


# When women aren't quoted in the news, the public loses

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The third time the analyst blew me off, I gave up on her.

I'd tried this particular source for three separate stories over a three-month span. The first time we missed each other, she encouraged me to try again. So I did. Twice. Reporters routinely talk with stock analysts, since when news breaks, they often often provide a fast, solid route to understanding developments. Moreover, I specifically seek out female experts, since, according to every report ever on the subject, journalists quote women far less than men. That's a problem.

But you know what's critical to correcting it? Women actually have to talk. And like with my elusive stock analyst, my professional experience suggests that, maddeningly, this is where the process often breaks down.

Why does it matter if women don't call me back? Because civil society hashes out issues in print, online and on the air. If you aren't there, it doesn't matter how eloquently you air your views on Facebook: Your unamplified voice will peter into silence, unheard.

And that's exactly what's happening, according to a report released last month by the Women's Media Center. It shows that, even in news stories about reproductive rights and sexual assault, journalists quote men more than women. Men provided 48 percent of the quotes in stories about sexual assault, compared to 32 percent from women. For reproductive rights stories, it was 41 percent versus 33 percent. (The remaining quotes were attributed to organizations, or the speaker's gender could not be determined.)

This is a travesty, because when we don't hear from women, we miss hearing how events and policies are playing out for half of humanity.

The news media also helps to crown authority figures. Some, like government officials, are foisted upon us, but the subject matter experts—the cadre of lawyers, academics, executives and activists whom we use to interpret the world—are not. Those experts are women only 36 percent of the time, according to a 2015 study by the Global Media Monitoring Project.

When female experts aren't quoted, they lose out on career-enhancing media mentions and readers and viewers lose out on their expertise, whether the subject is nuclear physics or cake decorating. The public is robbed, too, of the chance to see female lawmakers, executives, union organizers, scientists, artists, judges, athletes—the whole wide range of what women can be in the world.

This is why it drives me bonkers when women turn down my interview requests. They tell me my story falls outside their bailiwick, but do call them back next time. There's so many problems with this approach. First, my potential source is selling herself short. How does she know she can't answer my questions? Writer Sarah Hagi's phrase, "God, give me the confidence of a mediocre white dude," is relevant here.

Which brings me to point No. 2: Her male colleagues rarely hesitate to run their mouths.

Sometimes women refer me to their male bosses. I get it. I really do. A recent study of women in financial services found they are punished more severely for misconduct than men, a fact that likely extends to other industries. Why, faced with those kind of consequences, take even the small risk of speaking publicly? Easier to wait until next time.

Except "next time" may not come. I can't make her talk, and I've got a deadline. I won't keep calling forever.

So, I'll end with a plea. There are a lot of hard problems in the world. This is one of the easier ones. If you are a woman who has reached a point in her career where reporters come calling, do yourself—and all women—a favor. Call back. Especially if the reporter is me.

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