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# Rapid Evidence Analysis of Diversity in UK Public Service Television: What Do We Know and What Should We Find Out?

Lee Edwards and Giles Moss

## Abstract

This article reports the results of a rapid evidence analysis (REA) of academic research focused on diversity in UK public service television broadcasting, published between 2016 and 2021. The aim of the REA was to establish the scale and quality of academic research on diversity in the context of public service television production, representation and reception, as well as to understand trends in research and gaps in knowledge that need to be addressed. The findings show that research is both sparse and fragmented. It is dominated by studies of on-screen diversity, rather than production or reception, and BBC content receives most attention, while other public service broadcasters are analysed much less frequently. In light of the findings, we propose a number of new directions for research, including a broader range of topics and methods and a more inclusive approach to the broadcast landscape. Analyses should facilitate an understanding of the impact of diversity across production, on-screen and among audiences, and adopt a longitudinal design, so that progress towards diversity over time can be evaluated.

**Keywords:** Diversity; public service broadcasting; television; representation; production; rapid evidence analysis

## Introduction

Diversity is an important element of the public service media remit in the UK. All public service media providers have an obligation to deliver programming in a way that meets the needs of the UK population in its demographic, cultural, social and geographic variety (see section 264(4) of the Communications Act 2003). Diversity is important in both on-screen portrayals and representations, and in off-screen roles. Diversity ‘behind the scenes’ in production and direction and casting, for example, can help to support more diverse representations on screen by bringing an awareness of the importance of portraying different cultural and social backgrounds, as well as different lived experiences (such as gendered, racialised and classed realities) on screen. While monitoring has been intermittent since the Communications Act was introduced (Block, 2021), more recently gathered evidence suggests that low levels of diversity in public service broadcasting companies have been persistent, regardless of the statutory obligation imposed on producers (Saha, 2018; Included, 2021)

The issue has particular importance in the UK because the country has been engaged in an ongoing debate about the value of public service broadcasting since the election of the new Conservative government in 2019. The government intends to change policy on funding and ownership of public service media in the future, and there have been public consultations about the issue (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2022; see also [www.smallscreenbigdebate.co.uk](http://www.smallscreenbigdebate.co.uk)). In addition, broader political initiatives such as the government’s ‘levelling up’ agenda (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2021) strengthen calls for more diversity in the media, which reinforce the already existing nation and regions guidance from Ofcom, requiring broadcasters to have a ‘substantive base’ of production outside the M25 (London’s orbital motorway).

Industry data on diversity was sparse until statutory reporting was introduced, after which the quality and volume of diversity in public service media organisations have been regularly

reported, although in varying detail and with varying levels of rigour. Data collection initiatives such as Ofcom's annual reviews of diversity in television and radio, Project Diamond<sup>1</sup>, and regular reporting on diversity by individual broadcasters, have illuminated the extent to which different groups are represented in the workforce of public service media. Research has also been commissioned by Ofcom to investigate the portrayal of diversity on screen (Cumberbatch *et al.*, 2018) and to understand the views of different audiences about representation (Ofcom 2018). However, beyond these sources it is unclear how much research on diversity in public service media provision has been done, nor what the conclusions might be from the work that exists.

In this article we report the results of a rapid evidence analysis (REA) of academic research on diversity in public service television broadcasting in the UK. The analysis was carried out for Ofcom, the UK broadcasting regulator, as part of their review of public service broadcasting provision (2020-2021), *Small Screen, Big Debate*. The analysis suggests that while diversity is present in the broadcast industry, there are significant gaps in research that limit our knowledge and understanding. There is a limited amount of academic research on diversity, what exists is mainly focused on on-screen representations rather than production or audiences, methodologies are limited in scope, and the findings are not generalisable. We first introduce the methodology, followed by the insights from the grey literature, before we present the findings from the academic research. We conclude with some reflections on the analysis and offer reflections and proposals for future research.

### Methodology

The REA was conducted from December 2020 - June 2021 in order to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What is the scale and quality of empirical research about diversity in public service television production, content and consumption (including audience attitudes to diversity in the media)?

**RQ2:** What aspects of diversity in public service broadcasting receive most attention from researchers?

**RQ3:** To what extent does research address the impact of diversity initiatives on public service broadcasting production, content and consumption?

**RQ4:** What gaps currently exist in our knowledge base, and how could they be addressed?

In line with the statutory responsibilities of public service broadcasters (in the UK, these are the BBC, Channel 3 licensees, Channel 4, Channel 5, and S4C), we defined diversity broadly to include class, national and regional identities, and the protected characteristics defined in the Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, gender, marital status, pregnancy, race, religion, and sexual orientation).

