experiences across four key domains of everyday life, a vivid picture of structural exclusion emerged.

1.
Healthcare Services: System-Based Failure vs App Utility

In the domain of digital health, participants' narratives fluctuated between appreciation and severe alienation. While some recognized the functional utility of tools like the NHS App for managing prescriptions or confirming appointments, many encountered absolute barriers.

Crucially, our findings demonstrate that these difficulties do not stem from simple personal skill deficits but from system-based design failures embedded in digital health systems. Cluttered interfaces and inaccessible visual layouts create a massive cognitive load. This tracks an industry-wide problem: when media and health platforms move to "digital-by-default" models without auditing for sensory disabilities, they build physical and cognitive walls around essential services.

2.
Social Welfare Services: The Disconnection of the "Digital Lifeline"

During the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, technology was frequently praised as a benevolent lifeline that kept communities connected. However, our research surfaces a deeply unsettling undercurrent.

Participants recounted immense frustration and alienation when attempting to navigate online local authority websites and digital benefit forms. The rapid, unyielding pace of technological change — frequently framed by tech companies as "progress" — operates in reality as an aggressive exclusionary force for older adults with limited literacy or sensory impairments. Instead of delivering social welfare, these digital portals exacerbate isolation, turning an institutional safety net into a source of profound psychological distress.

3.
Social Media and Community Networks: Disempowerment and Surveillance

The most overwhelmingly negative data emerged in the domain of online social networking. While a small minority noted the benefit of reconnecting with old friends, these positive accounts were completely overshadowed by intense anxiety regarding privacy, security and algorithmic manipulation.

Participants discursively portrayed themselves as entirely disempowered users with restricted agency, viewing platforms like Facebook as invasive, unsafe and "easy to hack". They expressed acute scepticism toward the aggressive commercialisation of social networks, pointing out that toxic political messaging and relentless pop-up sales adverts actively undermined their emotional well-being.

Furthermore, participants highlighted the crushing social pressure of idealised self-presentation online (describing it as "boasting" or "look at me" behaviour), which further alienated them from digital community spaces. Social media does not deliver meaningful social connection for this demographic; it reinforces an internalised sense of ageism, ableism and cultural exclusion.

4.
Education and Information Seeking: The Oasis of Informal Learning

In stark contrast to the fields of health, welfare and social networking, the domain of online education and training emerged as a remarkably positive space. Participants did not articulate negative or fearful discourses here - instead, they viewed search engines and digital platforms as highly convenient tools for everyday knowledge enhancement.

This study found that older adults with intersecting vulnerabilities do not experience the "digital good" as a fixed or universal condition.

Crucially, their digital good was not achieved through formal, institutional academic courses but through self-directed, informal and interest-driven learning pathways, such as watching YouTube tutorials for DIY skills, researching products or navigating digital maps.

In this domain, participants acted as highly agentic, self-efficacious consumers, showing a profound willingness to engage when the practical utility was clear and unmarred by extractive corporate gatekeeping.

The Crucial Gaps: Scepticism, Confusion and 'Warm Experts'

When we look beneath these domain-specific findings, two massive structural crises emerge that directly challenge how the media industry approaches its audience:

The Illusion of Critical Literacy

The study showed that older adults with intersecting vulnerabilities possess a sharp, highly developed scepticism regarding the authenticity of online information. They are acutely aware of the dangers of fake news, data misuse and digital manipulation, frequently warning that "*you can't believe everything that's written on the internet*".

However, this empirical work exposes a tragic paradox: this critical awareness is entirely disconnected from the functional skillset needed to safely navigate these risks. As older people with intersecting vulnerabilities lack the tools or training to actively verify sources or cross-check content, their critical literacy manifests as total avoidance and disengagement rather than empowered participation.

This suggests that they are likely not to read and/or trust online news altogether. For the media sector, this means that an entire demographic of diverse citizens is completely retreating from the digital public sphere out of self-defence.

The Overreliance on Overstretched Networks

When digital systems inevitably fail or confuse these users, they express an overwhelming, non-negotiable preference for human mediation: "*I would rather speak to a real person*". They are fundamentally hostile to corporate chatbots and automated AI systems, not least echoing critiques of how automated decision-making systems reinforce inequalities and areas of injustice (Eubanks, 2018).

Since public and corporate institutions have systematically dismantled face-to-face customer support, these vulnerable consumers are forced to rely on informal, localised networks of support — family, friends, and neighbours — frequently referred to as "warm experts".

However, this research reveals that this informal safety net is heavily fragmented and highly unreliable. Grandchildren are often "too fast" to actually teach skills and neighbours are "busy people". By forcing older adults to depend on the reluctant charity of their immediate circles for basic digital media access, the media industry is called to encounter and resolve these areas of systemic precarity into its future-rolling audience distribution models immediately.

The Internalised Burden: Shifting Corporate Blame Inward

Perhaps the most damaging and urgent finding from the analysis above is what I and colleagues have termed the individualisation of responsibility within modern digital governance.

When older, minoritised and disabled adults encounter a structural or accessibility barrier online — such as a streaming application crashing or an online form rejecting their input — they do not blame the multi-billion-pound media conglomerates or the software engineers who designed the system. Instead, they discursively turn the blame inward, placing the entire moral, cognitive and practical failure upon themselves.

Throughout our study, participants consistently used deeply self-deprecating language, building their personal narratives around an internalised sense of personal deficit: *"I don't understand these gigabytes... that goes right over my head*," or "*We just have to struggle on ourselves*". They treat an exclusionary corporate architecture as an inevitable symptom of their own aging or impairment.

This internalised guilt represents a profound victory for neoliberal platform governmentality (Mavelli & Cerella, 2025). By framing systemic engineering exclusions as "personal digital literacy gaps," tech developers and media operators have successfully offloaded the economic and operational costs of user support onto the shoulders of the most vulnerable consumers in our society.

Media diversity professionals and regulators must recognise this profound discursive tension. We cannot allow the celebratory industry narrative of "building personal digital resilience" to act as a shield for corporate unaccountability and state neglect.

Implications and Rationale for Media Diversity Professionals

These empirical insights carry profound implications for the future of the UK media industry, particularly as we commemorate the milestone tenth issue of Representology. Industry professionals must confront two core realities:

When digital systems inevitably fail or confuse users, they express an overwhelming, non-negotiable preference for human mediation.

1.
Rejecting the extractive "single box" framework

Media organisations must discard any reductive, single-layered demographic categories that, more often than not, prevent effective diversity policies. Treating "age", "ethnicity" or "disability" as isolated corporate compliance boxes ignores the compounding reality of intersectional precarity.

