

The OpEd Project: Giving Women a Voice in the Media

There is an alarming absence of women thought leaders in the media. For example, a survey of opinion bylines in *The New York Times* for the week of November 10–16, 2011, shows that only 20% of the writers were women. In *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Los Angeles Times* for the same week, the figures were 17%, 20%, and 16%, respectively.

In short, public thought leadership all but excludes half of the population. Now ask yourselves: What could we accomplish if we invested in broadcasting the missing voices, those of women, minority groups, and the underprivileged? What about the voices of scientists who can communicate important information to lay people? What about YOUR voice and the voice of the organization, research, or cause you champion?

The OpEd Project (www.theopedproject.org) is a social venture founded to enrich and diversify the world's conversation. Our near-term goal is to increase the ratio of women to men in key thought leadership forums. Our long-term vision is to create a new, sustainable ecosystem of experts and mentors that will constantly renew, enrich, and diversify the world's conversation.

To accomplish this, we encourage and enable women to contribute opinion pieces to newspapers and other media. These opinion pieces are typically called op-eds, after their placement “opposite editorial” in many newspapers, and reflect the views of experts who are not members of a newspaper's editorial board.

But placement of op-eds by women and minorities is just the beginning. Ultimately, we evaluate our success in terms of helping women and minorities to take concrete, measurable thought leadership positions. It's what happens after the op-eds are published that matters most. As a direct result of their publications, OpEd Project members have gone on to speak on national TV and radio; receive book contracts;

brief Congress and consult on policy; speak at national conferences; and be consulted and regularly cited as experts by national media. And—crucially—they have received national and international recognition for their ideas, thus becoming role models for a new wave of diverse brain power.



Becca Frucht

Regardless of Why There's a Problem, How Do We Fix It?

A few years ago Larry Summers (then president of Harvard University) asked why there were so few women in higher math and science, and he wondered if it might be due to our lack of “biological aptitude.” From the impassioned national debate that ensued there arose an ancillary debate about why so few women were getting bylines on the op-ed pages. Susan Estrich accused *The Los Angeles Times* of institutional sexism. Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* said the lack of participation by women reflected their fear of being attacked. And Anne Applebaum wrote in *The Washington Post* that she took offense to being called a “woman journalist” in the first place. And the debate went on and on....

The OpEd Project isn't interested in getting embroiled in why this disparity persists despite all the advances of the women's movement. It's an intractable, age-old argument. So instead of jumping on the debate dog pile, we're intently focused on how to fix the problem.

Encouraging Women to Enter the Forum

The fact is that women do not submit op-eds with anywhere near the frequency that men do. *The Washington Post* did an internal survey in 2008 and found that 90% of their op-ed submissions came from men. When you consider that 88% of *The Washington Post* bylines were male, it becomes clear that women were actually being fairly represented. Biology, sexism, weather patterns—how will we ever know what causes the thought leadership gap if we aren't even submitting?



And that's how The OpEd Project was born. Our focus is on training and empowering women, and other disenfranchised groups, because we're committed to reaching a tipping point (which we believe to be between 15% and 30%) that will permanently change this pattern.

Constructing an Op-ed

Anyone who wants to write a successful op-ed should understand the structure of such articles. It is also important to understand how to prepare compelling arguments.

A basic op-ed usually has five components:

- **Lede:** an opening line or paragraph designed to capture the reader's attention, usually around a news hook
- **Thesis:** a statement of argument, either explicit or implied
- **Argument:** three main points based on evidence (such as statistics, news, reports from credible organizations, expert quotes, scholarship, history, first-hand experience)
- **"To Be Sure":** a paragraph in which you preempt your potential critics by acknowledging any flaws in your argument and putting forth any obvious counter-arguments
- **Conclusion:** a statement that often circles back to your lede

Your op-ed will have a better chance of being well received if it conforms to this basic structure. In addition, it will help to keep in mind some basic guidelines for crafting a powerful argument:

- Own your expertise. Know what you are an expert in and why, but don't limit yourself. Consider the metaphors that your experience and knowledge suggest.
- Stay current. Follow the news, both general and specific to your areas of specialty. If you write about Haiti, read the Haitian press. If you write about pop culture, read the media that cover it.
- The perfect is the enemy of the good. In other words: write fast. You may have only a few hours to get your piece in before the moment is gone. But also...
- Cultivate a flexible mind. Remember that a good idea may have more than one news hook. Indeed, if the idea is important enough it can have many. So keep an

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eye out for surprising connections and new news hooks. The opportunity to express your views may come around again.