We conducted a scoping exercise by reviewing grey literature<sup>2</sup> for research on diversity in the media and interviewing two academics who were experts on diversity in cultural production. Our search of the grey literature identified 39 publications where diversity was the primary focus and the information in the report presented new knowledge or data. Using these sources, we identified the main search terms for the REA, as well as a range of topics and gaps in industry knowledge about diversity that we paid special attention to in the search and categorisation of articles. The search terms were selected to reflect the two main themes of the REA – public service television broadcasting and diversity – in order to avoid too many extraneous results. We found that the acronyms describing the devolved nations’ broadcasters, STV, UTV and S4C attracted a very large number of unrelated articles (e.g. describing scientific terms and processes, or political structures), and so we covered broadcasting in these nations through searching for country and / or language name combined with the other search terms. The full list of search terms can be viewed in Appendix 1. In addition, we used the scoping exercise to identify other categories that would be important for structuring the analysis. They were:

1. Focus of research

- Production or workforce / content and representation / audience
2. Methodology
    - Qualitative or quantitative
    - Specific method (e.g. interviews, focus groups, ethnography, surveys, experiments)
    - Evaluation of impact
  3. Outcomes addressed
    - Recruitment, promotion, progression, retention, experience
    - Type and quality of portrayal (e.g. stereotype, authenticity, type of role)
    - Audience-related criteria (e.g. perceived identities, uptake of portrayals, assessment of diversity achievement)
  4. Policy focus

A full title-abstract-keyword search was undertaken on multidisciplinary databases, to ensure the analysis would have enough scope to capture any articles published outside the main media and communications journals, but which were still relevant to the topic. The databases were:

1. Communications and Mass Media Complete – media studies, journalism, linguistics, popular culture and IT.
2. Web of Science – all aspects of the sciences, social sciences and humanities
3. Scopus – science, social science and arts journals
4. International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) – cross-disciplinary coverage across the social sciences and particularly anthropology, economics, political science and sociology.
5. SocINDEX Full Text – sociology journals covering sub-disciplines including gender studies, criminal justice, social psychology, racial studies, religion and social work.

Following de-duplication, 1372 articles were subjected to manual title-abstract-keyword screening by four reviewers. A test screening was conducted using an initial set of criteria drawn from the scoping exercise. The reviewers compared results and discussed areas of definitional

complexity or confusion, after which the screening criteria were finalised. Articles were included that met all of the following criteria:

- Studies that specifically focus on diversity in production, content and / or consumption in the context of public service broadcasters and their associated portfolio channels (BBC channels, ITV/ITV2, Channel 4/E4/FilmFour, Channel 5);
- Studies that focus on television broadcasting but NOT radio;
- Studies that are empirical, not purely theoretical;
- From any geography but published in English;
- Published between 2016 and 2021.
- Published in peer-reviewed academic journals;
- Methodologically robust research, defined as:
  - Quantitative studies that give a thorough description of the method used<sup>3</sup>; *and/or*
  - Qualitative studies that give a detailed description of the methodology undertaken, pay systematic attention to relevant behaviours, experiences and attitudes of participants, and demonstrate an analytical rather than descriptive approach.

Articles were excluded in all the following cases:

1. Diversity and its forms as per the search terms *are not* in the abstract or keywords
2. Articles that *are not* about public service broadcasting or Netflix or Amazon
3. Articles that are focused on *data from the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, because we regarded these as too dated to be relevant to the current state of diversity in public service media
4. Articles that *are not* full journal articles
5. Articles that are *purely theoretical*

All the articles that met the above criteria received a full-text review (188 in total). This process led to the exclusion of an additional 125 articles which, on close inspection, were not relevant to the aims of the REA. The final sample contained 63 academic articles.

## Results of the Rapid Evidence Analysis

The results of the REA showed that the overwhelming emphasis in academic research was on on-screen diversity (49 articles); production was a focus for 16 articles, and reception studies were covered in just 4 articles. Gender, ethnicity and class were most commonly researched (20, 14 and 11 articles, respectively), followed by disability, regional diversity (9 articles each), migration (8), sexual orientation (5) and age (4)<sup>4</sup>. Most research focused on BBC programming (44 articles), followed by Channel 4 (15 articles). ITV and Channel 5 received significantly less attention (6 and 2 articles, respectively). Reflecting the emphasis on representation, the methodologies in the sample were dominated by close analysis of on-screen content, and by portrayal analysis and literary theory. Only 9 articles in the set used quantitative methods (primarily content analysis) (Table 1).

Table 1: Methods Used

Method	Number of Articles
Close analysis of the broadcasts	29
Interviews	8
Quantitative content analysis	7
Framing analysis	6
Discourse analysis	3
Focus groups	2
Policy analysis	2
Quantitative analysis (other)	2
Survey	1
Psychoanalytic film analysis	1
Ethnography	1

Semiotic analysis	1
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The results of the analysis are summarised in the following sections, organised by characteristic (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, disability, region, other). Articles that featured intersectional analyses are addressed in the sections relevant to their main category of analysis to avoid repetition, but we note their relevance in other sections as appropriate. Age was generally a secondary focus, and so is included in other sections. Because of the limited number of articles, an overarching thematic analysis in each category was unrealistic; instead, we include a brief synopsis of each article relevant to the section and note connections between them where possible.

### *Gender*

Two articles focus on the importance of gender on production company decisions. Knowles (2017) examined the interactions between financial concerns, seasonal programming norms and gendered audience stereotypes and their effect on ITV programming strategies from 2006-9, the early years of the company's existence as a listed company. Genres associated with female audiences (e.g. light / crime dramas and soaps) were less desirable than the more reputationally prestigious drama genre, but the market for them remained financially important. While the company introduced comedy-drama as a compromise, it was scheduled in the less valuable summer season, and audiences remained small. The analysis shows how gendered stereotyping intersects with assessments of quality and programming norms, to affect decision-making. In a different context, Johnson (2019) shows how the female-owned and directed production company RED actively supported women by providing flexible working arrangements and gender equality in senior positions. Johnson argues that these feminist approaches to production are also reflected in more complex portrayals of women in their programming. Johnson (2016) also examines how production decisions can affect on-screen portrayal of women, based on an intersectional analysis

of gender, age and class in the BBC series *Getting On* (BBC, 2009-2012). She shows how the series counters normative female identities by including older characters and scripting women's work as difficult and unpleasant forms of labour, minimising the nurturing, caring stereotype. Scripts also used language and humour to illustrate women's experience of the classed hierarchies of the NHS.

