



50-50 Gender Balance on Tonight with Vincent Browne

Ireland

2012-2014

TV3

Irish current affairs programme gives women an equal place

Summary

Tonight with Vincent Browne, a late evening current affairs television programme aired by TV3 in Ireland, decided in 2012 to bring in a policy of gender parity – meaning that half of the experts interviewed should be women.

It has been able to do this at no great financial cost, and the policy is permanent. However it does demand some ingenuity on the part of the production staff. First of all, there are fewer women in highly visible occupations such as politics, so production staff have to go out actively to find them. Secondly, women are habitually less confident about airing their opinions on television unless they feel well prepared, so staff have to be prepared to work with them to overcome their inhibitions. Then, those women whom journalists identify as willing to be interviewed tend to be so much in demand that a disproportionate workload falls on them.

Though it has not been formally evaluated, TV3's policy has influenced the media landscape in Ireland, and other broadcasters have followed suit.

A question of prejudice and lack of confidence

Research shows that there are gender imbalances both in media content and in decision-making within Irish media organisations. As for access to expression, in hard news subjects, women are largely limited to the role of reporting. Experts, commentators and anchors in hard news programmes are mostly men. Women feature in these roles mainly in media products covering soft news or typical women's issues such as the family, childcare and the private sphere. Women in the media find it even more difficult to play a role in decision-making, as even though media organisations are aware of gender imbalances in top management, they do not see this as a problem. Fundamentally, they view and address gender equality in terms of equality of access to employment, not in terms of equality of participation in decision-making. As a result, women working in the media in Ireland bump up against a 'glass ceiling'.

According to commentators, the reasons for this imbalance are to be found in the wider socio-cultural context in Ireland and in the assumptions about women's roles: while they are changing, they are still a decade behind those in some other European countries and the USA. If the media are not to be considered any differently from other industries and institutions on the gender equality issue, some factors specifically concerning the media environment can be identified: for instance, there is a persistent myth that seems to be perpetuated among colleagues that listeners only want to hear male voices on air. A lack of self-confidence on the part of women is a widespread problem too: even expert women who



are asked to do uncritical ‘puff’ pieces often refuse to appear, as they feel that they need to know everything on the topic before speaking about it, whereas men are more willing to take it as it comes. A lack of women’s labour rights and tools promoting work-life balance also accounts for the difficulties women face in expressing themselves and making decisions in the media. As far as broadcast media are concerned, many current affairs programmes are scheduled at times that are inconvenient for those with children to care for, and so are newsroom meetings.

A self-imposed rule

In order to contribute to redressing the gender imbalances found in access to expression through the media, the *Tonight with Vincent Browne* broadcast production decided, as a form of self-regulation, that experts invited onto the show should be gender balanced. The show usually airs between 23:05 and 23:55 on weekday nights, and is reputed for its combative style. It is popular, and attracts on average 120,000 viewers.¹

The initiative addresses the problem of the lack of women on air and, specifically, the lack of women experts in the topics of hard news. It combats segregation by increasing women’s voice in those domains that are traditionally male-dominated, such as current affairs and politics, enabling women to feature in prestigious roles such as experts and primary sources. It improves women’s access to roles enhancing their intellectual skills and competences and gives them a voice in media products that shape public opinion.

For instance, there are not many female economists who are comfortable on air covering economic issues: men are more willing to come on if they are not experts, whereas women have to feel really confident in what they are saying before they come on. Judging audience feedback via Twitter, editorial staff know that women who participate are judged differently: comments will be about appearance, mannerisms and voice, while men do not get as much of that.

The initiative has been effective in achieving the gender equality objectives it set itself, and the intended beneficiaries have been able to take advantage of the changes: on the basis of internal calculations, much better gender balance has been achieved in the representation of men and women on the show; women are willing to appear on the show and put themselves forward to speak about their field of expertise. They also spread the word, encouraging colleagues to take the plunge.

Balancing the composition of interviewees is not costly, and is therefore efficient in terms of financial resources; however it does have organisational costs as it takes time to find women during the production day. The staff have to go to events where they think they can source women speakers, they approach the political parties and spend time with women if they are nervous about coming on.

This is a sustainable policy since TV3 has the institutional and management capacity to continue it. Also, producing permanent structural changes is one of the initiative’s objectives, which is meant to encourage others to follow and break the self-perpetuating cycle of male-dominated panels on TV and radio. Within the *Tonight* show, the change is permanent, as staff say “there is no going back to male panels now”.

Knock-on effect

¹ <http://www.independent.ie/life/falling-ratings-but-tv3s-400k-anchor-isnt-about-to-step-down-30352214.html>



No evaluation has been carried out yet, apart from internal calculations. Nevertheless the practice had a positive impact not only on the *Tonight* show, but on the wider environment as well: since the show is a high-profile media programme, its '50:50' policy represented a step forward in a wider political agenda (fostered by groups like Women on Air). Other political programmes have been influenced to have more women; political parties, too, have been influenced and started to prioritise putting women on. It is also believed that this has encouraged women who might be reluctant to be more confident.

The initiative has succeeded because it does not require finance, specific skills or resources – just the political will to redress gender imbalances. Also, the show has highly-committed staff who devote time to working with women and helping them gain the confidence to appear. However the show sometimes struggles to achieve its quota of women, because there are fewer female politicians available, and they are on journalist's 'speed dial', so they get sick of being in constant demand.

TV3's experience demonstrates that it is worthwhile to dedicate resources to finding women to come on air, as it benefits the overall quality and pluralism of TV broadcasting. To optimise their potential and contribution, it is necessary to devote time to working with women at the beginning in order to prepare them.

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EIGE (2014): *Review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States. Advancing gender equality in decision-making in media organisations – Ireland*: <http://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/MH0113724ENN.pdf>