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Exploring the dynamics of EDI leadership in the Irish screen industries: policy, practice and perspective

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ABSTRACT

Equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in media are key concerns of contemporary academic research, current policy initiatives and ongoing activist debates in Ireland and across the world. This article evaluates the extent to which EDI change has been championed and best practice implemented by the leadership in Irish screen production. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, industry documents were analysed and structured in-depth interviews were undertaken with senior personnel across the sector. The findings suggest widespread support for EDI. The sector noted that wide ranging organisational change was needed alongside a coherent vision for the future. Visionary leadership from the top down and dedicated resources from government are identified as key requirements to embed EDI in the screen industries. However, in most cases, interviewees do not identify themselves, even implicitly, as industry leaders who are also empowered to generate change. Indeed, the actions taken to embed best practice in their own organisations often lag behind an expressed desire for change.

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Introduction

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in media are key concerns of contemporary academic research, current policy initiatives and ongoing activist debates in Ireland and across the world. From the outset, we wish to acknowledge our support for the term 'equity' rather than equality and agree with the distinction adopted by Wreyford et al. who contend that 'equity argues for treating people differently depending on their needs' (Wreyford, O'Brien, and Dent 2021, 37). However, within the Irish screen industries, 'equality' has been widely used in debates, reports and research interviews, including those that form the basis of this paper, and therefore will be used here. Until 2015 the Irish film and television sectors were not engaged with EDI issues at all. It was an overwhelmingly male industry unproblematically defined as 'gender neutral' (Liddy 2016) with no reference to diversity and inclusion. However, an eruption of grass roots activism, sparked by Waking the Feminists campaign, prompted a challenge to the status quo and elicited a response from the leadership at Screen Ireland (SI), known as the Irish Film Board until 2018, and later from the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI). Between 2016 and 2021 new policies and targeted funding initiatives designed to diversify media content and the Irish media workforce were implemented by both organisations, which is discussed in more detail below. This has resulted in significant, though still limited, sectoral change.

Transforming interventions, to increase workforce diversity, are aimed at changing exclusionary practices and processes and can prove controversial within industry as policy interventions require 'uneasy coalitions of stakeholders and the forging of alliances to implement and run' such initiatives (Newsinger and Eikhof 2020, 57). To date, research has focused primarily on the content of screen production and the socio-demographic profiles of those who work in Irish media industries (O'Brien 2019; Liddy 2020a; Kerrigan 2020). But the focus here is to determine whether transforming interventions are being embraced and implemented by the leadership in the Irish screen production sector; broadcasters, independent production companies, public funders and professional organisations. Burns (1978) identified transformational leadership as powerful in the way in which it seeks to inspire and motivate others to achieve personal and organisational objectives. This paper will tease out where Irish leaders are currently positioned in terms of embedding EDI policy and best practice to generate systemic change.

Literature review

EDI: national and international context

Gender equality in media output and in the workplace is an agenda that has been pursued by activists internationally, since at least the 1970s. Across the world, men write, direct and shoot the majority of screen content (Liddy 2020b). Systemic gender and diversity inequality impact on who tells our screen stories and who shapes our narratives and characters (Directors UK 2018; Lauzen 2020). Women are less likely to direct a second feature (Follows 2019); crew are overwhelmingly male (Follows 2014); the higher the budgets the greater the struggle for female directors internationally (Smith et al. 2020; Liddy 2020b) and films directed by women are shown on fewer screens and have a shorter screening window than those directed by men (Verhoeven, Coate, and Zemaityte 2019). The Hollywood Diversity Report (Hunt and Ramón, 2020) found 'a clear underinvestment of films made by, written by, and led by women and people of colour' combined with significant underrepresentation in behind the camera roles (Ramón in Wolf 2021). Black, Asian and minority ethnic women represented less than 1.5% of all personnel working in 6 key roles in the British film industry in 2015 (Cobb et al., 2015, 1). In the US, Smith et al. have examined diversity onscreen and behind the camera and found that underrepresented groups have a greater voice on Netflix than in Hollywood, with the caveat that many groups still struggle for inclusion (2021).

In Ireland, there was relatively little recorded activism in the media sector until Waking the Feminists protests in November 2015, which focused on gender inequality across the cultural industries. The formulation and adoption of gender and diversity policies and the collation and publication of gender statistics pertaining to funding applications and awards had been entirely neglected here (Liddy 2016, 2020a; O'Brien 2019; Kerrigan, Liddy, and O'Brien 2021). It took grassroots activism to elicit action from the leadership of both organisations. Only then, did top-down leadership begin to emerge and over time a range of initiatives to embed gender equality were implemented. Internationally, in the last few years, calls for gender equality have been further underpinned by a turn to additional forms of inequality such as 'constructions of class, race/ethnicity, age, disability and sexuality, which complicate inequality' (Finkel et al. 2017, 282; Crenshaw 1989). Aided by academic and global industry attention (such social media campaigns like as #OscarsSoWhite and #MeToo) Irish research, policy and activism have begun to address broader questions of under-representation, as is the case in this paper.