The importance of women decisionmakers working in production is also reflected in two articles focused on writer / director Sally Wainwright's work. Gorton (2016) examines the ways in which Wainwright uses emotion as a productive force for personal transformation in her scripts, centres female characters and their northern identity through accent and location, and focuses her stories on authentic issues faced by rural communities. Woods (2019) also examines the intersection of gender and regional identity in Wainwright's work, particularly the parallels between the stereotypically practical and straightforward northern women living complex lives, and the dramatic but unadorned West Yorkshire landscapes.

Female stereotypes are the focus for two authors investigating representations on-screen. Bliss (2015) analyses the ways in which the appearance of women newsreaders is subject to greater public scrutiny than that of men, and notes their more frequent changes of outfit, and the emphasis on youthful appearance. McCann (2015) analyses the presentation of femininity in make-over series *Snog, Marry, Avoid* (BBC, 2008-), and shows how the 'make under', which involves removing and reducing 'excessive' make up, codes 'appropriate' femininity as white, controlled, heterosexual and modest.

Morgan (2019) and Fanning (2017) both address contemporary interpretations of masculinity on-screen. Fanning argues that the central male characters in the BBC adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are nuanced and emotional, and less dominant vis a vis their female counterparts. Morgan's analysis of Sherlock Holmes' character in the BBC series *Sherlock* (2010-2017), highlights the asexuality of the character, but notes that masculinity is still portrayed

in other ways, including intellectualism, drug use and narcissism. She argues that Sherlocks' 'ascetic' identity contributes to a broader trend towards nuanced on-screen masculinities. Wearing (2017) offers a different perspective in an analysis of portrayals of ageing, dementia and masculinity in three crime dramas: *Mr Holmes* (BBC, 2015), *The Fear* (Channel 4, 2012) and *Wallander* (BBC, 2008–16). Masculine stereotypes of control, power and strength of identity are refracted through the lens of dementia, which undermines all three pillars of masculinity as it strips male characters of their autonomy, sense of self, and authority.

The only study of gender in relation to reception was an analysis of audience responses to the announcement that Jodie Whittaker would be the new Doctor Who (Eeken and Hermes, 2021). Findings from a content analysis of 4230 YouTube comments showed that responses fell into three main categories: those who were tolerant of the gender change; those who were positive about it because they saw it as a counter to previously restrictive ideas about the Doctor's identity; and those who were fearful of the gender change because it was perceived as a threat to the integrity of the character and the series continuity. The latter group included some strong, overtly hostile and anti-feminist rhetoric.

### *Race / Ethnicity*

Studies focused on race and ethnicity in production highlight the importance of institutional realities in facilitating but also limiting diversity in programming. For example, Jowett (2018) notes that the current BBC *Dr Who* series (2005-) has a more diverse cast, and storylines related to racism are now included. The exception is the main character of the Doctor, who has remained white and (until the most recent iteration) male. Jowett notes that while diversity in supporting roles is positive it is also limited because the characters do not lead storylines. Moreover, because changing the Doctor's identity is more commercially risky, casting processes may be driven more by personal networks and institutional preferences for a risk-averse choice of actor (see also Eeken and Hermes, 2021).

Ibrahim and Howarth (2021) analyse the BBC's response to presenter Naga Munchetty's on-air comments about then-US President Donald Trump's racism. The broadcaster first upheld a complaint that she had breached guidelines, and then withdrew it after multiple complaints were made. They argue that the response illustrates the tension between the broadcaster's journalistic commitment to objectivity and impartiality, which effectively silenced Munchetty and 'othered' her as a racialised individual in an institution with origins rooted in the service of the British Empire, and its desire to integrate racially diverse individuals into the organisation. The tensions characterising institutional efforts to be more inclusive were also the subject of research by Gorringe (2019), who analysed the effects of including a South Asian category in the BBC's *Young Dancer* competition. While it was backed by the inclusion of expert judges and the instructional credibility of the BBC brand, the judging was based on assumptions about western dance traditions, and ignored some of the structural constraints that South Asian dancers and their schools faced, including lower levels of institutional support across the dance industry.

Research on on-screen racial and ethnic diversity addressed three main themes: multiculturalism; stereotyping; and the presence of racism on-screen. Articles focused on multiculturalism examine the ways in which Britain is portrayed as a nation of diverse communities on various programmes. In the David Olusoga series *Black and British* (BBC, 2016) multiculturalism is historicised, rehabilitating diversity and difference in Britain's history as well as its present and future (Black, 2019). This contrasts with fictional programming, where the portrayal of multiculturalism is more normative, if also complex. For example, BBC classic dramas may include Black actors in the cast, but they play roles that include an element of 'othering' (e.g. illegitimacy, expendability) that ultimately cast doubt on their own legitimacy and the legitimacy of diverse communities in British society (Carroll, 2015; Pittman, 2017). Tollerton (2015) argues that both the colourblind casting and the central storyline of BBC drama *Merlin* (2008-2012) (focused on King Uther's war on magic and Arthur's greater tolerance of it), reflect

the challenges of an increasingly diverse British society, and the value placed on tolerance and integration as central to successful multiculturalism. The programme *Second Generation* (Channel 4, 2003) also deals with the evolution of multiculturalism, this time situating it in the context of second-generation South Asians in the UK (Peart, 2015). The hybrid and complex lives of this generation are portrayed not only through the characters and their cross-cultural lives, but also through music and language. However, storylines remain simplified in order to ensure they are accessible to a wide audience.

