Two years after the launch of our campaign, more women experts are appearing on TV – but broadcasters must do more if we are to see real, lasting change, says Lis Howell

When we started, it was a bit of a shock to read the male/female ratio on the main news programmes. When we monitored the ratio of male to female experts on news programmes, Radio 4’s Today programme regularly went more than an hour without airing a female voice, never mind that of a female authority figure. We started the campaign with a pledge for broadcasters, asking them to commit to improving the ratio of male to female experts. We then set up a petition to gain public support, led by students from City University London.

Channel 4 News and Sky News signed the pledge, promising to improve the ratio from nearly 5:1 to 3:1. Within three months, thousands of people signed the petition.

Since then, 164 women have received media training under a BBC initiative, Radio 4’s The Media Show dedicated an edition to the campaign and another of the station’s final feedback, used Expert Women stats to support Caroline Criado-Perez, who critiqued Today and went on to start The Women’s Room, a website set up to help women experts get on TV.

Then in 2013, the number of women who applied for 30 places in the first year was 54, and there were 60 (12 a night). It has a more varied format than the much more varied format than the evening shows. It is erratic. In the same week, January it achieved a ratio of 2.5:1, but in February it went back to its old ways at 7:1. The same week in January and February were the UK floods, Syria, the ivory trade, redundancies at Barclays, the death of Shirley Temple, the trials of Joanna Lumley and Dave Lee Travis, Scotland and the pantomime. The results are that Yarnold winning gold in the winter Olympics, and Helen Mirren becoming a Bafta fellow. More than half the stories on the 10 days monitored were either of equal interest or featured a strong female interest or protagonist.

If the Expert Women campaign has, in a small way, helped to achieve something, it is the improvement in Today. This is in part down to the same things we do. Whenever we launch the figures in 2012, the ratio of male to female experts on TV and radio news across the first three months was 4.5:1, but in the past month it has improved to 2.8:1. We have more female reporters, more women experts and presenters, more late-night sport, more women witnesses in court cases. However, it is a long way to go.

Two years after the launch of our campaign, more women experts are appearing on TV – but broadcasters must do more if we are to see real, lasting change, says Lis Howell.

Since the campaign began, broadcasters have challenged us with two arguments, that they are merely reflecting society, as men outnumber women as authority figures in the real world; and that in any case, women don’t want to appear.

As part of my academic research, I have been trying to ascertain if this is true. The campaign acknowledges that in the real world, more authority figures are still male than female. But is the number comparable? No. On TV and radio news, the ratio is 4:1 – 80% male and 20% female. But in society, the figure is probably more like 70% to 30%. Of course, you cannot come up with an absolute figure. But two agencies I have spoken to that provide expert witnesses for courts said they provide 70% male and 30% female experts, and are seeking more expert female witnesses in court cases. The ratio of male to female MPs is 3.4:1, and in even in the Cabinet it’s 4.5:1. So David Cameron has achieved a better male/female ratio than both Channel 4 News and BBC News At Ten in the past two months. Of course, you cannot come up with an absolute figure. But the evening shows show more male experts, more male presenters and interviewers, and more late-night sport.

There is no reason for this except tradition and macho thinking. When we want to talk to the news editors to find out what they honestly feel about the campaign to use more women experts, is it fair to these editors? Are they being asked to do something that is not just another part of their work? Do they really have a duty to do it? Or is it the best they can do, and anyway, the situation isn’t that bad – look at Shami Chakrabarti... It’s a bit of a mystery. Or is it just as part of their own TV... That’s another problem. When we ask them, they often get very specific, that there is no reason why they have bad – look at Shami Chakrabarti... It’s a bit of a mystery. Or is it just as part of their own TV... That’s another problem. When we ask them, they often get very specific, that there is no reason why they have more male reporters, more male experts and interviewers, and more late-night sport.

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