

Take on Board



Transcript – Deb Verhoeven breakdowns what the data really shows about gender equity on ASX 300 boards

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on a Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Deb Verhoeven, about her recent research into gender equity and the ASX 200 boards. First, let me tell you about Deb. Deb is Canada 150 Research Chair in gender and cultural Informatics at the University of Alberta. Prior to this position, she was Associate Dean of engagement at UTS. An agitator, commentator and critic Deb is a long standing advocate and leader in academic community engagement. In 2013, she was recognised as Australia's most innovative academic for her efforts in creating crowdfunding opportunities for academic researchers. Deb is a former board member and CEO of the Australian Film Institute, and she was the inaugural deputy chair of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. She holds a current position on the board of Canary Canada's peak digital research infrastructure provider. She served on the boards of the Victorian a research strategic initiative versie and the Tasmanian government's Digital Futures Advisory Council. Professor Verhoeven is a leading proponent of Digital Humanities. Her recent research has addressed how we can use the tools of big data networks and understanding of digital infrastructure to shed light on power relationships and inequities. In her work as a digital humanities scholar, Professor Verhoeven is enlisting machine learning to redress the persistent domination of power elites. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast Deb!

Deb Verhoeven 1:30

Happy to be here Helga.

Helga Svendsen 1:33

So good to have you. I should say, Deb also, I always ask people to list their current and former boards. I'm not going to read out Deb's form of boards here because it is such a long list. Suffice to say we have she's a professor so she probably wouldn't say governance guru but so I'm gonna say governance guru in our midst. So the dead before we talk about your research, and you know, the take on board community knows that I'm always love a conversation about gender equity in the boardroom and how they come together. But before we do that, as always, I would love to dig a

little bit deeper about you. So firstly, can you tell us where were your mum and dad born? And do you know where your ancestors are from?

Deb Verhoeven 2:16

So my dad, and you probably get a bit of a guess about this from my surname. I was born in Holland. And he arrived out in Australia in the UK in the 1950s, as a 13 year old, 11 year old something like that. My mum comes from a long line of settler, Scots in Australia, so she can trace her lineage in Australia back to the 1850s. So 100 years earlier. And it's quite an interesting story. Actually, if you've got one minute, I'll I'll try and do the short version. The original ancestor of hers who came to Australia was a guy from the the mountains of Scotland, you know, the highlands, and he fell in love with his cousin and said, You know, I want to marry you, I'm going to take you away. And she said, I don't think so. I'm actually your cousin. So that's not happening. And he said, Okay, well, I'll just wait till you have a daughter then. Oh, did he waited? She had a daughter, and your daughter was 16. And then he swept her off her feet and to go to Australia. And the story just goes on and on like that. It's just like one of those really kind of like, odd lineage stories that you probably shouldn't ever tell it unless you're at a party and you've had far too much to drink. But here we are.

Helga Svendsen 3:33

No, no one's listening. It's okay. Wow, I wow. So many questions about that, that you probably don't know the answer to. So for you, where were you born? Where did you grow up? Do you have siblings tell us about that part?

Deb Verhoeven 3:48

I always like to tell my foundation story. I was born in Melbourne, Naarm, and I'm currently speaking from the the unseeded lands of the bordering peoples of the Kulin Nation. But when I was born, there was a bit of a baby lot going on in that particular hospital that my mum was in. So there were no beds for cribs for children. So they put me in a drawer of a cupboard. Um, so. And the other part of my foundation story that I do like to mention is that the doctor that delivered me eventually committed suicide, which is a terrible story, but seems to sort of have some bearing on the way I feel about that moment. So

Helga Svendsen 4:30

Oh, my goodness, I ask these questions of lots of people in every part of this so far, I've got so many more questions about the cousin and the second cousin and the baby in the drawer and oh, the the obstetrician or the doctor. Oh, my goodness. So again, only because I'm on the board of the Royal Women's Hospital, which hospital where you popped in a draw. Dare I ask?