A number of explicit (Newsinger and Eikhof 2020, 57) policies have been published across both gender equality and diversity agendas, by Screen Ireland, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and RTÉ, one of two public service broadcasters. While a detailed analysis is outside the scope of this paper some of the key points are outlined here. In 2016, Screen Ireland published a gender policy (the Six-Point Plan) which was, in an Irish context, a trailblazer. It included a commitment to publish and monitor statistics, despite previous resistance to that measure; the

introduction of a 50/50 target to achieve gender parity in funding allocation over a three-year period, which was not ultimately realised, and the establishment of a Gender Equality and Diversity Committee. The Six Point Plan was extended and developed in the 5-Year Strategic Plan. A suite of initiatives to accelerate gender equality were also introduced over time including the Enhanced Production funding scheme and a POV production and training scheme. In October 2019 the Spotlight Scheme was launched to target ‘diverse and underrepresented voices and this is reflected in the choice of projects’ (Screen Ireland 2020 cited in Kerrigan, Liddy, and O’Brien 2021, 14).

Subsequently, the BAI launched the Strategy Statement 2017–2019 with a mission to ‘promote a plurality of voices, viewpoints, outlets and sources in Irish media’ (Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) 2017, 1) followed in April 2018 by the publication of its Gender Action Plan which proposed to gather ‘transparent and accurate data on the number of women involved in the sector, what roles these women have, pay structures . . . and whether there exists adequate gender balance in decision-making positions in the industry’ (BAI 2018a, 3). The assessment criteria for its Sound and Vision funding scheme included gender balance in key production personnel; a special funding round on Women’s Stories (2018, 4) which was announced in 2019 and a commitment to undertaking gender research on areas such as equality of access, leadership, and gendered working conditions (BAI, 2019a & 2019b).

RTÉ published the 2018–22 Strategy in March 2017, which acknowledges the need to ‘create content that reflects the diversity of an ever-evolving nation’ and to measure on-air diversity (RTÉ Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) 2017a, 6). This was followed in October 2018, by a Diversity and Inclusion Charter, containing a commitment to ‘ensure that there is fair and authentic representation of gender . . . within the workforce’ (RTÉ 2018, 4). The goals attached to that objective included ‘a 50/50 gender balance across RTÉ as a whole and, where possible, within key levels of management’. However, RTÉ had already claimed in its 2017 Review of Role and Gender Equality that the gender distribution of employees was almost a 50/50 split and there was a lack of clarity around the timeframe for achieving the stated targets: was it 2020 or 2030? In February 2019, as part of that strategy for diversity and inclusion, after an internal competitive process Zbyszek Zalinski was appointed RTÉ’s first Diversity and Inclusion Lead.

Leadership, best practice and EDI

Sinclair, drawing on the work of Mary Uhl Bien (Uhl-Bien 2006), describes leadership as ‘a process of influence, often aimed at mobilising people towards change – for example, in values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours and ideologies’ (Sinclair 2014, 19). Leadership is central to changing organisational cultures (Schein 2010) and is an important predictor of success, ‘leaders can and do make a difference’ (Bassi and Russ-Eft 1997, 8). Transformational leaders can act as ‘powerful agents for change’ (Kelan and Wratil 2021, 497) particularly when they are not perceived to belong to the group on whose behalf they are advocating. For Hay, such leaders inspire confidence ‘and provide a foundation for accepting (radical) organizational change’ (6). They lead changes in mission, strategy, structure and culture by making a compelling case for change and instilling a sense of urgency among their followers (Hay 2006, 9–10).

The approach of transformational leaders to EDI can inspire others (Sawyer and Valerio 2018) and put pressure on others to act (Lansu, Bleijenbergh, and Benschop 2020). Because covert forms of bias can be difficult to identify, concrete measures to actively monitor and change organisational policies and practices are key and create and maintain transparency (Iyer 2009, 260). A number of actions are now identified as best practice internationally and require ‘clear measurable workforce targets and diversity and inclusion objectives, with tangible outcomes’ that can lead to ‘more focused and accelerated results’ (Ofcom 2021). These include the publication and implementation of policy documents; regular public reporting on successes and failures; accountability on the part of leaders, policy makers and organisations; setting targets with a stated commitment to diverse outcomes;

tracking and monitoring funding awards and hiring decisions; diversifying recruitment sources and collating and publishing statistics and workforce demographics (Armstrong and Page 2015; Diversity Arts Australia, BYP Group and Western Sydney University 2019; Kerrigan, Liddy, and O'Brien 2021; Vinnicombe et al. 2020). Wreyford et al. propose what they term 'the 5 As Policy Recommendations': Ambition, Allyship, Accessibility, Adaptability and Accountability. These five As 'provide a framework for good and effective practice, and should act as benchmarks for anyone wanting to see results in EDI' (Wolf 2021, 32).

