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Ros Atkins and the 50:50 Project at the BBC (A)

As BBC news presenter Ros Atkins drove home to Cornwall for a visit with his family in 2016, he listened to a one-hour radio programme on BBC radio with not a single female guest on it. “It occurred to me that the editor may well not have even noticed,” said Atkins. A “manel” in the news was hardly news in 2016. Virtually every media outlet offered a greater representation of men than women among their presenters, story subjects and expert commentators. The BBC (originally founded as the British Broadcasting Company in 1922¹), the London-based leading global public broadcaster where Atkins had spent the past two decades, was no different.

But *could* it be different? Atkins wondered what he could do about this pattern that he had been noticing his entire career, including on his own TV programme, *Outside Source*. Was it even possible to get the BBC, a bureaucratic news giant with a deep love of tradition and over 22,000 employees globally,² to change its ways? How exactly could Atkins make meaningful change on the gender representation on his show?

Atkins could not have known that his 2016 drive home would spark the 50:50 Project, an organisational change initiative led from the newsroom rather than the boardroom that would spread throughout the BBC and the world (see **Exhibit 1**) and dramatically change gender representation in the media.

Ros Atkins

Ros Atkins is the son of a fisherman and a teacher. Growing up in Cornwall, in the southwest of England, he took an early interest in gender and society. In his teens, a friend's struggle with an eating disorder impacted Atkins deeply, as did his reading of the book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* by Naomi Wolf, given to him by his mother. At Cambridge University, Atkins studied history and wrote his thesis on gender, body and food in late medieval European mysticism. “My mum and wife are both feminists. Mum had a big influence on me, especially in my teens, opening my eyes to certain things. My wife has also always inspired and challenged me to think about equality and gender – and to see things that are right in front of us. She's also been a huge influence,” said Atkins.

Atkins joined the BBC in 2001 as a 27-year-old news producer at Five Live and began to get occasional shifts as a fill-in presenter in 2004, before becoming one of the main presenters of *World Have Your Say* on BBC World Service radio in 2006. Like many journalists, in addition to his primary role at the BBC, Atkins pursued creative and investigative side projects

This case study was written by Research Fellow Siri Chilazi of the Harvard Kennedy School, Associate Professor Aneeta Rattan Ph.D. of London Business School and Ph.D. Candidate Oriane Georgeac of London Business School, based on public sources, interviews with people named in the case study, interviews with individuals within and outside the BBC, and observations of interactions and team meetings at the BBC. The authors thank the Leadership Institute at London Business School for its support. *Siri Chilazi and Aneeta Rattan share equal first authorship of the case.

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