



BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Second Annual Sir Lenny Henry Centre Lecture, 28th May 2026

Speaker: Sir Lenny Henry

Sir Lenny Henry Centre
for Media Diversity

Hello and welcome.



Jason Sheldon, Junction 10 Photography

What an amazing honour and pleasure it is to stand before you and deliver the Second Annual Speech for the Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity.

And you've got to feel sorry for the racists this week, right? They're trying to send us back home and we're like

"Bugger Jamaica, it's hotter in Kidderminster!"

This speech is about setting the agenda for a media landscape that truly represents the people of the UK.

Because if large parts of our society are missing from that media, then our democracy is incomplete. And that makes us all poorer.

The stakes are high.

So let me begin.

Now, those of you who've heard me speak before will know - I like a statistic.

I like a number.

I like something I can point to and say, "*there. That's the problem.*"

Like Farage when he sees a samosa on a Wetherspoons menu.

But today... I want to start somewhere slightly different.

Not with numbers.

With words.

Because words matter.

And sometimes...

When words disappear - justice disappears with them.

Let me explain.

Over the past few years, we've all got very used to a particular set of letters.

D. E. I.

"DEI."

It sounds neat. Efficient. Professional.

Like something you can put in a powerpoint slide and tick off before lunch.

But here's the problem.

An acronym doesn't just shorten language.

It shrinks meaning.

It compresses something complicated - something emotional - something political
- into a neat little package.

And when that happens...

We stop thinking about what's actually inside it.

Because before it was "DEI"... it was:

- **Diversity** — who is in the room
- **Equity** — who has power
- **Inclusion** — who actually belongs

Three different ideas.

Three different struggles.

Three different fights.

And sometimes - let's be honest - each one of these are big fights - and sometimes they need different policy solutions.

But once you turn it into an acronym?

It becomes one thing.

One box.

One line in a strategy.

"Are we doing DEI?"

Tick. Move on.

And that's where it gets dangerous.

Because once you flatten something like that...

It becomes very easy to attack it.

You don't have to argue about racism.

You don't have to defend fairness.

You don't have to confront exclusion.

You just say:

“DEI has gone too far.”

“DEI is a distraction.”

“DEI must die.”

And suddenly... we’re not talking about racism anymore.

We’re talking about an acronym.

And that is not an accident.

That is the weaponisation of language.

Something Trump’s been doing his entire second term. Donald hates DEI so much he thinks it stands for “Don’t Eye Up Ivanka”

At the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity- we published a report by Rohit Kachroo, ITV News’s Global Security Editor, along with Co-Author Doctor Ellie Tomsett on the state of UK newsrooms .

The report based its findings on a survey of 80 journalists, with follow-up interviews.

Of those who participated in the research, 63% said they’d experienced racism in their workplace, while 70% said there were insufficient opportunities for career progression.

The report was damning and it was covered across the trade press from journalism UK to Deadline and in mainstream media outlets like The Guardian.

But here is the important thing, the report didn’t call it a “DEI issue”.

The report didn’t flatten the issue to an acronym.

It didn’t speak in corporate niceties. Because racism and prejudice are not niceties.

The report called it what it felt like.

The report called it “Apartheid” in newsrooms.

And suddenly - people paid attention.

Headlines. Debate. Discomfort.

Because when you name something properly...

You can’t ignore it.



And here's the uncomfortable truth.

Most organisations have responded to the attacks on DEI, not like Rohit Kachroo and Ellie Tomsett by strengthening their language, but by weakening it.

We have gone from “inclusion” to “wellbeing”, we have gone from equity to “belonging” and we have gone from “diversity” to “what about fairness to white people?”.

We have literally gone from “black lives matter” to “all lives matter”, thinking somehow, we can help black people if we don't focus on our needs and just try and help everyone.

As they say ‘you have to put on your own oxygen mask, before helping others.’

Unless you're on Ryan Air, where the saying goes “crack a window and hope for the best”

Now I know I said I wasn't going to focus on the numbers - I told a little white lie. So let's look at some of the numbers.

Because what's happening globally should worry all of us.

An investigation by Gravity Research analysed more than 1,300 corporate documents - filings, earnings, calls, reports - across some of the biggest companies in the world.

And what they found is extraordinary.

Between 2024 and 2025:

- Use of the term “DEI” dropped by 98%
- “Diversity” dropped by 62%
- “Equity” dropped by 48%
- “Inclusion” dropped by 43%

Not reduced... disappearing.

