Abridged: Interview Findings

2025

NORMALIZING INJUSTICE 2

How most of Hollywood's scripted crime shows are still spreading dangerous misinformation about crime, race and the legal system

A comprehensive study of the content and production diversity of 71 scripted crime TV shows airing on major networks, cable channels and streaming platforms. Including first-person accounts of behind-the-scenes dynamics from 45 writers, producers and others working across the genre.

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SECTION 6

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES IN THE CRIME TV GENRE

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We interviewed 45 writers, producers and others working on scripted crime shows, each of whom had many stories to tell.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

As a complement to our quantitative analysis, we conducted and synthesized 45 qualitative interviews with people who have served in producer, writer or other roles for one or more scripted crime shows. Many were longtime veterans of the genre.

Our aim was to understand the story behind the content we see on TV: how the genre works and what goes on behind the scenes in terms of the creative and production process.

An analysis of the interviews surfaced four distinct sets of findings. Each set could feature many, many more revealing stories and insights from interviewees, which would easily double or triple the length of this section. We have selected a limited number of excerpts in order to focus on the overall conclusions. Every step has been taken to ensure strict confidentiality.

Following this topline summary, each detailed set of findings provides both analysis and interview excerpts providing first-person accounts.

1. THE IMPACT OF CRIME TV ON SOCIETY

- **All interviewees believed that TV can influence culture and have a social impact,** both positive and negative. They believed the crime genre, as a whole, can and does have an adverse impact on public attitudes and perceptions.
- **Many also saw opportunities for crime-related shows to have an important positive impact:** bringing new stories and realities to the screen, tackling social issues and presenting strong alternatives to the norm of traditional copaganda.
- **Many producers and writers were deeply uncomfortable with the negative impact** they perceived their own shows to have.
- **Some writers didn't see their own show as having a direct impact** because they didn't think it was special enough to do so: it wasn't widely popular, it wasn't different enough from any other show to make a difference, etc. They didn't think that the single, individual show they worked on could have any significant negative impact unto itself, even if they fully recognized that the aggregate impact of the entire genre, in total, could negatively influence public perception. (See below for a deeper analysis of this point.)

2. PERSISTENT RACISM IN THE WRITERS' ROOM & PRODUCTION PROCESS

- **All 45 people** working in the genre in different roles expressed the belief that Hollywood is structurally racist: The racism they see and the significant impact it has are the result of corporate policies and culture maintained by people in power, not merely the result of individual people with bias or hostility.

- **Nearly two-thirds** of the Black writers interviewed reported instances of *overt racism* directed at both themselves and colleagues.
- **Nearly all interviewees** attested to the frequency and widespread nature of instances of less overt—but equally damaging—forms of racism:
    - Erasing "Blackness" from characters
    - Tokenizing "diverse" people
    - Typecasting and pigeonholing writers
    - Blaming white writers' failures on diversity
    - Enforcing the pecking order (another failure of the "diversity hire" policy)
    - Using "diverse" people as a fake stamp of authenticity

3. THE ROLE OF SHOWRUNNERS & TV EXECUTIVES

- **The creative and product process** is very hierarchical: Either a TV executive or a showrunner has the power to make changes at any level and at any point in the process.
- **Network, platform and studio executives** routinely intervene in the creative process to defend or advocate for racist storylines or other problematic content.
- **To do so, they often promote outdated or false assumptions** about "the audience" and other factors that have no basis in fact.
- **Some showrunners are willing** to have their own racial biases and gaps in understanding checked by other writers, and were grateful for the feedback.
- **Many showrunners are either unwilling or unable** to address the racism written into their own stories and productions.
- **Financial incentives** make changing storytelling practices on crime shows very difficult: Networks, platforms and studios want to protect the big profits they generate.

4. "THE RULES" OF CRIME TV

- **Many "rules" govern how the genre works:** storytelling conventions and guidelines that writers and producers are forced to adopt, and ways of working that people working in a given genre are forced to follow. They are enforced by people in power and also by the social regulations and norms of workplace culture.
- **Many of "the rules" have a serious racial impact** by dictating what can and can't be represented on TV, with the effect of exposing viewers to completely inaccurate representations about: the legal system; Black people, communities and culture; who is

and isn't a sympathetic crime victim; how race and racism work (and whether racism even exists); and so much more.

- **Several problematic "rules" include:**
    - Cops are always heroes.
    - Black people aren't relatable.
    - White people aren't racist.
    - No soapboxing is allowed.
    - Audiences love violence.

INTRODUCTION

WHEN DIVERSITY LEADS TO CHANGE—AND DOESN'T

Our research team conducted formal interviews with 45 people who have held one or more different writing or production roles while working on scripted, crime-related television shows, many of which we examined in the quantitative analysis sections of this report.

At a high level, the findings all converge on the same theme:

> Hollywood's current approach to diversifying writers' rooms is failing to prevent racist storytelling in crime-related shows, while also failing to address many persistent dynamics of discrimination and privilege in the hiring, creative and production process.

In the seven years since Color Of Change published *Race in the Writers' Room* (2017), which detailed many of those dynamics, television networks have either started or expanded many diversity programs. But those programs have not fundamentally altered the way in which most of those shows are made, nor fundamentally changed the experience of being a Black creative for so many Black people working on them.

Black writers are given jobs at the bottom of the writing hierarchy, effectively ensuring that their presence will not upset the existing power structure. Many still face persistent bias in everyday work encounters that limits their contributions. Many still get cycled out when their usefulness to a network or production as a token Black face expires. Many are never allowed to get comfortable or feel that they belong in the way their white colleagues do. Many are blocked from rising through the ranks in a meaningful way.

It is important to note that there is no diversity program—even an ineffective one—aimed at diversifying the representation, mindsets, approaches and talent of positions involving ultimate decision-making power: the positions of network executive and showrunner.

With many important exceptions, Hollywood's attempt to fix racist storytelling through self-regulation is predominantly a public relations exercise. In fact, as our findings show, the inclusion of Black writers has often served merely to give a stamp of authenticity to storylines and characters developed, pitched and sold by white writers. Not only are Black writers silenced in these spaces, but their presence is too often used for touting the preferred approach to "diversity" in Hollywood that has nothing to do with equity, inclusion or change.

There is an extremely troubling catch-22 at play when it comes to experience and seniority. You need "experience" to move up a rigid writer/producer hierarchy, but the way to prove experience and worthiness to superiors often means playing along—playing to the tastes of the people in charge (largely, white men) by giving them what they want, which is often problematic content.

Many diversity programs have become a feature of structural racism in the industry, rather than a challenge to it. Hiring does not solve the problem on its own. Hiring Black writers into writers' rooms is certainly a positive development that should not be reversed. But "diverse hiring" will eliminate racist storytelling and change workplace dynamics only if it targets every rung of the power hierarchy, and only if the writers, producers and executives who actually make decisions about content—of every identity—commit to changing the creative/production process and upgrading the standards of storytelling.

We will see change in outcomes only when we see changes in policies, and when we see effective systems set up to support and enforce effective policies. Those changes are critical to moving the industry forward, in addition to making fairer, nondiscriminatory hiring decisions.

We know what happens when we change the people at the bottom and not the policies at the top. New hires, with the least power in the room, certainly cannot change the system simply by walking in the door. Change comes from the top.

One longtime, senior white writer shared their view about the pace of change and how change currently works in the industry, including its shortcomings:

> "Progress is generally slow, and it often comes in the form of a lot of small victories being won over the course of constant, everyday negotiations among writers, producers and networks. [That is: It's case by case, instance by instance, and often episode by episode. Winning progress in the form of network-wide, systemic policy change is rare.]
>
> "The individual 'small victories' process can make the change you win vulnerable to getting reversed. Because it's not a policy change, it can easily get changed back to the way it was whenever the vibe of the final decision-makers changes. For example, we worked long and hard to bring people around with respect to no longer representing or endorsing certain stereotypes or morally abhorrent positions on the use of violence. It stuck for a while, especially with people who believed in it and brought that ethos to their next show. But we also saw a lot of backsliding on other shows—likely, still the majority."

1. THE IMPACT OF CRIME TV ON SOCIETY

All those interviewed believed that TV can influence culture and have a social impact, both positive and negative. They believed the crime genre as a whole can have a very negative impact on public attitudes and perceptions. Many also saw opportunities for crime-related shows to have an important positive impact: bringing new stories and realities to the screen, tackling social issues and presenting strong alternatives to the norm of traditional copaganda.