- Use plain language. Jargon serves a purpose, but it is rarely useful in public debate, and can obfuscate—sorry, I mean cloud—your argument. Speak to your reader in straight talk.
- Respect your readers. Never underestimate your readers' intelligence or overestimate their level of information. Recognize that your average reader is not an expert in your topic, and that the onus is on you to capture his or her attention and to make the argument compelling.

Pitching Your Op-ed

How do you get your op-ed published? It is fine to contact the editor of a newspaper by email. The key to a successful email pitch is establishing credibility, capturing interest, and conveying the immediate relevance of your perspective as efficiently as possible. Here are some tips on how to achieve that outcome:

An effective email pitch answers these basic questions:

- Why now? What's the news hook? Why is this worth reading at this moment?
- So what? Why should people care?
- Why me? Why am I the best one to write this piece?

A pitch should also include:

- Your idea in a few lines
- Your credentials (but only those that are relevant)
- The finished piece pasted below your pitch
- Your contact information

A pitch should:

- Be timely
- Be well written
- Be brief and clear
 - Convey expertise
 - Offer an unexpected point of view

Follow up if the editor responds:

- Thank the editor, even if he or she said "no." Remember that "no" can be the beginning of a conversation that can eventually lead to "yes."
- If the editor accepted your article, thank him or her not for showcasing you but for giving space to the ideas and issues.

You should also follow up if there is

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no response. Have a time limit. If your idea has a very short shelf life, you might give an editor a day or less to respond. If it's evergreen, wait a week or two or even more. Then send a follow-up email to the editor saying that you'd still like to run your piece in the publication. But explain that since the piece is timely, if you don't receive a response by the end of the day (or week, or other clear deadline) you will assume the editor is not interested and will submit your op-ed elsewhere.

Also, keep in mind that most national newspapers will not consider your piece if you submit to more than one paper at the same time. If you have further questions about the process of submitting your op-ed to publications, as well as the requirements and specific contacts at major papers, please check out the OpEd Project website for more details.

The OpEd Project Strategy

The foundation of the OpEd Project's effort is our core thought leadership public seminar and training, which is currently being offered in New York City, Boston, Washington, DC, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego. During this highly interactive, energetic full-day program, we explore the source of expertise and credibility and strategies for making a greater impact.

The training is about much more than writing an op-ed, but participants get all the essential, nitty-gritty tips like those discussed above. In addition, for one year after the date of their seminar, and for as many op-eds as they choose to write during that time, alums can tap into the Mentor-Editor Network. The Mentor-Editor Network is a national resource of high-level editors, columnists, and top thought leaders across all media platforms for truly insider editing and submission advice. The support of mentor-editors provides participants with inspiration and the focused help that often doubles their chances of breaking into public debate in a meaningful way.

We see women as a starting point, but we have already begun to export our model to minority men and youth. The larger goal is not a solution for women, but a solution for everyone. We envision a world where all the best

ideas—regardless of where they come from—have a chance to be heard, and to shape society and the world. What we are doing, in essence, is building a global, open source think tank to diversify the world's conversation.

Since our founding in January 2008, over 4,000 women and minority experts have come

through our system, producing hundreds of op-eds in major (50,000+ readers) media outlets, as well as thousands of pieces in smaller media in print, online, on radio, and on television. The ideas of women and minorities in The OpEd Project community have reached hundreds of millions of people so far. We are not just creating new thought leaders, we are creating a new media landscape in which ideas are now increasingly shared.

So if you're ready to jumpstart your influence, contribution, and thought leadership, please join our

movement. The Larry Summers' of the world will always be loudest until we drown them out with the expert voices of passionate, educated women and scientists.

And that begs the most important question of all: if not you, then who? ■

—Becca Frucht, *The OpEd Project*

Editor's Note

The OpEd Project is a social venture that offers a variety of seminars and keynote addresses to individuals, corporations, nonprofits, and universities. Its 501(c)3 status is pending.

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