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Screening Gender
Gender Portrayal And Programme Making Routines

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Since 1991 the portrayal of men and women on television has been a topic of concern for the Netherlands Public Broadcasting. In this article I will focus on our experience with projects aimed at stimulating discussion about gender portrayal among media professionals. The main focus will be on the European project “Screening Gender”, which took place from 1997-2001.ⁱ

I will first outline the basic criticism about gender portrayal in European television. Then I will try to explain our approach to stimulating discussion about gender portrayal within the broadcasting organization. Finally I will evaluate the merits of the Screening Gender project, both in terms of its potential to change the image of women and men in media content, and its relevance to the obligations of public broadcasters.

Gender portrayal in television

*Gender*ⁱⁱ refers to the feminine or masculine role. It expresses a set of social and cultural perceptions of men and women. These perceptions change over time, just as gender roles themselves change. *Portrayal* literally refers to the art of portraiture, drawing a portrait of someone. A portrait is a representation. This immediately suggests the existence of a gap between the real person and the depicted person, no matter how true to reality a portrait may turn out to be. The concept “portrayal” also indicates agency: someone is actually in charge of creating the image. Images on television are made by programme-makers.

Television is not an unbiased “window on the world”. What we see on television always involves a specific interpretation of the world, a particular reconstruction of its reality. In fact, what we see is a reality experienced and understood by programme makers. It is a version of reality that comes into being during a complex production process, entailing many choices: of subjects, story focus, guests, script, location, lighting, sound, camera angles and movements, editing, music, commentary and so forth. Decisions on these and other issues affect the image of reality that reaches the audience. Programme makers thus play a pivotal role in the way television represents the world. For years, research into gender portrayal has revealed the same patterns. For every woman on the Northern European television screen we see two men. It is a strange phenomenon. In Europe more than half of the population is female, but this is never mirrored by the reality that is caught in the camera. Women often remain invisible on television. Even if a subject is clearly of significance to them, or if the topic is specifically of concern to women, they may not be represented.

The absence of women in the media is closely tied to our ideas about social success and social status. Generally, women are perceived as having less social status. Hence women and their views are seen as less important. Or to be even more correct, women often do not see themselves as important or as having high status. For instance, it sometimes happens that when the programme maker has found a female expert or spokesperson, she defers to a male colleague who she thinks has higher status or more interesting views on the subject. This is just one of the many reasons why women are not portrayed and interviewed as often as men. It is a complicated process which involves both the programme makers and their subjects. No wonder that research over time shows that men appear more often in roles with a higher status, e.g. as experts and authorities, while women appear principally in lower-status roles as e.g. victims and passers-by.

It was with the goal of changing some of these patterns and practices that in 1997 five broadcasting organizations – YLE (Finland), SVT (Sweden), NOS (Netherlands), DR (Denmark) and NRK (Norway) – decided to pool resources in a project called Screening Gender. In 1998 ZDF (Germany) decided to join this project. The aim of the project was to develop audio-visual material to stimulate debate on the subject of gender portrayal with programme-makers. The European Commission provided financial support for the project under its Fourth Community Action Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men.

Who speaks in Television?

To launch a productive discussion with media professionals about gender portrayal patterns, however, it is not enough to cite scientific articles and abstract data. Programme professionals demand recent facts and figures, related to their own direct experiences. That is the reason why the Screening Gender project started with a piece of research, called Who Speaks in Television?ⁱⁱⁱ In 1998 a ‘constructed’ week of public service television was analyzed in Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden to see how much time men and women were given to speak in different prime-time programmes. The study employed a method developed at NRK, and NRK researchers were responsible for processing and analysing the research data. Over 380 hours of prime time television and data concerning 10,000 speaking persons who appeared in these programmes, were gathered in a database.

The research confirmed the still existing imbalance between men and women appearing on prime time television. There was not a single genre in which there were more women than men, and the only genres in which there was anything like a reasonable balance were children’s programmes and religious programmes.

