

The name is Pernicious, Pernicious Bacon.

I am interested to see so many people think and comment on gender parity. I must admit I have already been on a journey with it. When it came up, Paul Cornell's idea that is, I was in agreement with what he was talking about, but then I am a comics fan, and know in comics fandom there is an atrocious deficit whether it be in the industry, on convention panels, or on guest lists when it comes to women. And I hate it. There is no rhyme nor reason.

So it made sense. With SF conventions, I was unsure and wavered one way and the other.

Then I realised I was thinking about this wrongly. I wasn't imagining the problem as I see it, and considering solutions or ideas, or creating concepts and thoughts that would deal with a problem, like I normally do. So I did.

There is an awful lot right with SF conventions, just as there is an awful lot wrong with comic conventions, even the ones run by women, such as Kapow, or even my favourite British convention, Thought Bubble again run by ladies, which even last year they had the basic 'women in comics' panel, but SF cons.

SF cons are not at all bad places, and to be honest I came to realise that if any person had been discriminated against at an SF convention for being something, well apart from being an arsehole of course, but for any reason, then that not only would that be wrong, but it could be very easily highlighted. I also doubt many of the chairs of say, Eastercon, of the 21st century would allow such discrimination. Who would? Although yet it might happen sub consciously. How to avoid that, think positive.

SF conventions are very lucky, they have loads of people turn up who want to participate, including authors, scientists, creators, editors, publishers, artists, and fans, many of whom are drawn from the membership of the convention, and then cons have their GOH's as well as being able to extensively invite external speakers for specific items.

To be honest, with the fun cons that myself and Stef ran, ten years ago, it was the skill, ability or knowledge that the person possessed that mattered, whether it be the British Chess Federation secretary or piercers, or a person in psychic contact with aliens. Well they could be physics in touch with aliens for all we cared, let alone male or female or otherwise. And anyhow we had tin foil hats to protect us from the messages.

I thought about how one could broaden participation, and realised that we, or I should say some programmers are victims of their own actions. This may be because they apply an analytical or perhaps scientific approach, which may be too rigid, one needs to be creative and inventive as well.

For instance, programming 'popular people' whether it be Charlie Stross or John Coxon on many items is not good for the old participant pool. Also I would prefer four really good panels with Stross on them, rather than ten mediocre ones where he carries them.

Cons are very lucky that so many professionals attend, who are so willing to give up their time. Many love the genre as fans, and programme teams can never truly express the gratitude that is due. Yet, I think though that no one except the Guests of Honour should get to be on the programme automatically, simply because of who they are

If a convention wants to have as diverse and interesting a programme as possible, this relies upon

getting a wide variety of programme volunteers, recommendations and suggestions.

Uh-huh. Pernicious struck!

Encouragement. Why can conventions not encourage people to volunteer to join up as participants, maybe people who haven't considered it, or maybe are not within the 'fandom' net that we know, or who for whatever reason are not participants?

People could be encouraged to sign up as participants, especially those with a different angle, perspective, or experience to offer. Britain is such a diverse country, and in my mind all con programmers surely want to reflect that diversification. Of course an easy statement is to say that all con people should be in charge of that, but I would disagree, I think a team of people, listeners, quiet and thoughtful, who watch and see, should reconnoitre and gently suggest, be it with a business card, or some quiet words, that they would be excellent on programme. Or in some cases it may be to point others within the team at them who they might be good to chat to.

Everyone is different and we should treat people the way they need, to make them feel welcome. Not evangelists, but rather thoughtful and positive, but happy to take no as an answer.

We should look beyond our safety zone, outside the convention circuit wire, beyond comfort, out at other events, and festivals, at other media, and invite, have the courage to invite. An item I cherish is a letter from J.K. Rowling; she turned down an invitation to a children's programme that I was running for worldcon, as it clashed with a previously made engagement, BUT I ASKED, I didn't assume she would say no, or decide for her, I made the effort.

That can be hard sometimes, but I think it's worth it.

Of course there is a real issue, and a misconception is that only experienced or experts need apply. This is unhealthy and I can understand why it might be the perception. Yet as a creative type, as someone who uses their imagination to come up with ideas rather than a scientifically based tick box type, I think that it is easy to define 'best' as whoever I think at that time would be right for the panel, but that for the more analytical it is very hard to define who is the 'best' for any given panel. An example perhaps.

At Olympus, the 2012 Eastercon, there was a panel with Melissa Taylor, who had only known the subject eight months, had never been on a panel before, was young, was not a public speaker and the tick box world that many posers would fail what YOU or some programme experts consider is best, but she was best for that panel, and the best panellist. Melissa was the BEST panellist. And Anna was a close second. Is that logical.

An exciting programme will challenge many norms, perceptions, expectations and make one think, so I do not understand why people are not asked to NOT disqualify themselves. Of course a convention wants experts, authors, professionals, people with experience and really need all of those people to sign up but why do some people decide for themselves that they are not suitable? This seems wrong, yet no one publicly says anything, so isn't it easy to say to people not to rule themselves out.

Also, couldn't a con accept recommendations so when a convention member has seen someone, knows someone, reckons someone would be amazing, let the programmers know, and even with their details. Then the programmes can politely ask them if they would like to make a contribution. That's all they can do, ask. Not evangelise, or press or hassle, just ask politely and nicely.

Some people wonder 'why' they have been asked onto programme, and after working on convention programmes in earnest for twenty years now, I know it is because the programme team WANT that person to be on it, because they feel you will add to the discussion. Yet again another losing point, and I think that participants who are unsure why they have been asked, need to be encouraged to ask, just ask why. The wonderful reply may cause blushes, but isn't that better.

Con runners should not deter any suggestions, or subjects. If con goers wonder why something has not been mentioned, maybe everyone is waiting for that person to say 'what about THIS'. I have spent hours considering ideas and suggestions and trying to bring them to fruition, but knowing there are suitable participants is a huge help and knowing others want it, is even better.

There is the Teledu approach, allowing people free reign to design and bring their own programme items to the convention. Is there space for this type of activity, or will it cause the control freaks amongst fandom a little seizure?

Diversity is scary. Quotas are shite.

I do not know how long I would remain a programme volunteer, if every time I was asked onto a panel, it was to meet a quota for having 'Johnny Foreigners' represented. In actual fact one would start to doubt why one is being asked at all, and the default that it is to meet the quota would pervade throughout.

We want to enable and encourage and welcome participants to help make cons more diverse and reflective of the country we live in. I think this is hard work, but I also think that a positive and proactive approach, broadening the participant pool and welcoming more people in, will achieve it better than a quota system, and also have none of the potential political hackles raised.