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

When the phone rang in early May 2019, Ros Atkins was in Lucerne, Switzerland moderating a tourism conference. Atkins dashed outside between sessions to the scenic deck overlooking Lake Lucerne. Atkins' colleagues and 50:50 team members, Nina Goswami and Sarah Holmes, were on the line, sounding exuberant: "We hit 74%!" Atkins felt euphoria and a deep sense of exhaustion wash over him as he absorbed the news. The previous month, 74% of the BBC teams that had participated in the 50:50 Project for more than a year had hit 50% representation of women on their shows. Of those same teams, only 27% had hit 50% when they started 50:50. To Atkins, it all felt profoundly unlikely and surreal.

The numbers hadn't looked as good as Atkins had hoped during the first and second weeks of April. There were now 500 BBC teams participating in 50:50 and 84 of them had been onboard for more than a year, meaning that their data would get reported and highlighted individually as part of Director-General Hall's company-wide challenge. Given the high stakes, Atkins wanted to act sooner rather than later. A week and a half into April, he reached out to then Head of News Output Gavin Allen, an early supporter of the 50:50 Project, to alert him to the lagging numbers. Atkins' message to Allen and other senior leaders was straightforward: "We already have a great story to tell on 50:50, but we are within touching distance of something that no one has ever accomplished before. How far can we take it?"

In the end, of all 500 teams participating in 50:50 in April 2019, 57% reached the goal of 50% female representation in their content. Among teams that had been involved in the 50:50 Project for a minimum of six months, the proportion increased to 62%. And among teams that had been monitoring their data for 12 months or more, 74% reached gender parity in representation. Moreover, audiences had taken note. A third of respondents in a nationally representative survey in the UK noticed more women on BBC programmes compared to a year earlier, and a fifth of respondents aged 16 to 34 said they were more likely to enjoy content with a better gender balance.

Unsurprisingly, 50:50's success had also generated some backlash. Noted British journalist Piers Morgan suggested in a tweet that the BBC had gone too far with its gender equality efforts, to which Rob Burley, head of the BBC's live political programmes, responded vigorously, defending 50:50 and reinforcing that the BBC believed in its approach. The data generated by the 50:50 Project also showed that most of the BBC's high-profile news programmes had reached 50:50 on their shows only once or not at all, suggesting that even gender parity – let alone female dominance – had not been reached yet.

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 first authorship of the case.

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