Doing Diversity of, in and with Media – Challenges and Potentials

Brigitte Hipfl

Abstract: Diversity is understood and practiced differently in different contexts. This essay does not focus on the question of what diversity is, but - influenced by the work of British scholar Sara Ahmed - explores what diversity 'does' or what we 'do' and 'can do' with diversity. Initially, the essay will address the current state of diversity and how diversity has become integrated into a 'performance and audit culture'. This integration can lead to practices where diversity policies within institutions are managed as a form of capital, while the actual inequalities and the need for their rectification fade into the background. The essay will also discuss the impact of diversity on individuals who embody it. Subsequently, the essay will shift its focus towards the act of engaging with diversity in media, both within media platforms and through media usage. To better understand the complex, context-dependent and ambiguous nature of diversity work within the media, the essay will explore the key criteria of critical diversity literacy developed by South African researcher Melissa Steyn.

Keywords: diversity, doing diversity, critical diversity literacy, media

Author information:
Brigitte Hipfl is associate professor emerita in the Department of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria.
For more information: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7461-947X
Email: brigitte.hipfl@aau.at

Introduction

Culture Kitchen is one of the teams participating in the *Diversity Challenge* 2022-2023, a competition focused on diversity for young employees in Germany. The team's project involves collecting recipes from their co-workers who represent over 90 different nationalities, to create a cookbook for company canteens. This initiative is just one example of the many activities and resources one can find on the website of the *Charta der Vielfalt*, which offers support to companies and institutions in implementing diversity management. There is also the *German Diversity Day*, which will take place for the eleventh time in May 2023, an annual *Diversity Conference*, the *Flag for Diversity* campaign, an invitation to sign the *Charta der Vielfalt* (German Diversity Charter) as an expression of commitment to diversity and to join the diversity network. The Diversity Charter considers diversity as an opportunity: "We can only be successful economically and as a society if we acknowledge, promote and leverage the existing diversity. That pertains to the diversity of our workforce and to the diversity needs of our business partners and of citizens. Employees' diversity with their different competencies and talents open up opportunities for innovative and creative solutions". By signing the charter, organizations pledge "to create an appreciative work environment – irrespective of age, ethnic background and nationality, gender and gender identity, physical and mental abilities, religion and worldview, sexual orientation and social background" (Charta der Vielfalt, n.d.). It is worth noting that diversity charter initiatives exist in most of the European countries that are part of the EU Platform of Diversity Charters.

The way diversity is promoted in the diversity charters is in line with what is commonly perceived as the prevailing understanding of diversity. Social transformations such as globalization, digitalization, the transnationalization of labor, migration result in a diversification of the population and therefore, social diversity seems 'normal' (Bührmann, 2020, p. 9). "We are living in the age of diversity" according to Steven Vertovec (2012, p. 287), or it rather could be called "superdiversity … to convey the multidimensional nature of diversification processes" (Vertovec, 2023, p.2). One of the effects is that "*discourses about diversity*" (Vertovec, 2012, p. 287, emphasis in the original) pervade the policies in Western state agencies, universities, businesses and NGOs. However, diversity is understood and practiced in diverse ways across different contexts (Klein, 2018, p. 1055), making diversity a 'travelling concept' (Walgenbach, 2014), which changes its meaning when it encounters new questions and challenges in different contexts. From an economic standpoint, using the competencies of employees with diverse backgrounds in various areas is linked to market benefits and competitive advantages. By embracing diversity, organizations can potentially appeal to a broader range of customers, which can lead to an increased market share and at the same time it can enhance the organization's image. From an ethical and human rights perspective, diversity refers to equal, non-discriminatory interaction with co-workers. The approach that sees diversity as a resource combines both the before-mentioned perspectives and is more comprehensive. Another perspective is based on concerns about the reduction of diversity. This

perspective can be observed in discussions surrounding biodiversity as well as (independent) media diversity. Company mergers and the dominance of certain operating systems are considered problematic when it comes to media diversity at the level of ownership, sponsoring, control and freedom of expression. In this context, the call for diversity emphasizes the need to create conditions that allow for a multiplicity of perspectives to exist and to be heard (Löwstedt & Palac, 2019).