The significant effects of EDI on organizational work cultures and output informs a sizeable body of research. Much of it refers to 'productive diversity', whereby a more diverse workforce provides the global marketplace with 'widely diverse people, cultures, ideas and viewpoints' that contribute towards sustainable competition and success within organisations (Chavan 2010). Diversity has been similarly touted as crucial at the level of decision-making and has been noted as 'providing a range of new resources and tools for those who want to promote inclusive decision making' (Lukensmeyer, Yao, and Brown 2014). An argument exists for diversity based on the importance of incorporating new voices and perspectives into strategy dialogue, to help senior management and leaders understand and address the needs of a demographically diverse base and to stimulate a wider range of creative alternatives. In fact, research demonstrates that organisations with a strong commitment to diversity outperform their competitors (Slater, Weigand, and Zwirlein 2008). Though there are currently substantive gaps in the evidence on workforce diversity in the screen sector anecdotally there is a strong conviction that barriers to workforce diversity represent 'a lost opportunity' for companies, creative teams and audiences alike (CAMEo 2018, 60). However, Nwonka and Malik (2018) have challenged a discourse of diversity that has increasingly taken attention away from inequality and social justice. Cobb and Wreyford among others have pointed to groups who have been sidelined in diversity initiatives (Cobb and Wreyford 2021).

Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was adopted here (Yin 2009). All policy documents issued by any individual or organisation in the sector from 2015 to 2021 were examined. Interviews were conducted with leaders in broadcasting, independent production companies and professional organisations and each was treated as an individual case with respondents being sampled from within each case. Respondents' positions in key roles concerned with implementing equality and diversity policy within their company or organization dictated their inclusion in the sample. For that reason, Managing Directors, Senior Executives, Diversity Managers, Heads of Departments or their Deputies and Commissioning Editors across the sector were approached for interview. Most requests, though not all, were positively received with a total of 27 interviews undertaken. Women in Film and Television Ireland, were excluded because one of the researchers is the Chair of that organisation. For different reasons, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) was also excluded. Because the BAI was funding the research it was decided there would be a conflict of interest to include their perspective on the issues. Moreover, the BAI was motivated to commission the research in order to solicit the opinions of industry and key informants without influencing the discourse with their own input.

RTE and TG4 are public service broadcasters in the English and Irish languages, respectively, while Virgin Media is a commercial broadcaster. FÍS Eireann/Screen Ireland acknowledges itself to be 'the primary source of public funding for feature films directed towards a cinematic release' in Ireland (Liddy 2016, 901) which is administered through the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. Both Screen Ireland (through Screen Skills Ireland) and the BAI also fund a range of activities for professional organisations and guilds, some of whom have been interviewed here. Respondents who worked for independent production companies were anonymised to ensure they were free to speak openly without fear of consequences to their working lives. All other respondents would be identifiable because of the specifics of their job title or industry role and so they gave consent to be named in the research. Participants are described further in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Named research participants.

Participant + Identifier	Role	Organization
Eimear Cusack	Head of Human Resources	RTÉ
Annie Doona	Outgoing Chair	Screen Ireland
Alan Esselmont	Director General	TG4
Hugh Farley	Director	Writers Guild of Ireland
Paul Farrell	Head of VMTV	VMTV
Birch Hamilton	Director	Screen Directors Guild
Susan Kirby	CEO	Screen Producers Ireland
Gareth Lee	Manager	Screen Skills Ireland
Áine Ní Chaoidealbhain	Deputy Head	VMTV
Laura Ní Cheallaigh	Commissioner	TG4
Trevor Ó Clochartaigh	Director Operations/Director Communications	TG4
Clíona O'Leary	Deputy Head of Sport	RTÉ
Zbyszek Zalinski	Diversity Lead	RTÉ

Table 2. Anonymous research participants.

Identifier	Description	Gender
Participant A	Media Activist	Male
Participant B	Independent Producer	Female
Participant C	Independent Producer	Female
Participant D	Independent Producer	Female
Participant E	Independent Producer	Female
Participant F	Independent Producer	Female
Participant G	Media Activist	Female
Participant H	Independent Producer	Male
Participant I	Independent Producer	Male
Participant J	Independent Producer	Female & Male
Participant K	Independent Producer	Female
Participant L	Independent Producer	Male
Participant M	Independent Producer	Female

Data was gathered using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each interview lasting one hour. Open-ended questions addressed issues that include the adoption of policy and processes to support EDI and the approach of leadership to adapting to EDI initiatives. In-depth interviews are useful for exploring detailed perspectives and allow for long and complex responses, which generate very rich data (Bertrand and Hughes 2018, 98) and this was the outcome here. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The resulting data was coded with categories derived from the literature and codes that emerged from the data. Codes were analysed and key themes generated for further analysis in order to present the central findings of the research. While extrapolating globally on the basis of a relatively small, nationally specific sample is not possible, case studies generate context-rich knowledge and have merit because of their proximity to studied realities (Flyvbjerg 2006).

