

French media sign up for equal airtime

Act of Commitment for a Process of Self-Regulation Aiming to Improve the Image of Women in the Media (Acte d'engagement pour une démarche d'autorégulation visant à améliorer l'image des femmes dans les medias)

In brief

In 2013, key French media organisations representing 61 TV channels, radio stations and print publications signed a self-regulation agreement undertaking to strive to increase the number of women experts appearing in their programmes and articles. The agreement had been prepared by the Commission on the Image of Women in the Media, which was set up by the secretary of state for solidarity, which comprised not only media and regulators, but also educators, lawyers, health professionals and NGOs. The commission monitors compliance with the agreement, and produces an annual report.

Although the agreement was greeted with enthusiasm, it has had, at least in its early years, little concrete effect, and the share of female experts on air and in print has stayed at the low level of 18% across the three media. However a number of media organisations have taken steps which will have their effect over time. These include initiatives to recruit more women, in-house monitoring, working groups, awareness-raising, training and the designation of a contact person responsible for the act.

Persistent under-representation of women

In March 2008, the French Secretary of State for Solidarity set up a Commission on the Image of Women in the Media, which was made permanent in May 2011. The Commission comprises key stakeholders including professionals from media organisations (radio, television, press, internet, cinema), representatives of state media authorities and regulatory bodies, experts from education, law and health, and NGOs. Its objectives are to monitor and reflect on the image and role of women in the media, and make proposals for improvements.

The commission was set up in recognition of the key role which the media play in shaping – and often constraining – the roles of women and men in society. At 21:30 every evening, 45% of the French population is watching television, and 90% of the French population switches on their televisions at least once a day. Stereotyped representations of women and men in the media are the ‘final frontier of inequality’. Although a lot of progress has been made in France in terms of gender equality, significant gender gaps persist including a 20% gender pay gap, horizontal and vertical segregation, and an over-representation of women in low-paid, part-time work.

The establishment of the commission builds on previous initiatives in France. In terms of diversity (including gender, but also ethnic origin, age, etc.), in 2001 clauses were introduced in contracts for all private television channels to reflect the diversity of French society. The High Audiovisual Council (CSA) has been given a much stronger role in monitoring diversity in the media (by the 2006 Equality Law and the 2009 Law on Audiovisual Communication) and the Observatory on Diversity in the Media was set up in 2008. In the field of gender equality, the State Gender Equality Department produced a report in 2007 on human dignity, particularly in advertisements, and access to decision-making roles.

Yet the figures demonstrate that considerable inequalities persist in the media. According to a study conducted in 2011, women only represented 24% of experts or principal personalities on news programmes and 29% of anchor presenters of documentaries or current affairs programmes. On two of the most popular radio morning shows on current affairs (RTL and France Inter) in 2008, 82% of experts were men, with women only having 18% of airtime. A study of press articles in 2006 by the Association of Women Journalists showed that, of 826 people mentioned, only 17.7% were women. Overall, the commission’s report for 2011 shows that women represent 23% of experts in radio programmes, 15% in the written press and 18% on television.

Within media organisations too, there is an under-representation of women, particularly in decision-making roles and in certain professions. A study for the French senate in 2008 showed that women only occupy 8.8% of strategic management posts across all media organisations. The commission’s own study highlighted that women only represented 23% of strategic directors in television companies. Progress has however been made in some professions: 43% of journalists were women in 2011, compared to 37.5% in 1996.

A media self-regulatory commitment

As a result of the evidence presented and proposals made in the commission's first report (September 2008), in 2010 the prime minister called for the media to establish a process of self-regulation. The Act of Commitment for a Process of Self-Regulation aiming to Improve the Image of Women in the Media was prepared and signed on 13th October 2011. It has three main parties:

the representatives of most of the key French media organisations, representing some 20 radio channels (including France Info, Europe 1 and RTL), 19 television channels (including France 2/3/4/5, TF1 and Canal+) and 22 press organisations (including Le Monde, Le Figaro and Libération);

the Commission on the Image of Women in the Media;

the French government, via the Secretary of State for Family and Solidarity, responsible for equality issues.

In the agreement, media organisations undertake to actively seek to feature more women experts in programmes and articles, through the means of their choice; to take part in setting up a network of women experts; and to raise awareness among editorial and production staff. The Commission on the Image of Women in the Media undertakes to monitor each year the number of women experts in a corpus of articles and programmes of their choice, to hold annual hearings of media organisations (over one week of the year) on their self-regulation practices, and to write an annual progress report. The French government undertakes to support the process and to keep an overview via the commission's annual report.

Making space for women

Within the global objective of deconstructing gender stereotypes which are portrayed in the media, the act's specific objective is to increase the proportion of women experts appearing in programmes and articles. Because of the wide range of media organisations which have signed up to the act, it increases women's chances of having a voice in all the thematic domains covered by media and to have voice in all the media products.

It has led to a number of initiatives by different media organisations, including new initiatives to recruit more women at all levels of the organisational hierarchy; in-house monitoring of the proportion of women experts and of progress with the Act (i.e. Arte, NRJ, TV5 Monde); setting up in-house working groups (i.e. the working group on the place of women and their image at Le Monde); awareness-raising of staff (i.e. TF1, RTL, Direct Matin); staff training (i.e. a module on Reflecting Diversity in Society to Better Inform at TF1); and the designation of a contact person responsible for the act (i.e. 20 Minutes, TV5 Monde).