Many producers and writers were deeply uncomfortable with the negative impact they perceived their own shows to have. One writer shared how seeing the negative impact of the crime shows they worked on pushed them over the line—and out of the genre:

> "There are a lot of specific things that I can point to and go, 'That was good, that was good work, that was helpful or important to the time.' And there have been shows that I've been involved with that make me sick and that I've quit or walked away from and spoken out about. But I won't do it anymore. I got to a point where I said 'No' because I felt that I didn't have enough power to fight back against some really harmful, dangerous tropes and narratives and stereotypes that were creeping into the work, and I felt like I was serving an agenda that I couldn't agree with ethically or personally or morally."

Yet, one common attitude we uncovered during our interviews had to do with the question of which shows actually have the most impact. We often heard a version of this sentiment:

> *TV shows definitely shape perception and have an impact on society, just not my show.*

Some writers didn't see their own show as having a direct impact because they didn't think it was special enough to do so: It wasn't widely popular, it wasn't different enough from any other show to make a difference, etc. Many didn't think a single, individual show they were working on could have a significant negative impact unto itself, even if they fully recognized that the aggregate impact of the entire genre, in total, could influence public perception negatively.

One writer at a major police procedural franchise put it this way:

> "I would not particularly say that it is a big influencer, and I only say that because there's just so many of them … And I think all shows do have a formula, but they're not necessarily breaking any new ground, right? And there are shows that do come along that do break new ground … They come along and people kind of look at them and go, 'Oh my god.' You know, the *Successions*. *Billions* is another one. *Homeland*. These are shows that people gather around the water cooler and talk about—talk about what she's wearing, why she did this, how it's mirroring what's happening in the world.
>
> "And so I think that shows of that nature where you can explore outside of the boundaries of something that is a serialized show, where you're not solving something each and every episode. Those are the ones that I think influence people and the ones that people talk about long after the episodes are over."

Shows are not necessarily influential because people talk about them. Many are influential specifically because people *don't* talk about them: They enter below the level of consciousness and shape people's perceptions and assumptions in subtle ways that are hard to pinpoint but have a profound and controlling cumulative effect over time. They are assumptions about other groups of people, how the world works, what is normal and problematic, and what is right and what is wrong.

That is the most dangerous impact of a show: embedding attitudes and allegiances deeply within us, without debate and without alternative views—and without us even knowing it.

Exceptional shows might have exceptional influence with certain people. But that doesn't mean that the typical genre shows don't have equally strong influence with other people. Many of the most formulaic shows are also the most popular: broadcast to the most people, streamed the most on streaming services, syndicated the most—not just in America but all over the world. The cumulative effect of the standard genre shows, taken together, likely has an even bigger effect than the shows that get more individual attention.

Interviewees were acknowledging a reality: It is very hard to change the cumulative effect of the genre simply by changing certain practices on one individual show within it. Yet, if you don't start somewhere, it never gets better. The reality is that storytelling standards rarely change all at once, even if they should.

Absent new standards set at the top, change can require a one-show-at-a-time approach—until the momentum snowballs and we start to see changes adopted genre-wide. It is an understandable tension. But the view expressed above is a dangerous one when internalized by executives, showrunners and producers, as it often is. Decision-makers should, in fact, take responsibility for what they are doing, including how each decision adds to a very negative cumulative effect. Yet executives rarely ever take responsibility, especially when it comes to copaganda.

This pervasive attitude makes solving the problem of misrepresentation difficult because no one makes it their job to take responsibility for the impact of the genre as a whole. If every decision-maker can say there is a problem, but chooses not to see how they contribute to it, then it is extremely difficult to make headway in raising standards and solving the problem.

This reality makes a good case for why the industry needs to adopt universal standards related to eliminating the most harmful representations we see endlessly promoted by scripted (and unscripted) crime shows.

2. PERSISTENT RACISM IN THE PROCESS

Racism: More Overt, Highly Damaging

Nearly two-thirds of the Black writers interviewed reported instances of *overt racism* directed at either themselves or colleagues—or both.

The aim of 'diversity hire' programs is to diversify TV storytelling by diversifying the writers' rooms that produce that storytelling. This goal sounds obvious. Yet, our interviews revealed this statement to be untrue. In fact, our interviews led us to understand that diversity policies are largely built on incorrect assumptions about how TV is made, how writers' rooms work, and the many ways racism emerges in the workplace—be it structural, attitudinal or psychological.

A senior TV writer summarized numerous encounters she's witnessed:

> "I have watched too many talented young writers of color reach their breaking point in rooms where racist words and ideas go unchallenged, especially if those words and ideas are being thrown around by the showrunner or people in power. Early in their careers, too many writers have to make a choice between being silent in the face of offensive language, or standing up to those who have the power to take their job or damage their career. I have witnessed, up close, how writers of color who stand up to showrunners over harmful language in the room are mocked, patronized and ultimately treated differently for their brave stance. And that often means they feel pushed out of the room, or that they even *get* pushed out of the room, which can end or sideline their career before it even begins."

We heard many accounts pointing to this same dynamic: Not only is racism overt in writers' room discussions, there are also professional penalties for drawing any attention to it, let alone trying to intervene to stop it.

Another example:

> "[I] was going in for an interview as a lower-level writer and having a showrunner try to test me by mentioning the N-word in the meeting. That's directed at me as a Black man to see what my response is going to be."

One writer recalled when:

> "A male television writer/producer said he was afraid to work with their director, who was African American. [The director] seemed threatening to him and [the writer/producer] made joking comments about how this guy could kick his ass and was scary. And this was an African American, gay, gentle director, and I think it absolutely came from a place of fear."

A Black female writer recalled many instances:

> "I mean, it happens all the time, to be honest with you, the same type of stuff. You know, there's only three African American women who are working on a show, and all three are in the writers' room. Yet for over six years, they were still fumbling all three of our names and getting us mixed up. All three of us look completely different.
>
> "I've heard comments about, 'Why do we care about, you know, these people?' I've heard, 'All Black people look alike.' On the procedurals, it feels like you're being tolerated. There

are shows where there are no people of color at the helm, you know, at the top. And so there is that lack of respect."

Writers' rooms are generally not workplaces in which racism is somehow suspended if a Black writer is present or a media corporation has put an anti-racist policy on the books. As the writers we interviewed attest, overt racism is very much alive in writers' rooms across productions and across Hollywood, just as it is across society.

Racism: Less Overt, Highly Damaging

All 45 interviewees expressed the belief that Hollywood is structurally racist. They experienced or witnessed racism in the industry directly and often. They have seen enough to know that racism in the industry is not just a product of a few mean-spirited and bigoted people, but rather a product of the fundamental ways in which the industry works. It is a matter of corporate policy and culture, sustained by the people who run those corporations.

Moreover, they have enough experience to know that racism in the industry is not merely an inconvenience to "get over" or a nuisance to ignore. Every day, they see the direct and highly significant impact of racism on people's careers, on viewers' choices, on viewers' attitudes and on society itself.

There are fundamental rules dictating how Hollywood works. Many are inherently discriminatory and serve to both prevent Black people and other persistently marginalized people from moving forward, while driving a high level of racist content onto the screen. Some of these rules are explicitly written policies, some are spoken but not written, some are implicit but made very clear through cultural cues. All are equally powerful in governing how the creative and production process works, and equally enforced through formal and informal forms of punishment.

It goes far beyond explicit discrimination, such as restricting Black people to play very limited roles in the writers' room, having quota limits for Black writers, passing over Black writers because they don't "fit" the culture of the room, or institutionalizing checks on the influence of Black writers and producers by putting white people in key decision-making roles above them.

These workplace norms, and the people who wield them, serve to silence Black voices. While the following mechanisms of discrimination and disempowerment are less overt, they are identifiable and endemic across television production—including scripted crime-related shows.

Erasing "Blackness" from Characters

One common experience involves the erasure of Blackness from Black characters. This happens routinely when executives, showrunners and producers cast a Black actor to play a character written as "neutral" (i.e., white), in order to present a superficial image of diversity, but do not actually allow characters to be written as Black. They do not allow characters with a Black background, or those involving Black life experiences, to make it into the script and get onscreen.