If an organisation claims to be diverse because it commissions content representing ethnic minorities but delivers that content through a digital platform that is completely inaccessible to an older, disabled person from that same minority community, it is practicing an automated form of cultural erasure. Diversity policy cannot be separated from digital distribution architecture.

2.
Auditing for "adverse digital incorporation"

As media companies increasingly incorporate big data analytics, automated recommender algorithms and digital content pipelines, they must actively audit their ecosystems for what development scholar Richard Heeks (2022) terms "adverse digital incorporation".

We must ask ourselves hard, structural questions: Are we bringing minoritised and older audiences into our digital spaces on equal, empowering terms? Or are we forcing them onto opaque platforms simply to extract their attention, expose them to hyper-commercialized advertising and alienate them through complex, insecure architectures?

True media equity means ensuring that a user's engagement with digital media yields tangible, positive offline outcomes — strengthening their social capital, community belonging and civic voice — rather than compounding their societal vulnerability.

Conclusion: A Manifesto for Change

Technology is never neutral - it is an active, material manifestation of power relations. When the UK media industry is faced with the prospect of a "digital default", lacking functioning models for intersecting vulnerabilities, it actively participates in the construction of absence — the systematic erasure of alternative ways of knowing, being, and remembering.

The path forward requires public service broadcasters, commercial networks and tech platforms to shift from an individualistic deficit model to a framework of collective, institutional responsibility. The realisation of the "digital good" must not be made contingent on the exhausting, under-supported resilience of the individual user.

True media diversity demands equitable digital infrastructures, absolute corporate accountability and software design guided from day one by vulnerability-sensitive considerations. It is time for our industry to stop forcing its most vulnerable citizens to struggle on alone. The gateway to our digital society must be built wide enough for all of us to pass through.

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CLARA'S HEART: TRACING LEGACY, BELONGING AND THE WOMEN WHO REFUSE TO BE DEFINED BY LIMITS

Michelle Alexis



Grandma Clara

When I started making Clara's Heart, I had absolutely no idea what a delight I was unearthing.

Most sensible people probably spend years learning how to make documentaries. In true Michelle style, I dived straight in. What began as curiosity about my grandmother Clara's journey from St Vincent to Wales quickly became something much bigger. It became a story about belonging, migration, resilience, womanhood and community. It became a celebration of the women around me, who are quietly (and not so quietly) transforming lives, industries and futures.

Looking back, one of the most profound things I learned was that stories are everywhere. We walk past extraordinary people every day without necessarily knowing the depth of what they have overcome or achieved. As a community, we are often very good at discussing disadvantage, but not always as good at celebrating excellence. I wanted Clara's Heart to redress that balance.

The project was inspired by a box of family history left to me by my late Uncle James. True to form, he left a cheeky note on it that read: "Michelle, you have always been nosey, so here is our family business." Inside were birth certificates, marriage certificates, letters and fragments of lives that stretched across oceans and generations. It was a treasure chest of migration, love, loss and survival.

That box led to a spontaneous trip to St Vincent with my son Isaiah. We met family members we had never met before, yet we felt completely embraced by them. We walked where my father had walked, stood where previous generations had stood and discovered a sense of belonging that neither of us realised we had been searching for.

We came home feeling, quite honestly, like proud peacocks.

That journey made me think deeply about my grandmother Clara and other women of the Windrush Generation. We often hear about Windrush through the lens of hardship, discrimination and sacrifice. Those realities matter and should never be forgotten but I also wanted to explore legacy. What happened because those women came? What businesses did they build? What communities did they sustain? What generations did they inspire?

My grandmother arrived in Wales in the 1950s and ran guest houses in Butetown. Like many Windrush women, she was entrepreneurial, resourceful and determined. She helped build an economy and a community while simultaneously building a future for her family. Too often, the contribution of Windrush women is overshadowed by wider narratives, yet their labour, leadership and courage continue to shape Wales and the rest of the UK today.

The strong female Windrush legacy did not end with their generation. It lives through us.

One of the greatest joys of creating this documentary was interviewing women whose families came to Wales from across the globe. Their roots stretch to Somalia, Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica, the United States and beyond. On the surface, their stories look different. Yet beneath them run common themes of migration, aspiration, identity, resilience and determination.

As I listened to these women, I became increasingly aware of the intersections between race, migration, gender and class. These are not abstract academic concepts. They are lived realities.

Many of the women spoke about navigating spaces where they were the first, or one of very few people, who looked like them. Others reflected on balancing cultural expectations with ambition. Some described experiences of being underestimated because of their gender, race or class background. Yet, what struck me most was not the barriers themselves, but the creativity and persistence with which they navigated them.

Growing up in Butetown prepared many of us for exactly that.

Butetown is one of the most multicultural communities in Wales, and it has often been misunderstood or portrayed negatively. Like many working-class communities around the world, its challenges are well documented. Less frequently discussed are its strengths: the emotional intelligence, adaptability, cultural fluency and resilience that come from growing up in a place where many cultures, languages and traditions coexist.

Despite being under-resourced, people thrive.

That was one of the central messages I wanted this documentary to communicate.

Each interview offered lessons that stayed with me long after the filming ended. A few of the interviewees shared some gems:

Monique's story was particularly powerful. An internationally recognised DJ, she made the unexpected decision to take up boxing to support her mental wellbeing. What started as a tool for self-care evolved into a professional boxing career. Her advice was simple but profound: do not put yourself in a box.

There is something deeply liberating about that message, particularly for women of colour who are often told, explicitly or implicitly, who they should be. Monique's journey challenges the idea that people must choose one identity, one talent or one pathway. We are allowed to evolve.

Orienne, a specialist counsellor, spoke eloquently about the importance of representation within therapeutic services. Her reflections reminded me that visibility is not simply symbolic; it can transform outcomes. When people see themselves reflected in professionals who understand aspects of their lived experience, trust can be built more quickly and authentically.

Michelle, who works in the corporate sector, shared advice that resonated strongly with me: just try things. She pursued higher education later in life, obtaining a psychology degree while working full-time. Her story was a powerful reminder that personal development is not linear and that potential does not come with an expiry date.

Kyla's entrepreneurial journey was equally inspiring. She identified a gap in support for young people's mental health and wellbeing and built a successful business around meeting that need. Her story reinforced something I have observed throughout my own career: some of the most impactful innovations emerge from people who are deeply connected to the communities they serve.

Then there is Jade, who launched a fashion business during lockdown. While many people saw uncertainty, she saw possibility. Her advice: to surround yourself with the right people, reflecting a truth that emerged repeatedly throughout these interviews. Success is rarely an individual achievement. It is usually rooted in networks of support, encouragement and opportunity.

