

Counting ourselves in: Understanding why women decide to engage with the media

October 2018

Nancy Worth

Alkim Karaagac

Shari Graydon

Samantha Luchuk

https://informedopinions.org/about/research/counting-ourselves-in/







About the authors

Nancy Worth is an Assistant Professor in Geography & Environmental Management at the University of Waterloo. She is a feminist economic geographer who is interested in work, social reproduction, inequalities, age and generations, and social theory. Dr. Worth's research agenda as whole takes an identities approach to focus on issues of social justice and equity. Recent publications include *Intergenerational Space* with Robert Vanderbeck (Routledge 2015), 'Feeling precarious: millennial women and work' (2016, *Environment and Planning D*). 'Who we are at work: millennial women, everyday inequalities and insecure work' (2016, *Gender, Place & Culture*).

For further information about the *Counting Ourselves In* project, contact Nancy at nworth@uwaterloo.ca

E. Alkim Karaagac is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Geography & Environmental Management at the University of Waterloo. Her research interests include urban restructuring, housing policies, financialization of daily life, and feminist methodologies in economic geography. For her dissertation, she is examining the role of indebtedness on the conduct of citizens by investigating the state-led housing provision and everyday debt relations in Turkey.

Shari Graydon is an author, advocate and the founder and catalyst of *Informed Opinions*. A former newspaper columnist and commentator for CBC radio and TV, she has devoted the past eight years to amplifying women's voices for a more democratic Canada. Previously she served as press secretary to a provincial premier, and as president of the national women's organization, MediaWatch. She has written two best-selling media literacy books for kids, received the Governor General's Award in Commemoration of the Persons' Case, and been named one of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women by WXN.

Samantha Luchuk is Informed Opinions' Manager of Administration and Recruitment, providing essential programming and communications support. Among other duties, she oversees the expert women database, an online tool designed to help journalists and producers find the female guests and expert sources they need. Samantha has more than 18 years of experience in office management delivering support for high-level professionals, and a background in editing and communications.

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Executive Summary

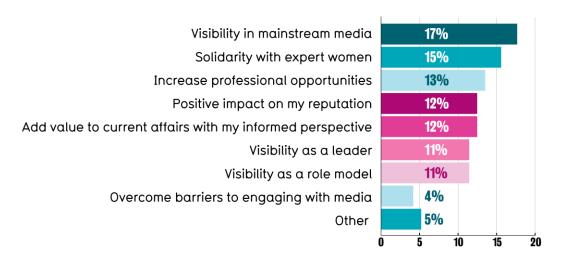
This research explores what motivates women with professional and subject matter expertise to "count themselves in" by sharing their informed opinions and analysis with the broader public through the news media. Funded through the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, the study was a collaboration between Dr. Nancy Worth and the non profit project, Informed Opinions, the mandate of which is to amplify women's voices to bridge the gender gap in Canadian public discourse.

We sought insights from women who have chosen to be listed in Informed Opinions' database of expert women regarding their incentives for engaging with media, despite the barriers that continue to prevent many others from doing so. At the time of the study, the database featured profiles of 550 women, 193 (35%) of whom completed the online survey. Thirty-four of the surveyed women then agreed to participate in in-depth follow-up interviews.

The surveys and conversations reflected a variety of incentives, both personal and professional. Many women shared their desire to use media exposure to support career and leadership ambitions through enhanced visibility and reputation. Many also cited their belief in the importance of expressing solidarity with other expert women who were braving the risks, adding value to public conversations through their specialized knowledge, and serving as a role model for girls and younger women.

WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO JOIN THE EXPERT WOMEN DATABASE?

Participants could choose all that applied



In the process, they shared insights into the formal and informal supports that have helped them do this work, and offered concrete suggestions for what universities, journalists and Informed Opinions itself could do to encourage other women to engage with media.

