REPRESENTING RACE

It's not so black and white

19 years after the smash hit teen novel 'Noughts and Crosses' was published, it has finally been adapted for the small screen. As an alternative history, where Africa has colonised the world, the plot flips racial discrimination on its head. The power firmly lies with the black-skinned 'Crosses', while white-skinned 'Noughts' are descendants of slaves, without political, social or economic capital.

The novel was read by thousands of teenagers who are now young adults, highly invested in its success or failure. Its creators will be hoping that they can translate the profound effect it had on the likes of Stormzy (who calls the show a 'gamechanger') to new audiences.

There is the potential for this adaptation to tap into contemporary social discourses about race and power dynamics, from #BlackLivesMatter to reverse racism. However, creating such an alternative scenario is incredibly ambitious and there's a real risk of misinterpretation from a range of different audiences.

So, with this challenge in mind, **how do content creators approach content where representation is vital to success?** Moreover, how do we as researchers **best feed into the content development process to help creators shape, refine and evaluate its performance?** There are no hard and fast rules for success, but by viewing the content and audience reactions through a range of lenses we can give content creators a set of tools and guidelines for handling this complexity.

Step 1: Scoping the cultural landscape

Firstly, it is vital to understand the cultural and social landscape at the point of launch, i.e. what has come before and what is relevant now, so that we can contextualise interpretations. We particularly need to consider the timeliness of the concept, treatment and characters within emerging conversations about representation. Here our cultural analysts use case studies as springboards to illustrate the best and worst-case examples, to provide recommendations for content creators.

For example, for Noughts and Crosses, we can look at the ways alternative history has been used in fictional content before and **learn from these successes and mistakes in terms of misrepresentation.** We can consider the 1995 movie 'White Man's Burden', which explores a similar racial power flip, in what many have argued was an over-simplistic device of replacing one skin colour with another. The film failed to inspire empathy and discussions on racial discrimination. Presenting a world where black people in power commit the same mistakes as white colonialists might be perceived as justifying the atrocities committed by whoever is in power, communicating very different messages from the ones desired.

On the other hand, the 2019 remake of 'Watchmen' has fed discussions on some dark parts of US history through its references to the KKK, but has also been accused of serving political agendas and misrepresenting white audiences.

Furthermore, we need to consider the **importance of rich and authentic**

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world building. Imagining a world where African culture is dominant, not only requires a consideration of how western society would have been different (from fashion and language to politics and social structures), but also definitions of what 'African culture' is. The African continent is extremely culturally diverse and talking about 'African colonisation' risks downplaying this complexity.

2018's 'Black Panther' demonstrates how to avoid such issues. It succeeded in creating an inspiring vision of 'Africanness' that resonated widely while dodging issues related to national identity. The Marvel movie did so by creating the fictional nation of Wakanda, a sort of African Atlantis able to condense some of the strongest features of several African cultures without directly referencing any of them.

Step 2: Test and deep dive into nuances directly with relevant audiences

Sharing your concept, narrative and depiction with relevant audiences will ensure content feels culturally authentic. This requires in-depth qualitative conversations through interviewing or sensitively handled group sessions, moderated by empathic and culturally attuned researchers.

When testing with relevant audiences, content creators and show runners will be able to pick up on the **detail and nuance of character portrayals and authentic, culturally attuned behaviours** that make a difference in relaying an accurate portrayal. For example, the way food is prepared and eaten, family hierarchies, levels of strictness, and the pronunciation of names (highlighted as an emotionally impactful microaggression in the first episode of Noughts and Crosses). This does not always have to be manifested through the lead characters, but subtle references can go a long way to delight audiences while also educating and exposing newer audiences to cultural practices unfamiliar to them.
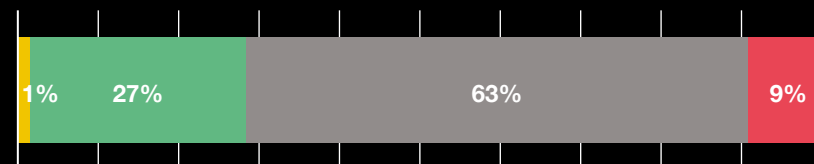
Some of the most successful content in this space comes from a **diverse and**

Noughts + Crosses Sentiment Analysis:
Pre vs. post show

● Unassigned ● Positive ● Neutral ● Negative

Pre show: based on automated sentiment analysis of 2,181 posts

| 1% | 27% | 63% | 9% |

During/post show: based on automated sentiment analysis of 5,880 posts

| 2% | 38% | 52% | 8% |

representative workforce (both in front and behind the camera). We see from Noughts and Crosses and other content that it is important to ensure the creative team represents the group they are trying to depict – they'll be able to pick up on and advise on the subtleties of cultural nuance which audiences will expect you to get right. On-screen talent must represent the breadth of ethnicities and cultures that exist; it's not enough for all characters to be 'black' or 'African'. Content must reflect different races within that utilising specificity to engender authenticity. Featuring talent that audiences are already engaging with and trust to represent their views accurately and fairly on topics such as diversity, class, politics, etc. can help to further foster a sense of connection and relatability. The rise of hashtags such as #representationmatters and #firsttimeisawme demonstrate how vital it is for audiences to see true reflections of themselves.

