

Ofcom review of BBC Representation & Portrayal

Off-screen research: Interviews with BBC staff working in commissioning

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1. Background

Ofcom is undertaking a review of on-screen representation and portrayal in BBC television programmes. A wide range of research inputs are feeding into this review. While the focus of this review is on what we see on screen, it is recognised that this may be influenced by people and decisions throughout the content creation chain. With that in mind, Ofcom wanted to hear from people who are involved in the commissioning process on a day to day basis.

Commissioning Editors and Commissioning Executives are responsible for filtering and developing ideas for all BBC content. Ideas can be submitted to the Commissioning Hub through Pitch, the BBC's specialist idea pitching system. Follow up meetings with commissioners are at the discretion of the relevant commissioning department, and will be based on the idea, the department's current needs, track record, talent and so on.

In its public-facing material, the BBC says that it is committed to working with a broad and diverse range of suppliers across the UK and suppliers will be commissioned on the quality and relevance of their idea, its fit with current editorial strategy, and the supplier's ability to deliver. The BBC also asserts that it wants to make sure suppliers bring the best ideas for audiences. Creative dialogue evolves through conversations with both the channel and genre departments and are managed by the genre commissioning editor.

As part of its review into representation and portrayal in BBC television programmes, Ofcom commissioned Craft Strategy Ltd to undertake a series of interviews with BBC commissioning staff. This document represents the findings of this process.



2. Methodology

To complete this strand of work, ten one-to-one depth interviews with senior people working at the BBC in Commissioning were undertaken between 16th and 24th July 2018. Interviews were discursive in nature and lasted approximately one hour each. Each interview was audio recorded to ensure accuracy of analysis. No quotation will be directly attributable to any individual but serve as a general overview of opinion. A wide range of issues were discussed around the topic of representation and portrayal on-screen within the BBC.



3. Executive Summary

- Across the sample, there was a consensus that the BBC has a responsibility to be at the forefront of driving the diversity and inclusion agenda within the UK television broadcasting industry.
- It was believed that the BBC has made significant progress in terms of representation and portrayal on-screen, particularly in the last five years.
- It was also recognised that this is a '*work in progress*', with more to be done to ensure representation of previously under-represented audience groups becomes second nature.
- Commissioning success is measured by a number of metrics besides audience size. Critical acclaim, awards, affecting the national debate as well as providing opportunities for new and diverse talent in front of camera as well as behind the camera are all relevant metrics in the 'new' BBC.
- Corporate guidelines have proved to be invaluable in ensuring the diversity and inclusion debate is at the forefront of people's minds. They have served as a catalyst to 'opening' people's minds to reflecting society in the UK back to itself on-screen.
- In-house initiatives such as the Assistant Commissioner Scheme, Writers Room, and Diversity Support funding were cited as reflecting the BBC's attitude towards developing its diverse presence on and off-screen.
- The newly introduced Commissioning Code of Practice has proved invaluable in setting out the Corporation's standards in terms of diversity and inclusion going forward.
- The 2020 Diversity and Inclusivity Strategy was perceived to be a useful means of formalising practices that were already taking place.
- BBC commissioners were clear that they would meet the BBC's 2020 targets but acknowledged that broader external or societal challenges especially impacted certain genres, such as Drama.
- There is to some degree an inherent tension between delivering output that guarantees returns in terms of audience numbers, with providing emerging talent the opportunity to develop.
- Formal reporting is in its infancy with Diamond cited as the main form of monitoring. Self-reporting or self-signup means it is still early days for the industry as a whole.
- Portrayal of different audience groups on-screen is likely to have more resonance if the off-screen 'talent' includes members from the communities that are being portrayed, i.e. through innate sensitivities around stereotyping etc.



4. Key Findings

4.1 Diversity and inclusion in the Commissioning Code of Practice

Most of our interviewees were well versed in the new corporate guidelines on diversity and inclusion that came into being on the 1st April 2018. The general sense was that the guidelines put a formal framework around an already daily conversation.

“I think it was useful for commissioners: things that had become part of the daily conversation but perhaps felt a bit more informal on the ground, there was a clear precise document commitment there that they could refer to. I don't think there's anything actually in here that people weren't doing but it sort of codified it in a useful way”

“I just think it's inherent in the way we commission now. I think there is a culture here now where diversity is at the absolute heart of the way we commission. Not just creatively but in terms of good practice”

“There's a code of practice, there are targets, there are 2020 targets... and there are a number of hubs in the BBC where we can go if we feel there's something we need to discuss, or if we need exceptional funding”

“I'm aware of the Diversity Code of Practice. I think we've been working to it for a while, it got formalised fairly recently but we're working to greater diversity on and off screen”

“I don't think it really told us anything that we didn't already know... we've been working to that for as long as I can remember, a long-time”

“I'm obviously conscious of and aware of the BBC's diversity guidelines, I know what the targets are, I know what their objectives are... do they inform our decisions? Absolutely”

“In pretty much every conversation, not every single conversation but you know what I mean, we've talked about diversity, disability, gender, sexuality, for a long time and all that's done is formalise it, put some meat around it”

For some, it was exactly what was needed to help drive home the diversity agenda with all producers. There was a recognition that the industry as a whole needed to become more conscious of the need for greater representation from diverse groups of people on air. There was



also a very strong feeling regarding diversity and inclusion behind the camera. Not only was this perceived to be the appropriate thing to do in a modern society, it was imperative to ensuring the output truly reflected the whole of the UK's society.

