



**March 8, 2021 – International Women’s Day**

**By Shari Graydon**

I’d like to abolish International Women’s Day.

Never mind the many opportunities it’s given me to command space on op-ed pages for issues I know and care about; I’m striving for a world in which everybody agrees that IWD is no longer necessary.

In the meantime, designating a single 24-hour period to focus on the concerns and realities of fully half the population of the planet is about as insulting as making space for the voices of Black people only one month of the year. But as media workers, you can help address both these issues.

Since 2010, the non-profit Informed Opinions has been working to amplify women’s voices in Canadian news media. Because for decades men’s perspectives have outnumbered women’s by a ratio of sometimes four or five to one.’

That’s a problem in a society that thinks of itself as a beacon of democracy. Representation is as fundamental to democratic decision-making as are free and open news media.

It’s true that as long as men continue to dominate politics, business and sport, and news is significantly shaped by the pronouncements of those who exercise the most power, official sources will skew male. But women - especially those whose intersecting identities afford them significantly less power - are invariably as or more affected by the impacts of those pronouncements. Failing to effectively reflect their concerns and experiences is failing to fully report the news.

Moreover, women dominate the fields of health care, education and social services. If their voices are absent, coverage of related issues is likely to be woefully insufficient. And at a time when news media are scrambling to adapt their revenue models to continually evolving technology and shifting demographic sands, it's more important than ever for journalists to be deliberate about seeking to cover stories that reflect the realities of the audiences they serve.

Recognizing that what gets measured gets done, Informed Opinions has been collaborating with scientists at Simon Fraser University to monitor the gender ratio of sources quoted by Canada's most influential news outlets. Since October 2018, our [Gender Gap Tracker](#) has been offering daily updates of the aggregate percentage of men and women interviewed and quoted by CBC, CTV, Global, *HuffPost Canada*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star* and *The National Post*.

The tracker's machine-learning algorithms are reading text that's been data-scraped from the news outlets' websites. As a result, it's not capable of discerning nuance beyond a male/female gender binary. And if a broadcaster convenes an all-female on-air panel, but then publishes a story that fails to quote the women, that won't be reflected in the tool's results.

Nevertheless the aggregate data's insights are telling. From October 2018, when we began tracking, to February 2019, when we made the tool public, women were being quoted only 27% of the time. A month after the Gender Gap Tracker's launch, we were delighted to see an increase of two points. But that short-lived blip was fuelled by - you guessed it - International Women's Day. However, two years into our monitoring experiment, women now consistently make up 31% of those quoted.

Predictably, some news outlets do a better job than others of reflecting women's perspectives. In February, the spread between the best and worst performers was 17 points. CBC featured women 36% of the time, and has consistently outperformed its private sector competitors since the start. Global and CTV weren't far behind last month at 34%. *The Toronto Star* featured women's voices 28% of the time, and *Huffpost Canada* - which early on was often a close competitor with CBC - came in at 25%, as did *The Globe and Mail*. *The National Post*, which has consistently lagged all others, quoted only 19% women's voices last month.

Informed Opinions has been actively supporting the aggregate upward trend in a variety of other ways. For more than a decade, we've been motivating and training women with subject matter expertise to share their insights through media commentary. Four year ago we launched an easily searchable [online database of expert women](#). Together, its English and French iterations feature more than 2,000 sources across all sectors and fields. And we are deliberately recruiting and tracking diversity more broadly in a bid to ensure that we too, are accurately reflecting the Canadian population.

All listed experts have explicitly committed to responding quickly to journalist requests, we actively promote sources able to comment on current and emerging issues, and as a result, we're receiving many dozens of queries every week.

But as the numbers attest, progress remains incremental.

So last month, we collaborated with media consultant and Ryerson journalism instructor Anita Li to launch a national [#DiversifyYourSources](#) pledge campaign. It invites reporters, editors and producers across the country to publicly commit to tracking the gender of the people they interview and quote.

The good news is, [many of them have](#). Leaders of publications ranging from *The Toronto Star* and *Xtra* to *The Walrus* and *The Saltwire Network* have signed up their entire newsrooms. Many individual journalists have also pledged, including news directors, columnists and editors.

This should not be a controversial act or ask. Many respected newsrooms and reporters have been actively working to better reflect their audiences and the world for years. The BBC now regularly reports on how it's doing in meeting the goals of its [50:50 Challenge](#). And journalists at *The Atlantic*, Adrienne LaFrance and Ed Yong have both written about their own efforts.

Yong, who covers science, has called the simple spreadsheet he uses to track the gender ratio of his sources "[a vaccine against self-delusion](#)."

News media organizations aiming to survive need to invest in that remedy every bit as much as countries need to invest in vaccines that counter Covid19.

Your commitment as a journalist is to reflect the realities of the audiences you serve, to share insights from sufficiently diverse sources to be confident that the pictures you're painting are as full and accurate as possible.

[Signing the pledge](#) to monitor how you're doing is a great step towards achieving that goal.

In the process, it will help deliver a world in which one day devoted to women is completely irrelevant.

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*Shari Graydon is founder of Informed Opinions, a non-profit that works "to ensure the perspectives and priorities of qualified women with diverse backgrounds are equitably reflected in the news media and integrated into Canadian society."*