

## Diversity: Broadcasters' pledge

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**The recent all-black episode of EastEnders reignited the debate about diversity in television. Broadcasters are all for change, but can they turn goodwill into reality?**

In February, an episode of EastEnders featured an all-black cast for the first time, attracting both praise and grumblings about "political correctness".

It also met with broader criticism of what one critic called "an awkward attempt to pack 50 years of recent black history into a half-hour soap".

Reaction to the episode demonstrates the fine art of tackling diversity in TV, whose on- and off-screen talent base has again come under the spotlight in recent weeks. The soap's stunt also contrasts with Channel 4 head of diversity Oona King's declared intent to make minorities' presence on TV "unremarkable".

Last week, questions were raised in parliament over whether the BBC and C4 should come under the government's proposed Equality Bill, which the broadcasters fear could stifle creativity by imposing racial- and gender-based quotas.

In any case, they argue, they are one step ahead: last month saw the launch of the Cultural Diversity Network's (CDN) Diversity Pledge. With buy-in from all major broadcasters, the pledge is adapted from Pact's existing diversity code for indies and aims to establish common, measurable steps to improve diversity across the industry.

Broadcasters are adding a new clause to editorial specs asking indies and in-house producers to commit to at least two pledges to improve diversity (see box). Following criticisms of the industry's lack of progress by comedian Lenny Henry, chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission Trevor Phillips and Juniper managing director Samir Shah, the pledge is intended to encourage everyone to recruit more widely and turn good intentions into standard practice.

Phillips is relieved by the pledge's launch. "It's good to see the powers-that-be get together to do this. It's the kind of thing that makes people take action because there's money involved," he says. Shah is also encouraged, but appeals to CDN to keep to a singular focus and to demonstrate clear results.

The pledge is voluntary, but C4 chief executive and CDN chairman Andy Duncan says indies can expect broadcasters to take a hard line. "It's almost inexcusable not to embrace it. We would want everybody that C4 works with to engage with some of this – and for big indies to sign up to all of it." Ethnic diversity is the initial focus, but he acknowledges that class and disability must also be tackled.

For King, the case is clear: "Commissioning editors want to see new and original ideas and one way to do that is to offer new and original content. For the first time, this introduces an element of accountability."

### Indie reaction

Roy Ackerman, outgoing creative director at Diverse Production, which has a track record of producing multicultural programming, predicts the extra paperwork and burden of expectation will irritate some indies.

"People will complain about quotas and affirmative action, but they've just got to suck it up and get on with it."

He sees the pledge as disrupting an entrenched employment culture that failed to build on the promisingly diverse make-up of LWT in the 1970s, when Shah and Phillips made names for themselves. "Not necessarily for bad reasons, people hire people they know, informally and on a short-term basis," he says. "But it's possible that the lack of a range of people in TV is contributing to audience drop-off."

Paul Blake, managing director of factual indie Maroon Productions, who sits on Pact's diversity



Eastenders

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policy group, hopes that the "seriousness" of the pledge will result in more authentic voices. "People will turn over every stone to get a commission and won't hesitate to get a black presenter if it'll earn them some points," he says.

"But ask them why there are no black people on their production team and they'll say they didn't know where to find them. What then happens is that as a viewer, you hear the voices of the white producers filtering through."

It's something Darren Minshall, head of HR at Lime Pictures, can relate to. The indie's placement schemes with North West Vision and Media and C4 for ethnic minorities and people with disabilities have led to full-time job offers. "It gives us a platform to assess people for roles in the company, and for them to get a foot in the door of the industry," he says. "I'd challenge any company to say they wouldn't enter into the spirit of this."

As a working-class British Asian, Jazz Thwaite, co-founder of Transparent Television, says she wrestles between feeling that any initiative risks patronising minorities and applauding any attempt to redress the balance.

"It always has to be the best person for the job," she says. "But we've made a pledge to put more time into developing a person from a minority background where they have potential."

Anil Gupta, one of the creators of groundbreaking Asian sketch show Goodness Gracious Me, joined the BBC through a diversity scheme. He welcomes the ambitions of the latest attempt to shake up TV's make-up, but questions its limitations.

"The danger is that people think they've made a change and they've opened a door," he says. "And it needs to be top down: there are more people at commissioning editor level today than a decade ago, but they've still not found many black or brown faces."

ITV's HR director, Bruce Robertson, acknowledges that external pressures on the industry – from mergers and acquisitions to the advertising slump – have traditionally meant developing a career path for a diverse workforce was low on the agenda.

But he hopes that a shared approach can sharpen broadcasters' diversity strategies. "We need to refocus entry-level recruitment, looking at how and where we advertise, and then at development and promotion," he says.

### **Challenging preconceptions**

"From middle to senior management, the talent pool is not as diverse as it should be – and these are the people who move between broadcasters and indies. There has never been enough focus within the industry on encouraging people to rise up the ranks."

King admits her own record is far from spotless, recalling the moment in her former role as an MP when she realised her advisers were all white. But with Obama in the White House and Slumdog Millionaire ruling the Oscars, she sees a definite turning of the tide. King saves her final thought for another unlikely success story that in its way challenges our preconceptions of what constitutes a 'minority'.

"As a notionally un-telegenic middle-aged woman, Susan Boyle's success perfectly demonstrates our prejudices," she says.

"We assume we know the box in which talent lies, but we don't always lift the lid to look inside."

### **The Cultural Diversity Network Pledge**

The Cultural Diversity Network (CDN) is a cross-industry body chaired by C4 chief executive Andy Duncan, featuring representatives from all the major broadcasters, plus organisations such as Pact, Bafta and Skillset.

C4 head of diversity Oona King last week joined Duncan to launch the CDN's Diversity Pledge. All in-house and independent producers, plus broadcasters, will be expected to sign up to improving their approach to diversity in at least two of the following areas:

- 1 - Recruit fairly and from as wide a base as possible; encourage industry entrants and production staff from diverse backgrounds
- 2 - Encourage diversity in output
- 3 - Encourage diversity at senior decision-making levels
- 4 - Take part in, or run, events that promote diversity

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