The Hype around Diversity and What It Does

To better understand the recent rise of 'diversity' and the hype around 'diversity' it is helpful to see diversity as a key element and expression of what Andreas Reckwitz describes as "society of singularities" (Reckwitz, 2017). There is a shift in focus from industrial society, which was characterized by norms and standardization, to a contemporary emphasis on what is special, unique, singular, and non-exchangeable (such as artisanal food, vintage furniture, unique personalized vacations, the special child, or the special school). What counts are extraordinary profiles in all domains; what was once considered standard is now seen as losing value. For people seeking employment this means to create a profile of competencies and potentials that highlights their unique competencies, allowing them to stand out in a competitive job market. Generally, all what is unique and special is supposed to be visible and is supposed to 'make a difference'; the performance of the exceptional is required. Organizations develop their specific organizational culture based on storytelling, communal rituals, extraordinary events, distinctive aesthetic design, and *diversity management* – to perform their uniqueness (Reckwitz, 2017). Seen in this context, diversity is a captivating term with positive connotations, effectively utilized in marketing. In contrast, other terms dealing with diversity – such as equality policy, social justice, anti-discrimination, and anti-racism – are connected to political movements which criticize existing relations of power and dominance that (re)produce differences and inequalities. These latter aspects are usually not considered as part of diversity management. That is the reason why Sara Ahmed (2012) criticizes that in management contexts differences are individualized, systemic inequalities are concealed, and the histories of political struggles become neutralized. Diversity may even become a technique to keep the more problematic aspects of society under control.

As emphasized several times, diversity has now become a policy issue (Ahmed & Swan, 2006; Ahmed, 2012; Vertovec, 2012). Papers are written to ensure the diversity commitments of corporate and public organizations, demanding stringent documentation. Documents can be evaluated, thus making diversity part of performance and audit culture (Ahmed & Swan, 2006, p. 97). Diversity has become a key element of marketing strategies, of branding and re-branding, and of creating positive images of the respective organizations. Often, such images are literally presented as images of happy BPoC people (Black and People of Color), which

illustrates that diversity policies mostly denote the inclusion of people with different physical appearances. Thus, when diversity predominantly is embodied by the 'other', it allows the whiteness of the institution itself to be occluded. Or, to phrase it differently: If diversity means to add color to an institution, the existing whiteness of the institution is confirmed while, at the same time, the whiteness of the institution is brought to light (Ahmed, 2012). That means, "[d]iversity becomes about *changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations"* (Ahmed, 2012, p. 34).

To perform well in audits, organizations require more than just policies and program activities. They also need comprehensive documentation, not least concerning cases of discrimination. According to Ahmed & Swan (2006, p. 97), this results in a 'bureaucratisation of diversity', where in the process of ticking boxes even documentations of examples of racism are then considered evidence for good performance. Then the focus is no longer on challenging inequalities; worse still, diversity "could even function as a technology of concealment, where inequality is hidden by the very measurements of 'good' performance" (Ahmed & Swan, 2006, p. 97). By following this approach, genuine inequalities remain unrecognized and are reproduced, ultimately resulting in the depoliticization of diversity.[1] Diversity becomes a form of capital in institutions, that is often manifested through documents and a sense of 'good feelings.' This leads to a situation where the pride in achieving good diversity goals overshadows the tensions and frustrations that arise when addressing and working through diversity issues. Ahmed raises concerns about the tendency to treat 'statements of commitment' in diversity documents as equivalent to actively 'doing diversity'. Such statements alone do not automatically translate into tangible actions and perform, what the statements say; rather, merely stating diversity can be a way of appearing to prioritize it without actually engaging in meaningful diversity work. For genuine commitment in this field, there must be a strong connection between statements of diversity and actual efforts in diversity work (Ahmed, 2012).