On-screen stereotyping is a concern for a number of analyses, highlighting how pervasive stereotyping may be, even if the intention is to avoid it. Stereotypes of criminality are observed in analyses of fictional on-screen portrayals of Black men (Malik and Nwonka, 2017) as well as Chinese communities (Knox, 2019) – the latter also being associated with the ‘exotic other’. In both cases, a lack of social and political context contributes to simplistic storylines and homogenised characters. In non-fiction programming, Piazza (2017) finds that some representations of traveller communities are associated with standard migration tropes such as criminality, invasion and oppression of the communities in which they arrive, while others highlight their resilience against opposition and systemic prejudice, but thereby also emphasise their marginalisation. Richardson (2021) analyses *My week as a Muslim* (Channel 4, 2017), and finds that the programme’s challenge to stereotypical associations of Muslim women with terrorism is undermined by the oppositional construction and incommensurability of white (liberated, free) and Muslim (oppressed) female identities, and the perpetuation of white superiority that results. Finally, an analysis of BBC and ITV commentary during the 2018 FIFA World Cup showed how stereotypes about Black players’ ‘natural’ athleticism influenced commentary patterns, with commentators noting their physical abilities more often, while White players received more comments about their cognitive skills (Campbell and Bebb, 2022).

## *Class*

Perhaps because class is such a broad category, analyses of class were quite varied. In production, Merrill's (2021) analysis of BBC journalists shows that middle- and upper-class indicators (e.g. private education, professional backgrounds, elite universities) and men were all overrepresented, constituting a challenge to the BBC's remit to represent the whole of the UK. Production decisions about script, gender, character and place also contributed to the representation of class on-screen. Harris (2016), for example, found that the ITV drama *Sharpe* (1993-2008) portrayed the central character's class through the mechanisms of Yorkshire identity, accent, and rugged masculinity. It also reinforced the association of upward mobility with geographical mobility from northern to southern England, as the character moves location along with his army rank, but subsequently finds it difficult to return to Yorkshire. Haslop (2016) reveals the fragility of sustaining class diversity in production decisions, with an analysis of the new *Dr Who* series (2005-). While the first new Doctor was cast as a northern working-class character, once the series had secured a large domestic and international audience, the character and the series reverted to a more middle-class identity, with smarter attire and more professionalised supporting characters.

As with race and ethnicity, on-screen portrayals of class tend towards stereotypes and generally lack context, creating reductive narratives that reinforce negative identities. In documentary analyses, for example, class is found to be associated with geography (northern England in particular), fragmented families, a lack of self-care, limited community, and poverty. Information about structural inequalities such as those associated with race and gender is omitted, thereby individualising blame for the circumstances in which people find themselves (Forrest and Johnson, 2019; Harrison, Raisborough and Taylor, 2021). One study (of Channel 4's 2014 documentary series *Benefits Street*) found that these pejorative stereotypes prompted negative judgements of the communities featured in the programmes, even though viewers knew the on-

screen portrayals were partial (Paterson, Coffey-Glover and Peplow, 2016). In fiction, P. Johnson (2016) found that the BBC's *Last Tango in Halifax* (2012-) presented a gendered interpretation of class, normalising white women's lack of respectability and positioning gender as the locus of division within the storylines.

### *Sexual orientation*

Work on sexual orientation shows how on-screen portrayals normalise heterosexuality, even when fluidity around sexual identity is built into the script. For example, Moore (2016) argues that in the series *In the Flesh* (BBC3, 2013), the emphasis on the domestication of zombies through medication has parallels with gay and lesbian communities 'performing' normality and minimising difference in order to be accepted. At the same time, the treated zombies' fear of being outed and ostracised reinforces the oppression that gay and lesbian communities continue to suffer, undermining their collective identity and solidarity. Greer (2015) analyses *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010-2017), where the relationship between Sherlock Holmes and John is opaque, but heterosexuality is reasserted through traditional forms of masculinity and gender binaries. In a different context, Wahab (2021) shows how, in the BBC2 documentary *Out There* (2013), a post-homophobic identity for Britain is constructed in the service of a politically useful exceptionalist narrative. Britain is portrayed as a locus of tolerance (particularly for white gay individuals) and intolerance is associated with terrorism, Islam, (colonial) barbarity and cruelty in other nations. The programme ignores Britain's historical role in constructing homophobic legislation domestically as well as across the British Empire.

In contrast, a study of audience responses to a lesbian romance between two older characters in *Holby City* (BBC, 1999-) (Turner, 2019) showed that the survey participants, who were also older women, appreciated the absence of stereotypes as well as the more realistic character portrayals, which reflected and validated some participants' confused experiences of

their own feelings. The fan community that emerged in response to the storyline was an important locus of connection with others, and had a positive effect on their mental health.

