



MEDIA & CULTURE

Pandemic reinforces need for media to better reflect women's diversity

Diversity in media sources is still lacking even as COVID has disproportionately affected women, especially Black, Indigenous and women of colour.

by [Shari Graydon](#)

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“Be it resolved that journalists should quote women as often as men.”

This assertion animated a [debate convened by the Rotman Initiative for Women in Business](#) seven years ago – long before the pandemic made the consequences of sidelining women's perspectives so vividly damning.

At the time, research conducted by both the [Global Media Monitoring Project](#) and [Informed Opinions](#) found that news media were featuring men's perspectives about 75 per cent of the time. In Canada, the situation has improved slightly since then, in part due to a variety of advocacy measures. (The [Gender Gap Tracker](#), a digital monitoring device developed with researchers at Simon Fraser University, shows that in aggregate, Canada's most influential news outlets are currently quoting women sources closer to one in three times versus one in four.)

But now our failure to make more than incremental progress in ensuring that women are heard more broadly has taken on a renewed urgency. The disproportionate social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on women – especially Black, Indigenous and women of colour, as well as those living in poverty, with a disability, or with an abuser – have been [well-documented and extensively lamented](#).

In the process, many have called for greater attention to the voices of those least well-represented [in the corridors of power](#). Clearly, we can't fix the problems in long-term care homes that imperil the elderly and their minimum-wage-earning caregivers who are often working multiple jobs in order to survive, without hearing from the people directly affected. That we haven't previously paid heed to their realities is in no small part due to the fact that most of those residents are female, and most of their caregivers are [women of colour](#).

the importance of a national daycare program for decades, the catastrophic economic effects of this potential massive migration out of the workplace has suddenly [increased the idea's saliency](#).

Which is infuriating, when you think about it. Is that what it takes? A global pandemic and millions of deaths worldwide, to remind the people who hold power to consider the realities of those who don't?

Some will argue that there's no fast and easy way to fix the chronic marginalization of the people who've been left out of public discourse and the policies they inform. But we don't have to accept past incremental change as predictive of the future. The dizzying pace of social, cultural and technological change witnessed in the past 50 years makes clear that when the situation dictates, we can revolutionize outdated systems and counterproductive practices. We can choose to be intentional about incorporating women's voices into public discourse.

Embracing the premise of the 2014 Rotman debate is both needed and demonstrably possible. In 2018, one of the most respected news organizations in the world challenged its producers and reporters to feature an equal number of male and female expert contributors in their news coverage. The [success of the BBC's effort](#) to significantly improve representation of the diverse audiences it serves subsequently led the broadcaster to expand its tracking protocol [to monitor ethnicity and disability metrics](#) as well.

Canadian media can build on that success. Informed Opinions has just launched a [national pledge campaign](#) of its own in collaboration with Anita Li, a Ryerson University instructor, digital journalism consultant and the founder of Canadian Journalists of Colour. The goal of #DiversifyYourSources is to encourage journalists who care about responsible reporting and the critical role news media play in nurturing democracy, to track the diversity of the people they interview and quote.

Because if not now, when?



Over the past decade, many initiatives have emerged to address the indefensible gap. Women in political science, STEM fields and peace and security have created their own expert databases. On Facebook, a group calling itself “Binders of Women” emerged to draw attention to the availability of knowledgeable sources across disciplines. And the international non-profit United For News developed a resource and toolkit of strategies and best practices aimed at amplifying women's voices in the news media.

forced to quote women as often as men, I cited widely available business research about how incorporating the views of competent women in senior roles led to better decisions.

Our own work has motivated and trained thousands of expert women, Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people to engage with the media, and made it easier for journalists to find them. As a result, when the pandemic hit Canada last March and we reached out to our database members seeking sources with expertise relevant to emerging news stories, more than 100 replied. They included virologists and epidemiologists, economists and caregivers and experts in food security and remote work, labour law and homeschooling.

In thousands of news stories in the intervening 10 months, [they have offered professional knowledge](#) on all of the myriad issues Canadians have faced in this profoundly disruptive year. As importantly, that knowledge has been informed by their personal experiences as women, Two-Spirit and gender-diverse individuals. And those shared personal experiences have led to a newly unavoidable awareness of the degree to which Canada's social and economic recovery must address the systemic inequalities that have seen our realities so often disregarded.

In the three minutes I had back in 2014 to defend the debate proposition that journalists be forced to quote women as often as men, I cited widely available business research about how incorporating the views of competent women in senior roles led to better decisions. I argued that more diverse perspectives would translate into more empathy and greater collaboration. And I acknowledged that quoting more women would likely make us pay attention to different things, predicting "less focus on hockey fights and more on health research."

My tongue-in-cheek comment has proven prophetic. The Gender Gap Tracker reveals that public health officers [Drs. Theresa Tam, Bonnie Henry and Deena Hinshaw](#) have played an outsize role in the recent increased presence of women's perspectives in the news. And this increase has, indeed, been accompanied by a decline in quotes by male athletes. But what happens when we return to a world in which the male-dominated sports world is again operating in full force?

Journalists regularly cite as inspiration for their work the goal of "afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted." Doing that requires much more attention to who's being quoted, and measurement is necessary. So as part of our pledge campaign, we've created an electronic spreadsheet to facilitate the kind of self-monitoring that science journalist Ed Yong of *The Atlantic* calls "[a vaccine against self-delusion](#)."

This pandemic demands both kinds of vaccines. And our aim in encouraging journalists to embrace the responsibility they have to reflect the realities of all the citizens they serve is a better, safer, more equitable world for all.

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