The act has the potential to have a major impact on the wider environment. The presence of more women experts – from a variety of specialities – in all these major media outlets can be hoped to change the public’s perception of the role of women in society and in the workplace, and move them beyond the all-too-common stereotypes. For example, having seen women experts from science, technology or politics, more young women may consider a career in these fields. This type of impact is however very difficult to measure, particularly in the short term.

The act is monitored annually by the Commission which will contribute to its sustainability, since media organisations will not want to be ‘named and shamed’ as not progressing in comparison to other organisations. In addition, it is signed by the highest representatives of each organisation, which is important in terms of ensuring the power to implement initiatives. Furthermore, the presence of more women experts is likely to produce a ‘snowball’ effect, again contributing to long-term sustainability: once more women experts feature in programmes and articles, this is likely to become the norm for the future, and more women will gain a reputation. However the act does rely on the goodwill of the signatories, and no funding is provided for any actions which they may implement, which may be challenging in light of the current recession.

The preparation of the act itself does not represent a significant cost in comparison to its very wide impact on the public (due to its high profile and its signature by a government minister) and its likely impact on the media organisations that have signed it. It does rely on media organisations engaging time and human resources in implementing initiatives. These inputs should however be relatively modest in relation to the impact they have, and in relation to other potential ways of achieving this aim.

Enthusiasm, but little change at first

The 2011 report of the Commission on the Image of Women in the Media was the first assessment of progress achieved in relation to the act. The report is available online. Its findings are that after its first year, the signing of the act had clearly raised the awareness and enthusiasm of media organisations to a large degree. As an indicator, 60% of organisations agreed to be interviewed during the annual hearings. Significant progress has been achieved in terms of changes to recruitment policies and the access of women to important and visible roles. However, the proportion of women experts in programmes and articles has not made any significant progress. Out of 1,007 experts in the three types of media, only 18% were women. For the different types of media, there were only 15% of women experts in the written press, 23% on the radio and 18% on television.[1] This figure was even lower than the figure in the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) survey in 2010, which showed 20% of women experts.

The objectives of the act are fully in line with the legislative measures and policy priorities at both French and EU level. They also correspond to one of the key shortcomings identified in the French media: the presence of women experts in programmes and articles. However, they do not address other issues such as the access of women to decision-making roles in the media.

The act might have been more effective if other commitments had been included in it, for instance a commitment to improve the access of women to decision-making posts. Good practices in media organisations might have been promoted to serve as examples. A good practice guidebook and a database of women experts might have been produced. Media organisations might have been offered advice. Other partners close to the media, such as production companies and journalism schools, might have been mobilised. Institutions that the media ask to provide experts should also share responsibility for achieving the goal of equality. Particularly in the civil service, the key experts are often men, and so media organisations are simply not offered a choice of women experts when they make an approach.

It takes time to adjust

The act has had the effects that it has because of the high-level commitment given to it by heads of media organisations and the state. It also relied on the commitment of key contact people within certain media organisations. Three organisational factors have also been important: the monitoring of progress, the annual conference to present good practice, and the fact that it is based on the principle of self-regulation, rather than a new legal requirement.

A number of obstacles stand in the path of faster progress: Institutions approached for experts to feature in the media may not propose women, and may not even have them – media organisations are not offered a choice. Experts are a reflection of the reality of society to some degree. Thus, it has been hard to find women experts in very male-dominated fields like IT. Often requests for experts, especially for current affairs programmes, are very urgent. Neither journalists nor institutions may have the time to do extensive research. Journalists require ‘guaranteed’ experts who they know will not let them down. Those with such a track record are currently mostly men and it will take time to change this situation and for women to build up their reputations in a series of domains. Media organisations said that women experts were not available at certain times (i.e. early mornings and evenings) owing to family commitments. Finally, women experts themselves are reticent to be featured just because they are women, and can be nervous of upsetting male colleagues.

It is hard to detect the short-term results of this type of initiative, but its long-term impacts should be significant. Its implementation shows that high-level commitment is essential to make a change within media organisations, and that there are real barriers to gender equality in the media which do not only come from media organisations alone, but also from society more widely. It would be helpful for media organisations to receive more help in terms of guidance or examples of good practice. The act could be transferred to other countries where the political will exists to implement it.

[1] Commission sur l’image des femmes dans les medias (2011), Rapport 2011 : Les expertes – bilan d’une année d’auto-régulation, p. 52.

Contacts/Further Information

Contacts

Brigitte Grésy – Vice-President of the Commission sur l’image des femmes dans les médias:

brigitte.gresy@igas.gouv.fr

Michèle Reiser – President of the Commission sur l’image des femmes dans les médias:

michele.reiser@igas.gouv.fr

39-43, quai André Citroën

75739 PARIS Cedex 15

France

Further information

[Acte d'engagement pour une démarche d'autorégulation visant à améliorer l'image des femmes dans les médias](#)



[Commission sur l'image des femmes dans les medias \(2008\), Rapport sur l'image des femmes dans les médias](#)



[Commission sur l'image des femmes dans les medias \(2011\), Rapport 2011 : Les expertes – bilan d'une année d'auto-régulation](#)



[Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel \(CSA\) \(2011\), Baromètre de la diversité](#)



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