Deb Verhoeven 4:53

Springvale, so luckily not the one you're on the board of and it wasn't long time ago. Oops, I seem to add

Helga Svendsen 5:02

I don't know next time we do a walk around with the hospital, should I be opening drawers just to make sure there's no overflow babies sitting in there? Hopefully that is not what happens anymore. But at least they popped you in a drawer. How many languages do you speak?

Deb Verhoeven 5:15

Just the one. And that's always been a source of consternation, my mum would have liked my dad to have taught us Dutch. My dad was a great and classic melting pot, Australian, I think within a year of being in Australia, he was the top of his English class. So he felt there was no real need for us to learn Dutch, he just sort of saw his future and our future, being in Australia and, and for whatever reasons, that was a monolingual kind of existence.

Helga Svendsen 5:44

It's so frustrating, isn't it? I think I only speak English as well. My partner's parents are both Italian, they speak Italian at home, he doesn't speak Italian. My mother was happened to be born in Italy, even though her father was Hungarian, and her mother was Russian. So they had this great mix of different languages. She spoke Italian as a very young girl, but now only speaks English, we only speak English. Ah, it's such a shame.

Deb Verhoeven 6:11

It is really frustrating. I mean, I have lived in other countries where I've acquired some limited language skills during the time that I've lived there. And it does just give you really interesting insights into different ways of thinking and different ways of articulating your relations in the world. Which I think is really, really interesting, you know, whether how people treat for example, past tense and present tense in the language can really affect how you feel about your history, or your antecedents or your future and things like that. It's quite, quite interesting.

Helga Svendsen 6:43

Yeah, I think having at least one other language really gives you like, it's good exercise for the brain. But it just gives you a different frame through which to see through things which could be incredibly useful. But it's not me, unfortunately. Or not us. Where do you feel your places or where your home is?

Deb Verhoeven 7:03

That's a really interesting question to ask me right now, because I work in Canada, but I live in currently in Naarm In Melbourne. And I feel that sense of the kind of pull of where my place is. And whether my place is my home is another really interesting question. So I think possibly the answer to this is, I feel like I have many places, and possibly also many homes, but they're not necessarily the same thing. And as a feminist, I think this is also very interesting question. I've spent most of my life as a feminist trying to resist being put in my place. And I think that that question for a feminist of my generation, and my privilege, is about wanting a kind of mobility that you feel has been denied to you. So wanting to be able to move, at will or at ease. And that's, that is a position of privilege. And it's also let me clarify that I feel that not being put in my place, is a privilege, that having mobility as a privilege, but that doesn't hold true for all cultures. And so for example, for many Indigenous Australians having a connection to one place, is in fact, a privilege. This is pointed out to me by a friend and a colleague, Sandra Phillips, who made this point to me one day, when we were discussing where we felt at home and what our place was, and hadn't occurred to me before, that having that continuous relationship to place could also be a position of privilege and, and have a potency that I didn't experience because my whole life was about wanting to be free to move and feel free in some way and unshackled. And I think the importance of being in Canada, is, in large part directly related to something that I experienced as a university student in Australia, and having my research put in its place. And when that happened, I was denied scholarships to study overseas and so on. And I spent most of my life actually trying to have that opportunity that that sense of mobility and that sense of being able to connect more broadly or more globally, through my research. And so that yeah, it's a very complicated question that you've asked, and I think it's a really good one. And I'm not sure I have a definitive answer for you.

Helga Svendsen 9:27

Well, I'm not sure there is a definitive answer when you're asking people about their place and home. But that is such an interesting reflection about kind of knowing your place and therefore not I refuse to be put in put in my place or whatever it may be. And that reflection about air First Nations people or some First Nations people or even some non First Nations, people who might see it as a real privilege to be able to stay in that one place. You know, I even think, you know, my father's family moved a lot when they were young because I kept getting thrown out of their houses because they couldn't By the rent, it would have been real privilege for them to be in the one house, which is only one part of your place. So it's yeah, that is such an interesting reflection about that tension.