- To my knowledge, they didn't even bother to measure words that really capture what's really going on - words like prejudice, racism, sexism, able-ism

Even more striking: check this out;

- Overall references to diversity-related language dropped 72% in a single year
- Companies briefly shifted to “safer” words like “belonging” — which rose 87%
- And then even those words dropped nearly half the following year

Think about that. They didn't just change the language. They ran out of language.

To my knowledge, the study didn't even bother to measure words that really capture what's really going on - words like prejudice, racism, sexism, able-ism, homophobia.

And here is another truth. Employee resource groups — often the backbone of support for Black, Asian, LGBTQ+ and other marginalised staff — are being quietly dismantled or reframed.

As one U.S researcher put it, companies are trying to keep up with how polarised and charged the environment has become.

In other words,... the language is being driven out of public life.

Now, some people might say:

“Well, that’s America. That’s politics over there.”

But let me tell you something.

Every time I speak to a black or brown person in this industry...

Every time I walk into a room...

Every time I have a quiet conversation after one of these events...

I hear the same thing.

“It’s happening here too.”

Opportunities narrowing.

Conversations becoming more cautious.

Organisations stepping back.

Language being softened.

And issues being... gently parked.

It doesn’t always look like a dramatic rollback.

Sometimes it looks like silence.

Sometimes it looks like hesitation.

Sometimes it looks like... not quite saying the thing you used to say.

And meanwhile...the outcomes remain the same.

But.....Before I go on, I want to spend a minute recognising the commitment, perseverance and heroism of those involved in the hard work of diversity in the industry – many of them here in the room.

You are heroes!

(Applause)

You’ve made and continue to make a difference for us all.

But this can’t just be left on your shoulders.

It needs all our shoulders – specially those Joan Collins; Miami Vice shoulders in the most expensive suits.

.... I also want to highlight another problem here in the UK.

We don’t even have enough data anymore.

Yes, organisations like the Creative Diversity Network continue to do important work in collecting data on diversity in the British TV Industry.

But the Creative Diversity Network cannot be the only show in town.

With cuts in higher education...

With fewer organisations doing research...

With less scrutiny, less measurement...

We are trying to fight inequality with less evidence.

But let me borrow a line from the late, great Simon Albury:

***“You do not need a tape measure to know that an obese person needs to lose weight.”
Sometimes...you just need to look around the room.***

Let me give you an example.

The BBC has recently appointed a new Director General. Proceeding the appointment there were the usual conversations and industry gossip as to who might replace Tim Davie. ‘Deadline’ profiled Apple TV’s Europe Chief Jay Hunt, former BBC Content Boss Charlotte Moore, and ex-Channel 4 CEO Alex Mahon, others were mentioned in other publications and the job went to former Google Executive Matt Brittin.

How many serious contenders of colour were heard mentioned? Not a one m’dear!

That list has more white bread on it than the last series of Bake Off.

I don’t need new statistics to know we have a crisis.

And here’s a fun statistic.

There have been five black women in space:

- Mae Jemison
- Stephanie Wilson
- Joan Higginbotham
- Sian Proctor
- Jessica Watkins

Five black women have travelled into space...

And yet... we’ve had fewer people of colour leading newsrooms at our public service broadcasters.

For people of colour it is easier to leave the planet than it is to reach the top of British media.

And it’s hard to get us into space, right black people? They’d start counting down, we’d still be in the kitchen

“We have plenty time, come get us dem reach 3”

They tell us DEI has gone too far.

But the problem isn’t “DEI”.

The problem is Racism.

The problem is Sexism

The problem is Able-ism.

The problem is Class-ism.

The problem is Homophobia

The problem...is Power.

And no one has ever won a fight-by blunting their own weapons and hoping their opponent might hit them less hard.

But that is exactly what far too many of us are doing by changing our language and failing to identify the enemy.



Jason Sheldon, Junction 10 Photography

So let's be honest about where we are.

We are in a fight. Not a fight for an acronym.

Not a fight for a policy document.

We are in a fight for the heart and soul of our society. We are in a fight for the British media. Who tells our stories, who has the power to decide who those people are, and where those stories are heard.

We are in a fight for what it really means to be British.

Who belongs.

Who is heard.

Who gets to shape the story of this Country.

It is a fight that is bigger than any one of us individually.

It is a fight that requires us all to come together and fight for what is right.

We must call out sexism when we see it.

We must take the bold action to address able-ism

And we must speak truth to power when that power is prejudiced, bigoted, narrow minded.

Together we can do this - because individually we will be picked off.

Because this? This moment -

Is only the beginning.

My name is Lenny Henry and I implore you to stand with us.. Because only if we stand together - do we stand any chance of surviving.

Thank you.



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