“The series is actually really genuinely good and it does have a new female BAME face who's an expert. And that feels like it came from I think the first or the second conversation about that show, you don't always get a lot of opportunity to offer a new platform for new expert talent so when it comes along you try and grab it. And is that because I understand the BBC's diversity guidelines? Yes. But it's also from a genuine belief that we need to in those specialisms reflect the audience back at itself”

“I think the way we've allowed people to come in, to influence different stories, is something that I'm trying to do with all of my indies; and I do that through encouraging them, through getting them to think outside the box, so the next time they pitch to me they know that it's unacceptable to bring an idea in that kind of doesn't feature all of that”

“It's my job to make sure that the companies that do my work prioritise it as well. So, quite a lot of our job is not letting people off the hook. And they bring the first wave of casting in and you go, ‘Have you been to Newcastle to do some auditions? Have you been to Sheffield to do some auditions? Have you been to Northern Ireland to do some auditions?’ It's just not acceptable to do auditions just in London.”

“That's something that backs up everything we have wanted to talk about in terms of making sure that all of our initiatives and schemes about portrayal and representation, about looking at our work streams – all of those have something there in terms of concrete proposals you can talk to indies about. It doesn't kind of feel you've got to impose them on them: these are values we hold really dear to our programme making. We can say to them, ‘We want you to implement that code of practice in terms of your work, in terms of your teams’, all of that stuff. I think these are tools to let us make sure that we're getting diversity properly”

4.2 Changes in the BBC's approach to diversity and inclusion

The majority of our interviewees spontaneously referred to the journey the Corporation as a whole had been on as a testimony to its genuine desire to reflect the whole of the UK in its output. This reached as far as representation and portrayal. Some reflected that the past five years had been



a time of radical change from the organisation they had joined – in some cases – over twenty years previously. Even those who had shorter careers at the Corporation noted a step change in attitudes at the BBC, towards mirroring society back to itself, with particular emphasis on creating opportunities for BAME talent to be in front of the camera. Along with this, there was recognition that the organisation is on a journey with much work still to be done. However, despite this, there was significant approbation for the Corporation's leadership and particularly Charlotte Moore, who had spearheaded this change in both attitudes and behaviour which augured well for the future. There was a consensus that diversity and inclusion were now a normal part of everyday commissioning decisions.

“It just feels much more democratic and modern... it feels like a much more inclusive place to work”

“It definitely feels significantly more front of mind, much more baked into the day to day creative conversation about who we have on screen, off screen, why diversity's important. It's not that those conversations weren't happening when I joined the BBC but I think there was probably more a sense of, ‘By the way, can you remember to think about diversity?’, as an ... ‘afterthought’ is probably too strong, but as a later thought. Whereas now it feels like a sort of given that that is the conversation”

“I think it's such an open conversation now ... I think when I walked in it was sort of something you knew you should be doing but it wasn't an everyday conversation; whereas now it's absolutely the everyday conversation”

“I think Charlotte Moore speaks with passion and conviction about diversity and I think that's made the conversation easier, it feels much less like, ‘Hey, guys, we've got to do this so can you put your head down’; and it feels much more like ‘This is actually an interesting creative opportunity because the BBC should reflect the audience back at itself”

Other clearly identifiable changes over the last number of years were the addition of schemes which encouraged BAME staff to see themselves having a positive career at the BBC. These schemes were both in front of and behind the camera. The introduction of a Disabled Presenters Scheme was welcomed as a positive development. Behind the camera the Assistant Commissioner Scheme was seen as giving people opportunities to get into commissioning who traditionally did not have a route. The Clore Leadership Scheme gave staff the opportunity to interact with senior management and learn from them. The Writers Room gives new writers the opportunity to develop their writing skills and the Young Talent Scheme aims to identify new faces.



“I think that that change came from Charlotte Moore, basically, taking diversity and making it a huge deal. She became one of the biggest champions in the industry, her and Danny Cohen, talking about diversity, and you could actually feel the results of that when the Assistant Commissioner Scheme came up, when the Clore Leadership Scheme came up”

“There's also as you know a BBC Disabled Presenter Development Scheme, which will develop a fast track for disabled presenters for factual daytime and sport”

“We've got schemes I think have proved useful, so the Assistant Commissioner Scheme has been brilliant for us, utterly brilliant. The people who've come through it I don't think would have made their way into commissioning”

“The Leadership Scheme which basically sits with the leaders of the BBC so you've got someone sitting with someone like James Purnell, graduates sitting with Tony Hall; so, all the strategy leaders you've got people sitting with them bringing in different thoughts, to be able to learn, to be able to push back, they have a whole scheme like that for a year; you've got the Assistant Commissioner Scheme... you're giving notes to programmes, where you're coming up with ideas, so there's an actual tangible result of that. You've got Writers' Room, for writers to come forward, BAME and disabled writers; you've got the Disabled Presenters Scheme. I think the growth of those initiatives have allowed different people into the BBC”

“For example, with drama, with the writers, there's a variety of projects which reach out, which are specifically there to target new voices, which have done particularly good work at bringing in new BAME voices, they fund script programmes which then connects those new writers with independent producers, and that has created a pathway which connects back to commissioning”

“The Diversity Development Scheme, so that's been a way we've been able to help people off screen. Returning series are a really good way of helping someone get more experience because there's a template there, but you might need a little bit more help if it's the first time you've directed something. We did it recently on a doc about the Commonwealth, we felt like we wanted someone with heritage and links to the Commonwealth, so it felt authentic ... but they weren't quite experienced enough that you would give them that automatically and so were able to use that money to afford



more exec-ing time on the project, you know, we were a bit more supportive, it was still their project but there was just a bit more of a safety net”