Deb Verhoeven 10:10

And it relates to boards, actually, when we think about it. So when you think about the tenure that people might have on boards, it's considered quite powerful to, to have continuous board positions or to have positions that lasts for some period of time. And what we find often is when you new board members into a network like the ASX 200, they find it very hard to establish themselves. And there's often a high attrition rate or turnover rate. As a result. There's a really interesting sense of how your question about place might also relate to questions about power, or precarity.

Helga Svendsen 10:51

Thank you for doing the segue for me, I like it. So the research that you recently did tell us about what the research is and and what you've found. And let's explore that a little bit

Deb Verhoeven 11:01

I think your listeners will be really familiar with what we found, because it's come up quite a few times in podcasts that you've done over the last six months or so. And I really was interested, I had listened while I was prepping for this episode, to Melinda Ho's discussion with you, where she talked a lot about how boards need to get beyond representation as their kind of basic sense of equity. And I think what we did with our researchers, we found the evidence base for that feeling that a lot of us have had, which is it doesn't seem to matter. As the numbers improve. It doesn't still feel equal, or even close. So what's going on there? What's happening? Why are we having that feeling? What's that intuition? Is there an evidence base for understanding what's actually happening on boards when we start increasing the numbers of equity seeking groups into the board network. So we took the ASX 200, board network from 2015. And then we took another snapshot of it at the end of 2018. This is a really interesting period, because this is the period of time when we went from a 20% representation of women on seats, so not unique women, just the number of seats, and we got to 30% by the end of 2018, more or less. And so this was heralded as a great success, the 30% Club, which is very influential and trying to to create the conditions for greater representation of women on boards, and they did a great they did an excellent job they did they got to 30% of seats being held by women at the end of 2018. So we thought okay, this is going to be really interesting, because we should if we look at this be able to see that women also don't just increase in number but increasing influence at a proportional rate. Yeah, that's what we're looking for. Because it's really going to be meaningful if it's substantive change, as the numbers increase, so should the agency have women inside the networks. And we use this very, very new kind of analysis or reasonably new kind of analysis called social network analysis, to try and pin that down. Is it possible to see that women increase their agency at the same time that we increase their numbers? And the answer is no, it's not possible to see that. So we have more women in the network. But relatively speaking, the smaller number of men have greater power or greater agency. And we measured that in two ways. If you think about it, how would you think about understanding the kinds of relationships you can have an a board network and there there's many ways you can do this, using this this type of science, we picked out two very simple ones. So the first one is a kind of influence we call degree influence.

Degree just simply means how many people are you directly connected to in your collaboration at work. And we measured that by looking at all the people that you might sit with on a board. So the collaboration networks are formed from your boards, the board, you sit on, the people you sit with they your first degree of collaboration, if you sit on three boards, you would have a greater level of degree because you're sitting with more people. So degree measures your ability to influence a very local part of the network, the people you're directly in touch with. There's another way you can measure power as well. And that's called between us. And this is really, really interesting one because between us measures, the extent to which someone has to go through you to get to another part of the network. So it's measuring your systemic influence, how influential are you at the broadest level of the system? So if we look at degree and we look at between us, we see very, very interesting distinctions in means by Yeah, and women's behavior. And what we find is that when you pour more women into the network, in this period, we found their degree did increase. And that's in large part because, again, we have to make these distinctions very carefully. A small number of women sat on a large number of seats. Yep. So you can see already, that's why their degree would be higher, relatively speaking, because you might have 10, women sitting on 20 boards. Yeah, hypothetically speaking, between us, women's power actually went down. So what that means is women are doing a lot of hard work. They're working very hard at the local level. They're sitting on lots of boards, they're reading lots of papers, they're talking to lots of people. They're making lots of decisions. But they don't have any systemic power.