Introduction

Counting ourselves in: understanding why women decide to engage with the media, is a research partnership between Informed Opinions and Dr. Nancy Worth at the University of Waterloo. This collaboration was created to:

- understand why women decide to contribute to the media—to count themselves in to public discourse;
- use this knowledge to examine possible pathways forward to grow the number of women in Informed Opinions' expert women database and the '#AmplifyHer' campaign, which aims to facilitate and expand women's contributions in mainstream media

In 2010, Shari Graydon founded Informed Opinions with an aim to bridge the gender gap in Canadian public discourse by 2025. Since then, Informed Opinions has helped amplify the voices of more than 2,500 women across Canada, supporting them in sharing their insights and analysis with the public; making women role models more visible; expanding women's economic and leadership opportunities; and promoting practice and policy change within media organizations. This is important because women's perspectives remain seriously underrepresented in public discourse. Recent research has found that in influential print, broadcast and online media, Canada, women constitute only 29% of experts and sources being quoted, interviewed or profiled (Morris, 2016). That reflects a mere 7% shift over the previous two decades. The absence of women's insight undermines democracy and denies Canada access to the analysis and ideas of many of its best and brightest. In seeking to address this problem, Informed Opinions motivates and trains women to engage with media, and has now created an online database of qualified expert women who are willing and available to share their informed opinions through the media.

Background: Women's engagement with the media

While a gender gap is well documented in various aspects of Canadian society—in terms of political participation (Trimble & Arscott, 2008), and the labour market in terms of pay (McInturff, 2013) and leadership roles (Canada Board Diversity Council, 2016; Moyser, 2017), the gender gap in public discourse remains under-researched.

External barriers: pipelines, the male framing of 'expert' and the 'second shift'

While there is no shortage of experts who are women, in many fields a gender gap remains at the most senior levels. In academia, this pipeline problem has been well documented (Monroe & Chiu, 2010; White, 2005). While women are closing the gap in many professions, including law and medicine, gender parity remains a distant goal at the highest ranks. This is also true within media organizations, and under time pressure, producers report choosing a known source, or the most high-profile, creating a chicken-and-egg phenomenon that reinforces existing gaps (Morris, 2016). Part of this issue can be explained by how our society genders ideas of leadership, knowledge and expertise. Using phrases like 'women scientist' or 'female economist' marks out gender as exceptional. Moreover, it is common to refer to a woman's partner or children in a news story about her professional accomplishments (Wolfers, 2015). Lakoff's (2004) germinal work in this area traces how the language of power is coded as masculine, and

how we talk about women often precludes them from being seen as an 'expert'. Finally, women often cite time pressure as a reason that they don't participate in the media. Hochschild's (1989, 1997) work has carefully detailed the 'second shift' of women's domestic work in the home. In Canada, women do twice as much childcare work at home (Milan, Keown, & Robles Urquijo, 2011), which can leave them less available to participate in public discourse.

Internal, or Perceptual barriers: not seeing yourself as 'part of the project'

As women are less likely to be called on as an 'expert', they are less likely to see themselves as experts. Research shows that gender socialization can play a measurable role in confidence and communication (Howell & Singer, 2017; Kwai Gamble & Gamble, 2014). This does not mean that all women are shy and all men confident, but when both are surveyed, distinct gender trends emerge, with more women than men declining interviews, stating that they're not the most qualified expert, or expressing themselves in less assertive ways. Moreover, for women of colour or young women or disabled women or gay women, there is an addition challenge, as these groups are less likely to see themselves represented in news sources and they know that their views will be more heavily scrutinized (McMillan Cottom, 2015). In Worth's (2016) work with young women, there is often a very careful measuring of a situation—about when it's possible to speak up and when the cost might be too high.

Risks for women?

Beyond external and internal barriers to media participation, many women fear the negative consequences of engagement, including trolling (McMillan Cottom, 2015; Morrison, 2018). According to Veletsianos et al (2018) online harassment necessitates a range of coping strategies that range between "reactive, anticipatory, preventive, and proactive". Moreover, Healy (2017) has documented how academic work has become 'latently public' with the rise of social media.

One solution: databases of expert women

One method of mitigating the barriers detailed above is to create collectives of expert women. Political Science has Women Also Know Stuff (as well as a Twitter account and hashtag); History has Women Also Know History. Besides bringing visibility to women scholars, the networks also act as supportive metamentoring (Beaulieu et al., 2017). Informed Opinions has taken this approach within and beyond academia—creating an experts database of Canadian women and those living in Canada.

Methods

In the summer of 2018, we sent members of Informed Opinions' expert women database a survey which captured how, when and why women contribute to the media. We also collected demographic information, including gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, income and age. At the end of the survey, women could opt in to an interview, to share their experience in more detail.

