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# Let's take diversity to the next level

Targets and initiatives are all very well, but authentic stories are the key, says **Ally Castle**



This Country: BBC3's sharply observed mockumentary

With the BBC having exceeded various employee targets and Channel 4 announcing yet more on- and off-screen initiatives as part of its 360 Diversity Charter, there have been encouraging signs that the industry is tackling diversity.

It is no longer something seen as an 'ought to have' or a 'nice to have' but as a creative imperative. As C4 chief marketing and communications officer and board diversity champion Dan Brooke puts it: "Diversity is the lifeblood of creativity."

But are all these well-worn maxims and well-meaning initiatives enough? Are they having direct and deep impact on content, audiences and wider social change, or are we merely taking tokenistic, surface-level action rooted in a simplistic, one-dimensional view of the problem and the solution?

We have to be brave enough to deal with the 'messy middle' of diversity rather than seeing it as a neat dichotomy of either being diverse or not. We must grapple with the intricacies and contradictions of human identity and society.

To tackle what felt like an overwhelming issue, we've over-simplified it. We now need to mature in our view of it, and trust ourselves to be able to deal with complex authenticity.

So, how can executives, commissioners and programme-makers take portrayal and appeal to the next level?

Think 'representative' rather than 'diverse'. We need to be in the creative mindset of ensuring that above all, we're telling authentic stories with rich truths at their heart, rather than desperately shoe-horning in diversity. Tokenism can sometimes be more detrimental to content than no portrayal at all. This means deciding on characters and talent because the story demands it, not because the monitoring system requires it.

Maybe then we'd have black midwives in *Call The Midwife*, more BAME families in *EastEnders* and far less scripted content with default middle-class settings. If not enough stories demand it, then perhaps we're not telling the most compelling stories.

Aside from diversity statements from shows such a *Queer As Folk* and *Citizen Khan*, the focus should be on incidental portrayal, characters whose backgrounds and characteristics don't necessarily define them or drive their stories – like *EastEnders*' Donna, a character who just happens to use a wheelchair.

Identity is frustratingly complex. In telling stories, simplicity is often really useful, but with diversity, it is far more authentic to go for complexity – and, arguably, more interesting. Create characters, not caricatures – religiously observant lesbians, working class disabled people, black older people.

We need diverse voices telling their own stories. Not X 'normal' person goes to investigate Y 'diverse' person, or X and Y meet each other, have a clash of perspective, hilarity/drama then ensues before they realise they're not so different. Where are the shows where people of non-dominant backgrounds and characteristics dominate the screen, with others only there to support their story and not the other way around?

Diversity equals differences of all sorts, not just demographics. Social class is one of the last diversity characteristics to be genuinely explored and tackled in our visually driven industry; it's harder than the others to see. BBC3's sharply observed mockumentary *This Country* told the previously untold story of white working class rural young people. *The Moorside* gave us multiple different approaches to living on a council estate in Dewsbury – from deeply optimistic and community-driven, to horribly destructive and pessimistic.

Getting our hands dirty, we can take things to the next level, unlock many more stories and become an industry truly fit for the 21st century. Who knows, we may also be a leading light for others to follow. ⓑ

➤ *Ally Castle is a creative strategist at Ideally Consulting*

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