### *Disability*

The majority of studies on disability were focused on Channel 4's Paralympics coverage in 2012 and 2016. From the perspective of production, a number of factors were found to facilitate the broadcaster's objectives of breaking the mould with their coverage, rejecting stereotypes and ensuring parasport reached a mainstream audience. These involved employing more people with disabilities, including on-screen presenters; using marketing to make visible a wide range of disabilities and attract public attention; collaborating with mainstream brands that could legitimise parasport and disability; and ensuring a wide range of disabilities was included in coverage (Pullen *et al.*, 2019; Jackson-Brown, 2020). The combination of strategies helped the broadcaster negotiate pressure from stakeholders, commercial imperatives, and socially progressive goals (Pullen *et al.*, 2019).

Portrayals of disability during the actual competitions showed a more complex picture. Pullen and Silk's (2020) comparison of the coverage of Richard Whitehead (marathon runner, double amputee) and Ellie Simmonds (swimmer, dwarfism) showed that parameters of representation privileged strength, technological enhancements that overcame the disability, and exceptionalism, all of which favoured Whitehead, while Simmonds was infantilised. Pullen, Jackson and Silk (2020a) found that audiences increasingly accepted the Paralympics as an elite event, but that acceptable forms of disability tended towards those that could be remediated by technologies that enabled the athlete to approximate able-bodiedness. Pullen, Jackson and Silk (2020b) also noted that the coverage delivered a politically palatable narrative of 'able-nationalism' that exists at the intersection of 'acceptable' disabilities and British national identity. Acceptability included not only disabilities that could be overcome through technology, but also whiteness, and disabilities associated with the major events of swimming, athletics, and wheelchair

sports, where bodies were ‘palatable’ enough to be visible. Programming constraints meant that events featuring less severe disabilities were also part of this narrative, because their short duration meant more could be included in the programming. Echoing the privileged framing of palatable disability, Smith (2015) showed that the coverage of Oscar Pistorius in the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics never used his disability as a descriptor and tended to focus on his achievements and global fan base, thus minimising both difference and the salience of his disability in the coverage.

Beyond the elite showcase of the Paralympics, research identified more negative portrayals of disability. In the two series *Benefits Britain* (Channel 5, 2014-2016) and *Benefits Street* (Channel 4, 2014), portrayals of disability intersected with poverty, obesity, and limited individual capacity, all of which cast doubt on the authenticity of disability claims (Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2015; Raisborough, Ogden and Guzman, 2019) and reinforced the ‘scroungers’ stereotype of people receiving welfare benefits. Finally, Hansson and Suneson (2018) show how the BBC series *Brain Story* (2004) takes able-bodied brains as the normative benchmark against which the brains of people with a disability can be compared. The format frames disability as a biological threat, and overlooks the social construction of disability.

### *Region / Nation*

Production studies analysing the inclusion of region and/or nation in public service broadcasting pay particular attention to areas where production hubs have been set up (the BBC’s Roath Lock studios in Wales, RED Production in Salford and BBC Alba in Scotland). McElroy and Noonan (2016) and Spicer (2019) argue that siting production studios outside London (Wales and northern England, respectively) supports the media industries in these areas, helps build a reputation for excellence based on high quality facilities and creativity, and enables regions to benefit from the BBC’s international reputation and audience. Ramon and Haynes (2019) and Spicer (2019) both argue that regional locations help to maintain cultural diversity on-screen (for example, through airtime for national sports such as shinty or curling, and Gaelic language

programming in Scotland; or including northern identities on-screen in the case of RED Production). However, systemic bias favouring London and the South East also remained: in the case of Roath Lock studios diversity among production staff was still not always achieved because crews already known by BBC decisionmakers were often recruited into Wales from elsewhere (McElroy and Noonan, 2016), while barriers to RED Production's success included the fact that commissioning decisions remained with London-based staff (Spicer, 2019).

Analyses of representations of regions and nations on-screen showed a continuing tendency to stereotype northern English identities. For example, Andrews (2016) argues that the casting of northern English actor Jane Horrocks in the biographical series *Gracie!* (BBC4, 2009), about the life and career of Mancunian singer Gracie Fields, added authenticity to the character, but that she was nonetheless depicted in a stereotypical way that emphasised a no-nonsense attitude, determination and strength of character. Jamieson (2016) argues that Paul Hollywood, the northern host of BBC series *Pies and Puds* (2013), was stereotyped in similar ways, as well as through the centrality of traditional and nostalgic food traditions in the series. In both cases, the series emphasised class mobility as a marker of success, thereby reducing Northern identities and landscapes to associations with past heritage rather than modernity. In a different context, Baena and Byker (2015) and Leberg (2018) note the use of class hierarchies to structure narratives and characterisation in *Downton Abbey* and *The Hollow Crown* (BBC, 2012-2016), respectively, which equate Englishness with nobility and marginalise other national or regional identities, associating them with 'savagery, subordination and arrogance' (Leberg, 2018, p. 23)

Research focused on news coverage of issues related to the UK's nations and regions found that even for issues particularly relevant to the devolved nations (such as the Scottish referendum), coverage tended to focus on English news, politics and perspectives. Contextual information to help viewers understand the detail of devolved issues was limited (Hassan, 2018; Cushion, Lewis and Kilby, 2020). In coverage of the Scottish referendum, for example, presentation of the Yes /

No views was polarised and citizens' views received very little exposure as compared to the leaders of the two campaigns (Dekvalla and Sanchez, 2017). In the context of the Brexit referendum, Tolson (2019) argues that citizen vox pops from regional locations helped to diversify locations for news, but did not diversify perspectives, since the vox pops were used to align with the news narrative, rather than lead it. Overall, researchers argue that the limitations of regional and devolved nations coverage contributes to a democratic deficit because it neither provides the quality of information necessary for a robust debate, nor includes a wide enough range of citizen perspectives to be inclusive.