Collectively, these women offered more than career advice. They challenged assumptions about who gets to lead, who gets to succeed and what success should look like.

As a documentary maker, I discovered that my role was not simply to ask questions. It was to listen. Really listen.

In a world increasingly dominated by short attention spans and quick judgments, there is something transformative about creating space for people to tell their stories fully. Again and again, I watched women reveal experiences that were simultaneously deeply personal and universally relatable.

Filming often felt magical. Not because everything was perfect, but because something special happens when people feel seen.

I also learned a great deal about myself during the process. Professionally, I have spent years working in leadership, inclusion and organisational change. I have worked across policy, governance and strategy. Yet, documentary-making required a different kind of vulnerability. It asked me to share my own journey and connection to the story.

In doing so, I realised how much of my own life had been shaped by strong women.

My late mother, Margaret, remains a constant source of inspiration. Her resilience, work ethic and determination helped form the foundations upon which I have built my life. She is one of many women whose influence can be found throughout Clara's Heart. I also watched her care for my father, Carl, who had Sickle Cell Anaemia, for which I fundraise now and attempt to raise awareness, as I also have the trait.

The documentary is ultimately a love letter to those women.

I am particularly proud that the work has been endorsed by Women's Equality Network Wales, an organisation committed to advancing gender equality and amplifying women's voices. That endorsement felt significant because the project is rooted in exactly those principles: representation, visibility and creating space for women's experiences to be recognised and celebrated.

'WEN Wales is proud to support Michelle Alexis in shining a light on the achievements and contributions of the women of Butetown and the Windrush generation in Wales. Women like Michelle's grandmother Clara made an enormous contribution to Welsh life — to our economy, communities and public services — as workers, entrepreneurs, carers and community leaders, often while navigating both racial and gender inequality. Yet the contribution of Black and ethnic minority women has too often been overlooked in the stories we tell about Wales. This documentary is an important opportunity to celebrate these women, hear their voices and ensure their contribution is recognised as part of our shared history.'

Anna Brown, Chief Executive Officer / Prif Swyddog Gweithredol, Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales / Rhwydwaith Cydraddoldeb Menywod (RhCM) Cymru

Most importantly, I hope Clara's Heart encourages people to look at their own histories differently.

Whether your family came from St Vincent, Somalia, Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica, Wales, or anywhere else, there is value in understanding where you come from. Heritage is a strength that can be drawn upon, don't allow anyone to make that narrative negative. Not the media, politicians, social media etc. Nobody can take this inner strength away from you.

The women featured in this documentary remind us that migration is not simply movement across borders. It is the transfer of knowledge, ambition, culture and possibility. It is the foundation upon which future generations build.

My grandmother Clara could not have imagined this documentary existing when she arrived in Wales. Yet, her courage made it possible. That is the true heart of this story.

It is a story about women who crossed oceans, broke barriers, built businesses, nurtured communities and created opportunities for those who followed. It is a story about pride, perseverance and possibility.

And, above all, it is a reminder that we are not merely surviving. We are thriving.



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THE SPLIT UP and Normalising the 'Other'

Nina Robinson

A night of 'South Asian Creativity' at the BBC evokes thoughts of Edward Said and Toni Morrison for former staffer and Representology podcast host Nina Robinson

My text to a former BBC colleague who, like me, is a woman of South Asian heritage:



Exactness matters in authentic portrayal - as anyone who has ever watched Eastenders knows, those South Asian families who moved in and out of Albert Square seemed to sometimes be a mish-mash of religions and cultures which did not ring true to those who knew.

It was an evening to celebrate South Asian creativity, with a panel of cast and crew from the new BBC drama, *The Split Up*. This is a six-parter, which has been hailed as "shifting the diversity dial" in media portrayals of race – an actual real, authentic representation for the better! (Kahn, 2026) It centres on a rich family who own a law firm in Manchester and who happen to be South Asian – Hindu Punjabi to be exact. Exactness matters in authentic portrayal - as anyone who has ever watched Eastenders knows, those South Asian families who moved in and out of Albert Square seemed to sometimes be a mish-mash of religions and cultures which did not ring true to those who knew. One of *The Split Up*'s panellists for the BBC event, writer Ursula Rani Sarma, called it 'cultural specificity', which occurs when there are many people working on the production who know and understand the culture. They are in the room as writers, execs and commissioners, as well as actors. This was the case for *The Split Up* – a groundbreaking moment, which Rani Sarma said was a working environment she had previously only dreamed of. She said a couple of times what a dream it was for her to work on the show.

Kishan Law is the family law firm upon which the drama centres, specialising in divorce law. It's main character is the ambitious Aria (Ritu Arya) - a thirty-something barrister who is about to marry her long-term partner Neal (Danny Ashok), until her hunky old flame Luke (Dimitri Leonidas) arrives on the scene. It has intriguing storylines, the actors have chemistry and it's - on the whole - pretty believable, without any jarring misrepresentations. The law firm was built from nothing by the father, Dhruv, who is played by Sanjeev Bhaskar - one of the most familiar brown faces in Britain, whose credits include the comedy shows *Goodness Gracious Me*, *The Kumars at No. 42*, and dramas *The Indian Doctor* and *Unforgotten*). Bhaskar was in attendance as a panellist and spoke on the importance of having a drama set in the culture, rather than about the culture. Various marriage ceremonies that are depicted across several episodes of The Split Up, are not explained and are, instead, normalised as part of the tapestry of the drama. Those universal human emotions of love, betrayal and greed unite and, ultimately, connect audiences to the characters, not what is differentiated or exoticised.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is an essential starting point from which to understand the media's representation of race. Said discussed how the West views the East as the 'Orient' - mysterious, exotic, suspicious and inferior. It constructs 'otherness' through emphasising difference; for example, through repeated portrayals of forced arranged marriages, cousin marriage or 'honour'-based violence.

Bhaskar revealed that it was in that same BBC Radio Theatre, 30 years ago, that they had first piloted *Goodness Gracious Me* to a grand audience of about 12 people. They could never have known then what a huge hit it was going to be – crossing over into mainstream British consciousness, and whose hilarious sketches continue to delight audiences on socials and YouTube today. Bhaskar explained how the success of GGM came from a creative process rooted in lived experience, rather than concerns as to whether white audiences would 'get it'. He gave the example of a GGM phrase which entered the popular lexicon: 'Kiss My Chuddies.' No explanation, still funny.