“And it’s also helpful on screen if we’re looking for stories that tell a particular point of view, you know, diversity is not just about BAME, social economic and geographical diversity is really important, and so things like when you move the One Show around the country you see spikes in audience outside of the South East, it’s not a surprise, you know”

“We need our audience to believe that we’re making shows about all of them, so having those moments in the schedule, like the Partition season, or the Gay Britannia season, or the Hear Her season, it’s ‘Your stories are important, too, and your voices will be heard”

Evidence of the Corporation’s response to change is the inclusion of the diversity ‘strategy’ in the contract signed between the BBC and the programme maker. This section in the contract will set out the pre-agreed levels of diversity and inclusion in front of and behind the camera ahead of time.

“There are formal ways that’s reflected: you have that conversation when you’re signing contracts and it’s written into the contract, the diversity story on and off screen, so there’s no way of forgetting it, but it’s become a much more natural part of the conversation”

“When you sign a contract with a supplier to make a programme there’s a box that talks about diversity for the programme, so there are formal touch points. But I would say we were held to account in an even more important way, which is just in day to day conversation, and I feel like... I’ve seen it change, and I think in how society’s evolved quite profoundly over the last ten years, and diversity’s become a much more day to day conversation, so much the same is true of the BBC, and it should be true. So, when you’re talking about a show or you’re casting for a show or you’re talking to your colleagues about talent diversity’s just something that naturally will bubble up”

“Every single contract with suppliers has it as a box which needs to be filled in, and not just filled in, you’ve got to acknowledge that you’ve had a conversation about it.”

“So, it’s happening with the development of shows whether at the point of commissioning, and also the comm spec with the indie, are they part of the diversity network and also put it on their pitch, but that conversation happens and it’s brought up.



You know, 'Who's making this? Who are you working with? And on screen can you guarantee that this is going to happen?'

"Then it's enshrined in the way we work with suppliers, so for example we only work with suppliers who are signed up to a diversity and inclusion policy, and that's a contractual requirement if you want to work with the BBC. And then every time we take on a new project we ask what role that might be playing in our broad diversity; and then when we put funding in we consider where diversity sits within that; at the point of green light it then becomes part of editorial spec, which sets out contractually with the independent supplier what our expectations are with diversity"

Not only has the Corporation developed in its attitude to diversity and inclusivity, some pointed to the actual output as clear evidence of an evolving organisation.

"It's important that we still think about it. And if you look at our show reels, now versus four years ago, you can see how in a short space of time how much more culturally diverse our output is. So, I think it is achievable, I think we've made such great strides in such a short space of time"

Trends in viewing have also opened up opportunities for the BBC to develop new talent on a small-scale basis before moving into the mass audience platforms. BBC Three is a perfect tool for development of new comedic talent. Likewise, BBC Three was seen as the perfect platform for trying new comedy formats and moving away from traditional comedic forms. Along with iPlayer, BBC Three also provides the perfect platform for making short films, giving untapped talent in front of and behind the screen the chance to get the necessary experience to develop their careers.

"Some you can do really quickly, because I work in the short film space, you can have conversations for a long time and by the time they're packaged for the channel the Yes you get in the week turns into the NPR, the new project form, and money gets released the following Monday. I don't think the commissioning takes long at all. Once you put through an NPR they hop to, 'yep, we'll assign that much money and blah blah blah', so I'd say 5 to 10 days"

"I mean even the things we've been experimenting on, working with first timers who come from backgrounds that haven't been represented on screen so much. One of the first projects I took on was a ten-part series, he's a YouTube star, and he was testing out this character and someone said, 'That character's quite funny, you should expand that.'



So, he expanded that and pitched it to the Beeb and got a commission. But a brilliant ten-part piece by a British Muslim actor/performer... no, a British Muslim production team, and on YouTube he's doing silly voices but in this he's actually acting, and he brought a good performance. And I commissioned a pilot, written by and starring all women, all Chinese girls, their first network TV gig, their first writing gig, piloted on the BBC"

4.3 Achieving the 2020 targets for diversity and inclusion

Generally, respondents were positive about the 2020 targets. In the main, they perceived them to be well thought-out and fair in their nature. For the most, there was a belief that these targets were having a galvanising effect on the organisation. Rather than something to be chased they were in fact part and parcel of everyday commissioning in the Corporation already.

"I think they are achievable"

"I think those targets are totally meetable and in some areas we're meeting them already. And I'd like to see them exceeded in many cases. I think there are a number of external challenges: cultural challenges and challenges of funding"

"Yeah, 50% women, is it 15% BAME, 8% disability"

"We talk about these targets: maybe not specifically but they're just baked into the conversations we're having, from the development of an idea to an idea that might come in on pitch but has a presenter that's just lazily selected or just the casting of contributors"

"What I mean is it feels like we're in a place of confidence about it because certainly in my world people believe in it, my bit of the organisation. And I think because you can see results, particularly on screen, it's a virtuous circle, isn't it, you see it and you think, 'That looks really good', and you want to be part of it"

"I think the targets help you stay focused on what we're trying to achieve. I think the targets are very, very smart by not being too ambitious or daunting, they're literally just saying, 'Represent society'. You know, 'If there's a hundred people, 15 should look like this, 8 should look like this"



“I think there's a real sense of urgency. That 2020 date is coming and I think it galvanises, it focuses minds”

There were minor concerns around the difficulty of achieving such targets in the Nations, although these were generally tempered by the fact that some targets had been adjusted to reflect the different populations and the sense that some areas could potentially make-up for any shortfall in other areas.

