



ENTERTAINMENT

'Hire Better': BAME People On How To Fix The Broken Film And TV Industry

BAME people say removing TV shows like *Fawlty Towers* is never what they asked for. So is there a way forward?



By Adam Bloodworth

27/06/2020 07:00 BST | **Updated** 1 hour ago



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TV

Following the killing of [George Floyd](#) and [the international protests against institutional racism](#) that followed with the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement, the film and TV industry has responded by [removing certain outdated shows](#).

[Little Britain](#), [Fawlty Towers](#) and [Gone With The Wind](#) were taken off streaming platforms for featuring racially insensitive content alongside a range of other former hits.

But prominent Black, Asian and minority ethnic critics have stressed that TV executives never consulted them about the removal of the shows. And that has instigated a fresh debate around the merits and pitfalls of censoring old content.

The debate is age-old. *Gone With The Wind* was criticised by Black people for how it romanticised slavery as early as its release date in 1939, but the film ultimately became entrenched as an American classic. Its treatment is symbolic of how institutionalised racism has historically been excused by Hollywood when a film becomes a success.



SILVER SCREEN COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES

Gone With The Wind has been a focus of the criticism over Black representation in classic film and TV.

While films like *Gone With The Wind* feel racist and outdated, prominent Black voices largely agree that simply deleting shows isn't the right way forward, may even be patronising, and misses the point of the [Black Lives Matter movement](#) entirely.

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Fluctuating messaging by TV executives suggests their initial actions to remove content may have been impulsive rather than the result of thoughtful conversations.

For example, the Fawlty Towers episode that was [pulled by UKTV will now be reinstated](#) with a message at the beginning signalling to viewers that the show contains content that feels outdated and that some may find offensive.

Amid the floundering, the question remains: should streaming platforms delete shows in light of continuing debates around equality?

The message from most culture experts HuffPost UK spoke with, those deeply embedded within the equality movement, is that removing these shows doesn't help and isn't the answer.

They say this is a movement to end systematic racism and fear that decisions to remove certain shows are made by privileged white people who don't understand – or make any effort to understand – Black issues.

They suspect a lack of diversity in media organisations has meant that BAME communities weren't consulted about the decision to pull the shows – and that rather than their removal being a genuine attempt at promoting messages of equality and diversity, it is representative of media executives covering their backs.



BBC

Fawlty Towers was removed, then reinstated, from UKTV

“I don’t know a single Black person who’s said: ‘Stop Fawlty Towers,’” the activist and writer Musa Okwonga tells HuffPost UK. Musa refers to the debate around cancelling TV shows as “an invented controversy”.

“It’s a non-issue,” he urges HuffPost UK. “It’s not real. No one’s having this conversation. Literally no one I’ve heard from has said: ‘Get rid of classic British comedy.’ No one’s said that. The thing we’ve said is: ‘Oh yeah, actually I never really found it that funny,’ but that’s the one person who’s actually watched or heard that show.”

Prominent actors, comedians and writers echo Musa’s fear that streaming platform executives and TV commissioners have missed the point.

“What good will it do if we can no longer see Matt Lucas in blackface and Farage is still able to spread fear and hatred?” asks comedian Njambi McGrath, the winner of Hackney Empire New Act of the Year 2019 and author of *Through The Leopard’s Gaze*, a novel about racism and identity.

“If anything, simply deleting any apparently problematic programming feels like a slap in the face,” adds Ginnia Cheng, a comedian working with the BBC’s Writersroom sessions, designed to help the broadcaster produce more diverse content.

“Did the networks always know there was a problem with those programmes, but didn’t care enough to do anything about them? Or did they only just yesterday discover this

thing called racism?”

At its broadest, the message is that executives have searched for a quick fix to a problem that will require significant heavy lifting to overcome. Homogeneously white boardrooms represent their lack of diversity in commissioning non-diverse programming, and until the breadth of British society is reflected at decision-making level, the white experience will feel centred at the expense of BAME cultural experiences.

So for change to permeate through to our TV and film offerings, we first need to diversify the workplace. Musa Okwonga’s message is “hire better, it’s not rocket science,” and he blames wilful ignorance for the lack of diversity.

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It sounds cynical but a lot of this is quite wilful

—Writer Musa Okwonga

“Everyone who’s a producer or a commissioning editor is in their 40s or 50s, so you’ve got enough of a network by that point to ask for talent,” says Musa. “Everyone knows this – it sounds cynical but a lot of this is quite wilful.”