Racial representation that primarily caters for an assumed white audience has continually thwarted attempts at authentic portrayal. Stories viewed through a 'white lens' were exposed by the author Toni Morrison, who showed how narratives were dominated by this perspective in her 1992 essay 'Playing in the Dark'. Toni Morrison challenged an unquestioned reliance on the white lens as the default baseline from which all is assessed, conveyed and viewed (Yancy, 2016). Morrison described it as:

"An effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (Morrison, 2007).

For *The Split Up*'s writer, Rani Sarma, who is of Indian-Irish heritage and whose long-established career includes an adaptation of Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* for the Birmingham Rep, removing the white lens was emotional. She described working with British Asian writers Sonali Bhattacharyya, Kaamil Shah and Sumerah Srivastav as "a kind of therapy" during which they both "laughed and cried" together.

"It is one thing to be invited to sit at the table, but it is another to actually make the dinner," she said.



BBC panel on The Split Up L-R: Bryony Arnold, Danny Ashok, Aysha Kala, Sanjeev Bhaskar, Ursula Rani Sarma, Nawfal Faizullah

This sentence resonates for many Black and Brown people who work inside media institutions like the BBC. This includes me, as I worked for over 15 years as a journalist for the BBC World Service. My first staff job at BBC Radio 1's *Newsbeat* coincided with Director General Greg Dyke calling the organisation "hideously white", amidst a commitment to champion a workforce that was more representative of contemporary Britain. I thought it was forward-thinking and I believed the words, repeated by editors and highly paid managers. Yet, the same people kept being groomed for management positions and were recognisable as a 'BBC type' – white, male, with RP English, privately educated. Those people who looked more like me - female, regional accented, Brown - had to work harder, achieve more, be outstanding and yet they still, in the main, did not progress.

Media academic Dr Omega Douglas calls the experience an "inclusion paradox" in an essay which recounted interviews with racially diverse media workers (Douglas, 2022). The 'paradox' occurs when a media organisation is saying a lot about their efforts and commitment to diversity but actually does very little to correct systemic biases. Such performative (or thin) diversity efforts are mentally damaging. It's a form of 'gaslighting', in a way - extractive of your racial capital, which ultimately leads to an array of internal conflicts. You might be weighing up your complicity in contributing to damaging portrayals, such as writing in 'token characters' or reinforcing stereotypes, whilst protecting your career and ability to, one day, have

The 'paradox' occurs when a media organisation is saying a lot about their efforts and commitment to diversity but actually does very little to correct systemic biases.





BBC Director General Matt Brittin announced that *The Split Up* was being commissioned for a second season. He said the BBC were looking to do "more culturally specific stories" as well as finding and bringing in talent and backing bold ideas



Follow-up panel discussion on South Asian voices at the BBC featuring L-R; Dame Meera Syal, Sanjeev Bhaskar, Asim Chaudhry, Nikita Kanda, Shabaz Ali, Varada Sethu and Jessica Schibli.

the power and authority to work and create, within an inclusive culture and system. It often never happens, so the fact that it has for *The Split Up* is to be noted as significant.

The Split Up took four years to get onto our screens, with BBC drama budgets estimated to be around £2 million per episode (Ravindran, 2024). It's a follow-on from *The Split*, starring Nicola Walker and written by Abi Morgan, which I also loved, and which was a hit that ran for three seasons, with a special filmed in Barcelona.

BBC Drama Commissioning Editor Nawfal Faizullah described *The Split Up* as being part of "our mission" to address diversity behind the camera, as he detailed how the casting director, composer and two directors were from diverse backgrounds in a concerted effort to recruit beyond the usual circles. It was also mentioned how they opened up the production for two shadow directors in order to create pathways into the industry.

I caught Faizullah after the panel and recounted an observation that had occurred to me as they were speaking. This was to challenge the BBC on its claim for taking creative risk in championing bold ideas by providing context to the commissioning decision. The context was a media landscape of streamers (Netflix, Prime etc) which had already proven the success of centralising South Asian women in shows like *Bridgerton*, *Never Have I Ever/Best of the Best*, *One Day* - I wondered whether the BBC would have commissioned *The Split Up* if these other dramas had not preceded it. Faizullah did not see any connection, but I wanted to make the point that, as a public sector broadcaster, with diversity enshrined into its charter, the BBC should have been at the forefront of investing in prime-time diverse portrayals, long before the commercial platforms. What was it, I wondered, about the BBC, that had prevented them from doing it before?

It is a question of some importance, given the point made by Dame Meera Syal in a follow-up panel discussion, which began with a video showing an array of Brown faces, past and present, who had featured on the BBC (I was surprised that the presenter and Bake-Off star Nadiya Hussein was not included in the compilation video, perhaps because of her criticisms of the BBC?).

Syal, who has worked with the BBC extensively over many decades on shows, such as *My Sister Wife* in 1992, on the subject of Pakistani marriage, *Goodness Gracious Me*, alongside her future husband Sanjeev Bhaskar, and later as the grandmother in *The Kumars at No. 42*. She's also an author and wrote the screenplay for the film, *Bhaji on the Beach*. She reflected on the initial success of GGM, which lasted three seasons, but which lost the momentum due to a period of inactivity, nothingness, absence, tumbleweed. No follow-up invitations, no request to capitalise on its success by the gatekeepers. This is where the BBC stumbles. Syal explained that never taking advantage of the momentum garnered by a show meant that the next time another programme was announced, those people working on it often had to start again from scratch. This is where the burden of representation is placed heavily on new shoulders, time and again. By not laying down permanent pathways, pipelines and networks, momentum was always lost, with no historical memory of what had happened before. We end up working in silos and wondering why things always seem to stay the same.

This was why I couldn't describe the evening as fun, although I was privileged to meet the wonderful actress, Shobu Kapoor, who played the wife to Adil Ray's lead character in *Citizen Khan*. My daughter still watches the series on iPlayer - it ran for five seasons from 2012-2016 and then stopped. The BBC's longest running sitcom still in production is *Not Going Out*, going for 20 years and onto its 15th season.

You can watch *The Split Up* on BBC iPlayer.

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Nina Robinson is a former BBC staff member and host of the new Representology podcast. Follow her on LinkedIn and Instagram



The Battle of Cable Street and building solidarity today

Sophia Purdy-Moore

Sophia Purdy-Moore from the Runnymede Trust discusses celebrating the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Cable Street, when thousands of East Londoners mobilised against Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, showing what it can teach us about building solidarity within and across communities today.

Remembering Cable Street

On 4th October 1936, long-established working-class communities and recently arrived migrant communities to London's East End, trade unionists and dock workers, stood in their thousands with local Jewish communities to drive out Oswald Mosley's antisemitic Blackshirts from the local area. In today's context, when far-right politics and racist violence are becoming normalised, The Battle of Cable Street offers a hopeful vignette of what becomes possible when we choose unity over division.