Policies, practices, and perspectives

Policy and data gathering

TG4, RTÉ, Virgin Media and Screen Ireland all have policies or stated positions around gender and diversity and all articulated a desire to achieve diversity in their workforce and output. In their Code of Conduct for Employees TG4 asserted their 'commitment to equality and pluralism with regard to gender, sexuality, race, religion, age, disability or membership of the travelling community' (2019). Director General, Alan Esselmont, stressed the importance of formally collecting and monitoring data to identify 'where the weak points are and where we can bring in change'. Trevor Ó Clochartaigh, Director of Operations and Communications, has overseen the formulation of a diversity policy, not

yet published, and a champions forum was being assembled to evaluate diversity and inclusion 'as a living strategy . . . not a tick box'. TG4's focus was not only on diversity within its workforce but in its output and 'as a champion in the broader society'.

While RTÉ Diversity and Inclusion policy (2018) stated that the organisation was 'determined to embed D&I into everything we do', interviews with personnel across a number of departments suggest that data-gathering and the implementation of policy is inconsistent. This is impacted, arguably, by the scale of the organisation, its financial difficulties and the disruption caused by the COVID 19 pandemic. Diversity Lead, Zbyszek Zalinski, explained that RTÉ were still looking for the best way to gather data on diversity 'in a GDPR compliant fashion' resulting in a questionable delay. Zalinski made a case for 'softer' approaches to cultural change, like marking specific events such as International Women's Day or Black History month. These are, of course, worthy and important foci with the potential to create a climate for change but are arguably less effective because they are divorced from a formal strategy to create systemic change within RTE. Indeed, Vinnicombe et al. suggest that more ambitious (rather than 'realistic') targets are sometimes a way of 'mobilising organisations into action, even when they are not fully met' (2020, 8).

Eimear Cusack, Head of Human Resources, suggested that RTÉ had no issue with gender balance, 'every producer in here is a woman' which is at odds with the picture that emerged from the RTÉ Sports department. Deputy Head of Sport, Cliona O Leary, conceded there was considerable work to be done in the area of gender equality – 'eighty people working in sport and we have 67 men and 13 women, so we've got an 84% to 16% difference there'. Data collection in Sport had been ad hoc for the last few years but, more recently that process had been formalised and a target of 20% increase in women's representation by 2020 was established, albeit not met. However, the establishment of a steering committee, a sports strategy and a commitment to publicly reporting on progress had been pledged, all of which may signal ambition, best practice and engagement. This evidence-based approach is in sharp contrast to Cusack's assumption that because female producers were visible, in her opinion, there was no problem. Research consistently asserts the importance of organisations keeping regular data on workforce demographics which can help prevent the assumption that 'things are getting better (Everingham, Stevenson, and Warner-Smith 2007), or trusting that the *current* EDI interventions are the right ones for change' (Wreyford, O'Brien, and Dent 2021, 144).

Virgin Media's goal for 2020, according to the organisation's action plan, is encapsulated in the phrase 'more inclusive' and the broadcaster was focused specifically on creating a more gender balanced workforce and one in which people with disabilities could thrive. Indeed, the Virgin Media action plan struck a note of concern about gender equality, 'we've not hit the mark on this one' (Virgin Media online). While a diversity policy document did exist, it was formulated by the parent company, Liberty Global, and a small, interested group of employees was working informally on a policy specifically for Virgin Media Ireland. However, research suggests that for EDI to have impact in an organisation and successfully bring about culture change it should include the leadership and be a central plank in an organisation's vision. EDI issues, including organisational policy 'reflects the need for EDI to be addressed by everyone, at every level, and put at the heart of business, funding and commissioning plans' (Wreyford, O'Brien, and Dent 2021, 15). A number of Virgin Media executives stressed that diversity was much broader than gender equality. Paul Farrell, Managing Director of Virgin Media, reflected on some diversity practices that they had engaged with, such as increasing diversity among 'the pool of continuity announcers and promo people' and offering opportunities to female directors of drama. Farrell's statement 'on the screen side of things I think we would be ahead of most people' is a reliance on guesswork and the absence of company targets despite being open to, and supportive of, change. Vinnicombe et al., among others, suggests that 'targets enable cultural change [...] they set a clear vision and keep an organisation on track' (2020, 3).

The vast majority of independent production companies acknowledged the importance of creating a more gender equal and diverse industry. Some companies had formal policies in place and were proactive and communicated that policy: 'We have a production pack that goes out for every production and every member of crew gets it. It has our gender diversity policy, it has our bullying and harassment policy. It has our green energy policy' (Participant B). In other cases, companies had no gender policy at all and had made no attempt to collect data, even though EDI was strongly supported by them. Many of the independent production companies were small and spoke of a lack of resources and personnel using phrases like 'a small team' or 'there's only the four of us' when asked about the existence of an EDI policy. However, research would suggest that a 'baseline of accountability and transparency is pivotal to the work that is required to promote diversity and inclusion' and must become part of the way organisations do business" (Ofcom 2019, 7)