When decision-makers are presented with opportunities to introduce *meaningful* diversity through storylines including Black content, they deny them. They cut them out entirely, cut out everything "Black" about them, or even turn them into white characters or other non-Black characters.

(See also Section 4 below: Rule B, "Black people are not relatable.")

In a recent follow-up interview, one Black writer explained the general pattern:

> "On the past several shows I've been on, it's been difficult to inspire episodes featuring Black characters, no matter what I pitch in the writers' room. Often, when I conceive of a storyline with Black characters, the fact that they're Black gets called into question and that aspect of the story gets dropped. (I've had similar issues when I propose gay characters.) That includes but isn't limited to crime shows.
>
> "What seems to be happening these days is that casting directors, networks and studios are more comfortable casting Black actors in roles that are not specified as Black. I'm happy to have any people of color get jobs. But it does mean that those roles don't get written with any kind of connection to the race of the characters—their experiences and lives as Black people. So I have had fewer opportunities to write Black characters, being a Black TV writer. And those actors playing those roles don't get to have any grounded understanding of race as part of the material they get to play. These are missed opportunities on American TV.
>
> "I think showrunners can be educated to be more welcoming of storylines written for Black and gay actors (that are not, stereotypical or cliché)."

Another form of erasing Blackness is erasing the range of Black people, backgrounds and relationships that are portrayed. It distorts the idea of what Blackness is and who Black people can be.

One senior writer, a Black man, offered this account:

> "[A Black woman character] was going to have a love interest. The network wanted a man, and we wanted it to be a woman. The network agreed to make it a woman, but we wanted it to be a Black woman. Then the network agreed to let it be a Black woman, but we wanted a very dark Black woman. There was an actress that we wanted, but they wanted a very light skinned Black woman. We wanted two dark-skinned women on screen, just in love. That's what we wanted: Black love. Not that light skinned isn't black, too. But at the end of the day, when we couldn't get the person that we wanted, we couldn't get the right message that we wanted. So we scrapped it and moved on."

Tokenizing "Diverse" People

The way that diversity has been framed in many contexts, both through formal programs and through mandates from network executives, has reinforced two very harmful ideas: that Black writers do not actually "deserve" their place in the writers' room based on their talent, and accordingly, that Black writers are valuable for "checking a box" and not for their contributions.

Writers interviewed described a culture shaped by those ideas—a culture that executives, showrunners and senior writers **treat Black people as "tokens"** imposed on them by corporate bureaucrats instead of treating them as full and legitimate creative collaborators.

Those flagged as coming into the writers' room through an official diversity program faced particular mistreatment and were especially tokenized.

One writer shared:

> "Once they found out I came through the program, there was a little less expectation [for what I could do]. People think 'diversity program' and think you're not good. They just assume you're not: You don't deserve to be there or you got there just because of your skin tone. And that's it. I think that's just the generic bias."

These writers are often passed over for writing opportunities and not considered for promotion.

One senior Black writer summed up how it works:

> "Studios are starting to urge white people, white showrunners, to hire more diversely, but there's no consequence if they don't. And when a white showrunner talks about a writer as a "diversity hire," what that means is they were told to hire that person.
>
> "I have seen writers who are labeled that way treated as second class citizens in the room: not given a script to write, not given a voice, sort of turned into a glorified intern, not treated as a person with a real contribution to make … or with the necessary path for advancement.
>
> "That is largely because those white showrunners are given a free staff writer because they're a person of color, and they don't invest in that person because next year they're not free anymore. Your diversity money goes away. So you don't keep them and then you pass them along to someone else who keeps them in that low level position. It's offensive, it's wrong, it's abusive. And the studios don't call it out. [Executives] created a system that is unsafe and unfair. And they're perpetuating it."

That stigma de-legitimizes the voices of writers coming in through diversity programs, blaming the program and marginalizing its participants as a way of expressing their anger: as if the solution for long-term discrimination is the real problem, rather than the discrimination itself.

Color Of Change's *Race in the Writers' Room* report (2017) similarly found that Black writers, especially when they were in rooms led by white showrunners, were seen as mere "window dressing" to be either used or tolerated, rather than as people who belonged there.

Typecasting and Pigeonholing Writers

Black writers also reported being **typecast for jobs** and **being pigeonholed in the room,** restricting them to writing only stereotypically "Black" subject matter. This happens from the beginning of the hiring process, before they even step foot inside a writers' room. In the labor market, many (if not most) executives and producers see white people as general writers who can write anything, but see Black people only as "Black writers" who are needed only when there is a need for "Black content" in an episode or a show. They put Black people and others into very limited boxes, often so they can then check those boxes.

One Black writer explained:

> "I write science fiction, I write thrillers, those are my things … but over the past five years, everything they have reached out to me about has been a story about slaves or a story about the civil rights movement.
>
> "So, it's like they're trying to push me in that direction. I think those stories are important and need to be told, and there's definitely a writer out there who's good at writing that type of thing. There are certain people who know that, for optics, it would help if you had a Black writer or Black director, and that's the type of stuff that I get."

There is nothing wrong with highlighting someone's background and how it might bring something different to the table in terms of overall life experience and creative contributions. But that is very different from pigeonholing Black people or other people into fixed, limited roles in a writers' room, based on their identity. And then giving white men writers free rein to write any content—and from any perspective—they wish, even when they have no personal connection to that content at all. This double-standard defines so many writers' rooms.

In fact, much of Hollywood works this way, especially when it comes to casting, writing and producing. The current system rewards the behavior of putting people into boxes, treating them accordingly and allowing few people to ever break out of those boxes, in rare exceptions.

Executives, showrunners, producers and others are rewarded for demonstrating **diversity on paper**, and as a perverse reward for it, they remain able to get away with discrimination in practice in terms of the creative and production process, as long as they have shown that diversity on paper and allow everyone to check that box and move on.

Identity-based discrimination is openly encouraged through many hiring and decision-making conventions—for instance, writers being pitched through highly reductive mini-bios that showrunners and executives use to evaluate them. This is a convention that is not optional.

One senior woman writer explained:

> "That's how it all goes: The showrunner, the producer and the network executive were all kids who grew up in Hollywood and went to the same summer camp together. And of course, goes without saying, they're all white guys. What about those of us who aren't, or who come from outside?

> "The agent writes a little blurb about you. They're really terrible, reductionist, like, 'This is a young queer trans writer with a history of sexual abuse and a brother who's incarcerated and has addiction in their family. And they'd be a great add to your world, they could really add color.'
>
> "I mean, it's horrible. If you're from an underrepresented group or community, you're probably only brought in because of this trauma report. They don't want the Black writer from a healthy, intact family with a successful educational trajectory. They want the one they can fetishize, whose brother is locked up or whose mom was murdered or who was homeless. It's racism all the way down."

Certainly, some agents and managers are simply playing the game they are equally trapped in. They may not like the rules, but they write blurbs they know will work. That's what they're told their job is. They may not want to pigeonhole their clients, but they find that is the best way to get them noticed and hired. They are incentivized to get their clients work, and they try their best to get their client in the door, whatever it takes. Sometimes, they are even helping to force change in a positive way by emphasizing perspectives and experiences they know are missing from writers' rooms. Other agents and managers, however, are part of the problem: They see their non-white clients in very limited ways, and so they pitch them in very limited ways.

> **It's rarely:** *This is a great sci-fi writer who also brings different perspectives, savvy and creativity to their work by drawing on their life experience as a queer person, Black person, etc. They'll open up new opportunities.*
>
> **It's usually:** *This is a Black, queer, etc. writer who can add a few marginal things you might be missing, if you ever need someone to add or sign-off on those very few marginal things. They'll get you that one thing you need.*

The former view of diversity has a very different effect than the latter, in terms of the trajectory of people's careers and the content we see on TV. The former opens up space for people. The latter pigeonholes them into narrow spaces and encourages discrimination: *Nah, we don't need that.* The former expands the field of creativity, the latter restricts it, in a vicious cycle.

Meanwhile, white men are "neutral" and get to write with authority on everything. They don't need a special background or qualifier to be relevant and valued. They are inherently relevant and valued, and also serve as the arbiters for evaluating everyone else's relevance.

This convention is a major problem and a clear example of structural bias. It's a form of bias that is baked into the very culture and mentality governing how the industry works. It turns certain identities—whether race, gender or sexuality—into highly restricting markers determining how writers are commodified and sold. This means that a Black writer is sold on the marketplace only in terms of their "Blackness" rather than in terms of their overall abilities as a writer.