Ahmed also addresses the question what diversity does on individuals, particularly people of color who are seen as diversity. As studies conducted in Great Britain at the beginning of the 21st century illustrate, people of color often feel a heightened sense of exposure extremely. Not only do people of color represent diversity and serve as symbols of inclusion, but they are also often the ones entrusted in charge of diversity work within institutions (Ahmed, 2012). Sara Ahmed refers to her personal experiences at two British universities where she was employed. In both instances, the positions were advertised for 'race and ethnicity', and the team responsible for 'race equality' consisted of two academics who were people of color (Ahmed, 2012, p. 4). Ahmed also talks about her experiences of being the only person of color, entering '*a sea of whiteness'*, and, in comparison, how easy it is for white bodies to pass. She also refers to the difficulties addressing the issue of whiteness, which often was interpreted as ungratefulness on her side. Whereas her experiences in the

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[1] This specific experience is also the reason why Sara Ahmed left her university post where she also was heavily involved in diversity issues.

context of diversity work were quite different; there she found herself in '*a sea of brownness*'. For Ahmed, these experiences point to the importance of numbers: "It can be surprising and energizing not to feel so singular" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 36). She refers to Nirmal Puwar's concept of '*space invaders*' to describe such experiences, which are common to members of marginalized groups: "experiences of being treated as "space invaders," as invading the spaces reserved for others" (Ahmed, 2012, p.13). As Puwar (2004, p. 8) stresses, "it is certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific positions". When 'other' bodies (like women and racialized minorities) enter professional fields like the university, they experience that privileged positions are 'reserved' for certain bodies, that means white males. It seems 'natural' for these bodies to move in these spaces and feel at home, whereas the 'other' bodies are not familiar with the prevailing rituals, habits, and working cultures. They are perceived as interferences, as 'out of place' and all their movements, gestures and articulations are noted very closely. They also feel the pressure of having to work twice as hard to be recognized. In her interviews with diversity workers, Ahmed found that they often talk about institutional resistances, which they characterize as "banging your head against a brick wall' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 26).

Ahmed's work highlights the complexity and ambiguity involved when dealing with diversity issues; it depends so much on the specific context how diversity is dealt with. Furthermore, we cannot pre-determine what diversity work will entail or accurately foresee its impact. All of this implies that we need to be cautious, and critically reflect our own approaches of 'doing diversity'. In her inaugural lecture for the first Annual Visiting Professorship at the Berlin University Alliance's *Diversity and Equality Network* DiGENet in November 2021, Maisha Auma suggests paying more attention to 'respect studies' (Auma, 2021). She refers to the research group led by Michèle Lamont, which argues that groups are marginalized because their suppression is institutionalized. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize the responsibility of institutions. Institutions can become '*decent institutions*' that provide equal opportunities to marginalized groups. Then, equality is not defined by perceptions of the dominant group but rather by the perspective of marginalized groups. For this to happen, institutions must acknowledge the vulnerability of these groups and initiate processes aimed at showing respect towards them. One way of demonstrating respect, for instance, is active listening. An approach that focuses on respect, necessitates a restructuring of institutions and goes beyond just a a superficial inclusion of marginalized groups, which can impose a high cost on those groups, often referred to as 'space invaders.' What is at stake here, is a change of the institution's routines, a change in leadership and self-perception. This is a shift from 'fixing the excluded' to 'fixing the institutions' towards 'fixing the system' (Auma, 2021). Auma also stresses the need for adopting a multi-perspectival, intersectional approach to diversity which recognizes the overlapping and mutually constitutive structures of discrimination and privileges.