Helga Svendsen 15:56

And in my head, this is how I've, I'm describing it, it might be completely wrong. But in my head, that degree is the number of doors I guess that are that are available to you. And between us in my head is the opening of those doors. Does that kind of work as an analogy?

Deb Verhoeven 16:13

Like it kind of does, actually, it's a really interesting way to think about it. I was trying to explain it using social networks or social media, because we're all sort of familiar with that. So degree is like, How many friends do you have in Facebook? Yeah. But between us is, how many times to get to another part of the world? Would I have to go through you?

Helga Svendsen 16:33

Okay, so is it like, you know, how LinkedIn has first degree, second degree, third degree? So on those connections?

Deb Verhoeven 16:40

In a way? Yeah. So if I said to you, try and make a connection to a person that neither of us know, personally, right? How would you do that in an abstract way? How would you find that person using only LinkedIn? So you might tap someone on the shoulder and go, do you know, yes, person. And they might go, I don't know them directly. But I do know that so and so knows them, and so on. And then, and then we would work out that the quickest way to get to Person X is through a common denominator, that common denominator, that person who is the common denominator has a lot of influence they can they can close access to another part of the network or open it, they sort of have this tacit power to put people together or make connections across a broad network. Quite a few men in the ASX 200 network who have what we would consider relatively low degree. So they're not doing much work, but very high levels of influence. Right. So sort of think of them as the ammonoids Greece of you know, the network. They're the the old boys. Yeah, yeah, the guys who know who you need to know.

Helga Svendsen 17:49

Right? So. So how do we then influence that? Like, if that's, if that's the power base, essentially, the old school tie, whatever it may be? Women are getting to the boardroom. So they're getting their connections, but they're not getting the betweenness? How do we get that?

Deb Verhoeven 18:09

That's a really good question. Because it's, it's all about relationships, it's about one of the problems with the way we currently count equality on boards is we use a very simple measure, which is just statistics, numbers. And the numbers aren't telling us the full story head counts don't tell us the full story. And yet we pursue them as if they are the end story. So what we're saying is that we still need more more women, there's not there's absolutely not an argument against the idea that we need more women.

Helga Svendsen 18:40

I mean, aside from anything, 30% is not equality. It's like hooray 30%. But still, it's far from equality.

Deb Verhoeven 18:47

It was 100% for 100 years of men, so we should just have another 100 years where it's 100% women. So you know, that would be equality. But put that statistical anomaly aside, or ambition aside, what we need to do is start to think about which boards women end up on how many women end up being chairs of boards. And during this during this period, so many lost opportunities for women to have more influence and more responsibility between the 2015 network and the 2018 network. The

number of women chairs actually went down, there's definitely something missing there. It's the types of boards women sit on, I think, is also part of the issue. So there's any number of explanations for this. But until we start looking for this kind of evidence, we're not in any position to make change. At the moment, all we're doing is headcounts.

Helga Svendsen 19:42

Yeah, and saying yay, 30% of boards have women yay, which is I guess, yay, compared to 20%. But it's not the full story. And as you say, it's the same women being recycled through a lot of those boards, which are also the you If we look at other diversity lens, they are the privileged white women predominantly also that have been recycled through rather than women of color women with a disability, all of the other intersections of diversity that also need to be looked at.

Deb Verhoeven 20:15

That's right. And that's why we always talk about equality, diversity and inclusion. And that's, that's I guess what I'm, what I'm asking for here is we're only doing the statistical analysis, we're not doing the analysis of whether inclusion in particular, and diversity are, in fact, also in play here. So I think, you know, what we're finding, therefore, is, you know, this, that women are not taking up substantive power in the network, or having substantive agency. There's no real discernible trickle down effect occurring so that the carrot was always if we get to 30%, it will have benefits for CEO appointments, it will have further benefits down the line, we're not seeing that. And we have an inflated sense of presence, because we're calculating board seats rather than unique board members. I call this figley feminism by the way, I think this is where you use statistics to kind of mask business as usual. So it's sort of like rah, rah, we're doing the right thing. There's more women. But actually, what's going on under the fig leaf? Is what you would expect.

