

Graydon: In numbers there is strength – how big data can help close the gender gap in Canadian journalism

News media have a dismal record of using female sources. The Gender Gap Tracker can help them set targets to do better. gender parity among experts

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his gender-parity cabinet on Parliament Hill in November, 2015. Women experts abound in all fields of human endeavour, but you wouldn't know it from news media. *JUSTIN TANG / THE CANADIAN PRESS*

We hear a lot these days about how artificial intelligence is taking away jobs and making it easy for foreign powers to hack democracy. But some scientists are hunched over their computers in an effort to harness the power of big data analytics for social good.

A new tool just launched by Informed Opinions is a case in point. We collaborated with a team of researchers at Simon Fraser University's big data lab to develop a sophisticated digital monitoring system. It's now measuring, in real time, the gender ratio of sources being quoted online by some of Canada's most influential news outlets. It analyzes in microseconds what it used to take researchers hours to assess.

If only the data it reveals were more encouraging.

How grim are the statistics? Type gendergaptracker.informedopinions.org (<https://gendergaptracker.informedopinions.org/>) into your browser and see for yourself. You can access data as far back as October 2018, but no matter which date range you select, the aggregate percentage of women's voices never moves above 26 per cent. For context, that's a mere four-point increase over data we collected almost three decades ago.

And yet, in the intervening years, women have achieved significant advancement in virtually every field. They've become premiers and astronauts, Supreme Court justices and university presidents, corporate CEOs and award-winning scientists and entrepreneurs. And while it's true that more men still lead governments and corporations, our research has found that even in health care disciplines, where women dominate, their voices remain under-represented.

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That's a problem. Women's life experiences are often profoundly different from men's. Those experiences feed different insights and sometimes priorities. So it's not remotely defensible in a proud democracy that men's perspectives continue to outnumber women's by a ratio of almost three-to-one in public discourse. We can – and need to – do better.

Informed Opinions last commissioned content analysis research looking at the gender ratio of quoted and featured experts in 2015. Canada's prime minister had just sworn in a new gender-balanced cabinet, and we were edging towards the #MeToo revelations that would remind everyone of the social consequences of failing to listen to women's perspectives.

The aggregate ratio of experts quoted in the 2015 study was 29 per cent women to 71 per cent men. But that analysis left out both sports and entertainment coverage. It also included two broadcast talk shows: CBC Radio's *The Current*, and Radio Canada's *Tout le monde en parle* (<https://ici.radio-canada.ca/tele/tout-le-monde-en-parle/site>). Both programs exceeded 40 per cent female interviewees, raising the average stats overall.

In fact, the better performance of public broadcasters on gender parity planted the seed for the Gender Gap Tracker. Because Radio Canada and CBC are explicitly mandated to reflect the country to itself, their reporters and producers pay more attention to diversity. What gets measured does, indeed, get done. Anecdotal evidence and common sense suggest that journalists who actively track the gender of their sources achieve more equitable results. And a growing number are reporting on their performance.

The mixed gender team of scientists developing the Gender Gap Tracker includes researchers from across disciplines. They hail from Canada, Iran, Brazil and Spain and they've worked in the U.S., the U.K. and Switzerland. A microcosm of Canada's diversity, they tangibly demonstrate the payoffs of collective intelligence that benefits from different perspectives.

We've set 2025 as the target date for achieving gender parity in Canadian news media. The Gender Gap Tracker, though, is just a tool. To make a difference, journalists need to actively seek to improve the data – and news consumers need to give them reasons to do so.

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