“Within Wales BAME is 6% so that's sort of a slight difference because 6% is the reality. And it's chasing those down by 2020 but I think we're doing better and better and there's definitely positive pressure to sort this out and to make sure we've got that portrayal on screen and off screen”

“Geographically you have to say, ‘Right, we have set ourselves nations targets for stuff coming out of each of those nations’; if we're also going to hit BAME targets that's more difficult in those nations, everybody needs to accept that, maybe we need to over index in the areas where we have the ability to”

“It's a sector-wide thing, the BAME and disability, I think everyone's chasing after those targets, not just the BBC, so we just know about it. In Wales it's a smaller BAME population so maybe that's more challenging”

There was some suggestion that more work needed to be done in relation to female and disabled representation.

“Sport is another area in terms of representation on screen; I think we are doing ok, but we need to do better in terms of disability”

“But I don't think there's any sense that we're there yet, I think in terms of BAME on screen representation we're in a much stronger position, a much stronger position than five years ago. I don't think we're in quite so strong a position in terms of disability yet so there's still work to do. So, I don't think we should walk away when there's still a way to go but I think we're a long way into the journey”

The definition of disability was also raised as an issue, especially the area of mental health. There were discussions around and whether and/or how this ought to be included in the targets. There was a desire by some respondents for further discussion and clarification here.



“The interesting thing with disability, because I do think that industry wide, not just BBC wide, there is confusion about what we mean by disability, and I also think there's a danger that the focus becomes about disability that's visible. And that genuinely troubles me a bit because you don't want to get to the place where you're going, ‘That's not the right kind of disability”

“When we talk about disability in terms of Asperger's or mental health conditions, how does that actually play out off-screen, or things like depression, in what are very high pressure, deadline driven environments. But I find that a very interesting and acute question. I've worked on lots of programmes where people have physical disabilities and that's been accommodated brilliantly, and I know directors who have physical disabilities and, again, it's Forewarned Forearmed, we have the conversation and it all works. It's much harder I think in terms of mental health, because I think there's still such stigma around it and I think people are generally afraid of even declaring they have that kind of issue”

There was a suggestion forwarded that a key barrier to achieving better diversity and inclusivity on screen was the failure to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of BAME staff throughout the Corporation. There was a feeling that such staff, while welcomed into the organisation, did not always believe they had a clear career path to senior management.

“If you look at the workforce we are very good at getting people in. It's about keeping the people and it's about building them into a senior role where they're not the only one, and I think that is something that the BBC has got to get better at doing”

“I think other broadcasters are brilliant at encouraging BAME staff, and will woo them and say to them, ‘Come and work for us because we want you in senior leadership positions”

BBC commissioners were clear that they would meet the BBC's 2020 targets but acknowledged that broader external or societal challenges especially impacted certain genres, such as Drama. Drama is often a high production value, high cost operation that requires commensurate on-screen presence and off-screen expertise. Such talent tends to be sought-after and expensive, especially given the market distortion caused by new entrants such as Netflix and Amazon. As such, Drama is a potentially challenging environment for the BBC to take risks with new talent.

“There are other organisations that have to be willing to do it too, not least the Government that has to be promoting arts and culture to really attract I suppose those



diverse, less well-off people into drama and the arts. We can only do so much. So, I think internally everybody's grasped those targets are not simple, they're challenging, but we're willing to get there, but we need help, we need support."

Off-screen representation also presents challenges for genres such as Specialist Factual in which there tends to be an industry-wide legacy of people who are predominantly white, male and university-educated. Due to the highly specialist nature of such genres and the current lack of alternative talent there was a feeling that it may take the BBC some time before it can comfortably boast of a truly diverse workforce in these genres.

"Because you can only work with what you've got available to you and we've got to work more to get people of all classes to a certain level of experience"

"There are complexities about off-screen representation because it's quite difficult to meet all your targets in every area"

"If you're in specialist factual you need expertise, you need a qualification in natural history or science, and I think there are minorities which are under-represented within the education system, so you're mining from a smaller pool even in percentage terms to find talent; and I think we're really conscious that, because that's an even bigger challenge, it's something that we've got to think about more proactively...I think ten years ago you could have cast a whole series here and it could have been all white and male. It's unthinkable that that would happen now without someone saying, 'This doesn't feel very representative.' That just wouldn't happen anymore"

In general, the issue of the BBC being a commissioner – rather than content maker – was raised as a barrier to increasing diversity and inclusion. This ran along with the perception that, to some extent, the BBC can only commission what it is presented with by the production community.

"We're a commissioning outfit at the BBC, we work with those producers, of course we'll train the industry. And I think we've done brilliantly, we have seen much more diversity, but we work with what's brought to us, so the onus needs to be on the industry itself, on the producers, in order to bring female writers, BAME writers, you know, we can't commission a BAME writer if they're not writing. And there are very few of them"

Working with indies raised the issue of their ability to generate income and produce high quality output. This, juxtaposed with the challenge to give new talent an opportunity to work on programmes that will be transmitted on BBC 1 or BBC 2, was identified as a complication. The



solution suggested is to use budget allocated within the BBC to give new talent an opportunity. Some talked about using a 'Diversity Budget' to buy more edit time, while others talked about sending staff on specialist training courses or mentoring schemes. Ultimately, there was a recognition that the BBC has a responsibility to the industry to help raise up the next generation of talent in front of and behind the camera.

