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Advice columnists reflect on the lack of diversity and inclusion in their field



By **Julie Kliegman**

Julie is the weekend editor for TheWeek.com and a freelance journalist based in New York. She's written for publications including BuzzFeed, Vox, Mental Floss, Paste, the Tampa Bay Times and PolitiFact. Follow her @jmkliegman.

Writer and editor Ashley C. Ford **asked** her Twitter followers a straightforward question in December: "Who are some black, brown, and/or LGBTQ advice columnists?"

Answers weren't so easy to come by. In general, newsrooms **aren't diverse**, and advice columns seem to be no exception. Niche publications use queer, non-white columnists to reach specific audiences, but there are fewer writers with backgrounds in issues relating to race, sexuality and disability in the business of generalist advice-giving.

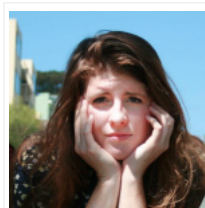
To get a better sense of how publications can better use their advice columnists to target broad audiences, ivoh spoke to two advice columnists, a journalism professor who focuses on inclusion and an editor who pushing to amplify voices of people of color.

"I definitely think of it as being something that primarily straight white women do," said Mallory Ortberg, a queer woman who **took over** Slate's "Dear Prudence" column from Emily Yoffe in 2015.

Ortberg, who also co-founded **The Toast**, noted a common trope among straight advice columnists who respond to queer letter writers. If someone wants to come out as queer but is currently in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex, they'll often be advised to not bother for fear of upsetting their partners. Their identity is supposed to take a back seat to public perception.

By contrast, readers are more likely to feel understood when contacting columnists who can speak directly to their experiences.

"In my own tenure, which has been pretty short, I would say the number of
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Mallory Ortberg

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questions I've gotten from queer people have really shot up as they're saying, 'Here's another queer advice columnist.' I think it's really helpful," Ortberg said.

Ijeoma Oluo sees about a 50-50 split between white and non-white people writing into her "Ask Ijeoma" column on The Establishment, an inclusive, women-centric online publication that **launched** in October. She started fielding questions on social media earlier in 2015 in an effort to help people realize they weren't alone with their problems.

White columnists rarely field questions from people of color, Oluo said, going onto suggest columnists belonging to marginalized groups may be better able to relate to readers of all backgrounds.

"People think that they can have a white columnist answer questions for everyone, but a columnist of color, for example, cannot," Oluo said. "If anything, I would say columnists of color — and same with a disabled columnist and an LGBTQ columnist — are much better able to answer questions from your white, cis, straight questioner. If you are a minority, you are always steeped in that culture just to get by."

Advice columnists out of their depth would do well to recognize their own limitations and listen to criticism from members of marginalized groups. Oluo pointed to Dan Savage, who writes the sex advice column "Savage Love" for The Stranger, as someone who has made strides toward addressing questions he can't speak to by bringing in outside experts.

Ultimately, though, the onus is on publications to hire diversely.

"It doesn't happen by accident. If you're a white person and your co-founder is a white person, if you just do what feels natural, society is set up for white supremacy to happen if you don't try," Ortberg said. "If you don't really consciously set out to say, 'Well, how can I make people who aren't necessarily white, who aren't necessarily straight, feel comfortable here, and not just a place where they're an afterthought?'"

Hiring is where resources like @WritersofColor comes in. In 2015, New York Times Magazine editor Jazmine Hughes, along with Durga Chew-Bose, Vijith Assar and Buster Bylander, started the **database** in part as a way of showing hiring managers that talented, qualified people of color aren't difficult to come by, as long as you make the effort to expand your network.

"I generally don't believe that people are malicious. I think that people are just lazy," Hughes said. "Obviously there are egregious and explicit exceptions to this, but for the most part I don't think newsrooms across the board are going, 'We're not going to hire any people of color, or any queer people, or any disabled people.'"

That said, for well-meaning publications, it's not enough to make one hire as a quick fix. If editors want to diversify their columns, attract wider audiences and catch each other's blind spots, Hughes said, they have to commit to making company-wide changes.

Deni Elliott, chair of the University of South Florida journalism department, agreed. Elliott draws on her own experiences of being legally blind and a lesbian as she works to make inclusion a key part of the department's curriculum. She sees broadening the definition of what a successful employee looks like as an essential step.

"I had to conform to certain standards that I think favored white male success before I felt safe enough to explore my own identity," Elliott said, "which was not white, straight male."

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