This not only greatly restricts Black writers' labor market opportunities, but it also serves to reproduce their tokenization inside a writers' room: putting them in a restrictive box before they even take their first meeting or show up for their first day in the room.

Blaming White Writers' Failures on Diversity

To make it all worse, whenever white writers fail to get jobs, so many people across the industry play the game of blaming those failures on the industry's push for "diversity" in general, on diversity pipeline and placement programs, and even on people of color writers themselves.

One writer explained:

> "You keep seeing writers, especially young white male writers, saying that their reps told them they can't get jobs because all the diversity writers are getting the jobs.
>
> "[Even if that's true for the lowest level positions], it's like, they're not hiring diverse writers at the upper levels, so if you don't hire anyone of color your whole way down, then all you have left is a staff writer. Talking to some people in diversity programs now, the reason [they may get that staff writer position] is sometimes they get paid a quarter of what a [regular] writer might get paid. And so when [the showrunner] is looking at the budget, they're like, 'Oh, maybe I'll hire the Black woman who I can pay practically nothing.'"

As another writer shared:

> "You have so many managers telling their white clients that they feel, 'You're not getting this because of some person of color they've got, they're undeserving, lazy and taking your spot.' Even though the numbers don't bear it out."
>
> This disingenuous, self-serving and highly inaccurate argument plays a very specific role. It reinforces the idea that somehow white writers/producers—who represented 70% of all writers/producers in our study of 71 shows, and an even higher percentage of shows that are not uniquely focused on people of color—are somehow being treated unfairly rather than continuing to experience unchecked privilege. It's meant to make us believe that we need to halt the push for diversity because it's "going too far" and discrimination has been solved. The reality is that anti-POC discrimination remains rampant, largely due to the protection of white privilege.

This blame game also serves to reinforce the stigma Black writers face. Putting the blame on them has many effects: stoking resentment among their white colleagues; making them feel like they don't belong; making them feel they're a problem for having "stolen" someone else's job, even though that isn't the case; making them feel they cannot raise any objections and have no right to rock the boat; and excusing treating them as "less than" others in the writers' room.

When this false assumption becomes the conventional wisdom—embedded in the hearts and minds of people in charge of hiring and managing people—the results can be far-reaching and devastating. It affects people of color's career trajectories: decisions about their

roles and responsibilities, decisions about the opportunities they are given or denied, decisions about where they get to work and the dynamics they face as they do their work.

As one Black writer explained:

> "A Black producer friend told me about an executive overseeing the show I work on now. My friend had been in a virtual production meeting, with their camera off, when the executive complained about how the network 'higher ups' wanted them to hire a senior level woman of color to write for a starring character, a Black woman. The executive told all the department heads on the call that none of the scripts they got from a dozen or so Black women were any good, and then went on to say that he shouldn't have to hire a Black woman—that maybe the best person for the job was a white man.
>
> "No one on the call said a word about it. **No one pushed back on the racist idea that there's no good Black talent out there, and that having to hire a Black woman, destined to be unqualified, would take away the job from some unnamed and inherently more qualified white man.**
>
> "This same executive had just told me how happy they were to have me on our show. It is beyond dispiriting to know that the people in whose hands your livelihood rests will say one thing to your face while privately harboring such offensive and patently false beliefs. And that some people in Hollywood still feel comfortable enough, albeit in a setting they assumed was segregated, to openly express such ignorance is, frankly, disgusting. And painful. How can I bring any material to this person, knowing that they think my ideas are less valuable—that I'm less capable than any random white person? And in the future, I know I'll have to deal with them or someone just like them being on the other side of an interview, deciding whether or not I get a job, not based on my ability but on whatever factually unsupported preconceptions they might have.
>
> **"All the full-throated proclamations from Hollywood's C-suites about the importance of diversity and inclusion are just cynical theater,** aimed at protecting their parent companies' share price. This business is hard enough in the best of circumstances. This kind of thing is unacceptable, yet, here we are."

Enforcing the Pecking Order (Another Failure of the "Diversity Hire" Policy)

Writers' rooms are hierarchical environments. There is a formal hierarchy based on rank and seniority: Staff writers and story editors are at the bottom, co-producers are in the middle, and executive producers and the showrunner are at the top. This hierarchy is political: often rigidly enforced, this structure determines who makes decisions and even who can say what, when, how and to whom.

One woman writer explained:

> "There are things that you know would work. But there's, you know, politics in the room. So you can't say that. Sometimes it's just mechanical: I need to wait until so-and-so speaks first, because I'm so low in the pecking order, if I spoke before they did, I would be 'uppity.'"

Another writer explained:

> "If you're a lower-level writer, the expectation is that you are not going to be the one that's shooting down an idea, you're going to be the one that's adding to it. So there are different expectations, depending on what level you're at, in terms of what you want to contribute and how you contribute it. I'm not in charge of deciding what's going to land or what's not going to land. It's someone else's job to do that. That's why it matters who's in these higher level roles over time, and having more women and people of color, etc., in those decision-making roles."

In our 2017 report, we noted how this pecking order is endemic across television production. One writer featured in that report said: "If you're a lower-level writer and the train is moving, it's your job to actually continue the train, pushing forward ... you're not getting paid to say what you don't like."

While this is true for any low-level writer coming into these rooms, it is compounded for Black writers. One Black writer summed up the typical everyday dynamics:

> "It's hard to be lower-level because you're lower-level and then you're also Black. There's a self-policing that goes on. It's like, I don't want to be the Black guy that gets upset every time someone mentions something about Black people incorrectly. It's hard to navigate those spaces."

Because diversity hire programs target entry-level staffing positions, they are adding Black voices to the very spots in the pecking order that make it least likely for them to be heard or appreciated.

And it is no accident. This is common knowledge among industry professionals and cannot be attributed to a mere oversight on the part of network executives and showrunners. If they were truly seeking to change the stories their networks are broadcasting, their diversity programs would target the positions empowered to make change.

Using "Diverse" People as a Fake Stamp of Authenticity

"Diversity's great, but how do we monetize diversity?" This is the question a network television executive once asked a leading showrunner, according to someone we interviewed who was present to witness it.

As the accounts shared above show, there are many answers to this question. One clear answer that networks give to explain how diversity is profitable is that more diverse casting attracts more diverse viewers. We also know that networks get "credit" for behind-the-scenes diversity when they are able to tout it, adding to the profitability of their PR and brand.

There is another reason: A Black person put in the right position, for instance, can give a network a very public stamp of authenticity, allowing them to produce content they might not be able to produce otherwise. Related: Networks can fall back on that person if they ever come under criticism for what they have produced, or use that person to clean up something offensive after the fact, something they thought was okay but turned out to cause a public backlash.

One senior writer recalled:

> "I got sent the staffing grid of [a new show]. I don't know if this made it on the air, but it was a show written by a white guy, directed by a white guy, with a white production company attached and a white studio executive attached. And the story centered around a queer Black female character in [a city]. And so they literally had on the staffing sheet, an internal document, that they were looking to hire a queer Black woman with knowledge of [the city] in the music industry.
>
> "Right. So all of that authenticity, all that personhood of their whole show, they didn't feel the need to reflect it anywhere except in this one magical unicorn, Black queer [city native] music-loving woman who is going to come in and give them all the authenticity that they didn't think it was important to have up until then … And they'll just grab that unicorn person to put that stamp of approval on the project. And that's wrong."

Based on other similar accounts, we should also ask: How much authority is that person really going to have? How much are the decision-makers going to hear things they don't want to hear, and make changes they don't want to make? How easy is it for that person to say anything at all, given how precarious their position is and how (intentionally) isolated they are?

This is perhaps the clearest expression of how the largely self-serving practice of hiring Black writers in such limited ways does not necessarily reduce racist storytelling, or racist industry practices, but can actually have the effect of legitimizing and encouraging them.

3. THE ROLE OF SHOWRUNNERS & TV EXECUTIVES

The reality of "who's in charge" and "who makes the ultimate decisions about hiring and content" is different for every TV show. Sometimes, a successful showrunner will call the shots, even outranking many of the network and studio executives in terms of authority. The executives will generally defer to them. Even in a conflict, the showrunner may win out. Most everyday network executives are not nearly as powerful as Dick Wolf, for instance, and cannot issue him orders. Sometimes, on the other hand, it's the executives who make all the important decisions, even if the show "belongs" to the showrunner. Sometimes the power is split or shared.