### *Migration*

Research on migration in public service media most often focuses on documentary programmes about the impact of migration on the UK. It shows that while some programming provides contextual information that illustrates the complexity of migration and migrants' stories, stereotypes are also perpetuated. These include tropes of passivity and victimhood, a threat to national security and integrity, and migrants as low-skilled, transient workers (Vickers and Rutter, 2014; Cheregi 2015a, 2015b; Høeg and Tulloch, 2019). Two articles focus on migration framing in news coverage. Horsti (2016) shows how the structures of online news websites facilitate dominant threat narratives in main stories, even if the online space allows for more personalised stories of migrants in side bars or linked features. Høeg and Tulloch (2019) show how climate refugee coverage on BBC news is dominated by sources and locations in the global north, is framed in terms of a numerical threat, and rarely features the voices of refugees themselves. Migrants in these types of portrayals are often anonymous, objectified and presented without voice, context or heritage (Høeg and Tulloch, 2019).

However, some portrayals add nuance to this picture by following migrant journeys in more detail. Bennett (2018) shows how the BBC film documentary *Exodus*, where migrants record their journeys on mobile phones, more effectively integrates the viewer perspective with the

migrant's viewpoint, and contributes to more holistic understandings of migrants as individuals with complex lives, and the migrant journey as both challenge and sacrifice. Andreescu (2019) shows how the Channel 4 documentary, *The Romanians are Coming* (2015), retains some negative associations of migrants with dirt and poverty by presenting Romania as a degraded, backwards country and the migrants in low skill jobs, but also balances this with depictions of cultural festivals that exoticize the country in relation to the UK, making it (and its citizens) more desirable. This kind of more nuanced coverage, which supports visibility for migrants' voices and lives, to some extent facilitates what Bennett (2018) calls advocacy broadcasting, rather than negative stereotypes. Nonetheless, overall the research on portrayals of migration suggests that coverage, whether documentary or news-related, tends to maintain a binary construction of migrants and host nation/community that legitimises negative migrant stereotypes.

#### Discussion

The results of the REA of academic articles allow us to draw some cautious conclusions about the current state of diversity-related research on public service broadcasting. Perhaps most positively, the findings demonstrate that portrayals of various types of diversity are found across a range of on-screen content in public service media, from documentaries, to soaps, reality TV, sports and news programming, and classic and contemporary dramas. Some formats more consciously showcase diversity than others – soaps featuring a lesbian romance, for example, documentary series about northern food or migrant lives, or a reality TV competition that includes a South Asian dance category. In other contexts, diversity is represented via characterisation, location and casting – for example, in drama series set in the north of England, or featuring characters whose lives parallel the challenges faced by marginalised groups, such that diversity resides within on-screen narratives rather than as a topic for programming. Alternatively, diversity may be a feature of news or sporting events, such as news reports on migration, or the Paralympics.

Such a wide range of contexts and rationales for diversity illustrates the variable ways in which public service media can support the visibility of marginalised groups on-screen.

In addition, a small number of academic studies illustrate the importance of diversity in production by linking it to the quality of on-screen portrayals, as is the case with female-led RED Production's output that explicitly supports non-stereotypical portrayals of (northern) women on-screen, or where Sally Wainwright's writing delivers an authentic portrayal of the challenges facing northern communities. Studies focused on production also emphasise the value of regional hubs for extending production expertise, creativity and reputation beyond London and the South East.

Nonetheless, most research also indicates that on-screen portrayals remain dominated by stereotypical portrayals of marginalised groups, especially in the case of women, classed and racialised groups, regional identities, and migrants. This suggests that, while diversity on-screen is welcome, too often it can perpetuate, rather than mitigate, prejudice and bias. On this issue, Channel 4's programming (Paralympics coverage, documentaries about benefit recipients or migration) appears to be better than other broadcasters at providing context and more holistic portrayals of marginalised lives, and thereby more ready to challenge stereotypes. Elsewhere, broadcasters tend to adhere to dominant tropes that centre whiteness, binary and heterosexual gendered norms, and an English version of British identity that reinforces regional and class divisions. A small number of studies suggest that institutional risk aversion may be one obstruction to achieving more diversity, especially where decision-making at the production stage errs on the side of caution (for example, in 'safe' casting or commissioning decisions) when balancing the tensions between commercial interests and more socially-oriented objectives. Nonetheless, overall, academic research underlines the need to avoid conflating the presence of diverse identities on-screen with assumptions that their presence is positive. Stereotypes, tropes and commercially-friendly characterisations and plots ultimately do little to promote a more informed,

contextualised and equitable understanding of difference among audiences. Enlightened approaches to production might avoid this, but in general, research suggests that diversity on-screen does not always lead to positive outcomes.

