The role of social media to advance the gender equality
Institute Meta's list, Slovenia
CEO, Natasha Briski
@DC43
natasa.briski@gmail.com

YOU CAN'T BE, WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE

I work as a journalist and editor-in-chief of a progressive media network that I co-founded with my friends back in 2012. It is called Meta's list and the ambition is to support open-minded projects and people of active spirit. What we do is publish opinion pieces and analyses provided by experts from various fields of knowledge regardless of their gender, age, race, sexual orientation … you name it. Just looking for smart people that have something to say and promoting their words of wisdom through active use of social media, mostly Facebook and Twitter we are focused on.

What have we learned so far, what works and where do we still have room for improvement?

There is about the same number of smart men out there as there are smart women, knowledge is spread equaly among sexes. By consuming traditional media one wouldn't think so. Men take about 75-80 % of their time, only every fourth/fifth guest in a studios are women. Not only media executives and editors are to be blamed for that though having people who understand the concept of gender equality in positions of power is a game changer. There aren't many who would understand. I will share a couple of examples with you, what is Meta's list experience.

THE RATIO

We are gender blind when it comes to who we cooperate with, the only criteria being the best and the brightest. About 55 % of our contributors on site are women, 45 % are men. One could say, genderwise, we are fair and balanced. But no, we are perceived, I was told that on social media on many occasions, as a womens media network. Because the pattern we follow is not the pattern people are used to.

One examble - couple of years ago we had a series of summer blogs where we asked interesting people to write about books they would recommended for reading. It went on for months. One day when we published one of the blogs, which we always promote on social media, author was a woman, the response from one of our readers was: *"Can't you find a man to write about books, you feminists!".* And I was a bit puzzled, not because I was called a feminist, I like that, but because I was wondering do we really have mostly women writing these blogs? I prefer diversity. I didn't pay any attention to statistics till then, so I checked the numbers. Up until that moment we published about 35 pieces, 35 authors, 18 of them were men, 17 were women. So I confronted the man on Twitter with statistics and the response was: *"Oh, really? It seemed to me you only publish women."* Because the only thing he and many others know is the 80 vs 20 ratio.

Another example. We publish weekly interviews with young Slovenian scientists: who they are, what they do and what their plans for the future are. The criteria is looking for talents working for various research institutes and universities. We have a mix of science fields, a mix of institutions, again, genderwise blind, it just happens about half of them are men,

half are women. And yet, sometimes people refer to that as: *"You know, that segment you have, promoting female scientists."* We have no such segment, just a gender ratio among contributors that is different from what people are used to in most of the media.

Exactly two years ago we partnered with an international agency Kliping which monitors traditional and digital media. We started analysing most watched slovenian TV news shows on a montly basis. How many female and male experts they host in their studios and what topics are they most often asked to share an opinion on. Results are as they are, average ratio - 75-80 % of all guests are men, every fourth/fifth guest is a woman. Hard topics are mostly reserved for male guests whereas women get a chance when talking about culture, the weather, social issues etc. We understand that the numbers don't tell the whole story, but nevertheless they are not to be dismissed just like that. So we regularly tweet about that. And what a joy!

Every time we "dare" tweet or facebook results of media gender ratio analyses we get hammered online. Everytime. Huge majority of responses we get are from male Twitter users, who are much more combative as female users, much more willing to confront and who complain constantly how things are really not as bad as the numbers show. Now me, I see those battles as an opportunity to raise awareness, they help me expose even more bad practices, I test public mood, share links I consider worth reading on the topic, engage in conversation, grow my Twitter followership … all in all, sort of a win win situation. If the conversation gets too ugly, I block or mute people.

No matter how hard it is we intend to keep pushing for greater accountability and action on gender equality via social media. That's what social media are very good for. Awareness raising.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

In all that time, two years worth of analyses, two years of constant Twitter fights and Facebook bruises, the ratio of the number of female experts on TV has not changed (yet), but, what changed is by exposing those numbers on social media, and we do have quite a reach, TV channels became more and more aware of our analyses, first they were ignoring us, then they started paying more attention to who they invite to be their guests, some of them are really trying hard, also calling us for informations about potential female guests. I consider that to be a step forward and have no doubt the numbers will start changing as well.

Lower representation of women in traditional media organisations is a worrysome thing, because it also silences women's voices online. And women's voices have proven to be fundamental to advance women's rights at all levels.

As I said at the beginning, it's not all media's fault.

One of the lessons learned so far managing Meta's list media network has also been - it takes our editorial team a lot more time and energy to convince women to speak up than it is the case with men. Can be explained but if we want to be heard in decision-making processes, we need to have an opinion and we need to be willing to share it publicly.

There are some real obstacles women face being opinionated on social media and there's so much noise that sometimes I worry it scares my fellow female Twitter users away. Truth be told women do not feel at home when fighting erupts on social media, they keep telling

us that. And fighting there is happening on a daily basis. Most of us don't feel comfortable playing this game, for most of the men, it's their natural teritory.

Women lack confidence and more often than not the reason being as they share with us, either they don't know much about how the media works, they are not at home with public speaking and they are not very savvy on social media.

If you want social media to work for you need to get to know how it works first. Way too often people join various new media platforms without knowing what to do with it and without thinking about what will my message be. Proper use of new technologies is critical for maximising social media's advocacy role.

We learned not to be intimidated or distracted by all the noise out there. Goof advice would also be, try not to get too emotional. Bullies and trolls come with the social media territory. Twitter and Facebook should do more about that. It's wild west out there, but we won't fix the challenge of gender equality in the media by either be silent or just complaining how bad things are. Don't get me wrong, it is important to expose bad practices, to wave a red flag when necessary, and that is often, but it is also important to focus on what works.

ECHO CHAMBERS

And my last point would be, and I consider that to be critical as well, let's not get trapped in echo chambers, debating the issue of gender equality with like-minded friends. I've attended numerous debates, conferences, seminars on gender equality, where huge majority of speakers, participants where women. We should try harder to include men in this process as well, the challenge is just too big for us to solve it alone. Too many of debates on the importance of gender equality seem to be excluding one big portion of humanity.