

Women too often shut out of public discourse

The Toronto Star by Shari Graydon 4 March 2016

The most compelling moment for me in Chris Rock's takedown of this year's Oscar whitewash was the video footage he shot in the mostly black neighbourhood of Compton (not coincidentally, the location of a critically acclaimed movie that was shut out of this year's awards show).

Most of the black moviegoers he interviewed had little knowledge of — or apparent interest in — the films honoured last weekend by Hollywood glitterati — even though their neighbourhood is just across town from the film industry's centre. Instead, his interviewees cited movies that reflected their realities, spoke to their concerns, and told stories that resonated with their lives. (Go figure.)

I found Rock's impromptu field experiment especially interesting in light of some recently completed research commissioned by Informed Opinions, the non-profit project I lead. Our focus is on addressing the under-representation of women's voices in Canadian public discourse. Last fall, we reviewed more than 1,400 articles and broadcast program clips from mainstream news sources to assess how well they were reflecting the insights and activities of half our population.

The short answer? Not remotely well enough.

Our data revealed that women's perspectives, at 29 per cent, had risen seven points since similar research was last conducted in 1993. But a persistent bias toward male voices clearly remains, and the rate of improvement feels ponderously slow.

In 2016, Canadian women lead provinces, major corporations and universities — which have been graduating more than 60 per cent female students for years. Justin Trudeau had no difficulty appointing extremely capable and qualified women to half the positions in his cabinet. And although still under-represented in science and technology, women dominate a number of health and social service professions.

But more important than women's actual progress in justifying our inclusion in news media coverage is the extent to which our lives are affected by what goes on around us.

Government legislation, corporate hiring and compensation practices, and climate change all exert a significant impact on women's lives, and so it in no way makes sense to exclude our voices.

Let me be clear: I don't believe the chronic under-representation of women's perspectives is a conspiracy against us. Our study's data reflect sins of omission, not commission. But here's what the research also demonstrates: journalists who make the extra effort to go beyond known sources, reach out to more diverse experts, and consider different approaches to standard reporting, find and feature more women.

The 29-per-cent average we found is only as high as it is because the samples studied from CBC and Radio Canada both included more than 40 per cent female voices. The Star's main news section (we deliberately chose to leave out sports, business and entertainment sections) at 34 per cent outperformed other newspapers, and recent internal efforts at making this paper's opinion pages more equitable have achieved up to 50 per cent women's perspectives.

This jibes with the business truism: "What gets measured gets done." Just as boards appoint more women and visible minorities when forced to pay attention to their numbers, so reporters, editors and producers who track representation feature more diverse voices.

We're all served by that. A growing body of research makes clear that not only do we benefit when drawing on the ideas of a wider talent pool, but also that societies in which the gap between those with access to power and those without is greatest, are the least functional.

Last Sunday night, Chris Rock pointed out that what black actors — and writers, directors, cinematographers — want is opportunity. I'm with him — for so many reasons. How many fewer black Americans would die at the hands of police if Hollywood stories featuring the issues of interest to the citizens of Compton were more often produced, more widely disseminated, and better understood?

By the same token, how much more democratic would Canada be, how much more likely to treat women equitably, and to utilize the contributions of the 50 per cent of the population who happen to be female, if our voices were at par in public discourse?

Many issues we currently marginalize as "women's issues" — like child care and sexual violence — might be redefined as profoundly important concerns that affect us all. Think how many families and communities would benefit as a result.

Shari Graydon is the founder of Informed Opinions and ExpertWomen.ca, projects aimed at increasing women's voices in the news media. The full research report is available [here](#).