On its 90th anniversary, *The Strength Between Us* campaign, curated by the racial justice think tank Runnymede Trust and creative agency On Road, launched as a two-day event at East London's Whitechapel Gallery, bringing together artists, historians and campaigners for a series of conversations, screenings, workshops and performances to celebrate and learn from historical and contemporary movements resisting racism.

The weekend's programme brought this and other histories of resistance to life. The *Cursed Objects* live podcast, hosted by cultural historian Dr Kasia Tomasiewicz and writer Dan Hancox, used a commemorative Cable Street tea towel to explore material culture and the ways we remember political struggle. They also spoke on the importance of the Cable Street mural, familiar to generations of East Londoners, in preserving this history. Actor Steven Berkoff's film, *They Shall Not Pass* (2021), which features archival footage of the Battle of Cable Street, gave an account of the confrontation and the people behind it. Meanwhile, video collective Reel News presented footage documenting wider struggles for justice, and the Radical Film School curated a selection of independent films documenting contemporary and international movements.



Reflecting on the weekend, Richard Martin, Director of Participation at the Whitechapel Gallery, said:

"It's the contemporary resonances and contradictions surrounding Cable Street that seem most important to explore today - how it offers a model for cross-community alliances and collective resistance at a time when the far right is again on the march, and how the anniversary provides an ideal moment to bring people together to highlight current intersections of artistic and activist practices. The East End continues to be a target because of the very things that make it special - its diversity, its creativity, its commitment to resistance - and the chance to celebrate this area and its many communities underpinned the programme."

Art as a tool for progress

Across the programme, art offered ways to open and connect conversations about solidarity and resistance. The *East Mend* banner, created by artist Aya Haider in collaboration with an intergenerational community group at Bethnal Green's Oxford House, served as a centrepiece in the gallery's Assembly Room. Drawing on local stories of working-class organising and resistance to the far right, the banner brings the East End's textile heritage into conversation with the identities and experiences of its diverse communities today, offering a creative, material expression of the shared labour solidarity requires.

In a panel chaired by *Representology* editor K Biswas, Maxine Thomas-Asante and screenwriter Yassmin Abdel-Magied explored the important role of art and culture in challenging injustice and building community. They stressed the fundamental need for shared spaces and everyday acts of connection in bringing people together around common causes. Embodying this ethos, Whitechapel Gallery's Alba Caffè hosted an anti-fascist pasta party, serving free bowls of cheesy, buttery pasta to a queue of people which stretched round the block. This was inspired by Italy's *pastasciutta antifascista* from 1943, when the Cervi farming family shared pasta with their entire town to celebrate the downfall of fascist leader Benito Mussolini, who had discouraged the consumption of the quintessential Italian dish. This history reminds us that solidarity grows through everyday encounters such as breaking bread together. Making space for joy and connection is essential to building resilient, sustainable communities and movements.

Poets Lara Grace Ilori, Joshua Aketse-Entsie and Mr Reed from Poetic Unity, a charity that uses poetry as a tool for connection and empowerment, put this into practice. They shared their experiences as young Black people living in contemporary Britain through moving and, at times, humorous performances. The crowd left energised in the wake of Ilori's interactive poem *Good Trouble*, a nod to American civil rights leader John Lewis's promotion of the spirit needed to confront power and create change. Artist, educator and carnivalist Linett Kamala brought the weekend to a close with a listening session. She connected personal and collective histories of migration, joy and resistance, reflecting on her Jamaican parents' arrival to the UK in the late 1950s and their experiences of settling in Notting Hill. Placing songs in conversation with each other, she traced continuities in the challenges and triumphs of Black diasporic life and cultural expression across generations. Jimmy Cliff's heartrending *Many Rivers to Cross* (1969) spoke to the unfinished struggle for freedom, before Public Enemy's *Fight the Power* (1989) brought the session to an energising close with its timely call to keep challenging the unjust *status quo*.

Learning from past struggles

Sunday's panel discussion featured journalist and historian Taj Ali, organiser Joshua Virasami and Samira Ali of Women Against the Far Right. The conversation, chaired by the Runnymede Trust CEO Dr Shabna Begum, explored histories of anti-racist organising and the work required to confront the far right today.

On lessons from Cable Street, Taj Ali urged the audience to remember that "it wasn't the state or police who made our communities safer, it was members of the local community." Indeed, the confrontation on the day was the culmination of the slower, less visible work of relationship building and political education. This is what's required to enable people to come together across differences and confront a movement built on division. Panellists connected Cable Street to other, overlapping movements, such as the Asian Youth Movement, miners' strikes and Black Caribbean community defence campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s. These histories reflect the importance of understanding our shared interests and organising around them.

Summoning cultural theorist Stuart Hall, Joshua Virasami added: "We can look to the past but need to grapple with the conjuncture." This is an important lesson - indeed, historical lessons can and do strengthen movements, but it is imperative that each generation engages with, and innovates for, the unique challenges they face.

Workshops offered practical ways to take that work forward. The Advocacy Academy, which supports young people to build campaigns, discussed their involvement in the Buy Back Brixton campaign, which seeks to bring Brixton Village and Market Row into community ownership. Through storytelling and participatory activities, the session thought through the different ways community members can affect change where they are. The Three Hijabis, changemakers in the sports and culture space, used football as a route to explore racism, belonging, safety and decolonisation. Meanwhile Harm to Healing, who are building power for communities impacted by racialised criminalisation, invited participants to consider responses to harm through a transformative justice framework that prioritises accountability and repair, and Healing Justice Ldn explored the relationship between healing and political organising.

Participants left each session inspired by the work happening at the grassroots, with a sense that we all have an important role to play in creating change.

Ultimately, each workshop was concerned with how communities can build the knowledge, relationships and capacity to change the conditions shaping their lives. Participants left each session inspired by the work happening at the grassroots today, and with a sense that we all have an important role to play in creating change.

Dr Shabna Begum, CEO of the Runnymede Trust, said:

"The event was a powerful reminder of why being together, in real time, in real space, is so fundamental to our strength. The conversation was nostalgic - not in a passive and romantic way, but in the way that reminds us that resistance is part of our DNA. That injustice and hatred have always encountered people and communities whose hearts and intellect refuse those scripts and write them anew. People may have come curious and interested, and we hope they left feeling braver about the possibilities of struggle leading to positive change."