Doing Diversity of, in and with Media

The insights and recommendations provided by Ahmed and Auma are highly relevant to the realm of media as well. They encourage us to critically examine the practices, emotions and outcomes associated with the implementation of diversity. This involves scrutinizing the impact of using the term "diversity", understanding how diversity work is carried out, and evaluating the outcomes it generates. What counts as diversity, who seems to embody diversity, and what emerges from that? Issues of media and diversity are explicitly addressed in diversity policies and encountered at three interconnected fields: In media production, the challenge of diversity refers to the variety of media outlets and media formats in private, public, and community media, and the diversification processes starting from ownership and decision-making in journalism and creative industry to journalists and actors in traditional as well as digital media. Secondly, media representation is the domain where diversity issues are most prominently observable. Which discourses of difference are advocated and endorsed, what is constructed and portrayed as 'normal' versus 'different', what kind of hierarchies are (re)established, which inequalities are (re)produced, how divers are the characters, who is afforded the opportunity to be the main character, among other considerations? In the third field – the use of media – the question of accessibility is of particular importance because unrestricted access to as many media as possible increases the potentials of societal participation. The use of media, as exemplified by various social media movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, as well as media education projects, serves as a means to critically examine and intervene in mediated inequalities, discriminations, and exclusions. In all three fields, it proves to be productive to adopt an understanding of diversity that incorporates intersectionality – that is the entanglement of axes of difference –, while at the same time, it is essential to recognize and navigate the ambiguities that characterize specific modes of being (Dietze et al., 2018). Moreover, I find Melissa Steyn's criteria of critical diversity literacy particularly helpful when it comes to 'doing diversity' in media institutions as well as in educational contexts working with media. Steyn describes critical diversity literacy as an "ethical sociopolitical stance in a world increasingly characterized by heterogeneous spaces – organizational, social and public" (Steyn, 2015, p. 379). This is a stance oriented towards a more socially just world through understanding and critiquing prevailing social relations.

Critical Diversity Literacy

Melissa Steyn, the holder of the South African National Research Chair in Critical Diversity Studies, advocates for an analytical approach which she calls 'critical diversity literacy' for individuals engaged in the practice of 'doing diversity'. They should be able "to 'read' prevailing social relations as one would a text, recognizing the ways in which possibilities are being opened up or closed down for those

differently positioned within the unfolding dynamics of specific social contexts" (Steyn, 2015, p. 381). Engaging in such an analysis allows for a critical examination of the social conditions, which is a prerequisite for fostering a more socially just world. Steyn developed ten criteria for critical diversity literacy, some of which overlap and cannot be strictly separated. I will focus on the aspects that I find particularly relevant to media and diversity in the three aforementioned fields. Subsequently, I will demonstrate how adopting such an approach sensitizes us to the complexities and ambivalences inherent in engaging with doing diversity work.

The primary and key criterion in Steyn's critical diversity literacy is to comprehend the constitutive role that power dynamics play in "constructing differences that make a difference" (Steyn, 2015, p. 381). Steyn stresses that all categories of social differences are social constructions within unequal power relations; they are not naturally given. Sustained ideological efforts are needed to maintain the belief in natural, given hierarchies – such as the utilization of binary opposites (e.g., man/woman; white/black; heterosexual/homosexual) where one end is given greater value than the other, effectively rendering it common sense. These expressions reflect unjust social arrangements which marginalize those who are less privileged and designate them as the 'other', while a system of entitlements emerges among the privileged. Media are key instances of this ideological work by repeating again and again specific constructions, such as portraying asylum seekers and migrants as 'problematic people', thus continuously 'othering' them by drawing a boundary between 'us' and 'them' (Ratković & Gouma, 2023).

An understanding of the symbolic and material value of social locations, that is the privileges that come with "hegemonic positionalities and concomitant identities, such as whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, cisgender, able-bodiedness, middleclass-ness etc. and how these dominant orders position those in non-hegemonic spaces" (Steyn, 2015, p. 382), is another one of Steyn's criteria. This is a complex issue because not everybody in privileged positions benefits from them in the same way, as, for example, R. Connell (1995) illustrates with different forms of masculinity. As Steyn emphasizes, people in deprivileged positions understand these systemic dynamics: they know that the positions of service, where most of them are located, support the privileged and their worldviews; and they must work through experiences of shame and humiliation while also being aware of the dangers if they question the social expectations that are imposed on them. At the same time, people in privileged positions have not much of an understanding of the social dynamics that produce their privileges. Steyn characterizes them as 'subjectivities of entitlement' (Steyn, 2015, p. 383), driven by the belief that they are entitled to everything. It is comfortable for them to move in a world which seems to be centered around their interests and conforms to their perception of "normalcy". When these social constructions are exposed and questioned, the privileged individuals often deny their benefits from these constructions, as acknowledging them would be uncomfortable and shatter their self-perception.