The first section below relays stories about what happens when executives are in charge. The second section below relays stories about what happens when showrunners are in charge.

Network, Platform & Studio Executives

Network executives are involved with every aspect of the production of shows that air on their network. The principal way in which they influence creative decisions is by giving "notes" to the showrunner and producers leading the show. Often, these notes function less like guidance and more like directions and instructions that must be heeded.

Sometimes, it's clear that the showrunner has very limited power, as one Black writer observed:

> "[Being recruited for the show], I was told I could bring myself to the table. The showrunner said, 'I want that.' But the sense was that it was frustrating more than anything. The showrunner was known for pushing the network to include more than they're comfortable with. But I could see that even this white showrunner who'd been working on the show forever, really was also hemmed in. Many times, he went to bat for what we wanted to do. He never gave up trying, but it only went so far when dealing with those at the very top. He was overruled so many times. The network had the ultimate control."

Writers interviewed frequently described instances in which network, platform and studio executives intervened in the creative development and/or production process to defend or advocate for a racist storyline, even when the showrunner was trying to do the right thing.

A senior writer described one such instance in detail:

> "[In one scripted scene, two cops] pull over these two Black kids driving a Mercedes … [One cop's] hand goes to his gun and the window goes down. And the kid on that side of the car is like, 'Holy shit, you're the cop,' and things are getting tense. And then [the other cop] is like, 'You know what? You kids just get on out of here,' because he doesn't want this situation to escalate, which is great.
>
> "We are on the call with the studio and the network … and they're like, 'You know, we were sort of thinking that [the cop character] wouldn't want to do anything, he'd tried to de-escalate … but how about this,' [the executives] pitch to us, 'because we feel this is what might really happen, what if [the cop] lets those kids go, but then later in the episode, those kids hurt somebody?'
>
> "And [the showrunner] said, 'Well, we worry that might reinforce the idea that if you don't stop every Black kid, they're going to go out and…' And then [the executives] got really mad at us, but we held our ground and said, 'We're not changing this,' and the call ended there. Then we got a call from our studio exec, who was a Black woman actually, to tell us how we were the problem on that phone call."

In Hollywood, everyone is asked to play along with the idea that network and studio executives know what would "really happen" in these scenarios in real life. They can impose their beliefs onto the creative process, whether those beliefs are accurate or not, and whether they actually know what they are talking about or not. In this case, they may not have gotten what they wanted, which is a testament to many developments: hard-won shifts in the mindsets of some showrunners after

long-term engagement; a racial justice movement that has emboldened people in writers' rooms to stick up for what's right (if they agree); and real diversity that leads to new voices having real influence (where it exists). But network and studio executives so often do get what they want, often to the detriment of their shows' impact on society.

Such network interventions can address any story point: storyline, character, casting, dialogue, etc. In the above example, the executives tried to restore the narrative that characterizes so many representations of police on TV and in film: the police-as-hero narrative, the need for police to have more authority and exercise more violence, and the dangers to society of police not wielding their power and not harassing young Black men (or giving them the benefit of the doubt that young white men get).

Unquestioned Assumptions, Posing as Fact

The interventions can also concern the aesthetics of the show, with the same effect of trying to control the story and all its elements, in order to cater the viewing experience to white viewers.

One Black writer explained:

> "One of the locations I picked for one of my episodes was [in the South]. The showrunners came to me with a network note: 'It will be populated with too many brown people. So we're going to move it.'
>
> "It was literally, literally just changing the [story location] because it would change the color in the background. I was just like, wow. The control is that much. It's that important that it does not affect the story, just the location. I just think that's absolutely crazy."

The executives forced the showrunner to force the entire production to move the show to a different location that would feature more white extras in the background.

Network executives often justify their interventions in the creative process by claiming they are working on behalf of the interests of the broad audiences their network purportedly serves. But in reality, they are mostly concerned with a narrow segment of that audience, and they do not reckon with the true breadth of their audience at all.

The narrowcast mediums of cable and streaming often draw their revenues from smaller or at least more focused niche audiences. But network television is a broadcast medium reaching a vast and broad audience, representing a very full spectrum of American viewers. Yet, network executives do not make program decisions with all Americans in mind, with all the geographical and racial considerations that would entail. They program to the part of the country they value.

One Black writer explained:

> "You get notes like, 'Middle America is what the network is and Middle America isn't going to like that. Susie in Kansas is going to turn it off.'"

Another Black writer explained how network executives think viewers want to watch crime-related shows where "the good guys win and the bad guys lose and they can be at home safely in bed and feel happy about the world." And there's never a question about whether they are actually correct in that assumption, or in their assumptions about what kind of stories, characters and scenes makes people feel that way.

Executives invoke their defense of "the audience" across a wide range of issues: from which characters are "relatable" to which victims would evoke "sympathy" to how the legal system should be depicted overall.

When writers pushed back against these assertions, according to our interviews, they were never provided any rigorous quantitative or qualitative research to justify those assumptions.

Instead, "the audience" is something of a vague symbol, the center of mythology that is wrapped around every facet of crime-related shows. This mythology can be characterized in five "rules of the crime genre" that are discussed in the next section of interview findings.

Showrunners

More than simply being the head writer and creative lead, the showrunner is the chief executive of the show. They are the main creative force and also the chief managerial decision-maker, answerable only to the network, platform or studio executives. They have tremendous freedom to decide how the scripts are written and how the writers' room is run.

Our interviewees reported a range of experiences with showrunners, which reflects the extent of a showrunner's individual power and therefore the importance of their own personal orientation, assumptions and idiosyncrasies in shaping the creative and production process.

Some showrunners were willing to have their own racial biases and gaps in understanding checked by other writers, and were grateful for the feedback.

One senior writer recalled an incident with their showrunner and senior writing team related to the scripting of a TV episode depicting racism directed at the Asian community:

> "As we're breaking it, one of the younger people came in the room, our writers' assistant, who was a young Black man. They made an observation that changed the entire story. They pointed out, 'You know what? This is showing this whole community from a level of weakness. How can we do the same story from a position of strength?' [In the room], it was like, 'Oh, shit.' We had to sort of take that in, our own shift. It's never comfortable, it's never comfortable. Because we realize that even as people of color, when it comes to stereotypes of other people of color, we are not always immune to them. Our intention was to make something that this community could be proud of and say, 'We feel seen.' But you know what? You take the hit, you take the L. 'Alright. Let's do it this other way.' And then you sort of go from there. We got to go make it right.
>
> "That was a powerful moment. All of us had a paradigm shift that day. There was a mirror to reflect our own potentially destructive thinking of other people, our own inherent unconscious

> biases. It was painful, but also productive. It hurt, but ultimately made us better writers and better humans. It works only if you want it to work, though, and if you're willing to hear and accept your own shit.
>
> "Many people in this business aren't willing to recognize when they're wrong, let alone accept being told they are wrong by someone else—let alone by someone junior. They feel like, 'I've made hundreds of millions of dollars doing it this way, why should I change?' That's one reason so much is so hard, and one reason change is so very slow. Money is their only barometer for ultimate success, but for so many of us, success is often about something different. It can't be about money at all costs."

A Black writer recalled a similar incident with a showrunner:

> "'I was reading the scripts in advance and there were several scripts that had Black characters—whether they were perpetrators, victims or bystanders, they all had criminal backgrounds. I told the showrunner, 'You can't do this. You can't make every Black man who is in these episodes have a criminal background.' It hadn't even dawned on him. He didn't realize it. He was embarrassed. And they changed that immediately. They just didn't even realize they're doing that.

Many showrunners are either unwilling or unable to address the racism written into their own stories and productions, however.

One writer recalls one particularly egregious instance in which a showrunner was incapable of accepting an alternative viewpoint from multiple members of the writing team:

> "I was on a show that was incredibly structurally racist—in the storytelling but also in the operation of the show. Oddly enough, it was the most diverse room of writers I've ever written in. But the showrunner had deep, deep racist issues and deep unconscious bias.
>
> "It was set in the world of a crime that was occurring in the space of a college sports program. And the showrunner insisted that the head of the sports program would be this white guy … and he was going to be up to no good exploiting athletes. But the 'heavy' that he would employ was a 'Black guy from the hood.'
>
> "That was the only way the showrunner knew how to describe this man. 'A Black guy from the hood. The Black guy from the hood will be the enforcer and he'll have a gun and he'll go and shoot and kill people because this white man told him to.' A lot of people in the room questioned this narrative.
>
> Writers: 'Well, why doesn't the white guy have a gun?'
>
> Showrunner: 'Because wealthy white people don't have guns.'
>
> Writers: 'What do you mean, white people don't have guns? Look at gun ownership stats in America.'