“That means that indies are inevitably cautious about not eating into their margin, and that means they want talent, particularly off screen, who they have experience of working with, a track record, because you don't want to end up overspending or putting an inexperienced person into an edit suite. So, I guess the challenge for them is, if you're going to be championing diverse talent off screen how are you going to ensure that they're going to deliver to the expected standard in the case where they don't necessarily have the track record you might expect? So, what we do as a team is, using the diversity budget, to offer to extend the edit by a couple of weeks. Or use the money to send someone on a course for camera skills or for interviewing skills”

“We mean it, we will put new talent on things, and I think that encourages the indies to bring things to us”

Interestingly, one barrier to achieving the 2020 targets may be posed by the measurement methodology of Diamond. A potential flaw, referenced by several interviewees, was that if group identity is in the eye of the beholder (i.e. the viewer) then people's group identities have to be made explicit on air for the measurement system to work.

“Unless [X]¹ explicitly refers to being homosexual in a programme he doesn't count as on-screen representation”

“if it's not directly referred to it doesn't count”

“Is it visible or is it not?”

“If it's hidden, if people don't talk about it, it doesn't count. And I think disability is easier to hide than say being BAME is, or being a woman is, so I don't think the conversation about it is yet as transparent as it should be”

¹ Name removed to retain confidentiality



4.4 Formal reporting challenges

Formal reporting was usually understood as the 'Diamond' system which was meant to be an industry standard for diversity and inclusion. In the main, most were supportive of the idea, though as with all new initiatives there was widespread recognition that not everyone had yet managed to commit to it. Going forward, there the issue of diversity and inclusivity was not perceived to be just a BBC responsibility, but more of a societal issue. Some were of the opinion that diversity was difficult to achieve because of the low incidence of constituents for each of the categories – particularly in the Nations. There was a general feeling, however, that it was not good enough to use a lack of suitable candidates as an excuse for not meeting diversity and inclusion targets.

“That’s something we’ve done recently, I don’t think it originated in the BBC, it was an industry wide thing, wasn’t it? In the last 12 months or something like that, just getting the industry to report better on the diversity within itself. I don’t think it’s been a proven success, yet, has it? It relies on people filling it in themselves, doesn’t it?”

“To some degree I think the BBC does everything it can to work with the world within which we live. The BBC cannot be held responsible for the national curriculum, but what we try to do at grass roots”

“Diamond? That’s a work in progress and it’s going to take time. But if you think about something like diversity and ethnicity on screen, there’s no reason why we wouldn’t be able to meet those targets. That’s about casting”

“I think they’re not perfect. I think Diamond, not enough people are signing up... I think in some ways it’s a good thing, the level that we’ve got, people have to engage ... but actually I don’t think people didn’t want to engage, there genuinely is a desire and recognition of how important it is. But it’s probably good to hold people to account more formally as well. So, I don’t think there’s any desire to circumnavigate it. And also, it’s new, isn’t it, the self-declaring isn’t big enough at the moment. So, the thing that’s frustrating is that sometimes it’s tiny, tiny percentages and they’re blown up to be ... like, it’s only ten people that’s done it. I think it’s got to get into the culture that people are declaring”



4.5 Additional changes required to improve on-screen diversity and inclusion

Perhaps the biggest change suggested was increasing the level of diversity and inclusion behind the camera. There was strong sentiment in this area, with many respondents' talking about the added value that having proper representation behind the camera could bring to the finished production.

“If you look at the workforce we are very good at getting people in. It's about keeping the people and it's about building them into a senior role where they're not the only one, and I think that is something that the BBC has got to get better at doing”

“I think other broadcasters are brilliant at encouraging BAME staff, and will woo them and say to them, ‘Come and work for us because we want you in senior leadership positions”

“I gave the example of Muslims Like Us that to get the right team they needed to get a Muslim series producer who could relate to them and get the right people and cast them properly”

“I think on screen we're doing well because I think people are beginning to see themselves on screen, that they think that the BBC isn't that closed to them anymore. That's good I think. Off screen is something I worry about a lot, I think people who are BAME in particular”

“I still would like to see much more BAME representation off screen, but I think we're doing very well on screen; and I'd like to see more BAME in the specialist areas.”

“Muslims like Us was such a phenomenal success and had [~~X~~] not been on the team I don't know if ... it may have been commissioned but I don't know if it would have been delivered in quite such an authentic way. So that plurality of voices has made a huge difference”

“If you've got people from a community trying to cast people from a community it's more authentic, it's more real, and I think the more diverse the workforce has become the more diverse the shows have become, it's a kind of a side effect, it solves itself, and it doesn't feel like ‘That's for somebody else, it's not for me’, it's for all of us.”

² Name removed to retain confidentiality



Many referred to the practice of commissioning of 'friends' or trusted partners who have perhaps delivered ground breaking, award winning programmes for years. It was suggested that this was a natural reaction because commissioners always want to be known for commissioning successful programmes. However, there was also the belief forwarded that in order for an industry to grow it needs constant injections of new ideas and talent. This is where the BBC is perceived to have an advantage over every other broadcaster. Some suggested that the BBC actually had a responsibility to move the industry to new levels by being prepared to support the introduction of new on-screen, but even more significantly, off-screen talent.

