Election 2013 media panel

Independent scrutiny of the Fourth Estate

ABC misses an important opportunity

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Folker Hanusch
Senior Lecturer in Journalism, University of the Sunshine Coast

In a decision that has stunned many observers, Leigh Sales, anchor of the ABC’s prime news and current affairs program 7.30, will not host Saturday night’s election panel on the public broadcaster.

And it turns out Sales will not even be on our screens on Saturday night at all.

Instead, Kerry O’Brien, who hosted the 7.30 Report for 15 years until his retirement a few years ago, will be the host, joined by Annabel Crabb, Antony Green, the ALP’s Stephen Smith and Liberals Senator Arthur Sinodinos.

This morning, The Australian reports that Sales turned down an offer to be on the panel after she was told it would be anchored by O’Brien. She did so, according to the Oz, on the basis that the role should be filled by the 7.30 host, as had been tradition.

While we don’t know all the details behind the decision, it’s not a good look for the ABC.

The role of women in our media has been raised time and time again this year, most recently by the CEO of APN News & Media, Michael Miller. Speaking at an all-male industry leaders’ forum, Miller said the industry needed more women in senior roles.

My own survey of Australian journalists, published in May, found that women are now indeed in a majority amongst Australian journalists. At the same time, they remain significantly underrepresented at senior levels, and also tend to earn less than their male counterparts.

Studies of news content have also for some time pointed to the fact that important stories tend to be given to men across the news media.

Things are improving - compared with 20 years ago, the number of women journalists has risen significantly. Women are also - albeit slowly - increasingly represented in senior editorial roles.

But, as most in the industry acknowledge, more needs to be done. And here was an opportunity for the ABC to appoint a woman to an important role - on merit.

The election-night panel is one of the most important programs of the year, and Leigh Sales has been one of the country’s best political journalists. Her interviews on 7.30 have regularly
won her respect from all sides of politics.

We don’t know if gender was a factor in the decision to appoint O’Brien as host, but that doesn’t actually matter.

What matters is the appearance the decision gives. Appointing O’Brien over the current 7.30 host looks just like another example of favouritism among an old-boys club. Which, by the way, is also unfair to O’Brien, who remains a brilliant journalist.

But particularly after the turbulence of gender politics under Julia Gillard’s prime ministership, it would have been nice for the public broadcaster to take a lead here, and appoint Sales to its election-night panel.

Not because she’s a woman. But because she has earned it.