> Showrunner: 'Well, they might own the guns, but they don't, they don't kill people.'
>
> Writers: 'What do you mean, white people don't kill people?'
>
> "This man had to invent this sort of mythic Black bad guy from the hood. Not part of the world or the story, but because he couldn't wrap his head around the idea of a white man doing his own violence. I mean, it was ludicrous, but also deeply terrifying, right? Because in this showrunner's head, it was just Black people with guns killing people. He could not process a world in which a white man would do his own violence …
>
> "Every single thing [the showrunner] touched was deeply imbued with that kind of thinking. He got to a point where his response to being challenged about his racist thinking got uncomfortable for him, **so he took his staff of 10 writers, he put all the women and people of color in a room, and then he kept all the white writers in the other room.** Except me. And he ran a segregated room."

Of course, there are cases in the real world in which white people in power use Black people as their "henchmen" to execute all sorts of dirty work, whether violence or other wrongdoing. But this showrunner had no other frame of reference aside from that. He had no knowledge, nor even the ability to even imagine, the direct violence that white people commit on their own.

Again, it was a classic case of the person in power insisting that everyone else adopt their worldview as fact and truth, no matter how uninformed, inaccurate or out of touch with reality.

The enormous power that showrunners can wield over the writing process makes them essential to any *real* effort to create more authentic, non-racist storytelling. They either make things happen that otherwise wouldn't, or prevent things from happening that otherwise would.

They make a mockery of the idea that greater writers' room diversity alone will inherently lead to different storytelling. They are able to ignore their writers and even establish segregated rooms. The case above may sound extreme, but showrunners can segregate the room (and the creative process) in many different ways other than physically segregating people.

The hierarchical nature of writers' rooms, and the unchallenged power of showrunners at the top of the power structure in those rooms, makes their position an inherently political one.

This was also the key finding of Color Of Change's previous *Race in the Writers' Room* report: Writers' rooms are an "ecosystem where Black writers were effective predominantly in rooms run by Black showrunners" due to the nature of the command-and-control structure wielded by white showrunners who largely ignored, undermined or in other ways marginalized them.

The Financial Factor

The alliance between most showrunners and executives against challenges to their established patterns of storytelling is, in part, a financial one. Hit shows, especially scripted crime procedurals, are the networks' core revenue stream.

One veteran writer recalled a longtime executive producer saying to them:

> "'I was taught simple: You can either kill your monster or protect your monster.' Basically, saying, 'If we protect the monster, we make a lot of money. We keep the show on the air.' And on [our crime show], we protected our monster … I mean, right now, it feels like the same procedurals are just never going to go away … Dick Wolf is going to own every night of television … And so you can't tell a healthy story or a legitimate story."

4. "THE RULES" OF CRIME TV

The content and style of most shows within a television genre are largely the result of a set of rules that people working in that genre must follow. Those rules or guidelines define the genre.

Some rules about what viewers like and don't like may be based on assumptions that are, in fact, true for a sub-segment of viewers. The problem is that they are presented by people with power in Hollywood as being true and immutable assumptions that pertain to *all* viewers, whether or not that is accurate and whether or not those assumptions have been debunked.

Other rules define who belongs in the writers' room—i.e., who will and won't be able to work in the genre productively. People who cannot accept the rules, or who insist on challenging them, will either be escorted out of the writers' room or driven out of it. There's a strong racial aspect to this, too: White rule-breakers are more likely to be celebrated, while people of color rule-breakers are more likely to be marginalized and forced out.

Some rules are written down, such as legal standards or words that are forbidden from being used in dialogue. Many are not, such as issues of taste, judgments about appropriateness, storyline and character clichés, decisions about what audiences will accept in terms of their credible suspension of disbelief, and so on.

Whether it's workplace comedies, sci-fi dramas, soap operas or crime procedurals, every genre has its conventions that make it what it is. They define what viewers can expect to see and what they are asked to accept as normal.

As one Black writer put it:

> "**We have such a long history** of police being heroes and all the criminals being people of color. We have such a history of seeing police behaving violently on screen and still ending up being the hero at the end of the day. We have so much history of not humanizing the Black and brown people who are in chains and behind bars and not talking about why those characters might have ended up there.
>
> "People like to watch it, so they just keep doing it the same way. **We are sort of baked in to how we tell stories**. It's really easy to find yourself in those moments where you

> have to depict law enforcement, **unconsciously writing the same scenes you've seen a million times over**. Because you don't have the experience to tell a different story. You haven't been there, you don't know those people."

In effect, the rules express a genre's point of view about the world. They focus the creative team on what is and isn't important to "get right" about the real world when it comes to accuracy. And after repeated exposure to multiple shows, genre rules can heavily shape viewers' conventional wisdom about many different issues in real life—even shaping their overall worldview.

In general, "the rules" are storytelling conventions and guidelines that writers and producers are supposed to adopt, and ways of working that people working in a given genre are supposed to follow. It's about all the ways that shows in a genre are the same, not the points of originality that make them different. It's the scene that a producer, writer or director comes up with when they're on autopilot or on a deadline. They know they won't get in trouble or face any resistance because everyone has seen it before: It's safe, it "works" and it's acceptable.

While many of the rules are presented as being based on proven facts about the expectations or reactions of the audiences, advertisers and advocates networks need to satisfy, they rarely are. They are most often based on nothing more than the personal preferences, outdated assumptions and professional anxieties of people who hold power in the industry. The rules are largely about protecting the concerns of those people, not objective realities.

Everyone inherits conventions from the recent past of their genre. The culture established by people in power in the industry determines which they can disrupt and which they must continue. The story goes: When you break the rules, the audience, the advertisers and/or the media will punish you for it. You'll lose people. If a rule is broken and it doesn't lead to disaster, then it must be an anomaly—an exception that somehow only serves to prove the rule correct.

The people we interviewed helped us understand "the rules" of the scripted crime genre, especially those they faced when dealing with enforcers like senior writers, showrunners and network executives. The rules they noted were often especially at play for producing crime procedural shows, where they were more tightly enforced. But they permeated how producers and executives thought about crime-related storytelling across the entire genre—and beyond.

Some of the rules that emerged from our interviews were:

A. **Cops are always heroes.**

B. **Black people aren't relatable.**

C. **White people aren't racist.**

D. **No soapboxing is allowed.**

E. **Audiences love violence.**

These particular rules have a serious racial impact. Because the rules dictate what can and can't be represented on TV, the effect of these rules is to repeatedly expose viewers to completely inaccurate representations about: the legal system; Black people, communities and culture; who is and isn't a sympathetic crime victim; how race and racism work (and whether racism even exists); and so much more.

Rules are enforced by showrunners, network executives and writers. Even people in those positions who want to challenge the rules will struggle to do so. Many eventually hit a wall, as these rules are so deeply embedded in the history of the genre and its profit model. The expectations to follow them are great and the stakes for disobeying them are high.

Sociologists call these rules "institutional scripts" because they are neither invented nor owned by any individual, but rather regulated by the social climate itself. Newcomers become part of the culture by learning these rules and internalizing them as second nature. They are not often questioned, and even more rarely questioned successfully. The resistance to changing them is intense. This makes them all the more difficult to break, though many writers are certainly trying and many shows have demonstrated that reinventing the rules can be highly rewarding.

Rule A: Cops are always heroes.

Writers interviewed most commonly cited one big rule: the command to represent police and law enforcement characters as the hero, enforced with great discipline by decision-makers. A cop might be flawed, break the law or even do the "wrong" thing. **But their motivation must always be portrayed as morally good.** And there's only one possible hero on a cop show.

