

BROADCAST



Ensuring 2021 is a year of progress

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Broadcasters, indies and filmmakers will have to stick their heads above the parapet and understand the power they hold, says Safi Ideas chief Wa'qar Mirza

There are many things we all want to leave in 2020: lockdowns, restrictions, isolation, loneliness and of course, Coronavirus.

But another issue that came to the fore once again this year has been racism, and this is an issue that needs to be constantly readdressed.

We've seen loud discussions emerging surrounding race and racism, fuelled by figureheads across the world who have openly expressed or failed to condemn racist ideologies, opening the platform for bigoted, racist views and opinions to flow through the media.

Racism became an accepted norm, with communities eventually reaching a tipping point as the Black Lives Matter movement unfolded.

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2020 was therefore a year of extremes, as a toxic racist environment juxtaposed with the global anti-racist response that prompted the most change I've ever seen to address inequalities.

As a UK-based Muslim, this year I suffered the most racism and fear surrounding my family's safety in my 65 years, yet I do believe monumental steps have been taken in the right direction.

The importance of asking questions

Racism and the need for diversity is being addressed within the media and beyond but it is important to question these changes - why now, what does it mean and is this just lip service to meet demand, or will they be taken seriously into 2021 onwards?

One recent example is the Sainsbury's Gravy Song Christmas advert – a great show of how to bring diversity into everyday content as an accepted normality of life.

However, using a black family in the advert sparked an influx of racist complaints from members of the public on social media, proving we have a long way to go.

Responding to the complaints, UK supermarkets teamed up with [Channel 4](#) to put aside their rivalries and run Christmas adverts back to back, with an introduction from the broadcaster and a '#StandAgainstRacism' hashtag.

As much as it's inspiring to see solidarity against racism, it's a shame this needs to happen at all and is a reflection on our current environment.

2020 has also seen other companies within the media representing diversity as the norm, with The Great British Bake Off, Loose Women and Strictly Come Dancing having contestants and hosts representing a wealth of abilities, race and gender roles.

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Taken on their own, these events feel minor but together they demonstrate how accepting differences is vital in educating our society, challenging misconceptions and prejudices.

In turn, such changes are hugely important as they create a more inclusive, less racist and diversely educated society. It is the media and filmmakers who hold the keys to what we all see on our screens - they must take responsibility for their creations and understand the impact and power they hold, while continuing to create unapologetic change.

This is why I created Zayn and Zayna's Little Farm, a children's animation show following a Muslim brother and sister. The show aims to teach young children about inclusive ideas and diversity through a multicultural diverse community.

Today's filmmakers must correct the harmful representations seen in the media not only this year but throughout history. They need to create truly diverse non-tokenistic, non-prejudiced characters that represent real people, as well as including diversity within the crew and production chain. This is the only way to promote real change.

This year has shown how diverse crews create fair and in-depth diverse characters.

[Netflix's Jingle Jangle: A Christmas Journey](#) was written and directed by African-American filmmaker David E. Talbert, who grew up watching Mary Poppins and Charlie and The Chocolate Factory but was disheartened that characters never looked like himself.

To see more change like this we ultimately need more filmmakers, networks and broadcasters to commit to creating diverse environments on and off screen and changing their policies.

Seeing the backlash to diverse content illustrates how we still have quite the journey towards a more inclusive civilisation, but we are on the path and that's what counts.

I'm hopeful this much needed change within the media will continue and we will begin to see more children's educational shows in the vein of Zayn and Zayna's Little Farm.

I look to 2021 as a year of hope, change and progression.

- **Wa'qaar Mirza is chief executive of Safi Ideas**