Celebrating the strength between us

The weekend offered a space for people to come together, learn from histories of resistance and explore how to build for the future. These encounters matter at a time when people can feel isolated and overwhelmed by the scale of the challenges we face. Far-right movements seek to divide us and threaten the rights and safety of our communities, whether we are people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, women, working-class people, or if we live at the intersection of these experiences. In this context, building solidarity is essential to our collective ability to exist and thrive.

The Strength Between Us, a wider campaign led by the Runnymede Trust and On Road, aims to build people's confidence and capacity to challenge racism, recognising the strength communities already hold and creating opportunities to connect across different experiences and struggles. Ninety years on from Cable Street, the challenge remains to turn these moments of connection into the relationships and actions needed to shape a more just future together.

Find out more about the Runnymede Trust's work:
www.runnymedetrust.org



The making of Equator

Gavin Jacobson

The Founding Editor of Equator places the political magazine in historical and geographical contexts.

The most consequential journals are rarely born in peaceful times. Their significance is often measured by their ability to make sense of historical upheaval, rather than the length of their run.

Dwight Macdonald founded politics in 1944 as a site of radical moral awakening, just as world war accelerated toward the nuclear abyss. A year later, Les Temps Modernes rose from the rubble of occupied France to hammer out the twin idioms of existentialism and anti-colonial insurgency. If these were reviews born at the breaking point of old orders, others emerged at the violent birth of new conjunctures. Présence Africaine appeared in 1947, just as the shocks of African liberation began to disrupt the world map. By 1951, Cahiers du Cinéma was forced to invent an entire vocabulary from scratch for a cinematic medium that had outrun its establishment critics.

Later cycles of intellectual contestation were no less volatile. In 1960, Tel Quel emerged to sweep away the complacency of the postwar status quo with theory fit for a new epoch; seven years later, Tricontinental channelled a brief moment of Third World solidarity. Often, the vitality of such journals is tied to the very forces that destroy them. In Morocco, Souffles lasted only six years before its suppression – a short life, its extinction proof of its subversive power.

Decades of upheaval birthed an extraordinary proliferation of journals across the decolonising world, each a manifesto for intellectual self-determination. These were sites of cultural assembly as much as they were print publications. In Africa and the Caribbean, Black Orpheus, Transition, Bim, Kyk-Over-Al and The Beacon provided the first literary blueprints for emerging independent states. The geography of these titles was as radical as their content. Through Al-Adab and Adonis's Mawāqif, the metropoles of Cairo, Beirut and Damascus found a shared voice amidst the fever of Arab political convulsion. While some focused on the local, others looked towards more distant horizons: Lotus attempted to weave these scattered, revolutionary threads into a single tapestry of Afro-Asian solidarity.

What these ventures shared was an explosive fusion of aesthetic, philosophical and political urgency that made them adequate for the moment that had called them into being. They arose because the existing organs could no longer account for what was happening in the world, when the ideas and assumptions that sustained respectable thought had been eroded by events, and something new was required to make sense of things.

These were the conditions in which we founded Equator.

Drawn from diverse stations within the trade – as contributors or, in my own case, as a senior editor at the New Statesman – and coming together for the first time in 2023, the founding collective already shared a palpable alienation from the legacy organs in which we laboured. For my part, I was driven by a revolt against a daily parochialism: a universe in which the places outside the Euro-American core – call it the periphery, the Global South, or the Rest of the World – were ignored, or worse, never allowed to speak for themselves or comprehended on their own terms. Their societies, histories and traditions of political thought were only ever processed through Atlanticist dogma or, especially in the case of somewhere like China, Western geopolitical paranoia.

All the journals that have dominated contemporary intellectual and cultural debate in the Anglophone sphere – the Economist, the New York Review of Books, the New Yorker, the Atlantic and their ilk – rose in lockstep with American ascendancy across the postwar decades, consolidating further in the wake of the Soviet collapse. They continue to operate under the assumption of American hegemony. Yet, it seemed to us that they were intellectually ill-equipped to make sense of what we started to think of as a "post-American world", a time when the illusion that the US (backed by its European satrapies) was some sort of serene bearer of benevolent modernity could no longer be sustained. In our weekly planning meetings, some of us liked to quote a line from the Indian social theorist Ashis Nandy, who once said that the West's message to the rest of the world had long been: "our present is your future" – the idea that every nation, no matter how "backward" or how belatedly, would converge with the Anglo-American model of economic and social development. That seemed like an intellectual position that was no longer credible.

Of course, millions across the world who had borne the brunt of Washington's imperial coercion or the shocks of neoliberal adjustment harboured no such illusions. Yet the guardians perched at the commanding heights of mainstream discourse – the house intellectuals and court commentators of the North Atlantic establishment – seemed to find themselves paralysed by the symptoms of this new epoch, assailed at home by the mounting contempt of reactionary populism and dismissed abroad by newly assertive rival powers. Yet, they seemed incapable of intellectual reformation, lurching from failure to failure and clinging to a dying world as the sum of all reality.

What was initially little more than an intuition on our part was catalysed into an urgent sense of mission by Israel's military campaign in Gaza. As the daily body count mounted, it wasn't hard to see how newspapers, magazines and generations of commentators were incapable of grasping this terrifying new epoch unfolding before us all. In the months before we launched, our group chat was a steady stream of mockery, directed at an industry that, having reached its absolute nadir, could debate the "moral permissibility" of killing children, or sanitised mass murder, with headlines like 'Lives Ended in Gaza'.

I remember feeling as if the 'Equator Project' was, above all else, in those initial days of scheming and planning and debating, an act of mental self-preservation in the face of this perma-crisis. Our small company of friends and colleagues had found a redoubt out of which emerged an editorial horizon – moving beyond the assumption that American or European viewpoints should dominate global conversations about politics, culture and ideas – and with it, a commercial one, too.

From the outset, we didn't want to make a magazine which treats its readers as the passive recipients of content, waiting for their periodic instalment to drop through their letterboxes. Our premise was that contemporary readers are looking for more of a parasocial relationship with the title – a sense of shared identity with those producing it and a community that's built around the project. So we avoided the language of "subscribers," speaking instead of "members"; we thought less in terms of a traditional "magazine" and more in terms of a "community" (and, in those moments of collective over-enthusiasm, we occasionally lapsed into talk of a "movement"). We said we wanted to be known for our events and other community-driven initiatives – reading groups, seminars, film nights, readings and so on – as much as for our journalism.

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We were also determined that Equator would not degenerate into a festival of dread. Having spent a lot of my days at the New Statesman editing the apocalyptic prophecies of writers like John Gray and a rotating cast of reactionary post-liberals – whose editorial playbook relied on stamping the word "crisis" across every conceivable cover story – the prospect of building a publication driven by some sort of militant possibility, rather than fatalism, was bracing. Despite everything bearing down on us all – genocide, climate crisis, cascading wars stretching from Sudan to Ukraine and the Persian Gulf, renewed arms races, fascism, messianic doom-cults and titanic aggregations of private power – we didn't want to surrender to the darkness. Before it was a magazine, Equator was my support group.