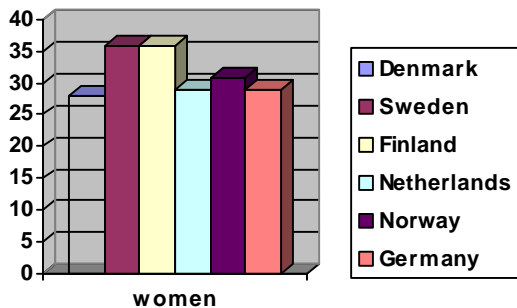


Fig. 1: Percentage of women participating in television programmes in North European public television 18-24 hrs. Who speaks in Television, 1998.

Even though social patterns have changed over the last two decades and women have entered senior positions in science, politics and business, this is not reflected on television. Only 20% of the experts and authorities that were interviewed, were women.^{iv} By and large, media images still reflect stereotypical reflections of gender roles. A male politician is first and foremost perceived as a politician. A female politician however is first and foremost seen as a woman, a wife and a mother. Her profession is rarely separated from her gender. By approaching a female politician as a woman, a mother or a wife, her social status tends to be diminished.

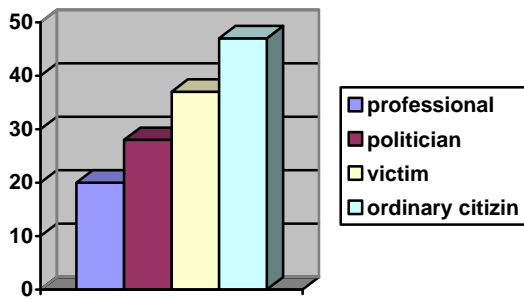


Fig 2: percentage of female participants in various roles. Who speaks, 1998.

Camera positions often add to this perception of low and high status. Women are portrayed more often from a high camera point, the camera thus literally looking down on them. Usually, this is not done intentionally. It tends to happen just because the camera is often operated by men, and men are generally taller than women. Although it may not be done on purpose, this camera angle is a visual representation of the stereotypical low status of women. Even reports that set out to highlight the changing roles of men and women in society often fall into the old stereotypes – for example, by implicitly assuming that women are principally responsible for child-rearing and home-making while men are responsible for income and management.

The Who Speaks research also revealed that women's share of speaking time was only 31%, although they were 36% of all persons who spoke.^v Despite the stereotype of women as the 'talkative sex', men take more than a fair share of talk time in a variety of settings. Some theories argue that the perception of women as the talkative sex continues, because the implicit norm for women is silence.^{vi} Research of The Netherlands Public Broadcasting Diversity Department also shows an ingrained and complicated pattern in interview techniques that both reflects and perpetuates the perception of women as lacking in authority and without serious opinions. Men tend to be approached more formally, respectfully, politely and indirectly. Women are addressed informally, amiably, jokingly and directly.^{vii} In television interviews this results in men taking or being allowed more time to speak, while women receive less speaking time.

Balanced portrayal is a professional quality

At first sight, changing this picture would seem to be mainly a matter of time: as women become more and more emancipated and take an increasing share of paid employment in the media as well as in the rest of society, gender portrayal will change of its own accord. We have now reached the stage at which almost half of all journalists in the Netherlands are women, yet there is nothing to indicate that this has done much to change the content of programmes or the image they project. Stereotyping is not so much a function of the sex of the programme-maker, it is deeply rooted in the routines of journalism. Any attempts to bring about change will have to concentrate mainly on changing those routines. The motives and arguments for change must be based on professional, journalistic considerations.

At the heart of the Screening Gender approach, therefore, is the idea that awareness can lead to change. A key concept is “quality”: by focusing attention on portrayal issues the journalist switches off the automatic pilot button. As a result, the item or story becomes better journalism. It is the professional stimulus that makes journalists react and willing to discuss change of behaviour. Feminism or questions of women’s rights have lost their appeal for most European journalists.

Changing journalistic routines begins with charting the journalistic production process. Programme-makers are constantly taking decisions, and they do so under great pressure of time. What subject is about to become news? What angle should we approach when we report on a particular subject? Who do I choose as the spokesperson? Where shall I put the camera? What questions shall I ask? What background pictures or archive footage do I show? These decisions are often rational and individual, and in the perception of the journalist their view of the position of men and women in society plays no part in them whatever. Yet the sum of all these individual choices continues to show the stereotypical pattern that I described earlier.

