



15th November 2016

Dear Mr Whiston

First, please allow me to apologise for the delay in responding to your email. I have been away recently and with last month being Black History Month have also had some big projects to deal with.

Secondly, I would like to thank you for your email and attempts to explain how and why such a reckless error was made.

I have carefully read and considered the contents of your reply. Unfortunately, your wording indicates to me that there is still a failure to understand the issue and continues to highlight the subconscious racism and racial bias exerted towards black/African people today.

I am going to select some of the terminology and comments you have used in your message in an attempt to enlighten you as to the severity of the situation we are in with regards to race and racism, and how comments such as the one made in Coronation Street compound matters, whilst at the same time act as a prime example of where things have gone so terribly wrong with discussions on racism today.

First of all we need to establish whether the remark was culturally insensitive, racially insensitive or racist. In your email you assert that the comment was 'culturally insensitive'. Culturally insensitive is used to describe knowledge, awareness and acceptance of other cultures. The Transatlantic Slave Trade is not part of African/black culture therefore the remark was not culturally insensitive.

Racially insensitive on the other hand concerns insensitive remarks made which touch upon on a sensitive issue surrounding a person's race. As the Transatlantic Slave Trade/African Holocaust was solely determined on race the remarks in Coronation Street could fall under this category. However, to be able to make a genuine racially insensitive comment you must not have been aware that the issue in question was a sensitive one in the first place; i.e. you unknowingly made an insensitive remark on a racially sensitive topic. Otherwise it is simply racist. I think we can all agree that everyone is aware that the Transatlantic Slave Trade is a very sensitive topic, so here again this particular remark fails.

Furthermore, as a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade I cannot think of any insensitive comment related to race which could fall under this category. In other words an insensitive comment made to an African/black person based upon their race could never be considered racially insensitive because of the common knowledge surrounding the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

This leaves racist. Racism, not to be confused with prejudice or bigotry, is a system of disadvantage based on race. It is exerted by a dominant race which benefits from the oppression of others and affects things such as access to housing, employment, police brutality, over representation in the mental health system, over representation in the criminal justice system and so on. Thus being so, it is also institutional. Derogatory/insensitive remarks based on race made by someone from the dominant race to someone from the oppressed race are racist. We have a winner. The remark made in Coronation Street was indeed racist.

For you to understand this conclusion I have given you a simple 4 step check list below:

1. A dominant and subordinate relationship exists between the races of the people involved.
2. The comment was made by someone from the dominant race to/about (someone) from the oppressed race.
3. The comment surrounded a sensitive issue of the race of the oppressed.
4. The comment was insensitive/likely to cause offence.
5. The comment was still made.

The breakdown happened at points 4 and 5, as somewhere between these two points the decision was made to still make the comment. Whether this was a conscious or subconscious decision would be dependent on one of two scenarios:

Scenario 1: Points 1 to 3 are met and point 4 is considered but then disregarded thus the remark was still made then it is consciously racist.

Scenario 2: Point 1 to 3 are met but no consideration is given to point 4 and thus the remark was still made it becomes subconsciously racist.

I would argue that scenario 2 is more serious than scenario 1 as racism is displayed on two separate occasions yet neither is acknowledged by the perpetrator thus it becomes nigh on impossible to fight. Allow me to explain, with scenario 2 a question arises - why, when speaking on an obvious sensitive issue surrounding a person's race and when you know racism is an issue affecting the community in question, would you omit giving any thought to the possible insensitivity of the comment and the offence it is likely to cause? The disregard highlighted in the action of omitting consideration of the comment shows a clear indifference to the feelings of the community affected, in this case the African/black community. That indifference is rooted in racial prejudice, which becomes racist if you belong to a dominant race. This racial prejudice/racist disregard is in addition to the racist comment itself. You see it is the act of failing to give proper consideration of the remark or its effects which is racist and thus causes the remark itself to become racist.