Helga Svendsen 21:20

So if we were doing a monitoring and evaluation plan for diversity and equity on boards, what should we be measuring, looking at just the numbers and the data is not going to tell the story? What should we be looking at?

Deb Verhoeven 21:34

So my belief is that male domination in networks is the result of unequal social relationships. And we need to be measuring social relationships, not just statistics, statistics are really fabulous at telling us whether we've progressed from a bench, a statistical benchmark to a new statistical benchmark, and that is quite useful. Again, not saying we shouldn't do it. But if that's all we're doing, then that's all we know, we've got a description, but we haven't got an explanation. And we haven't understood how to really create substantive change. So what we need to do is, I believe, a lot more of this kind

of analysis, this sort of social network analysis, where we're actually measuring behaviors and relationships. And that will tell us, again, whether we've progressed from certain benchmarks in previous formations of the network to new formations of the network.

Helga Svendsen 22:30

And might also give us some insights into, you know, what we need to do next as well, rather than just inverted commas, pop women on boards, which is, as I say, it's not a bad thing. Like that's good, but not just popping them on boards. But how can we increase that social connectedness? How can we share that equally?

Deb Verhoeven 22:51

There's a great branch of this science, which is all about what if modeling? So what if we just took out all the guys who have certain characteristics or measures? What if we just took them out? So for example, I did this analysis on the film industry networks, collaboration networks, and we discovered a number of really shocking statistics, like 75% of male producers in the Australian film industry, had only ever worked with one woman in their entire career, in their creative team, things like that, right? The lovely thing about this analysis is it scales, so you can see the very granular, and the very generic or systemic. And we could see and name the men who had never worked with women ever. And then we thought, Well, what do we do with that information? Right? Who uses that information to create better worlds? And the answer is, the police and counterterrorism agencies use this kind of analysis to take out the mafia, or to take out terrorist cells. And it's called criminal network analysis. And so I did a criminal network analysis of the Australian film industry. And we discovered that we could identify these guys, and you know, technically you could, I'm just gonna use this term, metaphorically, you could take them out of the network, like you could just stop funding them, or you could stop giving them things to do, right. So then what we did is we did what if analysis, we thought, let's see what would happen to the network's if we hypothetically did that, like so we had a map of all the relationships in the film industry. And then we had these guys, we knew their names, we knew who they were. And so we just took them out of the network. And we did that in different ways. We took them out one at a time, we took them out all at the same time. You name it, we tried all different ways to take them out. How many means you have to take out of a network before you see the network change when you do this hypothetical modeling, and the answer is almost all of them. Because patriarchy if I want to use a shorthand phrase for what we're describing here, male dominated networks have a particular quality which in data science is called module clarity. And modularity means when you take one of them out, they just sort of fold in behind. And so and you think about this, it makes a lot of sense. You take Harvey Weinstein out of the Hollywood film industry, you throw him off the side of SS patriarchy, what happens? The ship just goes faster. It's got less ballast, you know, it's kind of it's so that wasn't the solution. What was the solution? And again, this is very preliminary analysis. And please don't think it applies in all circumstances, because my patriarchy in the film industry is not necessarily the same as the patriarchy and aboard industry. And that's another thing to remember. But what worked in the film industry was to convince men who hold power or influence in the film industry to share that power with women. Right? Which is

really, really interesting, because again, it's not always practical. So you wouldn't necessarily send women to work with Harvey Weinstein. Yeah, that would not necessarily be a good idea. So it works nicely in theory, how you make that a practical aspiration is a different question again,

Helga Svendsen 26:08

and whether they're even up for it, whether Joe Bloggs, who's the center of the social connectedness is up for power sharing with anyone, let alone a bunch of women.