I can't remember the precise moment it was coined – though its elegance and intellectual precision bear all the hallmarks of my fellow co-founder Pankaj Mishra – but our refusal to succumb to fatalism and our conviction that the future remains open and contested, became encapsulated in a phrase that quickly hardened into our unofficial motto: "the end of the West is not the end of the world." This animating creed insisted that the ideas, movements and emancipatory horizons of tomorrow lie far beyond the exhausted frontiers of Western authorship. As we put it in our opening manifesto: "the epoch ahead is ripe with the promise of fresh illuminations, of new horizons of human action and imagination."

In the months since its official launch in October 2025, working at Equator has been relentless. We've published some twenty major essays alongside over a hundred dispatches across various genres. We have shipped two issues of a physical print magazine; watched our work syndicated across the globe; convened public talks, screenings and gatherings; produced a weekly newsletter and a podcast series; established two reading groups; forged alliances with kindred projects; signed a book deal with Fitzcarraldo; earned notice from the New York Times, the Irish Times, The Nation, Al Jazeera and other places; secured an office; expanded our core team and taken our ideas to festivals worldwide. To put it plainly, we are knackered. It is too soon to tell whether we've created an institution that can withstand and outlast the polar headwinds of our times. However, if nothing else, we've raised a standard and have already received countless messages from people around the world who never knew they needed something like Equator until they encountered it.

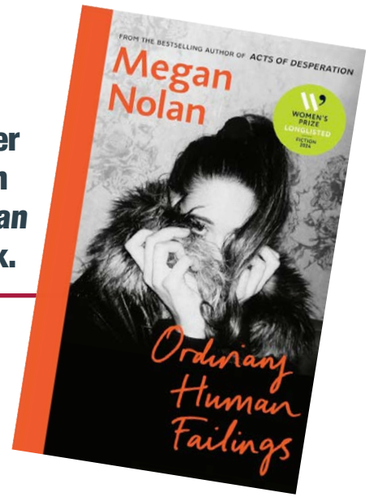
Gavin Jacobson is the Founding Editor of Equator. Read the magazine here: https://www.equator.org/

REPRESENTOLOGY RECOMMENDS



Megan Nolan

Megan Nolan is an Irish author and journalist who has written for *The Guardian*, *New York Times*, *The Observer* and the *New Statesman*. Her debut novel *Acts of Desperation* was released in 2021, followed by a second book *Ordinary Human Failings* in 2023. She currently lives in New York.



Read

Meghan O'Gieblyn, **Will and Attention**

For me, it's been a year of reading mostly non-fiction, and this book was easily the best. It rattled me and made me want to work harder, think more clearly and write more honestly. O'Gieblyn, who left her evangelical church upbringing in her early twenties, then descended into alcoholism which defined her twenties. Having become sober, she established a solid writing career, married and maintained her recovery actively through meetings. In her late thirties, she relapsed and drank secretly for almost a year, while at the same time attending Catholic mass (also secretly) and unsuccessfully attempting conversion. It's a beautifully written but terrifyingly precise intellectual exploration of why we crave oblivion and how we can live in the face of that desire.

Ed Caesar, **The Comet**

In the best way possible, this is a book you will want to, and should, buy your dad for Christmas. Caesar reports the unlikely tale of a resistance group helmed by a young woman during World War Two, which was organizing for stranded Allied soldiers to be transported out of occupied Belgium and France. I think of certain gripping, transportive non-fiction books as "Christmas books", meaning books that I look forward to settling into during cosy, uninterrupted reading periods, and this is the perfect example of one.

Hannah Assadi, **Paradiso 17**

One of the few novels I have read this year, and one I'm grateful and lucky to have encountered. Assadi writes about a Palestinian character named Sufien, inspired by her father. As a small child, his family is forced to abandon their home on the eve of the 1948 Nakba, moving through refugee camps and then Kuwait, before Sufien travels, as an adult, to Europe and eventually America. A tender and patient portrait of the long reverberations of exile and the equally enduring remnants of love and familial bonds.

Ian Parker (in the New Yorker), **She Made Me Do It**

I have long heard that Parker's profiles are especially moreish, involving just the right amount of scepticism and critique (which profiles typically eschew altogether). This piece isn't a profile, exactly, it's the story of a dressage trainer who shoots an annoying student of his and seemingly gets away with it, scot free, for fairly tenuous reasons - though Parker's comically evident distaste for his subject's grandiosity does, I imagine, give a sense of what makes him so enjoyable to read more generally.

Jean Garnett, **The Tantrum**

A biased inclusion, I admit: Garnett is a close friend of mine. We met because she edited both of my novels, but I stand strongly behind my endorsement. Essays are, everyone keeps telling me as I complete my first essay collection, a losing game and nobody wants to publish or read them. However, Garnett is a wonderful, enervating essayist who is by turns winningly playful and suddenly devastating. You might know her for her viral Paris Review essay about her open marriage, which opens the collection. A total treat.

Watch

Love Is Blind

I'm not one of these people who pretends they enjoy their reality TV slop because it's actually meaningful and "Shakespearean" or whatever - I like my trash because I want to turn my brain off and experience no reflexive analysis. However, there is something compellingly weird about Love Is Blind the longer it airs. This season, set in Boston, is a terrible one, full of banal weirdos and a few scary ones, but it does exemplify the meta tensions to which I am referring: we see an irate inebriated guy totally lose his mind on camera because he fears judgement from his bro-ey friends for being on the show, and he begins to bellow about how it's all fake and nothing is real.

Fjord

I love Norway and I love films about faith and its boundaries (see also the excellent Icelandic drama Godland), so I thought I'd like this one, starring Sebastian Stan and Renata Reinsve, and I was right. A religious family relocate from Romania to Norway and must negotiate a state which is both insistently secular and far more invasive to the family unit than the country from which they came. Eventually, the children are taken into protective services and their parents must confront the impossibility of maintaining their private ecosystem and existing in a society. .

Carrie

I've never fully settled into Brian De Palma fandom, loving a few of them, hating a few of them, uncertain on the rest, but when I learned my boyfriend had never seen Carrie, after he recently read the novel, we decided our Halloween movie night would be this. I've seen it a couple of times as a kid but was struck by how dreamily perfect and whole the vision was and how moving and beautiful Sissy Spacek's performance was.