With regards to the comment made in Coronation Street: *'I've got more roots than Kunta Kinte, **no idea who that is by the way it's something my mum used to say.***' It is the latter part of the comment I consider to be most damning of all, as it shows that some thought had indeed been given to the sensitivity of the comment with the writer adding the latter part as a way of justifying the former.

Alarming, the failure to capture this obviously racist remark was made by several people within ITV including the initial scriptwriter, the script team, Coronation Street producer Kate Oates and yourself. Some of these people hold very senior positions in ITV not least you as the MD Continuing Drama & Head of ITV in the North, ITV Studios.

I have made this point before but I wish to make it again as I believe it is a very important one. Do you think your writer would ever have scripted *'I've got more secrets than Anne Frank's diary'* and if s/he did do you think this would have been missed by your entire script team as well as all those who missed the Kunta Kinte remark? At this point I don't require you to provide me with an answer to this question but what I would like you to do is have an open and honest discussion with your colleagues about this particular point. In this situation a certain level of indifference was shown to the black community that isn't exerted towards other communities. This indifference is rooted in conscious/subconscious racial prejudice held by individuals, which I have explained with regards to scenario 2.

This type of subconscious racism is a very serious issue that needs to be appropriately and thoroughly tackled, as unfortunately ITV is not alone in showing such racially biased/racist disregard when dealing

with racist comments towards the black community. This is a national even global phenomenon. And is the reason why we still have such a huge issue with racism today.

At this point I'm sure the first thought jumping to your mind and any others you choose to share this letter with who also missed the Kunta Kinte remark will be: *'I'm not racist'*. The thought is a hard one to swallow, especially when you sincerely believe it to be true. In a very small way it is like a person suffering with alcohol dependency saying: *'I'm not an alcoholic'*. This is the issue with subconscious racism, it has become entrenched in society and is buried at such a deep personal level people are sometimes not even aware that they harbor such beliefs. And therein lies our biggest challenge when fighting racism. All efforts are spent on attempting to get people with racial prejudices/racist beliefs to acknowledge they hold such beliefs rather than fighting the battle of racism itself. Unfortunately, we shall never make any real headway in the fight against racism until wider society begins to acknowledge the issue of subconscious racism and sometimes that acknowledgement must begin at home.

The very fact that you as MD called the comment 'culturally insensitive' highlights a very serious problem at ITV regarding racial awareness, which goes to the very top. I think the entire ITV team could do with going on a racial awareness training course. If you were so inclined this is something we could accommodate.

With regards to Roots being a television series, yes it was. But, as you are aware, it was a fact-based drama based on the life story of Kunta Kinte who is an actual ancestor of the author, Alex Haley.

Finally, The problem with ITV's 'apology' was that it consisted of one sentence and included the word *'if'*. Both of these points only aggravated the situation. Considering the subject matter this related to I would have thought that a more impactful and unreserved apology would have been made. The inclusion of the word *'if'* implies that ITV is still unsure as to whether any offence has been caused, which in itself shows a failure to grasp the gravity of the situation, including the influence such programmes have on the daily lives and conversations of some the general public. Programmes such as Coronation Street guide many of their viewers day-to-day social interactions on what is and isn't acceptable.

Unfortunately, even though I have previously pointed out the problems with the apology to you, you have reiterated these very same sentiments in your email to me when you say 'I appreciate the offence it *may* have caused' with 'may' taking the place of 'if' in this sentence

I simply cannot understand the continued use of qualifiers in ITV's apology or discussion thereof.

Although it may have been long, I hope this letter was insightful for you. I also hope that ITV will now issue a full-unreserved apology without any qualifiers and one which is longer than a sentence and gives consideration to the true gravity of the situation and the impact such a comment, whether it be conscious or subconscious, has had and continues to have on the African/black community and its fight against racism.

Yours sincerely

Shezal Laing
Executive Director / Founder

For clarification purposes, a person who is racially prejudice holds the same views as a racist person. However, the race they belong to does not hold the power or means for those prejudices to manifest

themselves into a physical form i.e. they cannot influence personal circumstances through exerting discrimination in things such as housing, education, employment, criminal justice system etc.