Guilds and representative organisations Screen Directors Guild of Ireland (SDGI), the Writers Guild of Ireland (WGI) and Screen Producers Ireland (SPI) all spoke of their boards and committees being gender equal, or very near it, and of having equality or diversity committees in place and looking for diverse voices in an industry that is not itself diverse. Birch Hamilton, Director SDGI was clear that 'by diversity, we particularly mean class diversity as well ... class and race'. Hugh Farley, Director WGI explained that their focus had, until recently, been on gender equality exclusively but they now 'want to understand in a meaningful way ... how to reach and support the few people of colour who are members; to understand better how we can serve them'. Unlike the SDGI and SPI the WGI does not yet have a formal written policy pointing to the somewhat disjointed nature of the sector's response. It is also possible to have a policy committed to paper and for personnel not be proactive in ensuring that the tenets of that policy are supported. The recently appointed CEO of Screen Producers Ireland (SPI), Susan Kirby pointed to her organisation's diversity policy and to a gender and diversity committee. Yet, she was the most circumspect of the three leaders from this part of the sector. Kirby saw EDI as 'a complicated space that needed, like, a really long range, multidimensional kind of additional support' which could be indicative of a lack of motivation to challenge the status quo. Interestingly, outgoing Screen Ireland (SI) Chair, Dr Annie Doona, observed: 'SPI has not been at the forefront of pushing the gender/diversity issue. They don't represent all producers, but they do represent a significant number'. Doona and others have in the past called for greater engagement from producers who, it is argued, must be more accountable given they are funded by public money. However, to date, no such accountability has been actioned and anecdotally it is said there is a preference to 'carry the industry' rather than impose top down dictates.

Data-gathering for EDI is a vastly under-utilized tool, which is at best inconsistently applied even amongst broadcasters and large organisations and at worst is non-existent across the independent sector more broadly. The lack of data emerged as a concern consistently. Susan Kirby (SPI) remarked: I actually find it very striking that there doesn't seem to have been a body that really owns the idea of being the data collector for the sector ... I find it quite odd, actually, and a real loss for the sector in case-making and policymaking. SDGI would also welcome having more data on members' activity levels and budgets. For Birch Hamilton, 'data is everything ... you know that phrase, what gets measured gets managed? We would absolutely love that information'. Gathering data, monitoring progress and setting targets is regarded as best practice for all organisations, according to Ofcom: 'set measurable and time-specific diversity targets, particularly for those employers with no clear targets for critical areas of under-representation' (2019, 8). Despite some improvements over the last few years, coupled with an increasing understanding of the importance of data there is still a considerable shortfall and an uncertainty about who should, and could, be charged to rectify the situation.

Changing practices: a cultural shift?

In keeping with the 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report which stated that that US audiences were increasingly diverse and had a growing preference for diverse content (2020, 6) many participants here described how they put a positive value on diversity. One producer observed that diversity was part of the ‘integrity and “the DNA of the company”’ (Participant I). Another was appalled at the invisibility of minoritized ethnic groups on Irish television: ‘ethnicity in this country [...] is something I’m particularly interested in. I mean, all you have to do is look at how many black faces are on our screens ...’ (Participant C). The established link between diversity behind the camera and the stories and characters on screen was identified by some participants. Echoing an increasing body of empirical evidence (e.g. Lauzen, 2020) one producer articulated a clear strategy ‘really, where you can make significant difference is in the stories that you develop, the talent that you work with, the things that you produce and then who you hire. When you’re hiring one hundred or two hundred people or something, that’s where you can make a significant difference’ (Participant D). Some companies put an emphasis on their own practices and a moral imperative to ‘do the right thing’ and play a part in creating a more diverse and representative industry in hiring and in their choice of creative output, though they do not measure it in any formal way. ‘We work very hard to make sure that (we are) diverse and representative of gender and people of other ethnicities as well and that comes down to the projects that we work on ...’ (Participant M).

This independent producer was particularly concerned about recruitment. ‘One of the biggest issues in the film industry is how we recruit, like how we bring people into the industry, because it’s all through, it seems to me, word of mouth. There’s never job advertisements. So, it’s a closed shop in so many ways and that absolutely has to change. And I think that that will open up things a lot’. Several interviewees from all sectors expressed concern that unpaid internships and closed networks that shared information and contacts limited the range of new entrants to the industry. This chimes with Rivera’s assessment that ‘cultural similarities between employers and job candidates matter for employers hiring decisions.[] it is a process of cultural matching’ (Rivera 2012, 1). Another independent producer reflected on the changes she sees in herself and the way she now thinks about EDI: ‘You would have spent 15 years without thinking about that ... (but) it’s been an interesting journey. We don’t have a diversity task force per se (but) we would usually work with the production manager and the production coordinator to see what our crew is looking like’ (Participant E). While not minimising the goodwill of individual producers, and there was undoubtedly good will in evidence during these interviews, Iyer’s assessment resonates here ‘good intentions on the part of employers and managers are not sufficient to ensure fair, non-discriminatory treatment’ (Iyer 2009, 259).