These findings notwithstanding, the analysis demonstrates that there are some critical limitations to current academic work in this area. First, there is a real paucity of research on diversity in public service media. Over the five-year period we investigated, and across an extensive set of databases, only 63 articles were published in this area, an average of just over 12 per year. Second, the research that is carried out leans heavily towards on-screen portrayals of diversity. These close analyses of text, which featured in 29 of the 63 articles, provide valuable insights into how diversity is being delivered in various genres of programming, but they cannot be generalised and cannot explain why such portrayals emerge in the first place. While alternative forms of textual analysis were used in 16 of the remaining 34 articles, they face the same challenges. Other methods that could extend conclusions beyond the text, to explore the relationship between different areas of the industry, or to understand the reasons for decision-making and casting, were used in only a few studies, or were completely absent. As such, the current state of academic research cannot provide a robust explanation of the connection between improving diversity levels in the industry, or in specific production roles, and the impact on broadcast output. Importantly, better research in this area requires access to production environments and robust, long-term engagement by broadcasters with academics.

Third, most academic research focuses on portrayals, and most of this on fictional programming or (to a lesser extent) documentaries. There were differences across genres – for example, studies on migration were dominated by documentary analysis, while research on regional / national diversity included news and political programming. These gaps and biases mean that the full potential of public service broadcasting as a vehicle for better representation of diversity is not fully understood, and it is difficult to draw broader conclusions from the small

groups of studies focused on any single area. The research on production and reception that does exist is also limited in terms of the conclusions that can be drawn from it. The sixteen articles in the sample that focused on production provided some valuable insights into decision-making processes, the pressures that shape production decisions, and the consequences of these pressures for diversity in the sector. However, they tended to be cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, were often focused on a specific organisation, and did not engage with the experiences of production staff from diverse groups in any depth. Significant gaps remain in our understanding of how diversity is implemented across the sector, and how efforts to improve diversity might be playing out in people's lived experiences of working in public service media. Here, as above, research cannot deliver the necessary insights without better access to production houses and broadcasters, so that a more detailed understanding of processes and practices can be developed. The situation in relation to reception is worse, with almost no studies focused on this aspect of public service broadcasting. Only four articles in the sample addressed audience responses to content, and while they provided insights into an audience's critical engagement with diversity, they dealt with specific programmes (the Paralympics, *Holby City*) and so cannot be generalised.

A fourth challenge is the bias towards certain types of diversity. Gender, race and ethnicity, and class all receive substantial attention in the sample, but other forms of diversity are much less researched. Disability did receive some attention, but most of these articles were focused on the Paralympic coverage; only three examined disability outside this context. Research on the UK's regions and nations was also extremely partial, with very little research on the broadcast industry in Wales and Scotland and none at all on Northern Ireland, while regional diversity only focused on portrayals of 'northern' (and Yorkshire) identities. There were no studies of representations of age or religious identity, other than as a sub-category of another identity category, and only a few studies adopted intersectional approaches – mainly in relation to gender, class, and regional identity.

Finally, research privileged the BBC as the primary public service broadcaster, followed by Channel 4, which featured in only one-third of the number devoted to the BBC. ITV and Channel 5 received very little attention and only one article featured a broadcaster specifically focused on devolved nation interests (Scotland, BBC ALBA). While the BBC is clearly important given its heritage and size, the bias towards it in academic research also means that the contribution of other public service broadcasters is overlooked. These broadcasters are likely to provide different kinds of value and experiences for audiences, because their outputs respond to different imperatives - but their public service remit remains. How they interpret public service obligations in their context, how they balance the social and community interests of audiences with commercial objectives, and how their position in the public service media landscape affects their ability to deliver on diversity objectives, are all important questions for which we have no answers. Such questions are even more critical given the current political and economic challenges facing the BBC, which may result in a change in the public service media landscape in the medium term.

### Conclusion

The results of the REA reveal a landscape of research on diversity in public service media that is fragmented and partial<sup>5</sup>. Ofcom's recently commissioned review of diversity in broadcasting certainly suggests that there is a long way to go before a truly diverse public media sector can be said to exist, with diversity at all levels and an equitable experience of work for everyone (Included, 2021). Some academic research reinforces this point, by showing that when production is proactively oriented towards promoting authentic diverse representations (e.g. in the case of RED Production, or Sally Wainwright's dramas), the on-screen outcomes reflect a shift towards greater authenticity in the way different groups are portrayed.

In light of these shortcomings, we make the following recommendations for future research on diversity in public service media. First, the range of methods and contexts employed in research needs to be expanded. The reliance on specific types of method and a bias towards BBC content

has limited the insights that research can deliver, and combining new methods with existing approaches would alleviate this problem. In addition, research-led practice that facilitates collaboration between academics and practitioners, could deliver important insights into the lived experiences of marginalised individuals and groups, as well as ensuring greater impact for academic research by translating findings for a wider audience (see, for example, the Industry Voices project funded by the Screen Industries Growth Network and Research England – <https://screen-network.org.uk/videos/>). Second, more work needs to be done on under-researched categories of diversity, including the UK's regions and devolved nations, so that the interests of different groups and identities are more adequately reflected in research outcomes. Intersectional approaches are critically important here, so that diversity is not segmented into categories that are easy to count, but fail to reflect the realities of lived experience. Third, the original qualitative and quantitative data collected by industry organisations and associations should be made available for academic use, so that analyses of diversity in production can be conducted independently, based on an agenda that goes beyond policy objectives or legal obligations. Fourth, longitudinal and larger cross-sectional studies should be set up to complement current industry work such as Project Diamond, so that progress on diversity can be tracked over time and in different contexts (for example in different programming genres or production specialisms), and more generalisable conclusions drawn. This would help broadcasters understand where their initiatives are working, what best practices make a significant difference to diversity (on- or off-screen), and what areas of diversity need more support. Fifth, far more attention needs to be paid by academics to diversity in the context of production, and to audience responses to diversity on- and off-screen. The former requires access to production environments as well as audience data, both of which industry actors need to actively support. Research funding bodies could also actively encourage and support collaborative research projects, and potentially facilitate engagement between broadcasters and researchers. The Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity is one location where this kind of