Let us look at an example. In the Dutch parliament a debate is in progress on a new Bill designed to regulate the admission of refugees into the country. The government proposes various measures, the opposition has alternative plans. This is all properly reflected in the report in the news. A politician from one of the progressive parties explains the basis of the Bill. A politician from the conservative opposition party puts forward another proposal. The progressive party responds. The view of the refugee interest group is put in the voiceover. The statements made by the various parties are interspersed with archive footage of refugees at an asylum-seeker reception centre. The spokespeople are all white middle-aged men. “That’s coincidence”, is the journalists’ initial response. “And anyway it doesn’t matter because the subject has nothing to do with men or women, it’s about the new legislation.” From the point of view of gender portrayal, however, it is not a coincidence and it does make a difference who acts as spokesperson and who one is talking about. The choices made in the construction of the programme serve to reaffirm and reassert an existing power structure.

When you confront programme-makers with this pattern, most of them are horrified and come up with all sorts of plausible explanations. There was no woman spokesperson available, we only had a couple of hours to put the item together, we had no money for an interpreter. And besides: surely it’s all about the story, the subject, and not about who tells it? All these remarks are true and legitimate. And yet it is still important to ask whether things could have been done differently. What angle would you have had to choose in this case to let women or ethnic minorities express their views? How much time would you really have needed to make a better item? What would you have asked if you had had an interpreter? What kind of story would someone other than the politician have had to tell? And is that story important to the viewer, the citizen trying to form an opinion about the parliamentary debate?

By asking these questions we appeal to the reporter’s journalistic responsibility and curiosity. The automatic pilot is switched off for a moment, the choice of a particular approach has to be rationalized. This makes it clear what consequences pragmatic decisions have for the meaning of the images you ultimately broadcast, and hence for the story you are telling. It is precisely in these observations that the germ of change lies.

Screening Gender

The audiovisual training toolkit *Screening Gender*^{viii} brings together pieces of video footage that help us to address these questions. Issues and problems identified in feminist media criticism are illustrated through the use of recent television footage. Other examples, some of them produced specially for the toolkit, demonstrate the gain in quality that can be achieved by paying attention to gender portrayal. A third strand consists of interviews with programme-makers who explain how they achieve more varied gender portrayal and why it is important to them – as media professionals – to strive for this.

In June 2000 the toolkit was produced in English and German versions and distributed to training institutions affiliated to the European Broadcasting Union. In 2001 additional funding was received from the European Commission for French, Italian and Spanish versions and for the production of a CD ROM (in English), based on the original material. The project partners gave their permission for adaptations of the material into Bosnian and Estonian languages. The modular structure of the toolkit allows it to be easily adapted to new situations. The structure allows users to focus on the topics that interest them most, and to decide how deeply they want to go into a particular topic.

For the participating broadcasters the four-year process in which the *Screening Gender* project was developed proved highly profitable. The development of the material involved a large number of programme makers, decision makers and researchers within the companies in thinking about gender portrayal and the ways it should be changed. Those who were involved in one of the many discussions that were organized during the production period, will never lose the awareness they gained about how gendered patterns are produced in making television. These programme professionals are now important motors for change.

We have discovered that the toolkit seems to have a limited life-span within the broadcasting companies themselves. Much of the impact of the kit comes from the video examples that illustrate portrayal patterns and alternative approaches. In the five-year life of the project, some of the material has become outdated: for instance, a number of the programmes from which the examples are taken no longer exist. This weakens their credibility with many programme-makers, who tend to take issues of gender portrayal seriously only if they can be illustrated in very up-to-date material.

So after five years and intensive use the toolkit seems to have reached the end of its life cycle within our companies.

However, the *Screening Gender* toolkit is still widely used in training situations within European broadcasting organizations, as well as in schools of journalism and communication. The kit seems to have a potentially long life in universities and training institutions, where users are less demanding in relation to the actuality or topicality of the material. The regular influx of new students in these settings provides a constant stream of users.