Overall, with regard to policy, practices and perspectives on gender equality, diversity and inclusion, the unproblematic acceptance of a (white) male-dominated industry, in evidence just a few years ago was absent among participants in this research. Instead, a heightened awareness of the value and desirability of achieving diversity has permeated discourse, along with a realisation that a changing Ireland must be represented on screen. In terms of practices for improving diversity, participants described efforts to review recruitment practices, scrutinize company output and discuss openness to change as well as accepting a degree of accountability for improving diversity in the sector though these were often piecemeal, inconsistent and inconclusive with a tendency to redirect responsibility. The vast majority of interviewees argued for financial incentives and more extensive and systemic supports to be put in place to ensure that the onus did not fall unduly on individual organisations.

Interviewees from TG4, RTÉ, Virgin Media and Screen Ireland struck a note of caution: building a more inclusive culture would not happen quickly or easily. RTÉ’s diversity lead cautioned that ‘there is no silver bullet solution to diversity’ while Virgin Media acknowledged that change will take ‘years not months, and requires a company-wide approach with a solid action plan underpinning executive commitment’ (Virgin Media online). There was much that was positive in the sector with regard to policy and practices but there was also less animation and urgency directed towards the

implementation of practical, tangible measures that would begin to transform the way the industry currently does business, even in an increasingly supportive EDI landscape. Indeed, the acceptance by some that it will take many years to change the culture could be interpreted as an almost defeatist acceptance of existing structures and an inevitable continuity of a cycle of exclusion and marginalisation.

In the literature, risk avoidance is widely acknowledged as being key to understanding how the screen industries operate. Franklin argues that ‘riskiness is often given as a reason to persist with the status quo’ (Franklin 2018, 12) and Coles and Eikhof concur and argue that ‘socially constructed perceptions of risk held by key decision-makers is central to understanding inequality in the screen industries’ (Coles and Eikhof 2021, 2–3). Arguably, driving change at any level does involve some risk; organisations are investing time, resources and risking discommoding those in the industry who are less convinced that EDI merits all the energy and focus it has been receiving. In terms of policy, practices and perspectives in the sector the key insights were that policies did exist in the larger organisations but were less evident among independent companies; data-gathering was under-utilized, some good practices to promote EDI were in evidence but they were ad hoc and not consistent across the sector.

Leadership for change

There was widespread agreement that a more inclusive industry will require considerable investment and significant overhaul given that inequality, marginalisation and exclusion are well documented in the Irish context and exacerbated by the informal, project-based and freelance nature of the sector. It is not feasible that broadcasters, independent production companies or stakeholders could, single-handedly, implement the level of change required to embed EDI across the entire industry. As Gareth Lee, manager of Screen Skills Ireland put it ‘It’s a kind of cultural change is what you’re trying to achieve. And I think that’s a huge endeavour . . . there are interventions needed in all kinds of levels to achieve that . . .’. Alan Esslemont, TG4’s Director General, connected government-level leadership to the BAI, as a semi-state body and called for ‘a national policy’. Other respondents also called for the establishment of an entirely new body with responsibility for diversity in the sector. Either way, respondents saw the need for support to go beyond policy statements and fragmentary and intermittent initiatives to involve the allocation of resources to the bigger project of diversifying the media industries. They connected leadership not just to attaining resources for diversity but also to the need for an overarching strategic vision that could guide the sector through the change process.

One independent producer pointed out that ‘we should be seeing 10% of our stories involving people from a BAME background and we’re not. The leaders in RTÉ and Virgin need to say we need to see more of these stories and these faces and to say it out loud . . . Without leadership this will not happen because no one really wants to do it . . . people want to maintain the status quo, because producers and the like are doing alright already’ (Participant L). More specifically with reference to the government’s role in leading change, another independent producer expressed anger at the absence of senior government voices in public discourse on EDI matters in the industry and the unacceptably slow pace of change around minority ethnicities in particular. ‘I often thought what a powerful message it would be to hear the minister say, why are we not hearing voices from the Afro Irish community? On Virgin Media, on Newstalk and on RTE? . . . That’s where the leadership, obviously, should begin’ (Participant C).

Accountability

Accountability emerged in a number of these accounts. Director General of TG4, Alan Esslemont, was cognisant of TG4’s capacity to bring about change more broadly, because of its role as a publisher-broadcaster ‘everything we do is contractual . . . we can stipulate in the contract what we expect’. This introduces the prospect or possibility of production companies becoming accountable to

broadcasters who seek to implement change. The need for accountability also emerged in Hugh Farley's interview. Farley, Director of the Writer's Guild of Ireland, saw government as having a responsibility 'to ensure that the organisations it funds are held to account and are adequately resourced' to deliver on diversity in the sector. In his analysis, the BAI was again named as having potential for strong leadership. As he put it, the BAI 'is better positioned than Screen Ireland because it doesn't have a mandate to choose successful projects ... it has more latitude to adopt a really positive role and force producers to consider the make-up of their creative team'. Here, again, Farley taps into industry fears of risk taking, this time concerns about 'risky' projects. Screen Australia has identified risk as a challenge to more diverse screen content: 'TV drama is expensive to make, so it's difficult to take risks with new and different programs ... there are some perceptions that audiences and the market have a low tolerance for diversity, especially when they perceive it to be "worthy"' (2016, 7).