research is starting to develop, but more is needed. The latter is a matter of revitalising audience research in this critical context, so that we have a better understanding of how audiences make meaning from diverse representations in relation to their own lives, relationships and identities. Delivering content that serves the public good, fostering democratic values and culture and counter misinformation is a central objective of public service media (European Broadcasting Union, 2021), and without adequate audience research it is impossible to assess whether it is being achieved for marginalised groups, who have as much of a stake in public service media as mainstream audiences. Finally, research should aim to link the spheres of production, portrayal and reception so that the connections between diversity in these different spaces, the ways in which diversity is mediated across contexts, and the contribution of different strategies and practices to the desired outcome of a more diverse public media sector, are all better understood.

#### Endnotes

1. Project Diamond has been contested because of its relatively low completion rates (approximately one-third of eligible participants in the fifth iteration – see Creative Diversity Network 2021), and its lack of programme-specific and regional data. Nonetheless, it remains the most widely supported survey of diversity across the industry.

2. The grey literature includes industry reports, internal reviews where available, Ofcom’s research reports, and reports and reviews conducted by diversity-focused associations and regulators. The sources searched were: Ofcom’s diversity hub; UK Parliament: House of Lords and House of Commons databases; the UNESDOC digital library; International Broadcasting Convention; European Journalism Observatory; Core.ac.uk; research by civil society organisations Women in Journalism, the Runnymede Trust, the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity; and Google incognito browsing.

3. The original intention was to include only quantitative studies that demonstrated causality, but there were none in the final search results. Consequently, we loosened the

quantitative method criteria to include all quantitative studies where the method was clearly explained, even if they are descriptive.

4. Some articles are placed in more than one category and so the total exceeds 63.

5. It is worth noting that the industry research we reviewed as part of the scoping exercise is also limited in its scope of methods, research questions and research objectives. It is not always independent, and much of it responds to policy agendas that determine the research focus and narrowly instrumentalise diversity as a numeric objective, rather than conceptualising it in more expansive and experience-driven terms. For a fuller review of the grey literature, see the REA report here: *[address omitted to preserve anonymity in the review]*

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Appendix 1: Search terms

Concept	Search terms
Public service broadcasting	(public N1 broadcast*) OR "public media" OR "public service media" OR BBC OR "British Broadcasting Corporation" OR "Channel 4" OR FilmFour OR "Channel 5" OR ITV OR ITV2 OR Netflix OR "Amazon Prime" OR "Amazon Video"
Diversity (general)	divers* OR inequalit* OR disparit* OR inequit* OR equalit* OR "equal opportunit*" OR inclusi* OR exclusi* OR minorit*
Gender	gender* OR sex* OR women OR woman OR female* OR men OR man OR male*
Sexual orientation	"sexual orientation" OR homosexual* OR gay* OR lesbi* OR bisexual* OR queer* OR asexual* or LGB*
Gender identity	transgender* OR transpeople OR transperson* OR intersex* OR transsexual*
Disability	disabilit* OR disabled OR impairment* OR "long term illness*" OR "chronic illness*"
Religion	spiritual* OR worship OR church* OR temple* OR chapel* OR mosque* OR synagogue* OR imam* OR priest* OR vicar* OR rabbi* OR rabi* OR minister* OR chaplain* OR preacher OR religio* OR faith* OR belief
Specific religions	christian* OR catholic* OR jewish* OR judaism OR hindu* OR sikh* OR buddh* OR taoism OR shinto OR paganism OR rastafari* OR islam* OR quran* OR koran*

	OR muslim* OR moslem* OR moslim* OR muslem* OR god* OR persia*
Age	Age* OR elder* OR pensioner* OR over-5* OR over-6* OR over-7* OR teen* OR adolescen* OR "young adult*" OR youth*
Pregnancy / maternity / parental status	pregnan* OR matern* OR patern* OR "breast feed*" OR parent* OR guardian* OR mother* OR father* OR "caring responsibil*"
Ethnicity	ethnic* OR race OR races OR racial OR racis* OR BAME OR BME OR non-white* OR nonwhite* OR OR whites OR caucasian* OR black* OR asian* OR English OR non-English OR nonenglish
Migration	migration* OR migrant* OR immigrant* OR emigrant*
Socio-economic Class	((soci* OR economic OR working) N3 (class* OR group* OR status* OR exclusion* OR exclude* OR adversity OR advantage* OR include* OR inclusion OR mobility OR background OR socioeconomic OR socio-economic OR sociodemographic OR socio-demographic OR marginalised OR marginalized OR disadvantage* OR depriv* OR impoverished OR poverty))
Education	school* OR education* OR "private school" OR "public school" OR comprehensive school OR "state school" OR Oxbridge OR Oxford OR Cambridge OR "Russell Group"
Region	region* OR "linguistic diversity" OR Scotland OR Scottish OR Wales OR Welsh OR Ireland OR Irish OR England

	OR English OR "Out of London" OR "geographic diversity" OR "minority language" OR urban OR rural OR nation*
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