Deb Verhoeven 26:20

That's right, I'm not talking about mentoring or you know, vague associations, this is about actually giving up your power, or giving up your influence or sharing it in a meaningful way. That isn't aspiration to have the, you know, lifelong feminist in me says it's, as you say, highly unlikely that men are going to just give it up. And that we are going to have to compel them through regulatory mechanisms of some kind. But just focusing on the statistical numbers of head counts, isn't going to convince them. And they don't need to, because at the moment, they're not losing power. They're letting women into the network, but they're keeping power.

Helga Svendsen 27:00

What I'm hearing here is quotas work to some extent, but we definitely need more than that. It's convenient, convincing those that are at the center of those social power networks to share that but share it in a true, meaningful way. Have you seen instances of where that's happened? Where there has been that true? Sharing a sharing of power or giving over of power even?

Deb Verhoeven 27:27

No, is the short answer to that? The longer answer is, the Swedish film industry had some success at improving the position of women. But that was done. And this is a classic, this phrase will be very familiar to anyone listening to this podcast, the fish rots from the head. So what happened in the Swedish film industry is the head of the film industry was a feminist. And she just rolled the feminist framework of decision making right down from the top through the organization at every level. And it just became expected at every level. All right. She's no longer the head of the institute in Sweden. So it'll be very interesting to see if we can map any reversion after she's left.

Helga Svendsen 28:16

Interesting. Oh, my brain is both melting and kind of just popping in all sorts of interesting ways there. Deb, I'm imagining this is going to be on your research agenda for a while. So you're gonna

have to come back and tell us what, what else is discovered in this because it's just made, it's made the problem in inverted commas. So much more complex? That's good to understand. But oh,

Deb Verhoeven 28:42

Well, I have to say, Helga You know, the thing is, men have drama, national patriarchy has existed for a very, very long time, it was a simple thing to overthrow it, we would have done it a long time ago. So it's not ever going to be simple. And part of the problem is, I think we're all searching for a one size fits all solution. Wouldn't it be great for quotas, let's just record this, because that applies everywhere into lots of different environments. And we can do it, we can see the numbers and it's nice and easy and clear. I'm sorry to be the harbingers of bad news. But I just don't think it's as simple as that. Yeah, I don't want to make it more complicated than it is either, because I don't want us to give up hope. But what I do think we need to do as feminists is start to embrace some of these new tools that we have at our disposal. I'm an accidental statistician or data analyst I'm I was terrible at maths at school. And I've taken this on as part of my arsenal because I believe that often data is used against us. And if we don't start to work with people who understand these kinds of ways of seeing the world and making it accountable, we will miss out.

Helga Svendsen 29:51

Oh, dear, what an amazing conversation. I really want the answer to this question to what are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Deb Verhoeven 30:00

Yeah, don't let the numbers become an end in themselves. Yeah, that's it. Yep.

Helga Svendsen 30:05

Great. And is there some resources you would like to share with the take on board community?

Deb Verhoeven 30:11

Yeah, look in the show notes, I'll put the public version of this research but I'll also put the hardcore nerd version because it's, it's worth having a look at it, it does have all the numbers in it and you know, you can download the statistics and data if you want to, and, and look at it yourselves. If you feel like that's something you want to do. So we've made all the data available. And we'd really love feedback from from anyone listening to this feels they have some insights that they can lend.

Helga Svendsen 30:39

You know, we have a take on board book club, which as the name would suggest, often looks at books. I wonder whether we need to have a take on board book club around the research so that we can all data nerd out together on it. I'll find that away. I might make that happen. Oh, Deb, but thank you so much. Amazing pearls of wisdom there. So thank you so much for sharing with the Take on Board community today.

Deb Verhoeven 31:01

Totally My pleasure. Thank you.