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# Why Is TED Scared of Color Blindness?

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**By Coleman Hughes**

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Like any young writer, I am well aware that an invitation to speak at TED can be a career-changing opportunity. So you can imagine how thrilled I was when I was invited to appear at this year's annual conference. What I could not have imagined from an organization whose tagline is "ideas worth spreading" is that it would attempt to suppress my own.

As an independent podcaster and author, I count myself among the lucky few who can make a living doing what they truly love to do. Nothing about my experience with TED could change that. The reason this story matters is not because I was treated poorly, but because it helps explain how organizations can be captured by an ideological minority that bends even the people at the very top to its will. In that, the story of TED is the story of so many crucial and once-trustworthy institutions in American life.



Let's go back to the start.

This past April, I gave a talk at the yearly TED conference in Vancouver, Canada. In my talk, I defended [color blindness](#): the idea that we should treat people without regard to race, both in our personal lives and in our public policy. (This is also the topic of my [forthcoming](#) book.)

Even though a [majority](#) of Americans believe that color-blind policies are the right approach to governing a racially diverse society, we live in a strange moment in which many of our elite believe that color blindness is, in fact, a Trojan horse for white supremacy. Taking that viewpoint seriously—while ultimately refuting it—was the express purpose of my talk.

As you might imagine, TED is an unbelievably well-oiled machine. In the weeks and months leading up to the conference, I wrote my talk, revised it in conjunction with TED's curation team, and cleared it with their fact-checkers. I have never prepared more thoroughly for a talk. On April 19, I

stepped onstage in front of an audience of nearly 2,000 people and delivered it.

TED draws a progressive crowd, so I expected that my talk might upset a handful of people. And indeed, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a handful of scowling faces. But the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. The audience applauded; some people even stood up. Throughout the meals and in hallways, people approached me to say they loved it, and those who disagreed with it offered smart and thoughtful criticisms.

But the day after my talk, I heard from Chris Anderson, the head of TED. He told me that a group called “[Black@TED](#)”—which TED’s website describes as an “Employee Resource Group that exists to provide a safe space for TED staff who identify as Black”—was “upset” by my talk. Over email, Chris asked if I’d be willing to speak with them privately.

I agreed to speak with them on principle, that principle being that you should always speak with your critics because they may expose crucial blind spots in your worldview. No sooner did I agree to speak with them than Chris told me that Black@TED actually was not willing to speak to me. I never learned why. I hoped that this strange about-face was the end of the drama. But it was only the beginning.

On the final day of the conference, TED held its yearly “town hall”—at which the audience can give feedback on the conference. The event opened with two people denouncing my talk back-to-back. The first woman called my talk “racist” as well as “dangerous and irresponsible”—comments that were met with cheers from the crowd. The second commentator, Otho Kerr, a program director at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, claimed that I was “willing to have us slide back into the days of separate but equal.” (The talk is [online](#), so you can judge for yourself whether those accusations bear any resemblance to reality.)



Was Coleman Hughes's case for color blindness too controversial for TED? (Credit: @coldmxn via X)

In response to their comments, Anderson took the mic and thanked them for their remarks. He also reminded the audience that “TED can’t shy away from controversy on issues that matter so much”—a statement I very much agreed with and appreciated. Because he said as much, I left the conference fairly confident that TED would release and promote my talk just like any other, in spite of the staff and audience members who were upset by it.

Two weeks later, Anderson emailed to tell me that there was “blowback” on my talk and that “[s]ome internally are arguing we shouldn’t post it.” In the email, he told me that the “most challenging” blowback had come from a “well-known” social scientist (who I later learned was [Adam Grant](#)). He quoted from Grant’s message directly:

*Really glad to see TED offering viewpoint diversity—we need more conservative voices—but as a social scientist, was dismayed to see Coleman Hughes deliver an inaccurate message.*

*His case for color blindness is directly contradicted by an extensive body of rigorous research; for the state of the science, see Leslie, Bono, Kim & Beaver (2020, Journal of Applied Psychology). In a meta-analysis of 296 studies, they found that whereas color-conscious models reduce prejudice and discrimination, color-blind approaches often fail to help and sometimes backfire.*

I read the [paper](#) that Grant referenced, titled “On Melting Pots and Salad Bowls: A Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Identity-Blind and Identity-Conscious Diversity Ideologies,” expecting to find arguments against color blindness. I was shocked to find that the paper largely supported my talk. In the results section, the authors write that “colorblindness is negatively related to stereotyping” and “is also negatively related to prejudice.” They also found that “meritocracy is negatively related to discrimination.”

I wrote back to Anderson:

*Far from a refutation of my talk, this meta-analysis is closer to an endorsement of it.*

*The only anti-color blindness finding in the paper is that color blindness & meritocracy are associated with opposing DEI policies. Well, I do oppose race-based DEI policies in most (but not all) cases. Unapologetically. But that is a philosophical disagreement, not an example of me delivering incorrect social science.*

*I feel it would be unjustified not to release my talk simply because many people disagree with my philosophical perspective. By that standard, most TED talks would never get released.*

To which he responded: “Thanks, Coleman. Great note. More soon.”