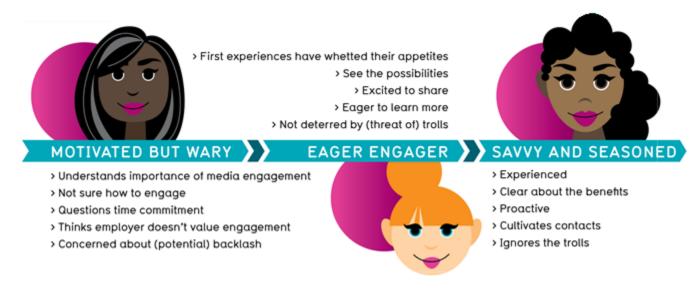
Survey Respondents: 193 members of the Expert Women database responded to the survey, a robust 35% response rate. As expected, most respondents hold one or more university degrees, and 56% of respondents earn more than \$100,000/year. 62% of respondents are 35-54, 80% are white, and 84% are heterosexual. This demographic data will be useful in increasing the diversity of the database going forward.

Interview respondents: 34 women were interviewed across Canada to learn more about why they decided to count themselves in, seeing themselves as part of public discourse. We were deliberate in the selection of respondents to ensure the project heard from women with many different experiences of media engagement.

Results

1 Who are Expert Women?

We identified three styles of media engagement (see below). While we wouldn't argue that everyone fits neatly into one of these boxes, they are helpful to show the range of interest and experience with media engagement.



Savvy & Seasoned

Many of the women in the expert women database are highly experienced with media engagement. Moreover, those in this group were often highly aware of their privilege and used it to support other women.

I'm an upper middle class woman, I have a car, I live in a secure place. If something happened to me and I called the police they're going to respond, and they're going to respond positively so I have a lot of security in place that a lot of people wouldn't have, and I'm a tenured professor, so I can't be fired from my job. And, so, I think that puts a real onus on me to be out there in the media, taking positions that other people can't.

Well, I'm a woman who has done well in my field so far. I think serving as a role model to other women is a really good idea. I also should because there are few people who work – few women who work in academia who are confident to engage with media who are well trained, and I am one of them. So, I feel like I can and should when the opportunity arises and if I can't, I should make sure that I refer them to another woman or somebody else who might not otherwise get their voices heard.

Eager Engager

The core group of women in the database are Eager Engagers. Those in this category recognize the value of media engagement and want to do more, even if they realize it's not always easy.

I was ambitious and felt that media coverage was "a feather in my cap". I also felt it was an obligation as part of my job and as a woman role model.

[After my first interview] it became much easier. I second-guess myself - there's probably someone smarter, more eloquent. But I realized I had a lot to offer - and something unique to offer. It is still a bit scary - scientists usually aren't trained to communicate to lay audiences, so presenting complex findings is a challenge. But again, someone needs to do it!

Motivated but Wary

This final group of women in Informed Opinions' expert women database are still unsure how to engage with the media, and many question if it's worth the effort.

I was forced to be the lead on organizing an event, which automatically means I respond to media requests for the event. I was nervous but had a friend who was also doing the interview and that support helped me say yes.

I haven't had much media engagement but for the little I have had I want to get my name out there associated with the work I do and also encourage young women/high school students to pursue STEM subjects.

The first time was a request from my research center and I did it to serve, though I was not convinced and I really disliked how what I said was misinterpreted and quoted out of context. When I decided to do it on my own, it was for knowledge mobilization. I had done something that changed people's lives and I wanted to share it with the wide population.

2 How do Expert Women engage with the media?

Conversations with these women about how they engage with the media revealed their relative familiarity with journalists' context and how they can best tailor their engagement accordingly. Regardless of their degree of experience or confidence, women who've chosen to count themselves in understand that deadline pressures in a 24-hour news cycle make responsiveness critical, even if it's to decline an interview.

A female journalist sought me out specifically through Informed Opinions' database and I said "that's not exactly my area of expertise, but given the mandate of Informed Opinions, I should probably try and talk to you anyway; here are the things I could say." Journalists want to talk to you; if they just get stuff out of the press release, they don't always get it right or they don't cover it the way you would want them to. But this was very positive. She needed to hear from somebody right away; if we'd waited to get ahold of my boss, she wouldn't have been able to file the story. And we had a great conversation, I enjoyed it and I ended up in the *Toronto Star*.

Even very experienced experts remain selective about which requests they'll say yes to, limiting their engagement to topics about which they can confidently claim expertise. Most are also pragmatic about their time relative to what the query involves. They gauge the disruption to their day against the other demands they have to manage, as well as the likely reach or impact of the media opportunity before agreeing to participate.

