

## Diversity in the media: talk is cheap, what we need is action



*Marcus Ryder is the Chair of the **Royal Television Society** Diversity Committee, and Head of Current Affairs BBC Scotland. He recently organised the first political hustings on media diversity between the three main Westminster political parties on how each Party would aim to increase diversity if they won the General Election in May 2015. He will be speaking at an **LSE Media Policy Project** event on **Thursday 27 November** on diversity in the media. Here, he argues that talking about diversity is not enough, and that it could even do more harm than good.*

In the last year, everybody from heads of Britain's largest broadcasting organisations to government ministers have been publically declaring their commitment to diversity. Frankly, I've never seen so many people saying they are committed to improving diversity in the television industry.

The two best examples of how important the issue of TV diversity has become occurred at the **Edinburgh Television Festival** during the summer and more recently at a **debate at the House of Commons** between ministers and their opposition counterparts. At both events some of the most important people in British broadcasting – such as Ed Vaizey and Peter Fincham – were fighting to prove why *their* commitment to diversity was greater than the person sitting next to them. This dialogue is great. But what is increasingly worrying me is the possibility that all the strong words supporting diversity might actually have the opposite effect.

With all these strong words coming from channel controllers, television executives and politicians part of me wants to pat people like Lenny Henry and others who have been making proposals to address diversity recently and say “job well done”. The temptation is to sit back, relax and wait for the media industry to become a more diverse and inclusive industry.

But perversely, a number of psychology experiments suggest now is not the time to relax. In fact, with all the fine words, these experiments suggest now is the time for those of us interested in increasing diversity to be even more vigilant.

In 2009 a psychologist – Professor Peter Gollwitzer from NYU – published a **paper** that tried to show the gap between people's public declarations and their actual behaviour. He looked at charitable giving and discovered that people who went public with their intentions to give to charity were significantly *less* likely to give to charity than people who kept their intentions private. According to Gollwitzer, it's all about how you view your own identity.

When people made their plans public (or their identity public) by signing a “kindness pledge” that effectively stated: “I am the type of person who gives to charity”, they were able to claim the identity without actually following through on the behaviour. By contrast, those who did not sign the pledge let their actions do the talking and in the end donated more to charity.

In another **experiment at Northwestern University**, psychologists randomly asked a group of people to write about themselves. Half were asked to use “positive” terms like **caring, generous and kind**, and the other half “neutral” terms. After distracting them with other tasks, the psychologists then asked the whole group whether they wanted to donate to a charity. I'm sure you can now guess the result. Yes – those who described themselves in neutral terms donated an average of two and a half times *more* to charity than those who said they were kind!

According to psychologists – whether it's signing a pledge or describing yourself as a charitable – such public acts seem to give people a psychological licence to actually give less.

The lessons for TV diversity are obvious. Could the public commitments to diversity actually have a negative result?

This could be one explanation for why the decline in the number of Black and Asian people working in television seems to have directly correlated with the [Creative Diversity Network Pledge](#). (The pledge was a public declaration made by nearly every major broadcaster in the UK and a lot of the major production companies to increase diversity in their workforce).

I think it would be churlish to criticise politicians and television executives for making public commitments to creating a more diverse work force. We should welcome the change in tone surrounding the debate on TV diversity in the last year. But what experimental psychology tells us is that when we hear everyone committing themselves to diversity initiatives, we should redouble our efforts to make sure the strong words translate into real concrete results.

*To register for Thursday's event, see [here](#). This article gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

---

November 25th, 2014 | [Featured](#), [Guest Blog](#) | [0 Comments](#)

---

5