

Silencing begins at home

By [David Beard](#) on Nov 4, 2016 at 5:26 p.m.

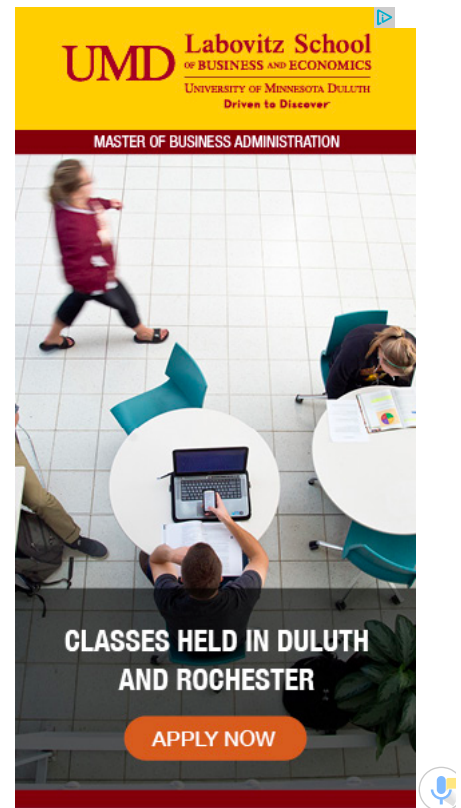
◀ 131



Shut up, Dawn! Wait a minute, that's not cool.

In the presidential debates, even casual observers noted that Donald Trump interrupted Hillary Clinton comfortably and frequently. Trump's habit is not unique. His disrespect was rooted in practices we think of as harmless, the everyday ways we treat women and girls who aren't running for president.

At fivethirtyeight.com (<http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-many-times-did-trump-interrupt-clinton-in-the-first-debate-depends-on-how-you-count/>), statistician Nate Silver and staff counted the interruptions in the first debate. Clinton interrupted people 11 times. She was nearly twice as likely to interrupt the moderator, Lester Holt, as she was to interrupt Trump.



The moderator was four times as likely to interrupt Trump as Clinton, but still with only 10 interruptions in the whole debate.

Trump interrupted Holt and Clinton 55 times, interrupting the moderator 27 times and interrupting Clinton 28 times.

If you grew up in my family, you differentiate "interrupting" from "interjecting." Silver's count subtracts moments when someone blurts something in the middle of someone else's speech but does not try to "take over" the conversation. When I was scolded as a kid, I might blurt a denial into the conversation while my grandparents told me how little I respected them by coming home late for dinner. ("Nuh-uh," I might interject in a weak and plaintive way.) Silver's only only moments when interrupting is an attempt to silence the other speaker.

What gnawed at me as I read these numbers was a night at the Zinema, where nearly 100 nerds watched "Once More, With Feeling," the musical episode of the TV show "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." Rules for audience participation have sprung up around watching this show. When the vampire named Spike appears on screen, audience members are directed to yell, "Bite me." When Spike sings a song, the audience is instructed to wear plastic vampire teeth and try to sing along.

At other moments, audience members snap their fingers, make bunny ears and blow soap bubbles. The event is in the vein of the "Rocky Horror Picture Show" with its singing and dancing in the aisles. But one part of the show scraped a little at the base of my skull, scratching and irritating and I couldn't tell why until I watched the debates.

One of the most annoying characters on "Buffy" is Dawn, the little sister who does all the things little sisters do: shoplifting, experiencing all emotions as melodrama, complaining about being ignored. For anyone who had an annoying little sister, Dawn strikes all the right notes. And so when Dawn appears on screen the audience is instructed to yell, "Shut up, Dawn." It bothered me to hear middle-aged men and women telling a teenage girl, even a fictional one, to shut up. It bothered me more to scan the room and see teenage, even tweenage, kids in the audience telling Dawn to shut up, not because she said something stupid, but simply because she was on the screen.

On her [blog](http://stackedbooks.org/2013/06/when-we-talk-about-girl-problems.html) (<http://stackedbooks.org/2013/06/when-we-talk-about-girl-problems.html>) at Stacked Books, Kelly Jensen, librarian and young adult literature expert, writes:

Girl voices aren't valued. Girl voices are written off as unimportant [...] even when it's clear there is a girl in trouble. [...] She's troubled and has problems and needs help but no one actually reaches out to her and sees her through it. Or worse, they do but they're doing so not

because they care about her, but rather, because she's causing a scene or a fuss and needs to be silenced again. In many ways, it's because of the culture of being undervalued, for being seen as not having something worth sharing, that these girls internalize. They don't choose silence. It's not a choice at all.

It occurred to me that I have seen the spectrum, that I have seen a teenage girl silenced and I have seen a candidate for president silenced — or at least, I have seen a man try to silence her — in the last few weeks. And while I want to pretend that Trump is an old man, operating in ways we don't accept anymore, I saw men half his age silencing a teenage girl on a movie screen and I saw girls, women, barely older than teenagers themselves, doing the same.

And I wonder how the silencing will stop.

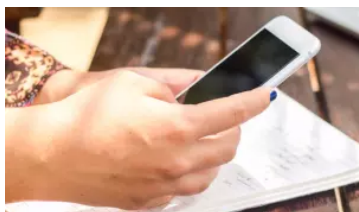


David Beard

David Beard is associate professor of rhetoric and director of the Master of Liberal Studies program at the University of Minnesota Duluth.

dbeard@d.umn.edu

SPONSORED CONTENT



What turns off small business shoppers?

By **Vistaprint Digital**



ADVERTISEMENT