An example can be found in a recent study conducted by *Die Neuen deutschen Medienmacher*innen*, a network of journalists in Germany dedicated to promote diversity in the media (Boytchev et al., 2020) The study revealed that out of 126 German editors-in-chief, only 6.4% have a so-called "migration background", meaning that they or at least one of their parents was not born with German citizenship. Furthermore, none of them identify as a person of color or come from a Muslim family. The editors-in-chief acknowledge that there should be a higher representation of journalists with a migration background. However, most of them emphasize that hiring decisions are mainly based on qualifications. Many see a perceived lack of skills as the reason that only few journalists with a migration history reach the top level. The editors-in-chief deny any personal responsibility for the underrepresentation of journalists with a migration background.

Steyn's criteria also include intersectionality – "how … systems of oppression intersect, interlock, co-construct and constitute each other, and how they are reproduced, resisted and reframed" (Steyn, 2015, p. 383). In addition to what is usually discussed as the intersection of various axes of difference such as gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion etc., Steyn points out that intersectionality can give rise to ambiguities that uphold certain hierarchies. To understand the complex dynamics that are at play, it is important to be aware of the processes that enable and contribute to the reproduction of existing power relations. Such processes include rendering norms invisible, naturalizing the status quo, generating ambiguities, encouraging patterns of forgetting, and rendering alternative possibilities unthinkable. However, as Steyn emphasizes, it is important not to view members of oppressed groups solely as victims. There exist always various forms of resistance, diverse memories and alternative forms of knowledge that can open up new possibilities and potentials. She argues for an openness that recognizes the existence of multiple realities and acknowledges diverse narratives. An example of this can be found in the study on diversity in Austria's newsrooms conducted by Andy Kaltenbrunner and Renée Lugschitz (2021, p.19). They highlight the case of Evangelista Sie, who identifies as a "black Viennese" and is the founder of the international platform *Black City Stories*. This independent media outlet is "committed to investigating in-depth Black Lived Experiences, breaking down the systems and contexts of structural racism and its ties with other forms of social disparities" (blackcitystories.org/about/).

Another of Steyn's criteria is to the possession of a "grammar of diversity", which refers to a vocabulary to grasp and discuss dynamics of privilege and oppression. Critical theories like feminism, queer theory, post- and decolonial theories, and critical race theory offer such vocabularies. Often, the first step towards change and transformation is to name power dynamics by using concepts like hegemony, ideology, institutional racism, coloniality etc. Such naming processes can also result in empowering re-definitions, as seen in examples like feminist hashtag activism, which draws attention to discrimination and (sexualized) violence (Drüeke, 2019).

Understanding emotions, including one's own emotional involvement, is another part of Steyn's critical diversity literacy. Steyn refers to Sarah Ahmed's (2004) conceptualizations of feelings as socially constructed and how the social and the affective are mutually constitutive. Using the example of 'othering', Ahmed argues that the repeated use of derogatory terms to refer to certain bodies makes the labels stick to those bodies, thereby creating social positions of proximity or distance between them. Such connections have an impact on our orientations, influencing whom we move towards and whom we move away from, as well as shaping our bodily feelings in certain situations. Gabriele Dietze, for instance, discusses anti-Muslim racism as a result of German/European narratives of superiority against an allegedly inferior Muslim gender order (Dietze, 2017). The Muslim "other" is represented in media as embodying the oppression of women, patriarchy, homophobia, and sexism, thus covering-up deficits of Western emancipation. According to Steyn, Ahmed, Dietze and others, critical self-reflexivity is essential to thoroughly explore our own feelings and understand where we may be complicit in perpetuating social hierarchies and processes of othering.

In Conclusion - Challenges of Doing Diversity with and within Media

The final criterion put forward by Steyn calls for an active engagement in transforming oppressive systems towards social justice. I will end with several examples that illustrate Steyn's central argument, emphasizing the need to connect theory and praxis and highlighting that simply understanding the complex dynamics of diversity is not enough. What is needed is "to become an ally to those whose oppressions would otherwise be further entrenched" (Steyn, 2015, p. 388). The following examples address some of the challenges associated with attempts to achieve this through media.