One white woman writer articulated the rule, its rationale and also the threat of violating it:

> "When you're working for the [broadcast] networks, they want heroes. They want your main character to always be heroic in some way, you know, to always catch the bad guy or show some heroism, whether it's admitting to their faults or standing up for what they believe in.
>
> "I've worked on shows where people have pitched ideas, like, 'What if they're wrong? What if our heroes are wrong in the end, and they send the wrong person to prison, or they make a mistake that affects somebody's life tragically, and somebody gets killed as a result?' We've had those discussions. We've all had those discussions. I've had showrunners say, 'No, no, no, no. **Our heroes always have to be right.** The network says our heroes always have to be right.' They say that whether that's true or not, whether it's coming from the network or not. I've had some showrunners who are like, 'Great, let's do that. Let's do the one where they're wrong.' Of course, the one where they're wrong is not always accurate, either.
>
> "It also can depend on whether you're working with the police for the show. So, for example, we filmed sometimes in [a city] and we had the cooperation of the police

> department there. And one of the cardinal sins of the show was like, **'God forbid, we portray the [City] Police Department in any sort of negative way because then they won't support us anymore** and we'll lose the police cars. We'll lose the logos. We'll lose that support when we go down there to film.'"

A senior white writer echoed the same experience of the rule:

> "I think it's important to the context that we're all working in now, which is that we had a 40 years or so of *Starsky and Hutch* and *Cagney and Lacey*. Often, two cops are always the good guys. They might struggle sometimes in their environments but they are essentially heroic all the way.
>
> "It's really, really striking to me how little some parts of American cultural life find it able to pay attention to the history of the last 400 years, and that they fail to make the connections. The fact there are people treated the way they were treated in Angola prison. And they're made to work picking cotton in the field for $0.14 an hour. It's just remarkable to me that people can't see beyond the end of their noses in order to understand those connections."

Sometimes resistance to breaking this rule can come from the stars of shows themselves. For the sake of their careers, they may not want to play an unlikable character, or one who regularly engages in injustice (that is presented as injustice, instead of normalized) or racism (that is presented as clearly wrong). There are actors who make careers out of being the "evil" character or the "ignorant" character. But most actors—especially stars of leading franchises—do not want to go in that direction. And they can exercise a lot of pressure to prevent their characters and the storylines of their shows from going in that direction.

A senior Black writer explained how this mandatory yet absurd level of propaganda is challenging for writers because it's so limiting to be forced to write to a rule, and being prevented from writing to reality and humanity:

> "I was just having to pretend like everything, you know, is all great with law enforcement. Especially pre-George Floyd. Just, they're perfect. They're heroes. (But they're people, man.) It's having to pretend like these are heroes 24/7. Nothing goes wrong. Everything is always perfect. They're not flawed … It's like they're not human."

As noted earlier, network executives think about crime procedural television as creating a "feel good" experience for their audience.

One senior Black writer explained how this rule dictates the formula for cop shows, turning cops into the good guys who must always win in order to (supposedly) satisfy the audience:

> "Procedurals I believe to be popular because you know what you get. I like writing procedurals because you know what to expect and you understand the rhythms of it, and it feels comfortable. You know that at the end of the act, the thing's going to go missing, and you know that by the midpoint it's going to escalate. And you know, by the end, the good

> guys will win. And you can go to bed happy. Now, why police procedurals are as perennial as they are, I think just has to do with the fact that it presents a very clear line of right and wrong. So you know who to root for and you know who to root against. [Police] are a good guy. They are going to chase a bad guy. It's comfortable. It's the old Western."

In practice, this means that **not only does the "hero cop" have to win, the law enforcement system itself must be presented as the winner**, right along with them. The story that every show must promote is that the system is good, the cops are good, it's all good.

Another Black writer shared:

> "On the network procedural, it always feels like law enforcement has to win it some way. Even if [law enforcement] is incorrect, that 'incorrection' needs to be fixed. You could never show law enforcement in a way that, I guess, denigrates the system at play so that the audience watching would then walk away from the episode feeling upset. In network television, there's always a certain sense and a certain idea that people should feel good about the world they look at."

A senior Black writer explained what "good" means in the context of procedurals:

> "Depending on the show and the network, I think most police procedurals tend to look at the job as a good guys versus bad guys. They tend to adhere to what a hero's supposed to be. Meaning: They have each other's backs; they love their job; they tend to be what I call workaholic geniuses—the job is the most important thing and they're really good at it. And they live to take down the bad guys.
>
> "But it's very rare that I would see shows, any show—any episode, really—that would deal with the systemic issues, the complications of what it is to go into a community and arrest people. What that does to your psyche, to your emotions, to your mind. But most cop shows tend to want to just take you on a ride, you know, give you comfort food.
>
> "The good guys take down the bad guys: That's the way the world works."

To feel good walking away from any episode, the rule rationalizes, viewers must feel good about the system and how it works—not about Black communities, about reformers or about anyone else. Rather the (mostly) white hero cops must feel good: the job they do, the reasons they do it, the results of their actions and the system they uphold.

It's a rule that makes writers lie. Firstly, lying about reality: making a bad system look good, ignoring any reality to the contrary. Secondly, lying about the creative process: accepting the false idea that the only way to make people feel good is to make them feel good about cops—that there's no other way to do it.

This rule is so baked into the formula of crime drama and comedies that it is extraordinarily difficult for even highly motivated writers to challenge it. Most procedurals are told from the point-of-view of the police or the character playing the investigator/enforcer role. This gives the writers

little room to develop characters or scenes without the police present, scenes in which people's experiences with the legal system—including some writers' own real-life experiences—might be more honestly discussed and elaborated.

One senior Black woman writer said:

> "[I want to] go into the projects and have a scene from the point of view of people who have to deal with cops. And unless you have your main [cop] characters in the scene, it's not going to happen. Maybe in the teaser, you can get away with other characters having a moment … And I know other shows have that same directive. And it makes it really hard to tell a balanced story, you're not getting more than one side. **So even though we, in our season, dealt with system and individual problems with the police, it was still from [the police] point of view.**
>
> "There's a line. Once in a while, you could step over in a scene or two. But still, that scene had to be with one of your main cops. So that's a challenge.
>
> **"I think it's a kind of safety valve that's built into the structure of these shows to make sure they don't go too far away from being supportive of the system that they're depicting.** Even having a Black writer like me in the room who considers herself an activist and wants to dig into issues that hadn't been dealt with before, you're still limited. You really are. So I think there are other ways to address it on other kinds of shows that are more effective and more authentic than a show that is so thoroughly from a cop point of view."

This rule, and the stringent storytelling limitations it entails, protects both the police and the legal system from criticism—not just in the fictional world, but in the real world. Without critical or even "balanced" perspectives, the crime shows inevitably function as self-serving police propaganda.

Rule B: Black people aren't relatable.

Network and studio executives, and their producers, are always assessing the "relatability" of featured characters. They believe their target audiences will not be drawn into the story unless there are characters they can easily "relate to" and love—building an imagined relationship with them over time (for recurring characters), or feeling invested in their story and in their fate (for episodic characters).

The broadcast networks, especially, consider themselves to be targeting predominantly "Middle American" (i.e., white) viewers. And so this mandate demands a process of highly racialized character development and casting for the storytelling process—in very explicit ways. Even people of color characters meant to appeal to people of color audiences must be the version of those characters that appeal to white audiences (or at least don't put them off). Creating and pitching relatable characters to executives becomes an important guessing game for writers.

When it comes to crime victims, the assumption is that audiences must first care about the victim of the crime if they are going to care about the solving of a crime, and therefore stay tuned

in to the show. And there are very rigidly defined, well-defended rules about the type of crime victim audiences will care about.

One Black writer explained the archetypal ideal crime victim:

> "I think what we missed was not necessarily how you handled the policing, but how you handle who is being policed—how you depict crimes and criminals. Who those crimes are against, and who those criminals are, becomes very important.
>
> "[We had a slang term for] a victim who must be saved. It's a little white girl who needs to be saved. Period. You want the network just to send this through. You cannot be saving a 50-year-old Black man. You need to be saving a little white girl because she is a victim and she needs to be saved … What if it's a Black teenage boy? Well, I just don't know, will
>
> the audience think he really needs to be rescued? Who you're 'saving' becomes a very important piece of the puzzle."
>
> Young, white, female characters are the most "relatable" victims: the default character the audience can be expected to care about. The further one gets away from this ideal—older, Black, male—the more "difficult" it becomes for the network executives to accept their relatability.

This is especially true when they are not just represented as racially Black but culturally Black, as well.