Before this email exchange, I hadn’t seriously considered the possibility that TED might not post my talk at all. What’s more, the fact that the “most challenging” blowback to my talk was a social science paper

showing that color blindness *reduces* stereotyping and prejudice puzzled me.

About a week later, I received an email from Whitney Pennington Rodgers, the current affairs curator at TED and the point person for the curation of my talk. Whitney said that in lieu of releasing my TED talk normally, TED was inviting me “to participate in a moderated conversation that we would publish as an extension of your talk.” I’m always happy to converse and debate, so I agreed—too hastily, in retrospect. I had assumed that the phrase “an extension of your talk” was meant metaphorically—i.e., that this “moderated conversation” would be a separate video. Only later in the email exchange did I realize that it was meant literally. In other words, TED wanted my talk and this “moderated conversation” to be released as a single, combined video.

I had two problems with this. First, it would hold the release of my TED talk hostage to the existence of this other “moderated conversation” (which at the time was not guaranteed to happen at all). Secondly, I worried that tacking a debate to the end of my TED talk would effectively put an asterisk next to it. It would imply that my argument ought not be heard without also hearing the opposing perspective—that it shouldn’t be absorbed without a politically palate-cleansing chaser. Given that my talk had passed the initial fact-checking, the curation team, and had been cleared by Anderson and Rodgers themselves, I saw no reason why it wouldn’t be released and promoted as any other talk would be. I told Rodgers as much over a Zoom call.

Because she and I were unable to come to an agreement, I had a follow-up call with Anderson. On that call, he conceded that his employees’ anger stemmed from political bias, but nevertheless asked me to agree to an atypical release strategy: TED would release the debate and the talk as separate videos, but at the same time. He sold this idea to me as a way to amplify my talk—as if this atypical release strategy were conceived for my benefit. That made little sense to me. The reality, I told him, was that



these nonstandard release strategies were intended not to *amplify* my message but to *dilute* it. After all, the whole genesis of this debacle was the fact that certain TED staffers wanted to nix my talk altogether—and Anderson feared an internal firestorm if my talk were released normally. Clearly, the release proposals being pressed upon me were conceived in order to placate angry staffers, not in order to amplify my message.

By the end of the calls, we had reached a compromise: TED would release and promote my talk as they would any other, and I would participate in a debate that would be released as a separate video no fewer than two weeks after my talk.

I held up my end of the bargain. TED did not.

My talk was posted on the TED website on July 28. The [debate](#) was posted two weeks later. By the time the debate came out, I had moved on—I assumed that TED had held up its end of the bargain and was no longer paying close attention.

Then, on August 15, Tim Urban—a popular blogger who delivered one of the [most viewed](#) TED talks of all time—pointed out that my talk had only a fraction of the views of every other TED talk released around the same time. Urban [tweeted](#):

*There have been a million talks about race at TED. For this talk and only for this talk was the speaker required to publicly debate his points after the talk as a condition for having it posted online. As it is, the lack of standard promotion by TED has Coleman's talk at about 10% of the views of all the other talks surrounding his on their site.*

Two days later, I checked to see if Tim was onto something. As of August 17, the two talks released just before mine had 569K and 787K views, respectively, on TED's website. The two talks released immediately after mine—videos that had less time to circulate than mine—had 460K, 468K

views, and 489K views, respectively. My talk, by comparison, had 73K views—only 16 percent of the views of the *lowest-performing* video in its immediate vicinity.

My debate with Jamelle Bouie—a *New York Times* columnist with almost half a million followers on X, formerly Twitter—has performed even worse on TED’s website. As of Tuesday, September 19—after having over a month to circulate—it had a whopping 5K views. That makes it the third worst-performing video released by TED in all of 2023.

Either my TED content is performing extremely poorly because it is far less interesting than most of TED’s content, or TED deliberately is not promoting it. A string of evidence points to the latter explanation: unique among the TED talks released around the same time as mine, my talk has still not been reposted to the *TED Talks Daily* podcast. In fact, it was not even posted to YouTube until I sent an email inquiry.

According to its website, TED’s [mission](#) is to “discover and spread ideas that spark imagination, embrace possibility, and catalyze impact.” They claim to be “devoted to curiosity, reason, wonder, and the pursuit of knowledge—without an agenda.” My experience suggests otherwise, with TED falling far short of those ambitions and instead displaying all the hallmarks of an institution captured by the new progressive orthodoxy. TED’s leadership must decide whether it wants to do something about it—or let the organization become yet another echo chamber.



***Coleman Hughes is a columnist for The Free Press. Read the responses from Adam Grant and Chris Anderson to this essay [here](#).***

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