

# Study finds increase in women giving TED talks but not ethnic minorities

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Julie Freeman at TED talks Juliana Rotich on Flickr

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Women gave more than half of TED talks in the first half of 2017, up from less than one-third in 2006, according to a new study published in *Political Research Exchange*. But the German research team also found

that ethnic minorities remain under-represented as TED speakers, giving just one in five talks over the same time period.

"Our results raise some concerns, particularly about the representation of certain ethnic groups in these talks," says lead author Carsten Schwemmer from the University of Bamberg. "This highlights the importance of [speaker](#) diversity to reduce stereotypes about scientists and people driving societal change."

Since 2006, talks given at TED events and conferences have become an important means for communicating latest developments in science, culture and society, with the talks streamed online to a global audience of millions. Many well-known scientists, politicians and businesspeople have given TED talks, including Stephen Hawking, Al Gore and Elon Musk. But this has raised concerns that TED talks are being dominated by [white men](#) and their interests. This is what Schwemmer and his colleague, Sebastian Jungkuz, set out to explore.

To do this, they used facial recognition technology to determine the gender and ethnicity of speakers giving 2,333 TED talks between 2006 and 2017, representing all those available on YouTube's main TED channel. They also applied automated text analysis to transcripts of the talks, to determine the main topics being discussed, and to 1.2 million comments left by viewers of the talks on YouTube, in order to assess reaction and feedback.

While this kind of analysis of the representation of, and attitudes towards, different groups in traditional media is quite common, it is much rarer for [digital platforms](#). This study was one of the first to apply facial recognition techniques to social science research. In their study, the researchers also advocate for responsible use, and support initiatives like Safe Face Pledge, which provides guidelines for ethic principle of facial analysis technology.

Schwemmer and Jungkuntz found that the proportion of women giving TED talks had increased steadily since 2006, which they attributed to efforts by the TED organization to achieve a more balanced gender representation. But the proportion of speakers from non-white ethnic groups had remained fairly static over the same time, at just one in five. As a consequence, white men still made up just over half (56%) of all speakers between 2006 and the first half of 2017.

Talks discussing inequalities such as violence against women and racism, which the researchers thought would be particularly important for women and ethnic minorities, were also in a minority, accounting for just 3% of talks, although this proportion did rise over time. These talks also received more [negative comments](#) than talks on other topics, perhaps, say the researchers, because they often contained depressing rather than entertaining content. However, the study also found that non-white TED speakers received more positive online comments than white speakers, but that female speakers received more negative and hateful comments than male speakers.

"Digital content providers like TED media should increase their efforts to prevent that talking about science and important matters of societal change on a global stage remains a privilege of white people," concludes Schwemmer. "Otherwise, under-representation of certain ethnic groups in the digital sphere can, similar to [traditional media](#) sources, further enhance stereotypes and negative attitudes."

**More information:** *Political Research Exchange*,  
[www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17445019.2019.1646102](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17445019.2019.1646102)

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