One veteran white writer recalled one particularly egregious—and costly—instance where the network TV executives replaced culturally Black characters with white characters:

> "[The episode opens with] a young Black couple who are enjoying a concert. The guy has dreads, and I purposely wrote diversity into this episode … And someone takes a backpack, goes into a garbage can behind them and it blows up and kills them … In the process, **after we filmed it**, I was told that the network and studio weren't happy with the way the director shot the scene and that it was going to have to be reshot. And I didn't think there was any problem with it … But then when the episode aired, **all the minorities in my episode had been scrubbed out for white people**.
>
> "One of the pieces of feedback I heard through the rumor mill was the reason they replaced the couple at the beginning was because **they weren't sympathetic enough.** And that's when I was like, I'm done with network TV … That experience just kind of confirmed for me everything that I had been suspecting for several years while working in network TV."

The rule about crime victims communicates to the audience who the police are truly serving and why. It explicitly aligns the actions of the police with serving the most socially acceptable members of the white community. It is, once again, providing a "feel good" product for the "Middle American" audiences the network and studio executives believe they are serving.

Rule C: White people aren't racist.

Writers interviewed described another important rule: If white characters are presented in a way that relates to their whiteness, such as being racist, then they cannot be presented as typical of white people in general.

As a Black writer put it:

> "I had written a white supremacist character as an everyday Joe. I wanted the audience to see this everyday white guy being this extreme racist. And when we went to casting, they picked the most extreme actor. They wanted an actor who had a beard, so he looked like he was one of the guys who stormed [the Capitol] on January 6. And I''m like, 'No, no, I want it to look like somebody who's your everyday.' But it was clear who was in charge and the message they wanted to send. So that's what they did."

This example shows how network and studio executives will protect the "feel good" factor for their imagined white audience in any way they can.

An extension of that rule: Executives, as well as many producers, will not accept stories that could implicate their white viewers in any complicity with racism or cast them in a negative light. They won't accept anything that might challenge the place of white people in American society.

Rule D: No soapboxing is allowed.

Writers were conscious of the fact that they worked in an industry focused on making entertaining television, and that their role was not to use their episodes as a 'soapbox' for a political issue. This isn't a rule that is inherently problematic or restrictive, in their view.

The challenge is in recognizing that there is no "neutral" position. Shows transmit values and social messages whether they intend to or not. Crime shows are especially moralizing.

So the question is about who gets called out for pushing a message, and which messages get labeled as "political" or "preachy" compared to the many that don't. The "soapbox" that almost all crime shows create for constantly promoting and rationalizing police propaganda is never seen as a soapbox or seen as a violation of the "no soapboxing" rule. It's seen as *part of the entertainment*, rather than as a threat to it.

Hard questions are not often answered: Is accuracy inherently progressive, and therefore not allowed? Can progressive social messages be entertaining in the crime genre, or are only regressive messages and inaccurate representations deemed entertaining? A few shows have succeeded in making different messages entertaining, compared to the norm of the genre, but the rules are generally stacked against them.

One writer said:

> "In the end, we're an entertainment show and it's about the characters. And so they can't be standing on a soapbox reading from this or that playbook."

A senior Black writer added:

> "This is entertainment, and if we start banging them over the head, that's when I just think people are going to turn off the show because that's not what the show is. The way the show was built, it's not what [audiences] expect when they see it.
>
> "If we're able to sneak something in, we're lucky. One backstory we came up with is that [a character's relative] was incarcerated by a dirty cop for eight years for a crime he didn't commit. And then he was exonerated. But the scars are still with him now."

A senior white writer stressed the economic incentives that writers, producers and network executives all face, and how this rule orientates everyone toward creating a product that is first-and-foremost entertaining.

> "I just think the biggest thing that people miss is that they don't understand where incentives lie with writers. Most writers don't come into work every day like, 'I want to write something that is going to teach the audience some great message.' They come in to work [thinking], 'What's the most exciting thing I can pitch to impress my bosses? That gets good ratings? That gets me rehired and keeps our show on the air?' [That's] at the forefront of most writers' minds, because it's such a difficult industry to keep employment and to keep writing and to break into. You have to understand that those are the discussions that happen in the writers' room.
>
> "I mean, I know some shows, they have a specifically social message, too. That's all they probably talk about. But for most shows, this discussion is about what's exciting and what's going to get good ratings. And I think that's something that a lot of people just miss. And I think it's not just for the writers. You also have to look at those same incentives for the showrunners and the executives, because everybody's jobs and promotions are dependent on how successful the ratings are."

He further explained that those writers who were motivated by the desire to get a message out to a broad audience could do so by being strategic about it. Messages could be a part of the storytelling so long as they were 'buried' in the pitch.

However, another writer described an executive producer on a major show who was on the lookout for anything that could be seen as "progressive" that had slipped into his shows.

She recalled one instance where he believed a season that aired was "too woke" and he axed a bisexual character and Black character as a corrective. Another canceled character "was beginning to stand up for pushing back against police brutality."

This rule is not just about keeping television engaging for audiences. It serves as an automatic barrier to any writer who might be pitching a storyline that challenges business-as usual representations of policing or other issues.

It implicitly frames police propaganda storylines as neutral, and any alternative as a forbidden "turnoff" to the presumed average viewer, with the assumption that it is not "what the show is about" and therefore should be ruled out. In flashes, there may be an audience appetite to see debates about social issues play out, but it is not a norm.

The "soapbox rule" is one way to police the representation of policing on television.

Rule E: Audiences love violence.

The definition of "entertaining" television is, at best, vague. At worst, it is nearly meaningless. But one frequent definition of an entertaining crime-related show is a violent one.

A veteran writer in the genre explained:

> "People love a murder. Someone needs to get killed in every show. … I'm not the one to judge why Americans, or internationally, humans, want to watch that. But it's definitely popular. People want to watch it."

Inserting violence into the storyline, especially the wanton killing of Black people, can be used as a quick, reliable fix to keep the episode entertaining and exciting and/or to move the plot forward.

One Black writer spelled out how it can work:

> "Yeah, it bothers me that we just want to spread Uzi and kill 30 Black people onscreen. You can do that in a novel all you want, but this is the screen, this is different. These are important depictions.
>
> "It can be exhausting because, in a crime drama, when you're trying to move the plot forward, and you have [a story setting that provides] unlimited violence at your beck and call, it's easy to just be like, 'Well, OK, we'll just have them get shot by a gang banger. Oh, this person's become a problem, this other person will just kill them off. We'll just kill them.' So it becomes a crutch.
>
> "[We had a law enforcement] lead who killed somebody and had a nervous breakdown. But we have all these Black people walking around killing each other, and it's just that one has had a breakdown about it? What are we saying? Are we saying that we [Black people] are inherently prone to violence and that these things don't bother us, too, that we don't cry, but the trained killer is having a breakdown?"

Despite the ease with which violence can be deployed in the story, some writers have pushed back against the idea. In one example, a show was commissioned with the explicit aim of making the police less violent. But the rule was not rewritten for long before it was un-rewritten.

As one veteran TV writer who worked on the genre-bending procedural recounted:

> "[The showrunner] created the show as an anti-gun show. In the pilot, the cops all lost their guns and they were replaced by nonlethal weapons. You know, kind of like a technology that's been created shortly in the future.
>
> "And then by episode two, we had already given the cops their guns back, and it was like, 'What? This wasn't the intention of the show at all.' And I think some of those decisions were made by the new showrunner because it became about, 'What's popular? What will people watch? What's exciting?' Versus, 'What's the moral message we're trying to get across to an audience here?'"

This example shows just how difficult it is to break the rules. There will always be exceptions, especially on cable and streaming services, where the rules appear to be subverted. But they are not fundamentally changed genre-wide. Network and studio executives, and their producers, will default to most of the rules even while taking a risk in challenging one of them.

Detours certainly happen. But those in power almost always return shows to the path of serving up what they believe their audiences want, whether those assumptions have been tested in any real way or not.

The rules make sure they keep serving up the inaccurate but highly safe and normalized propaganda of hero cops, sympathetic white victims, support for the status quo, frequent violence by authorities (including "guilty pleasure" abuses of power), and so many more harmful practices of storytelling that have negative real-world effects on people and society. It is a key part of how these shows normalize injustice—both onscreen and in the writers' room.

NORMALIZING INJUSTICE 2

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