Fréhel Vince's case study (2022) on the London *BFI Flare LGBTQ+film festival* in 2018 provides an in-depth exploration of the potential of queer film festivals to disrupt hegemonic representations. In general, queer film festivals are seen as political spaces, sites of resistance and counter publics, constituting a community based on solidarity against hetero- and cisnormativity. Vince's key question is, how diversity is dealt with in this film festival: They critically examine white normativity and ask whether queer/trans*/intersex/Black/People of Color are truly at the center or marginalized once more within these spaces. Starting from the assumption that texts concerning the festival contribute to shaping such an event and the spaces that emerge, Vince conducts a discourse analysis. From an intersectional, postcolonial perspective, the focus is an analysis of the festival's ambition "celebrating all cultures and differences". The findings of the analysis are disillusioning for a festival that is considered as one of the oldest (founded in 1933) and most significant in Europe. There is a lot of talk of diversity, but in fact white, cis, and gay identities and able bodies dominate. What is created is a "feel good" diversity as criticized by Sarah

Ahmed. Despite all good intentions, there is a strong presence of a 'homo-nationalist discourse' at the festival, which, as Jasbir Puar (2007) argues, involves the appropriation of LGBTQ rights for nationalist purposes.

In her analysis of the casting show *Deutschland sucht den Superstar*, Gabriele Dietze (2012) argues that this program functions as a training camp for diversity. The show, aired on RTL, a private TV channel in Germany, features many non-white people as well as people of different ethnic backgrounds who all can be winning. When participants are encouraged, praised and awarded, such reality shows are doing something that is not done in this way on public television: a ritual welcoming of 'children of migration' in Germany, creating a sense of belonging (Beheimatung), and emotional citizenship. According to Dietze, this show is a space where differences are negotiated. It determines which differences are accepted and desired, as well as which differences are being eliminated. A closer look at the candidates participating in the show reveals a wide range of background and experiences. Among them are queer participants, candidates with migration experience, candidates with criminal records or those with a history of drug use. It becomes evident that recognition depends on whether the candidates demonstrate 'German virtues' such as ambition and a strong work ethic. Of course, the format of the show corresponds to the neoliberal rhetoric that emphasizes individual agency and places the responsibility for success or failure on the individual. If candidates fail, it is often attributed to their own shortcomings rather than acknowledging the impact of structural disadvantages. This example also makes us aware that not all differences are seen as worthy of being included.

Denise Labahn's study on the potential of queer fanfiction regarding TV series on vampires (*Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, True Blood, Vampire Diaries*) explores how viewers in their 'produsage' rewrite what is represented in these series (Labahn, 2022). She is particularly interested in whether strategies for deconstructing hetero- and homonormativity can be found, as well as examples of making things more ambiguous (VerUneindeutigungen). Her data from the platform *fanfiction.de* and from online group-discussions with young adults who self-identify as queer paint an ambivalent picture. Heterosexual norms are neither totally accepted nor completely rejected. However, it is clear that fanfiction can be a safe space to explore different aspects of one's own gender and sexual identity. Fanfiction can also be a space where heteronormative constellations are rewritten, all of all which is experienced as empowering.

Gudrun Marci-Boehncke and Matthias Rath use an example of media education to assert that the attitude of teacher candidates towards digital media is an enabling factor for participatory media use of students (Marci-Boehncke & Rath, 2019). They refer to studies according to which only around half of future teachers are digitally media-savvy. This is manifested in their willingness to use digital media when they teach; which means that students in general, and especially those with disabilities, are deprived of the opportunity to learn digital media skills, which severely restricts

their opportunities for participation in a media society. Theoretically, Marci-Boehncke & Rath refer to the intersection of teachers' attitudes and disabilities, as well as to Martha Nussbaum's 'capability approach'.

The last example, in particular, highlights the importance of maintaining an open mind towards new differences that prove to be impactful and discriminatory, while also being mindful of contingency. It emphasizes the need to recognize which distinctions become relevant in specific contexts. This also implies that we – as media professionals, academics, teachers, media educators, and so on, – must constantly question ourselves what we 'do' and 'can do' with regards to diversity. As Andrea Bührmann mentioned in a presentation at Klagenfurt University on October 19, 2022, quoting Theodor Adorno (1951), the objective of embracing diversity should be to create a world where all people can be different without living in fear.

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