“I think the only barriers are if you don't get more diverse voices in, I think if you don't get people that have different stories to tell, with a different background from you, I think you're always going to be the same, you're going to be stagnant, and we're always going to be employing our mates. I think what you've got to do is make sure you're refreshing the pool and giving other people opportunities; you're not taking a risk on them, you're nurturing them and you're supporting them”

“I think the challenge is there and we need to address it and it's a sector wide issue, and so actually it's important we get accuracy. And so in Wales, where are the up and coming BAME writers? How are we going to hear their stories? And it's about being deliberate, being specific, this is why these initiatives we're backing in Wales have led to scripts that we would never have come across if we'd just kept to our regular suppliers”

“There's nothing wrong with going back but if they're always delivering then you have to look at what they're delivering. Is it the same story being told over and over again? There's been Asian and black seasons and it's been, 'If we'd had a brown researcher in the mix then we would have known that that was as pertinent a topic to cover as that', so you can miss things without even knowing”

Likewise, there were concerns expressed, especially within the independent sector that people kept to their 'comfort zones' when hiring. As a consequence, programme makers kept reproducing themselves in their staff.

“Off camera I think it's much more challenging: there will be data to prove this I think but this is anecdotal, but there are people who tend to recruit in their own image. And so, if we walk into a production company if the head of that production company is a white middle-class female the chances are that the team will be white middle-class female. Do



you know what I mean? And I think it's really challenging to recruit out of one's own comfort zone. So, until that starts to happen that one is tricky"

There was a belief among some that without diversity 'champions' in the Corporation, BAME talent would take longer to get on air.

"I'm utterly convinced that could only have happened because [X]³ and I had the conversation which was 'Let's keep an eye on her'. It's really hard to find expert talent, so I'm really, really pleased we did that... And that is being watchful and looking at our own content really carefully and going, 'OK, can you see that person who's doing something here doing something else over here?' It's sort of being opportunistic when someone comes through your door."

4.6 BBC culture and its impact on diversity and inclusion

The issue of 'social class' appeared to be a significant issue when discussing the BBC's overall culture. However, it was suggested by some that there had been a metaphorical 'changing of the guard' with a whole new generation of staff not coming from traditional Oxbridge backgrounds now present in the Corporation. As such, there was a feeling that this new cohort were much more in touch with society, giving them greater levels of credibility with the viewing public as well as an ability to reflect its lives in a more meaningful fashion.

There still are elements of the industry, however, that naturally attract middle class candidates because of their ability to work for free in an agency until they garner sufficient experience to apply for a job.

"The regions are very important in Scotland, and there's social class, so what I observe in production company in Scotland is they're much more socio economically diverse than they are in London, they're much more open in Scotland whereas in London, my goodness"

"What you tend to find is people who can afford it, people who already live there or whose parents live there, it becomes that very self-fulfilling people who know people who know people"

³ Name removed to retain confidentiality



“And something I think we can continue to do more on and off screen is social mobility, like, class”

“I think that ten years ago the BBC was a much more ABC1 organisation speaking to a much more ABC1 audience.”

“There is that thing, even when I was starting here, ‘It’s an old boys’ club, that, it’s an old boys’ network’; and then going back 20 years there was anecdotes of like, ‘What college did you go to?’”

Ultimately, as previously stated, for a cultural shift to gain momentum and ‘stick’ it has to be driven from the top down. This means the senior leaders of the Corporation should be leading from the front in provoking organisational shifts along with making deliberate decisions to ensure a broad representation of UK society at every level within the Corporation.

“I think the cultural shift has got to be in our senior leadership positions.”

4.7 Representation and portrayal

There was generally a good understanding of the differences between representation and portrayal and was something that commissioners were alert to when receiving pitches. That said, internal BBC language is somewhat confusing here as ‘portrayal’ has another meaning – which is essentially, ‘representing the nations’, i.e. Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

“I think for me representation is something that looks familiar, I mean if I turn to the left and turn to the right and then turn to my TV it all looks the same. I think portrayal is where I could learn something from the content: I think portrayal is showing something authentically, showing something as it is, where it is”

There was significant discussion about the portrayal of characters in programmes. Many were able to cite situations where stereotypes were reinforced in pitches only to be sent away to be changed into something more appropriate and meaningful.

“I get frustrated if northerners are on the telly and they’re only cast as bawdy and common and all the rest of it, it’s like everybody’s got a stereotype”



“To me portrayal is basically is how you show people on TV, it's the writing, it's basically how you think about those communities, like, are you always going to show a Muslim woman in a head scarf”

“But I think in a script putting anything other what that person should be, that's you showing your bias. Because if you wanted someone to cast a black shopkeeper what you write in the script is, ‘Oh, back home in the Caribbean...’, and just by that you're telling us he's probably going to have to be black (laughs) And if he's gruff we get that he's a grumpy bastard: what you don't have to do is say that he's a ‘menacing looking black man’ at the top of it, let the story unfold”

“Sometimes it's just laziness but you have to be careful that you're not holding onto old stereotypes: when I see ‘barrister’ I should have nothing in my mind: Surprise me. I mean, give me a person in a wheelchair, why shouldn't they be a barrister?”

“Yeah, it's weird, I've had a few instances where a script has come in and ‘barrister, 34; shopkeeper, quite menacing, black, 34’; and I'm like ‘Why do you have to mention ‘menacing’ and ‘black’, and then you've just put ‘barrister’ and left that open?”

Ultimately, there was the sense that representation as a target was much easier to deliver than portrayal. By its very nature, portrayal is more subjective and will quite possibly only be accurate if the production and commissioning teams are populated with people drawn from the community or communities being portrayed on air.