Step 3: Use social intelligence for amplification of interpretations

Content such as Noughts and Crosses

has the potential to evoke emotive, thought-provoking and powerful cultural and societal conversations if done well. In an age where the rules of digital communication and real or virtual filter bubbles intensify outrage, we also need to consider the potential amplification of different interpretations of the show. Here we can make the most of social intelligence through using the best of artificial intelligence and human thinking to answer questions using social media data, i.e. capturing sentiment towards the show pre, during and post the first episode launch.

For example, we see through social intelligence that #NoughtsandCrosses captured audiences' attention – the first episode was trending on Twitter in the UK as it aired. This data also helps us pull out different interpretations, receive pointers on how to play to different audiences and, if possible, identify where perceptions can be shifted. As expected, social intelligence suggests to us that before the first episode was broadcast, there was a minority who rejected the show based on the

premise, with concerns around the content being anti-white and a feeling of being personally attacked. Capturing the sentiment analysis is particularly interesting when we compare pre- and post-waves – particularly, while positive sentiment grows slightly, negative sentiment does not. This suggests that while the concept was not for everyone, the adaptation itself did not seem to evoke negative reaction beyond that. While perceptions are not changed for this audience type, the reception to the first episode suggests that the **backlash can be minimised.**

We also see through qualitative analysis of social intelligence data **how powerful good representation can be.** We see many examples of celebrations of the issues it highlights. References to microaggressions dominated online conversations as they are seen to be highly relatable. For example, a significant micro moment within the first episode was a 'Nought' having to use a dark-toned plaster which contrasted significantly with his skin, is relatable to black audiences. Highlighting subtle experiences of racism

Feeling annoyed, I was looking forward to new drama on @bbc, looking forward to something new, yet now I feel like I am being told off for being born white. I thought we were moving forward. I will not apologise for attitudes that are not mine. #victimhooddoes nothelpanybody

I feel things guys, i really do— LOOK AT OUR sephy and callum #NoughtsAnd Crosses

This is probably the first time this much blackness has been on bbc without it relating to gangs or drugs #NoughtsAnd Crosses

#NoughtsAnd Crosses is so good. The tone is set just right. A negative of the Britain we thought we had left behind but are fast heading back towards. Should make some stop and think but probably not enough. Sadly too many are hard of thought.

forces audiences to confront these tensions – even if they create unease. This is felt to be integral to educate, inform and broaden cultural perspectives (as well as having **emotional impact on invested audiences**) from diverse audiences who may see their experiences validated (e.g. Black Twitter), through to passionate book readers who may be 'waking up' to their white privilege (e.g. typically white, female readers of the book).

Good representation is one part of the puzzle

Finally, we need to be mindful that **representing cultural difference is only one part of the 'compelling content' formula.** A representative cast and the portrayal of characters is integral, but so is delivering entertaining content, based on needs and interests. Enthralling, emotive and timeless stories alongside thrilling entertainment is what makes content memorable, creates 'talk-ability' and ultimately keeps audiences coming back.

We also hear time and time again that **depicting multifaceted characters**

with depth is vital. Individuals have many facets that make up their identity, therefore, representing just one element of this (focusing only on 'blackness' for example) can feel limiting and stereotypical. Narratives that highlight the depth and complexities of what makes up an individual is important, e.g. gender, class, location, religion, sexuality, as well as ethnicity. We have seen with Noughts and Crosses a conscious effort to address diversity by ensuring characters are authentic. Not just showing faces of colour, but insights into people's culture, homes, lifestyles, passions, and struggles.

We look forward to seeing how Noughts and Crosses contributes to creating evolving conversation and helps open new avenues, creating more authentic and exciting storytelling with diverse audiences.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

ABOUT THE TEAM

Yas' qualitative career has seen her focus on harnessing culture to drive change and inform strategy for media, technology and youth brands. Yas has a particular interest in championing diversity and has won a Virginia Valentine Award for her work within this space.

Lamberto Ferrara is a trained semiotician, cultural analyst and qualitative researcher. He applies his expertise in semiotics and cultural analysis to media and technology brands, uncovering how they can leverage cultural context to create compelling products and content.

Joe is an experienced qualitative practitioner with a background in media and tech research. Joe has a passion for understanding people and their behaviours and motivations. Joe has a keen interest in how cultures are represented and specialises in helping his clients deliver this with authenticity, sensitivity, and accuracy.

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