He relates the challenge of diversifying media offices to “looking for new flatmates.”

He urges: “It’s stressful, looking and searching – that diversity is work. It’s like moving house, and that’s stressful for a lot of people on a human level. But it means you don’t get situations like this.”

Njambi offers her method of diversifying as simply “treating all the applicants the same, looking at talent and creativity and not being drawn to the same Oxbridge pale males types”.

Another option for currently non-diverse teams is to hire consultants from BAME communities.

“If they were to engage with and consult us then we would advise them how to move forward in ways that are meaningful that will build trust and loyalty among their minority audiences rather than resentment and anger,” says Dr Deborah Gabriel, an academic specialising in race, gender, culture, media and communication.

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—Sheryl Miller

Greater racial diversity within scriptwriters, producers and commissioners is not only more representative, but will naturally produce higher quality television shows and movies that draw on a range of different life experiences.

“The ultimate aim should be that Black people that are artistically portrayed in programmes don't fall into the usual, go-to negative stereotype of a Black person – such as thugs or a criminal, or angry Black women and ‘sassy’ best friends,” argues diversity and inclusion specialist Sheryl Miller, author of *Smashing Stereotypes – How To Get Ahead When You're The Only _____ In The Room*.

She calls for “fairer and more positive representation of Black people that subvert the tired, inaccurate and discriminatory stereotypes” and cites *Love Island* and *Bo Selecta* as two more problematic modern incarnations of stereotypical race representation on TV.

Michaela Coel's [I May Destroy You](#) on BBC One has been [celebrated by Black writers, including Chanté Joseph for HuffPost UK](#), for its nuanced depiction of Black culture.



BBC/VARIOUS ARTISTS LTD AND FALKNA/LAURA RADFORD

I May Destroy You's Michaela Coel

The show uses lighting particularly suited to Black skin and presents an encouragingly three-dimensional Black lead in Coel's Arabella, a date rape survivor who has made a success as a popular writer but struggles to manage the fallout of her hedonistic lifestyle.

It also introduces themes such as adultification, the process of young Black women and children being treated as more adult than their white counterparts, forced into stressful work and home life situations that should be managed by adults.

"Black women in dramas often serve to prop up main characters or become aspirational and [advisory figures](#) that save the day. Seeing a character who is eager to please and in a vulnerable state breaks down the 'strong' narrative forced onto Black women from childhood," [writes Chanté](#).

Sheryl Miller believes that more authentically diverse BAME voices exist on social media than they do on TV, and recommends white commissioners spend more of their time here, farming for ideas for their commissions.

"Social media is a great barometer for what is popular because people 'vote' with their viewing time," she explains.

“Black and Asian influencers like Patricia Bright in the UK, Jackie Aina in the US, Chloe Ting in Australia and Thuy Le in the UK are the types of individuals who are not represented in any shape or form in mainstream media – yet they are social media stars, and their content is far richer and more encompassing in nature than many of their white counterparts who tend to stick to the usual editorial peg of ‘beauty, boyfriends, ring and a bump.’”

The broad message is that executives should look to make progressive changes in their future commissioning rather than tinker with old content – although there is a small but strongly-formed network of individuals that disagree. They would rather executives “start” their commitment to equality and diversity by making a more literal commitment now: by deleting historically problematic shows from platforms.

“Outdated, racist and sexist messages that are harmful to the groups they portray should clearly be removed because they reinforce the notion of ‘supremacy’ and ‘less than’ – especially when those that are ‘less than’ are being ridiculed,” says Sheryl Miller.



HUFFPOST UK

Sheryl Miller believes historical racist content should be removed from platforms

She adds: “It’s only funny when the joke is not being made at your expense. Even shows made by Black Brits, such as *The Real McCoy*, which poke fun at African culture (as well as Caribbean culture) requires reviewing, in my opinion; the material rides off the back of

discrimination that exists within the Black community, and has led to many young Africans feeling embarrassed by their culture and pretending to be Jamaican ('Ja-fake-an')."

Regardless of what becomes of the legacies of heritage content, their existence has instigated a greater debate about the perhaps more important question: what the future of British comedy and drama looks like in a new age of political activism.

"These shows have always been problematic and have always been challenged – it's just that broadcasters were not willing to listen before." surmises Dr Deborah Gabriel. "Now there is a public consciousness about the many levels on which racism pervades society including TV, there is an opportunity to dismantle it."

The UK's BAME communities and their allies are waiting – some patiently, some furiously – to find out what happens next.

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