

I'm the on screen diversity executive at Channel 4 and it's my job to ensure that diversity in all its guises is represented across all channel programming.

Diversity has always been at the heart of everything that channel 4 does, and I feel it is not only our moral obligation as a creative entity to do so, but I think it makes commercial sense.

For example, if 40% of London is black, Asian or from a minority and 18% of the UK population is registered disabled and they're all not being catered for creatively, then commercially we are missing a real trick. But that is with my cynical TV business hat on.

Creatively, I've always been of the view that greater diversity breeds greater creativity. I shudder to think how many incredible stories out there aren't being told as we tend to work in such a closed network. The way I tell a story will inevitably be different to the way you tell a story so how many points of view are we missing?

This year, the channel has been trying to rectify this. I've been tasked with doubling the amount of disabled representation on-screen in 20 of our biggest brands. Shows such as Hollyoaks, Gogglebox, and First Dates are all on my list and it's a big task. But a necessary one. After the Paralympics in 2012, Channel 4 commissioned a survey which showed that the Paralympics had a noticeable impact on the way that disabled sport was talked about. What was more important though is that that momentum continued and in this – our Paralympic year again – it's important that this goes on. The Paralympics in Rio proved that when you showcase excellence, viewers will come back time and time again.

When I speak to disabled charities or groups, the biggest gripe I hear is that disability is not represented at all. It could be something simple like being in the background in a pub for example so with this commitment to double disability representation this year, it's all about trying to create a 'new normal' where incidental portrayal of disabled people is also prevalent.

That means both physical and mental disability. How we do that is the challenge. We've made specific programming with disability at its heart. Shows like Kitchen Impossible last year which was a series featuring eight out-of-work people with disabilities going through an intensive four week introduction to catering. Documentaries such as The Stranger on the Bridge which was the true story of Jonny Benjamin's search to find the stranger who talked him out of jumping off Waterloo Bridge in 2008. Amazing one-offs like Kids in Crisis – a documentary following families from across the UK whose children are being separated from them to receive treatment for mental health issues. And then of course, there was No Offence – an award winning drama which featured a Down's Syndrome storyline last year.

No Offence was a great example of how a fictional programme and storyline with disability at its heart can transfer onto screen and still be great tele.

It's no secret to say that No Offence – for example - was an ambitious undertaking, but the word ambitious and the word risk unfortunately go side-by-side far too often. It should not be considered a 'risk' to feature mental and/or physical disability on screen. I'm not naïve but maybe I'm a bit of an idealist. I understand that productions will inevitably sometimes incur more costs but that doesn't mean that the shows should not be made. Sometimes it can merely be something as simple as recognising that spaces need to be wheelchair accessible. Or ensuring that someone who can help

with specific conditions is on set. How we turn it into the 'new normal' is the real test. It's going to take longer than a year but from experience, it will inevitably snowball. When I was a casting producer before I sold my soul for a pension and healthcare, it was no secret that ethnic minorities tended not to apply to television shows. The problem is cyclical though. If minorities don't see themselves on TV, then why would they apply to be on TV. But if they don't apply to be on TV then how do they see themselves on TV? If we can break that cycle though, it'll start to happen organically. And that will happen with more representation onscreen.

Diversity has always pushed the creative envelope. I grew up on diverse programming. Shows such as Desmond's which was set in a barber shop in Peckham, South London featuring an all black cast was a great example of creativity transcending race and proved that if the story is good enough, it will generate audiences across all divides. Grange Hill was ground-breaking in its day and featured drug taking, racial storylines, homosexuality and attempted suicide. What it showed was that it didn't have to shy away from certain issues that affect all teenagers in some capacity.

What it ultimately boils down to is trusting our audiences. In Hollywood, the diversity debate is at the fore and rightly so. Fast and Furious 7 took over 1 billion dollars at the box office and had one of the most racially diverse casts in recent Hollywood history. If a film set in Egypt can inexplicably have an all white cast – some of which I'd struggle to recognise - why would audiences lose their mind at the thought of someone with autism playing someone autistic on screen?

This year, Channel 4 gave a million pounds worth of air time to a brand that championed diversity and disability. The Maltesers ads are testament to what can be achieved when you think a little bit outside the box. What struck me most about watching those adverts was just how normal it was to see disabled people. Why has it taken so long to happen?

It can be done but it will take time. This won't happen overnight but I'm confident that when it does happen, it'll just be the norm. And when it finally happens, I'll be out of a job.

Thanks very much