Part of the argument for placing the BAI and Screen Ireland in leadership roles for change was connected to their status as publicly funded bodies. One producer distinguished clearly between the responsibilities of public and commercial funders. 'I think there's individual responsibility for the production companies. There definitely has to be responsibility for public funders ... commercial funders no. Commercial funders have to look at their bottom line' (Participant B). However, an alternative argument may well point to the public funding that many production companies themselves receive and question whether it is acceptable that they have little or no responsibility for EDI leadership. Indeed, that position was also articulated by another producer who suggested when funding comes from the taxpayer 'organizations have a responsibility to make sure that there is true diversity and actionable steps to achieve that' (Participant D). Similarly, Aine Ní Chaoidealbhaín Deputy Head of Virgin Media articulated support for public bodies as leaders in diversity and inclusion initiatives. As she put it 'anybody who's getting public service funding, it should be a part of the culture that we nurture (diversity)'. Confidence was thus placed in public funders to improve diversity and to nurture and promote talent in many accounts across the board. Public service leadership was seen as crucial in order to identify, orchestrate and implement change.

Some respondents however, were of the belief that a new industry body with a specialised brief would be preferable to any currently existing organisation. While one producer acknowledged that 'bitty things are happening' in the industry she called for a more comprehensive approach 'an industry body that takes in the BAI and Screen Ireland and TG4 and Virgin and RTE and the various different colleges and the independent sector ... something that's centralized' (Participant E). The proposal for an organisation with responsibility for diversity and inclusion in the sector resonated right across the board and was referenced by most of the interviewees.

The transformation of the industry is a mammoth task if permanent systemic change is to be achieved and it requires that significant resources be allocated to that change project. Dr Annie Doona, outgoing Chair of Screen Ireland, acknowledged the support of government during her tenure with that organisation. However, she described how support did not translate into the resources needed to acquire new posts for an overstretched Screen Ireland, which was problematic. As Doona described 'We put in for two or three posts every year and so far, we haven't got one, which is probably departmental funding restrictions'. Concerns about the financial implications of embedding cultural change in the sector emerged across multiple accounts from respondents. For instance, as Cliona O Leary, RTE's Deputy Head of Sport observed 'RTE's finances, I mean it's no secret, that we are really stretched to the bone ... it's hard to change mindsets, but then to try and change where money goes, from one thing into another ... if there were some supports around that ... to try and help the change process and help buy in, I think that would be very, very positive'.

Many of the respondents considered that leadership was needed from the top down to implement change and it was widely asserted that the BAI should take ownership and lead the way. Respondents did not acknowledge that the BAI has itself experienced considerable workforce and financial constraints over the last number of years and would not have the resources to execute a national change project, even if it had the statutory basis to do so. For example, Paul Farrell from

Virgin Media argued, this is a 'top down piece and if you don't have it at the start with the BAI, you don't have it. They need to be leading with something that says "best in class and here's how we can help you get there"'. There was support for the BAI developing a system like the British Film Institute (BFI) Diversity Standards and adapting them to the Irish context. Ongoing concerns about underrepresentation in the UK screen industries led to the introduction of the 'Standards' in 2016, 'which require film productions to include underrepresented groups in a range of film roles and positions, with these groups based on the protected characteristics identified in the 2010 Equalities Act (Nwonka 2020, 2) though Nwonka has also questioned aspects of their effectiveness.

However, the Standards found support among many respondents here and there were calls for the BAI or Screen Ireland to take the lead and implement policy change. As Gareth Lee, Manager of Screen Skills Ireland noted 'The BAI definitely have a place in all of this, even them adopting the BFI model, I think that's the big picture isn't it?'. This was echoed by Dr Annie Doona who compared Screen Ireland's approach towards producers with that of the BFI's Diversity Standards 'we don't have the same rigour in terms of the questions that have to be filled in as a result of an application that the BFI have, but look at the positive actions that initiative has had, I think that's something we could look at'. However, fear of risk taking emerged again with some respondents concerned at putting the onus on production companies to meet certain criteria in order to access funding 'I think you'd have to be careful around that, because obviously when you look at the population in the UK, it's hugely different and it's massively diverse compared to us' (Participant C).

Another independent producer agreed that while it was important for Ireland to strive to meet some diversity standards, it was important to recognize that Ireland was not the UK 'I think the women's initiative is really good, having women-focused rounds, because gender is 50/50, but we don't need to race to meet the EDI goals of our near and close neighbours [the UK] because their experience is different' (Participant L). Important though resourcing is for a number of stakeholders, the industry also identified dynamic leadership as crucial. Indeed, one producer called for governing bodies to 'step in and insist on diversity. That, then, empowers us to do that job' (Participant J). This was a perspective endorsed by another independent producer who added 'if the major funding bodies adopted that ... diversity and inclusion are best practice, and if companies had to adhere to that ... you know, a contractual obligation, people will do that' (Participant I).