The more I know about a topic, the more inclined I am to accept the interview. Also the wider the audience -- if it's national. And if I think it's an area where there's a solution, or steps toward a solution, where it's not just railing about a problem, but being able to say, "This is something we could do to make this better." That is something I'm really interested in. And often, they just want an explanation of a case, or something in the news, they just want someone to help make sense of something. And that's fine, but I'm especially interested if I can help evolve it.

Although some experts featured in the database remain relatively passive, waiting to be contacted by journalists, others are more proactive. They write and submit unsolicited opinion editorials, deliberately cultivate relationships with the journalists who interview them, and sometimes pitch stories about issues they know and care about. They're sensitive to timing and attentive to the formatting needs of the media they're approaching. A number specifically cited the insights shared in Informed Opinions' training programs as helping give them the confidence and tools to do this.

Most of my interaction with media is through online content that I generate myself and then submit to an outlet. The idea has to be pretty well-fleshed out by the time you approach the editor. It has to be within the word count that they say online. It has to be very clear how it's topically relevant or appropriate for that outlet.

I regularly write opinion pieces... I definitely set a goal, [so] that I'm writing a commentary a month, and I've succeeded probably every month and a half in making sure that that happens.

In addition to formal training, however, many cited the value of learning by doing, indicating that the more they engage with media, the more comfortable they become. And some specifically mentioned the amount of preparation they do for each interview.

A lot of what I learned and how I improved came from speaking to or watching other people.

The more interviews you do, the more comfortable you get, the better you get at framing your own research or the topic you're being asked about.

The Savvy and Seasoned participants, in particular, specified the kinds of strategies they employ in order to exercise some control over the direction of the interview. As they gained experience, they also developed a willingness to ask for information up front or be granted a review of the material before it was published or broadcast.

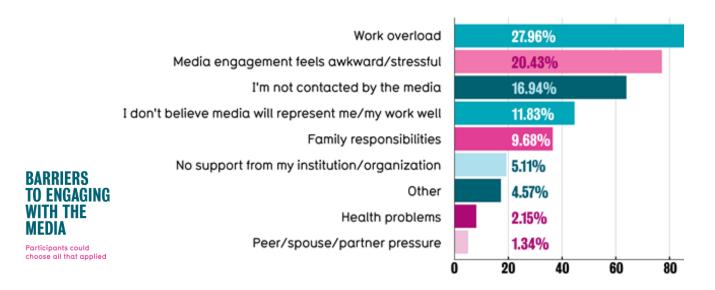
In my early days as an author, I might have let the journalist take control of the conversation, but I did my preparation ahead of time, and knew exactly what points I wanted to make. Then it was just a matter of looking for an opportunity to introduce them naturally during the conversation.

When I do magazine interviews, I've also become feistier during the fact-checking process. If I don't think something rings true, doesn't sound like me, I'm not afraid to say that anymore. I'll say, "you know, I think she might have misunderstood, but the message I was trying to get across was ABC," and then that way it's on the record what I've actually said.

Sometimes I'll ask if I can provide my comments in writing, because then I know if they quote me, it's going to accurately reflect my words. When they paraphrase, they sometimes get off track. And I've also learned that there are some stories that are going to be a no-win, like "let's talk about the ten things [this group] did wrong." I reject all interviews that in any way dance around that narrative, because I'm not about blaming and shaming [who I work with].

Notwithstanding their expressed enthusiasm for engaging with media, many experts are still very conscious of the potential fall-out in response to an interview. Those with the most experience, however, have generally developed the ability to move past small misrepresentations or negative audience response.

I'm very public about breastfeeding advocacy and it's certainly not something that I'm remotely modest about or that I even condone modesty about, but there was a lot of backlash to my exposure of the breast on camera [to breastfeed my child] and I really... I felt this, like yeah, I don't fucking care.



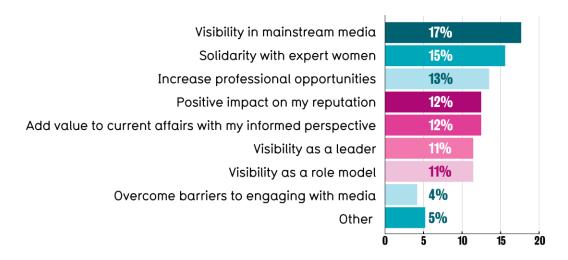
3 Why are Expert Women sharing their knowledge?

