Omar Ibrahim

Dr. Tilton

Media, Culture, and Identity

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Videographic Essay Reflection

The process of selecting my object of study for my videographic decision was more of an accident than anything else. I had planned to attend a TEDx even in Lancaster before the school year started, and before I knew I had to do this assignment. Even after I went to the event I wasn’t really thinking about using it as the topic of emphasis for my piece, but rather for just the field investigation. I saw a strong lack of representation in the speakers at the event and wanted to just analyze that. However, after meeting with you, you pointed me in a direction that I had not thought about before. I realized how large of an organization TED is and thought about the countless hours I’ve spent watching their videos without any critical analysis of them. I wanted to delve into TED a little bit more to see who they actually are and what they represented.

I knew going into TED Lancaster that the majority of the speakers would be white but it is not something I considered a problem because of the demographics of the area. However, I never really looked at TED and what they stood for. TED describes their organization as “TED is a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (18 minutes or less). TED began in 1984 as a conference where Technology, Entertainment and Design converged, and today covers almost all topics — from science to business to global issues — in more than 100 languages. Meanwhile, independently run TEDx events help share ideas in communities around the world” (TED). For an organization that says the help share ideas around the world I would think that they would have a wide variety of people offering talks. Unfortunately, when looking at their most popular talks of all time and the most recent talks there was a strong lack of racial representation, and this is very important for an organization that shares their talks with millions of people worldwide.

There were a lot of possibilities for keywords to use to analyze these pieces but two of the clearest choices were race and representation, which I will explain shortly, and the last one took a little bit to decide. I originally decided on power because I wanted to look at the power the TED had through social media. Initially, I took out the social media aspect because there was too much going on and I wanted to really focus on the lack of representation through race. However, I was struggling to find a keyword that I could effectively incorporate into my criticism. I went to ideology, but realized that it wasn’t what I was looking for. Eventually I returned to power but from a different perspective. A perspective where TED’s prominence is looked at through their viral videos on YouTube and their highly successful pages on the website. Also, by looking at how people constantly bring up the idea of TED talks on social media when they claim they are making valid highly intelligent claims. Using power as one of my keywords here set up the context and frame for why an organization as big as TED has a responsibility to be representative in terms of race. It is impossible to talk about one of these keywords without the other in this situation. It didn’t take long for me to realize that these two keywords would be highly successful in making both of my arguments.

While TED as an organization shares great ideas that are very diverse race and its representation matter, the quote I found from the Media and Society reading that emphasized that while race is a social construction “it is one that has powerful social meaning with profound real-life consequences” (Gray and Ouellette). Using this quote along with the screen captures of all the TED Talks really helped me in pushing my point home of the lack of racial representation. I knew that by scrolling through the webpage and just looking for one person of color takes a while and I said to myself “Damn, this is really eye opening” I knew it would be much more effective just to show everyone what I was talking about and try to insight the same reaction out of them. Whether that was with the “25 Most Popular” TED Talks or even with the most recent TED Talks (TED). Other than that, most of my media actually was to contextualize the power of TED. I wanted to show why the lack of representation was a problem because of TED’s popularity so when I decided what media to use it was simple, prove they have a large following. So, I showed the tens of millions of subscribers they have, then I showed the hundreds of millions of views their videos got, and finally I showed the tweets that go viral with an insane number of retweets for having a joke with TED Talks as the punch line. Finally, when I was making my conclusion I wanted to show people of color that have given TED Talks just to show that they are capable and willing to do it but maybe haven’t put much thought and idea into it.

Working on this videographic piece was like a bow on top for this course. In terms of media I went very “meta” on this piece. Most of my classmates used pieces of media like movies, photos, music videos, interviews, and news clips to analyze. During this I never really analyzed a single piece of media but created a piece of media about a collection of different media and their power through different media outlets. It really helped me with understanding how media operates from very macro to very micro levels, and its profound influence on what is around it. In terms of culture it was interesting to see how the culture of media panned out in this. Touching on our readings from earlier this semester the culture of media really lacked diverse people and ideas. That then developed into diverse people sharing not diverse ideas. What was different about TED is that its culture is predicated on sharing diverse ideas on a highly intellectual or even masterful level. This ties in with their identity as a global organization and even more so as an organization that has high amounts of influence on people’s identities worldwide because of the sharing of diverse ideas and challenging common thought. On the other hand, that lack of racial representation may have some of their fans wondering if their identities are worthy enough of sharing their own ideas. TED is an organization that has its heart and mind in the right place but could still use a little more work to become a media outlet that doesn’t have to worry about criticisms from a student like me!

Works Cited

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