Harold and Maude

Another recent re-watch of a film I was intimately familiar with as a teenager. This Hal Ashby was my favourite film when I was fourteen, at which age I was an as yet un-kissed girl who invited a cute, older boy over to my house to watch movies. This was an invitation he understandably took as one to come over and make out but, unluckily for him, he really did have to sit next to me, chastely, as we admired the unconventional romance between a depressed teen (Bud Gordon) and a seventy-something woman (Ruth Gordon).

Speak No Evil

(the Danish one - the American remake is also enjoyable but is not brave enough to fundamentally do away with your faith in humanity, as the original does)

This amazing but genuinely upsetting film captivated me when I saw it a few years back. It's a horror film of a certain kind I find the most unsettling, Funny Games being another example, where social graces and awkwardness lead characters to their doom. It's about two families befriending each other on holiday and a subsequent reunion trip, which begins the slow, creeping dread of one family realising that their hosts are not who they seemed. Sometimes you encounter a film or a book so disturbing and so hauntingly astute about dark potentials in the human heart that you really don't ever want to encounter it again, no matter how "good" it is. Unluckily for me, I wanted to make reference to it in an essay that I'm working on, so I had to watch it again this week and, yes, I can confirm, you need to see this film and you should NEVER see this film.

Listen

Cameron Winter at Carnegie Hall

Not to brag - but to brag a little - I was at the Cameron Winter show at Carnegie Hall last year with my boyfriend, and I've been nostalgically listening to the recording since it came out. Usually, I hate it when musicians noodle around with songs of theirs I love so much that they become different songs, but I love it when Winter does this.

Betrayal, Season 6

This podcast is pretty rote stuff, if compelling, in its earlier seasons, often about romantic betrayals and partners who have been leading double lives. This season is much better because it's so much weirder and less explicable; a pleasant and shy, recently out, gay man makes a close platonic friend through queer clubs, who ten years later begins a mystifyingly insane and intricate plan to completely destroy his life. I love stories where logical motive is genuinely mysterious or even apparently absent.

WNYC on my transistor radio

Doomsday warnings have led me to make exactly one purchase: a battery powered wireless radio, which I have set to WNYC. I don't think it's going to get me through the apocalypse but I like having it on when I cook – sometimes what I most value culturally is an enforced lack of options

The Devil's Candy: The Anatomy of a Hollywood Fiasco

by Julie Salamon

I listened to the audiobook of this thrillingly gossipy account of how the disastrous film adaption of Bonfire of The Vanities by Tom Wolfe came to exist and came to fail, with plenty of shockingly intimate detail provided by Brian De Palma and others involved with the production. I love films and I find the idea of their production almost unthinkably overwhelming and impossible, so I'll always be interested in properly involved accounts of the day-to-day work involved. I'm not huge on audiobooks, I tend to listen to them mostly when I need trashy filler audio to mindlessly accompany me on a walk, but the author reads this one and her voice is delightful.

Have One on Me

by Joanna Newsom

Every year, as autumn becomes winter, I get back to Joanna Newsom's album Have One On Me, because I associate singing along to it at distressingly high volume with times of anguish and introspection in seasons past. The fragile high-wire beauty is made for the self-indulgent anguish and tentative hope I tend to experience at this time of year.

Ordinary Human Failings by Megan Nolan is published by Vintage

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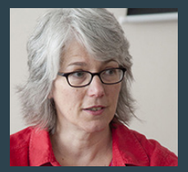


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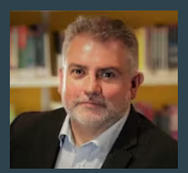
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Representology is a hybrid journal at the intersection of industry practices, academic research and policy making.

We welcome both non-academic and academic authors who would like to contribute thoughts, perspectives, analyses and research findings that help to foster diversity in the media and strengthen the media in diversity.

All ideas, abstracts and full manuscripts should be sent to **Representology@bcu.ac.uk**

The journal accepts contributions in two strands: journalistic and academic, each with a different review and decision-making process. Please understand the differences between the two strands when preparing and submitting your pitches, abstracts and manuscripts.

Journalistic articles

Journalistic articles should be between 1,000 and 3,000 words, and can take one of the following forms

- feature stories
- reflective essays
- issue reviews/analyses
- commentaries
- expert Q&As
- multimedia artefacts (for online publishing only).

Potential contributors must pitch their ideas to the journal in the first instance. Please include a two-line biography, including relevant links to past published work.

Commission decisions will be based on evaluation by the editor in consultation with the editorial board.

If we are interested in your pitch, we will contact to commission your piece. As our editorial team is small, it may take you up to a month to receive a reply.

Full articles will then be assessed by members of the editorial board. All articles will be read on the understanding that they are solely submitted to **Representology**, and published articles will receive a modest honorarium.

Academic papers

Academic articles can take one of the following forms:

- research notes of around 3,000-4,000 words (discussion notes that seek to advance a new idea, concept, theory or method)
- research perspectives of around 3,000-4,000 words (short research-based analyses that aim to provide new, unique viewpoints on established issues)
- reviews and commentaries of around 2,000 words on recent research publications
- full-length studies of around 6,000-7,000 words.

The lengths specified above are inclusive of everything (abstracts, texts and references).

All academic submissions will go through a two-stage submission process:

In the first instance, please send us an abstract of no more than 500 words, outlining the topic, its background, rationale, theoretical and methodological approaches and key findings.

The abstract should make clear which of the above academic paper forms the article belongs to.

Abstracts should be sent, together with biographies of no more than 100 words per author, to **Representology@bcu.ac.uk**

Our academic editors will consider whether your intended paper falls within the remit of the journal. We will respond to you within a month of submission.

All full manuscripts developed from accepted abstracts will go through a rigorous peer review process by at least two relevant experts in the field.

Final acceptance or rejection will be made by the editors in consideration of peer reviewers' recommendations.

For transparency purposes, each peer-reviewed article will be published with meta data regarding the peer-review process and editorial decision (e.g. date of submission, date of revision if any, and date of acceptance) at the foot, to help readers distinguish them from non peer-reviewed pieces.

All articles will be read on the understanding that they are solely submitted to **Representology**, and published articles will receive a modest honorarium.

Five Guiding Principles For Contributions

1. **Clear language**
   Making content as widely accessible as possible, writing should be clear, concise and engaging.
2. **Expertise**
   Contributors are expected to write on subjects for which they have proven expertise.
3. **Evidence**
   Articles should be supported by verifiable facts and research findings.
4. **Refresh debate**
   Submissions should seek to enrich current debates or create new ones.
5. **Diversity of perspectives**
   Preference will be given to writers seeking to widen representation and outline new perspectives.





















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