There are various and complex reasons why expert women are sharing their knowledge. Personal and professional factors play important roles in women's decisions at different periods in their lives. For many, joining the expert women database is an active decision that they make for counting themselves in and claiming their place in public discourse.

Survey data reported that multiple factors motivated women to join the database. Although women chose visibility in mainstream media and solidarity with expert women as the primary reasons for participating, these social factors often overlapped with personal reasons such as increasing professional opportunities, positive impact on reputation, and visibility as a leader and a role model. Women also named adding value to current affairs with their informed perspective and overcoming barriers to engaging with media as secondary important factors.

WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO JOIN THE EXPERT WOMEN DATABASE?

Participants could choose all that applied



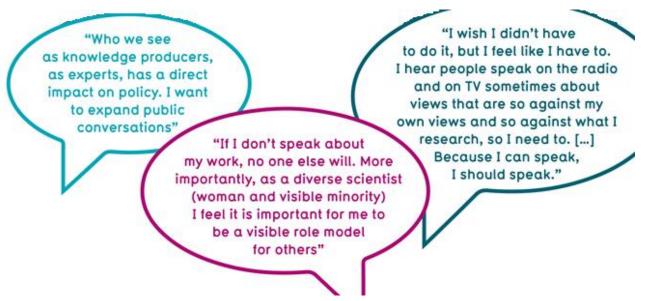
While expert women acknowledged the benefits of media exposure in terms of visibility, reputation, and professional opportunities, they also mentioned greater purposes that made their media experiences meaningful.

Many expert women defined their value added as sharing their informed perspectives and bringing nuance and diversity to public conversations. They believed that their knowledge gave them a responsibility to 'give back', and they viewed engaging with media as a form of public service. Also, women were aware of the reach and the scale of public attention they received by engaging with media and they were eager to make use of this opportunity to shift public perceptions.

I believe that publicly funded scholars have a duty to answer the door when the public knocks, and to help people understand what universities do and why it is important to support them.

I'm enthusiastic about my work. I think these are important and interesting issues, and as someone whose job is also to be educator – it seemed obvious to me that you would take advantage of any opportunity to try to engage with a lot of people, which, you know, I may have 50 people in the class, but if I do a national radio interview, there are thousands of people listening. So, to me, that's a bit of a no-brainer.

I'm running a business and appearing as an expert in media is a million times better marketing than taking out ads or just publishing your own written pieces. On top of that, one of my major life purposes is to educate people so that they have the information they need.



Conversations with expert women reveal that they are dissatisfied with the current state of media and want to address women's under-representation in the public discourse. By choosing to engage with media, women aim to draw attention to long-silenced issues and perspectives and shift public perceptions of women's leadership capabilities. Indeed, women not only look for opportunities to change the conversation, but also the power to influence systemic change.

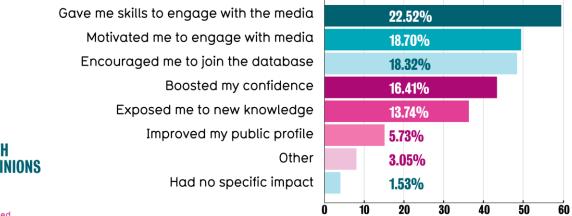
It's very important that we do have a voice and that we continue that conversation. I think that if not, we're doing ourselves a great disservice because we've lived in a... I mean it's a very male, pale, and stale industry and I'm, to be honest, I'm sick and tired of it. We need to get out there, we need to have our voices heard.

You get tired of hearing just men all the time about everything. Like, I just don't care what men have to say about pretty much anymore, not because they are not experts, but it's just — I've heard it, I've heard it, I don't care anymore. So I'd rather hear what women or people of colour and [Sable 00:39:52] people and Indigenous people have to say about things, than the same kind of, you know, panel of white male expert voices have been. So, I think it's just, yeah, it's just like an ethical commitment, and as a feminist, it's like, that's part of that ethical commitment to do

that work in the world. So, I'm sure other women feel that way as well, that we want to hear more voices like ours, more diversity that pushes us to count ourselves in.

Many women emphasized the importance of adding their voice to public discourse and described it as a way of contributing to the bigger picture of amplifying women's voices in media. Therefore, the expert women database served as a platform for women to align their personal motivations with the overall mission of Informed Opinions.