Diversity in the Netherlands

The Netherlands Public Broadcasting Organisation participated in the Screening Gender project initially because it was a cost-effective option. The co-funding from the European Commission, together with financial inputs from each of the five broadcasting partners allowed us to produce a highly professional training toolkit. In time however it became clear that the project could also serve the policy goals of the organization.

Public service broadcasting in the Netherlands is obliged by law to broadcast programmes that reflect society, and varied portrayal of men and women and of ethnic minorities is an essential part of this. However, it is still the viewers who have the last word: they expect public service broadcasting to offer programmes in which we can all recognize ourselves, man and woman, black and white, old and young.

Actively stimulating more varied portrayal in programmes thus is a necessary element of public service broadcasting, according to the Netherlands Public Broadcasting Management Board. It is not only a matter that concerns programme makers and journalists, it is also important for managers and policymakers. During the Screening Gender project the managers and board of The Netherlands Public Broadcasting were actively involved in discussions and presentations.

It led to the decision in 2000 that the organization should give a permanent position to the Diversity Department. This department – initially known as the Gender Portrayal Department – had existed on an ad hoc project basis since 1991. However, the decision to establish it as part of the permanent, organizational structure is a brave one, given that it means taking a critical watchdog on board. But it is also a unique decision, because it means that public service broadcasting is now taking the initiative to build bridges between programme-makers, audiences and media critics.

The Diversity Department invites critical representatives from women's organizations, organizations for ethnic minorities and organizations such as Age Concern to discuss matters of representation with programme makers and decision-makers. This turns out to work both ways. The media professionals get first-hand experience of their audience, in all its variety. But at the same time the representatives of the invited groups come to realize that the journalistic process is governed by rules that determine what is news and how it is presented. If you want to influence the news as an interest group, the first thing you have to do is to understand these rules. For example, you will have to train some energetic spokespersons who can put your point of view concisely and lucidly so that journalists will be prepared to listen to it.

Another way in which the Diversity Department works to change gender portrayal is to gather names and data about female spokespersons and spokespersons from ethnic minorities in a Diversity Database, which can be used by journalists and programme makers working for public broadcasting in The Netherlands. This is a very practical tool to raise the visibility of female experts in television.

Changing images

To change gender portrayal will take decades. The fact is that the reality of men and women in this world is still far more varied than the images we see on television. Change in the way we see men and women on television must come first and foremost from journalists and programme makers. The process of change is in need of new stimulus regularly so as to keep the discussion alive. The Netherlands Public Broadcasting Organisation has acknowledged this in giving the Diversity Department a structural position and funding.

Deliberately setting out to initiate a process of change so as to produce greater diversity in the media image not only of men and women but also of ethnic minorities: that is the complex task facing the NOS Diversity Department for the coming years. But while it may be a difficult task, it is one that is not only supported by those at the top of public service broadcasting in the Netherlands but also empowered by a statutory framework. By concentrating on the journalistic debate we hope to be able to advance the right arguments to bring about change. But it is through the meeting of minds that the importance of that change will become a live issue. And in that process, programme-makers, critics and viewers all share part of the responsibility.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Margaret Gallagher, expert in Media and Gender and consultant to the Screening Gender project, has been a constant source of advice and knowledge. There are no words to thank her for this.

ⁱⁱ Stuart Allen, The gendered realities of Journalism. p. 107-129. In: News Culture, Stuart Allen, London, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Who speaks in television. A comparative study of female participation in television programmes. NRK, NOS, DR, SVT, YLE, ZDF. Oslo, 1998.

^{iv} In the Global Monitoring Media Project, organized by WACC in 2000, only 10 % of the politicians in the news was female.

^v Who speaks in television, p.11

^{vi} Spender, Dale. The writing of sex. New York, 1989.

^{vii} NOS Portrayal Department. Getting through. Five years of the NOS Gender Portrayal Department. Hilversum, 1996.

^{viii} Screening Gender (June 2000); an audiovisual training toolkit for innovation in programme production. Produced by: NOS (Netherlands); NRK (Norway); SVT (Sweden); YLE (Finland); ZDF (Germany). Editions still available in Spanish, French German and Italian. CD Rom available in English, applicable on p.c., not on Macintosh.