4.8 Current commissioning process

For most of our interviewees, commissioning was something that was conducted on a rolling basis. The key reason cited for this was the extensive need for commissions to fill the schedules for the various television channels offered by the BBC. There was also a general opinion that good ideas don't only come at certain times of the year. As such, rolling commissioning was the best way to ensure the best quality ideas were coming in on a daily basis and were getting timely recognition and attention.

“My commissioning team, they probably get up to a hundred ideas a week, which is a lot. We respond to all those ideas”



Genre departments are sent ideas or are meeting with producers on a daily basis. These can come either from inside the Corporation or from independent production companies. There was a general consensus that the BBC cannot go out and suggest ideas because of its position as a Public Service Broadcaster and consequently is more reactive in nature.

“Oh, we’re definitely reactive”

“We don’t do commissioning rounds. We do rolling commissioning all year; the lead times vary so we’re really reactive”

“An idea will begin with a producer or the writer; it will then go into script development, then it will reach a point where it will be considered green lit by the channel controller. From there it will go into production, then post production and edit and then we’ll look at all the publicity and trails”

“We’re publisher/broadcaster. Commissioners will have a set list of suppliers that they have regular contact with, meetings with, and they’ll get pitched ideas at various stages”

“I get pitched to by people I meet on a regular basis, I have relationships with suppliers”

Overall, commissioning was viewed as a balancing act of ensuring the BBC meets everyone’s expectations in terms of the content it transmits on any of its channels. It extends to ensuring there is significant representation of the diverse range of cultural expressions across the UK as well as ensuring they are portrayed in a sympathetic and realistic nature.

“It’s about making sure the balance is right, that we spend within budget, that we meet our quotas... we might look at the year through the prism of talent, or through the prism of a nation story, or events, or whatever’s concerning us, or whatever we’re concerned we might not be doing a good enough job in”

4.8.1 Commissioning Hub and Pitch

“Pitch is our e-commissioning space... all ideas have to go through there”

This quotation basically sums up ‘Pitch’. As a tool, Pitch is identified as generally invaluable to the BBC commissioning process. It serves as a way to keep everything together, to ensure documentation is collated in an appropriate manner and IP is protected. Generally, if an idea gets



to Pitch, it has generated significant levels of serious interest. In an organisation receiving hundreds of ideas every day, and due to the 'rolling' nature of commissioning, Pitch has become crucial in ensuring fair play and probity.

“It’s actually a protective thing for you because after a world event of after Edinburgh Fringe, everyone’s got the same sort of ideas, so to protect your IP and your idea... so, it’s an IP protector, it’s got a date stamp and if anyone comes up with anything similar you can say ‘I talked about that first’, and then the onus is on us”

“It protects IP, basically. As long as I’ve been in commissioning there’ve been, ‘oh, I pitched that ideas as well’, you know, there are only so many ideas in the world and so it’s a way of keeping track of how and where the idea originated. Its protection for us and for suppliers”

“Personally, I find it quite a good tool because it allows me to keep track of ideas in a way that if I didn’t have it, stuff goes into the email inbox and it might be a week before you clock it. So, I tend to use it for anything that’s more than a casual conversation in the corridor, put the idea on Pitch, I think it’s a good fair way of capturing people’s IP”

That said, it appears the process often begins on a more informal basis, i.e. over a coffee meeting or via email. In such cases, the idea is logged via Pitch when it has taken more form.

“There comes a point where formally it has to be in Pitch. We may start off informally”

“So, they’ll either meet directly via Pitch, or they or I will meet producers who will take us through potential ideas and then the ones they’re interested in they’ll submit to Pitch that way... all roads in the end lead to Pitch”

“It’s very useful to be able to point to previous submissions be also it’s a record of what’s unique to that idea. And also, it’s a filtering process because you’re deluged with ideas”

“All the team have got the Pitch links in our emails”

“It’s been a very refining process because nothing, unless it’s printed on as it were on a document that’s come off Pitch can be presented and put in front of me”



4.8.2 Length of commissioning process

Generally, the duration of the commissioning process will vary on the type of programme and genre. Drama and Specialist Factual may invariably have very long lead times to facilitate the development of content as well as the quest for budget and possible production partners. Even though commissioning for these genres may take a long time, it may take an even longer period before the production will see transmission. This means a high level of commitment is required for everyone to have the patience to follow a story through to its conclusion. There is a belief that this is an area that the BBC is known and renowned for.

“We’ve done this extraordinary doc following the Parkinson’s trial and it’s not that high tariff and the trial’s played out over five years and we’ve stayed with it. I think that’s the brilliant thing about the BBC, ‘this is important and we’re going to follow it for five years until it reaches its conclusion’”

“Because of the scripting process in drama it can take longer than other genres, so I’d say 18 months from first conversation to green lit. We can reduce that to a year in some cases... when you’re spending upwards of a million pounds on a programme you need to take the time to get it right”

“for natural history, I’m now thinking about 2023”

There are other occasions when Factual output can be turned around in a very quick period of time to ensure it taps into the national debate or mood. Again, this is an area that the BBC believes is a specialty, citing strong public approval as a result of this unique ability.

“So, if England had got into the World Cup final I had ready to commission a doc to turn it around in a week. Whereas in natural history its commissioned five years in advance”

“The Royal wedding was a good example, that was very expensive and we had about four months lead time”

Other genres, especially comedy, can be commissioned and on air in a matter of weeks.