I was really inspired by and believe in Informed Opinions' mandate. I do think we need more women's voices. We need more representation of women as experts in their various fields, and we need more role models. I think junior scholars or forging new scholars like myself, or maybe women in university programs or graduate programs to see examples of women who are considered experts who are talking about these issues, so that they can begin to envision themselves in those roles more easily in the future.



HOW HAS WORKING WITH INFORMED OPINIONS HELPED YOU?

Participants could choose all that applied

Women's contributions went far beyond addressing gender bias. As inequalities in society are reproduced in a web of categories such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, etc., some women's contributions to public discourse involved advocating for the powerless or challenging expectations of who people expect to see as an expert. By choosing to engage with media, many expert women were becoming visible role models and leaders for their communities. Some women acknowledged being more privileged and less precarious than others in society, yet, still, speaking up required a constant negotiation, finding a balance between courage and capacity.

I think there's a lot of us also getting fed up with the fact that the folks who talk to the media are mostly white men. I mean, it's like it still is that way, right? Minorities aren't represented, women aren't represented, different voices aren't represented, and as someone who occupies multiple categories like that, like, I thought, you know, I have to say and it is grounded in real world experience and then also some expertise.

Incentives for media engagement echo the factors involved in women's motivation to speak up. Satisfaction with adding value to current affairs and positive impact on reputation were the most important incentives women mentioned. Women also pointed out visibility as a role model/leader and encouraging other expert women to speak up as important secondary incentives. Furthermore, many women cited they were more likely to benefit from nonmaterial incentives such as reputation, visibility, and recognition, and less likely to benefit from material incentives such as promotion and income.

The study reveals that for many women, workshops are an effective means of supporting them in translating knowledge. They mention how training helped them better communicate with the media and provided them with the tools to make their work more accessible to the general public. The workshops not only provided them with useful skills, but also boosted their confidence and motivated them to engage with media. Many women felt a responsibility to speak up and say yes to media engagement after participating in a workshop with Informed Opinions.

Conclusion: key messages for stakeholders

The expert women involved in this research have important lessons to share for all stakeholders:

For women: By choosing to engage with media, many expert women are becoming visible role models, drawing attention to under-addressed issues and perspectives, and helping to shift public perceptions of women's leadership capabilities. This has the capacity to change conversations and influence systemic change.

The great thing about working with journalists is their reach is much larger than mine so my information reaches many more people in a really clear and open way. And as long as somebody holds you out as an expert in any media or puts you at the front of a room to speak, people assign a certain amount of authority and expertise to you which benefits your career and business.

HOW OFTEN DOES IT OCCUR TO YOU THAT YOUR INFORMED PERSPECTIVE IS NOT BEING REPRESENTED, BUT WOULD ADD VALUE IF IT WERE?



For universities and other employers: When your scholars provide informed commentary through the news media, their contributions increase your profile and reputation, enhancing your capacity to demonstrate your value and raise funds. Better understanding their motivation and the barriers they face will help you to support them in engaging with media.

Really, in our line of work, you don't get much credit. The time you spend on media work means less time doing your research, and it's hard enough for women to try to climb up through the ranks in the university. [...] I loved the training. I think if you have more of the women-only sessions, it's far more comfortable just having women in the room.

For journalists: Expert women sources are in plentiful supply, many are eager to provide insights not already reflected, and news consumers expect to see their diversity reflected in media coverage. These insights will help you diversify your sources. It can be helpful to self-monitor, and track how many women you approach for comment.

Time is the most significant barrier to women agreeing to interviews; if you can reduce the hours required to participate (let them know your focus, share the questions ahead of time, permit them to respond online, do the interview by phone or Skype, accommodate their time window), they're more likely to say yes.

I am tired of only hearing the perspective of i) an older generation of men and ii) a socioeconomic group of rich men. I am pragmatic and able to communicate ideas in accessible terms. Unfortunately media often tell stories in a divisive manner. I don't think that helps women, people of colour, or non-rich citizens.

Resources

Twitter:

@InformedOps

@womenalsoknow Political Science

@POCalsoknow

@wealsoknowlit

@womnknowhistory

Web:

Political Science database https://womenalsoknowstuff.com/

http://theconversation.com/why-are-political-experts-mostly-men-women-also-know-stuff-54979

History database... https://womenalsoknowhistory.com/

https://www.chronicle.com/article/female-historians-try-to-end/243626/#.WxsBAr9o8No.twitter

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