Coles and Eikhof (2021) contend that intervening in the risk perceptions of decision-makers is key to achieving change. 'Future policy and practice for improving equality and inclusion in the screen industries, in relation to gender as well as race, class, disability, or culture, will need to intervene in the ways decision-makers perceive risk ... Re-doing and un-doing risk will be central to affecting this change' (2021, p.15). However, many of the respondents cited here do not recognise their own risk averse decision-making processes and can at times sidestep any acknowledgement that there is more they can personally contribute to change now, even if an industry-wide change project is more desirable in the longer run.

Apart from resourcing, for many stakeholders there was also a strong belief that there was urgent need of visionary leadership to steer the industry through the process of diversification. Individual stakeholders had made attempts to improve the representation of groups who have traditionally been side-lined by the sector, some with more conviction than others. The observations of Wreyford, O'Brien and Dent when researching the UK screen industries holds true in Ireland also 'despite a significant increase in awareness of the need for creative diversity in recent years, and a genuine desire to see things improve, the pace of change has been too slow' (2021, 46). Similarly, for Vinnicombe et al. progress 'needs to be accelerated' (2020, 3). Many of the organisations/independent production companies were operating in a piecemeal way with the majority having no overarching direction or vision. In some cases, there was no company policy in place, data was not available and therefore no tracking and monitoring occurred; targets were not identified and hiring was often informal and relied on word of mouth. Many accounts identify, and justify, reasons why EDI cannot yet be achieved such as a lack of data; inadequate resources; unpaid internships, inadequate skills and training, the need to create an entirely new body with responsibility for diversity; all of which speak eloquently to an absence of leadership at the very top of the industry. Leadership from the BAI

and Screen Ireland is crucial in order to steer a disparate sector towards EDI. Such leadership must be 'bold and visionary' and must also be in evidence 'across government, at sector level and within organisations and businesses' (Wreyford, O'Brien, and Dent 2021, 5). However, dynamic leadership cannot be confined to the BAI and Screen Ireland alone.

Conclusion

Where EDI in media work is concerned there has been a significant shift over the last few years leading to greater awareness of the issues and of the need for fundamental change in the sector. Increased awareness can put an issue on the agenda and locate 'a language for describing and questioning' (Wahl et al. 2003); however, awareness does not necessarily result in action or change. Notwithstanding the value of the 'bitty things' already achieved (Participant E) most of these interviewees are unlikely to carry sufficient weight to reconfigure the industry without top-down leadership. While the majority were supportive of the BAI taking on the task of driving diversity and inclusion, that organisation does not currently have either the statutory basis or the resources to execute a root and branch national change project. While some data gathering and the operation of strategic assessment criteria in its Sound and Vision funding scheme are within the BAI remit, it is doubtful that a more overarching EDI strategy could be delivered without significant additional resources. Additionally, it may be more impactful for such a strategy to be developed through a multi-stakeholder approach and be supported by a clearer statutory framework.

RTÉ, Virgin Media and TG4 explicitly stated that they were willing to work together to develop training and supports to bring new workers into the industry. SPI observed that the 'entire ecology' of the sector could 'embrace the concept at the same time and agree a roadmap ... the infrastructures are there'. Independent producers were equally supportive of the idea of an inter-organisational approach and the development of a 'really long-term plan' (E) to include more people from diverse backgrounds. The sector noted that wide-ranging organisational change was needed alongside a coherent vision for the future and adequate resourcing if a complete restructuring was undertaken to diversify the industry at all levels.

Top-down visionary leadership was called for and it is argued here that it is indeed crucial to bring focus and urgency to the EDI project. Worryingly, in most cases, interviewees do not identify themselves, even implicitly, as industry leaders who are also empowered to generate change. Indeed, the actions taken to embed best practice in their own organisations often lag behind an expressed desire for change. In a UK context Wreyford et al. have argued convincingly that 'accountability is at the beginning, and at the end, of any attempt to support creative diversity. Holding to account is a shared task for workers, businesses, audiences, citizens, and policymakers. Without the demand that our creative and cultural industries become more diverse, change will not happen' (24).

Reconfiguring Irish screen production would require a paradigm shift, not just in terms of industry but in thinking about how workers might be recruited, where resources should be allocated and who should take a leadership role on diversity and inclusion. But it also requires organisations who benefit from public funding to change their approach to better consider the ideas and meanings of EDI and their own role in its creation. From a state developmental perspective, diversity is perhaps the single most important determinant of success for our screen production sector in future markets nationally and internationally, going forward. If Irish media content is to thrive in a domestic market, and if it is to prove viable as an export commodity for an international market, then it needs more diversity at its core, in its workforce. However, it is not simply about the 'business case', representing Ireland as ethnically homogenous no longer reflects the reality of multicultural Ireland. The rationale for creating a diverse media workforce has merit, from a social justice point of view 'to honour our own and others' humanity' (Ely and Thomas 2020).

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