

The view from our moral high ground

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2014-12-3



Polis Intern and LSE MSc student Sana Ali reports on the latest Polis Media Agenda Talk featuring Monique Villa, CEO of the Thomson Reuters Foundation

Monique Villa, CEO of Thomson Reuters Foundation founded both [TrustLaw](#), a global pro-bono program that has provided over \$54 million in free legal support and [Trust Women](#), an organization that mobilizes third party businesses and organizations to fight slavery and human trafficking. She has been ranked among the world's 100 most influential people in Business Ethics by Ethisphere. Her work has undoubtedly changed millions of women's lives for the better and will continue to do so. Then what is it about all of this that might give us cause for worry?

Villa herself alludes to it.

"I am not a statistician, I am a journalist and a businesswoman. If you can tell a story backing it with data, that is how you have the greatest impact."

In a world where causes are vying for our attention as well as our support, Villa has managed to make that work in the favour of the women her organization helps. She uses the market to sell her cause and make the issues of her organization salient.

It's the Ice Bucket Challenge syndrome. Is it good that our society favours organizations that have learned to sell to us well, particularly solutions to global social welfare problems? Perhaps not. But we are all imperfect humans and Villa has come to terms with it and carries on.

Villa does not make any claims about strict methodology or accuracy. In fact she herself unabashedly says:

"We shed light. We are not the solution makers. Our work puts the debate on the table, perhaps as a take off point for deeper research. We can't do what we do with academic rigour – it would never become mainstream and it would take maybe 50 years."

We as academics are taught to be critical, often to such an extent that we become divorced from reality and from questions of efficiency and impact. The fact that we as a society have a taste for sensationalist information can become a matter of disdain for academics. We like to place ourselves away from society, as observers, dabbling in our rigorous methodologies and categorical frameworks. But what good does that achieve?

Perhaps our idealism paralyzes us from true action. Villa takes that action because she is not afraid to call herself a businesswoman, she does not criticize the Ice Bucket Challenge, she asks, how is human trafficking going to be next viral cause? We can call out the 'commodification of morality', but we would never feel right actually taking advantage of it. What is it that deters academics from declaring that they seek to manipulate society towards better ends?

Instead we looked at the Thomson Reuters perception poll on Most Dangerous Transport Systems for Women and snickered at its methodology. Not without reason. Only 16 countries were actually included in the sample and the number of women polled was far too small to possibly substantiate any claim about an overly vague 'female perceptions' variable. <http://www.trust.org/spotlight/most-dangerous-transport-systems-for-women/>

We may have reasons to be critical of Thomson Reuters Foundation for shaping the agenda as it does. It decides which issue is important and then comes up with an eye-catching headline to sell a solution based on limited research. But for all our scholarly disgust with band-aid solutions, what role do we really play? Maybe it is time we develop an academic culture that churns out more than just doctors who are trained to diagnose every problem, but treat none.

This article by Polis intern, Sana Ali

Polis Media Agenda Talks are every Tuesday at 5pm and are free and open to the public – [details here](#)

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