“some you can do really quickly”

“It’s the prep that takes a long time, I don’t think the commissioning takes long”



“I’d say about between 4 to 6 weeks to get an idea commissioned and in production”

4.8.3 Key decisions and decision makers

As commissioners, they act as the gatekeepers to the organisation and filter ideas into the channel controllers. In order to ensure total efficiency in this area, regular meetings are held with these channel heads to ensure a regular and smooth flow of ideas to the channel. Commissioners believe this is an area of strength for them in the organisation – understanding the schedules to the extent they will have a strong sense of where programmes should sit and what audiences are targeted with the output.

“We have routines every week with BBC Two”

“The idea gets discussed with the head of the department; he, knowing the channel needs and what’s worked before, what hasn’t worked, he’s listening as you’re pitching; if he’s as enthused as you are it gets added to the agenda for when we have channel routines. As a genre we give an indication to a production company that we really like your idea, but obviously the double tick comes from the channel: is it BBC One, is it BBC Two, so that comes from the channel meeting.

Key commissioning decisions are based on the channel objectives and needs. It is important to realise and deliver ideas that are innovative and not just ‘more of the same’. Generally, this is where commissioners believe they add value to the process. Due to their relationships with the production companies (in-house and external), commissioners do the ideas sifting before they are ever presented to the channel head. As such, they believe their relationships with producers have developed to the point where they have made inroads into their creative thinking which consequently ensures better targeted programme ideas.

“For the most part most production companies do their homework... it’s not giving the channels what they’ve already had, it’s giving them something in an area that might be of interest”

““What stories haven’t been told? Is it something about a middle-class bloke having a breakdown, having a mid-life crisis? I’ve seen that, I’ve seen that every which way.’ And we say, ‘What are the things we haven’t seen?’”



“So, to do something that’s familiar and ordinary doesn’t cut through any more. Do something that has a voice and a distinction about it”

When an idea is pitched to a commissioner, there will normally be a conversation with the producer where the commissioner will drive home the need for diversity and inclusion within both the on-screen and off-screen talent.

“It’s not a hard thing for us; if you say ‘There aren’t enough women doing X, Y and Z’, we’ll have an all-woman sketch show, you know, come in and pitch to us; we’ll have a production that’s got a female producer, a female director and a female in the edit”

4.8.4 Measuring success

Success was perceived as a multi-faceted thing with no one lead metric that stood out over all. Often, success was perceived to be different, depending on the genre in question. Key attributes could include; audience ratings, awards, critical acclaim or moving the national mood/debate in a different direction. As BBC commissioners it was not naturally in their DNA to chase audience ratings, even in comedy, where new talent development was often seen as a more desirable measure of success.

“In Current affairs, impact will be even more important; in entertainment, big audiences might be more important, I think we are very broad ranging”

“If you’re commissioning something for that broad popular story ratings become a more important factor whereas if you’re commissioning something for example on the History slate about the end of WWI and you’re not going to get a 6 million audience but it’s something you’re really proud to do, then it’s probably about critical acclaim”

“Because we’re not a commercial broadcaster the numbers are crucial to tell us that the marketing and lead up has landed us where we wanted to be. So, there’s the numbers; and the conversations about things, and critical acclaim”

“We look for these kinds of words, and it’s brilliant, you know, ‘We spotted them. We delivered, and we certainly surprised that critic”

“I think success to me feels like working with off-screen talent who might have been off-screen producers but who because of the work they’ve done for me can now produce



their first film for me on BBC One. On screen talent, be it people we might have found in one of our films, thinking 'You might be someone special, we're going to spend time nurturing you and giving you an opportunity.' Bringing in a different voice from a different community and to see them flower and go on to be a BBC presenter. And finding them in an organic way in communities that have not been represented in the BBC, things like that are a real success to me"

"I think there are different measures of success; within the industry overnight success, so the figures we reach on the first night of transmission have historically been seen as the key measure of success. I think that increasingly that doesn't reflect the way that people watch television. But more than that there are a wide range of different reasons to tell a story and I feel that the cultural reach and the conversation generated by a story, the way it can change perspectives and get people talking, that to me is equally important as a measure of success"

"I think we all know when a programme has generated a conversation. I think there's a virtuous circle, when you start to tell more stories from a diversity of voices and from a diversity of writers, then more voices come. I have seen that, and I think our responsibility in commissioning is to keep opening the doors and to keep people coming in and to prove to the creative community in the commissions that we make that those doors are truly open"

"Increasingly I think impact is success, so if you start a dialogue, if you look at Blue Planet - yes, it was successful in audience terms but for me an even greater success was the impact it's had on the world... or the Rio Ferdinand documentary on bereavement, that reached a really big audience but, actually, we know that it changed bereavement law, so that real world impact is also a measure of success, so I think there are lots of different measures of success"

In this new dispensation, success for some was the end product of a lot of hard work resulting in programmes that celebrate diversity being recognised with awards.

"I'm really proud that success looks like the Black and British season we did, success looks like Muslims like Us bringing in a Bafta, bringing in a younger audience, bringing in an underserved audience"

"On screen talent, be it people we might have found in one of our films, thinking 'You might be someone special, we're going to spend time nurturing you and giving you an



opportunity.’ Bringing in a different voice from a different community and to see them flower and go on to be a BBC presenter. And finding them in an organic way in communities that have not been represented in the BBC, things like that are a real success to me”

Success may also take the form of seeing someone make their first programme, having received additional support or time in edit. They may have been sent on additional training courses to help develop their skillset. For these commissioners, success was about much more than just numbers. Even so, the viewing figures of course matter.

“I think the number counting and the box ticking is fine but for me it’s seeing those tangible results on telly which is success”