



DeShuna Spencer

FOUNDER OF KWELITV

From Netflix to Amazon Prime, HBO to Apple TV, there's no shortage of streaming services fighting for our eyeballs with new and exciting shows – to the extent that catching up on a must-watch series can feel like a chore. Yet for people of colour, that same content is saturated with negative stereotypes and monotonous storylines. Trying to find authentic stories about the Black community, from a Black perspective, can feel like a fruitless exercise in channel-surfing.

It was precisely this scenario which led journalist DeShuna Spencer to launch kweliTV. “I wanted to see stories that properly represented the Black experience,” she recalls. “I was flipping through cable TV shows, and it was the same old stories. Where were the Black stories that I wanted to see? I went on Netflix, and they had some Black films, but it still wasn’t what I was looking for. It wasn’t enough.”

Meaning truth in Swahili, kweliTV was conceived as an antidote to inaccurate and distorted representations of Black culture in mainstream White media. Launched in 2017, the video streaming network is home to more than 400 titles by filmmakers of African descent, spanning high-quality documentaries, educational programmes and independent films. Content creators receive 60 per cent of kweliTV's subscription revenue every quarter, with payment based on minutes viewed.

With 35,000 users, the platform is clearly answering a demand, but even so the road to success has been a bumpy one. As well as a web designer who ghosted her, DeShuna experienced first-hand the entrenched systemic racism of the investment community. In the US, just 0.2 per cent of venture capital dollars go to

Black female entrepreneurs. “I can’t help the fact I’m a Black woman who didn’t go to Stanford,” she says, philosophically. “All I could do is focus on what I could change.” Instead, the money was raised via start-up competitions.

kweliTV has been dubbed “the Black Netflix,” but a better comparison is HBO says DeShuna: “We’re not trying to be all things to all people. We’re very thoughtful about the content we’re releasing on the platform. We want people to be inspired, to feel celebrated, and like they can make change. It’s not just about vegging out. We have a bigger vision.”

That vision is reflected in the calibre of the titles DeShuna curates, the majority of which are official selections at film festivals worldwide. Historical documentary is kweliTV’s most popular genre, which DeShuna attributes to gaps in the US curriculum. “Black history isn’t really taught in schools, beyond Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks,” she explains. We’re amplifying public figures or incidents that people haven’t heard of, and they really want to learn about that. They’re just desperate for knowledge.” She’s also proud to be the only Black streaming service currently providing children’s programming, and is always on the hunt for Black sci-fi (“there’s not much of it around!”).

Going forward, DeShuna is focused on building a real community around kweliTV. She’d hoped to replicate the success of last year’s six-week US tour, but the pandemic has put paid to live events, so she’s exploring virtual options instead. “We’re so much more than a Black Netflix,” she concludes. “In fact, we don’t want to be the Black anything. We just want to be kweliTV.”