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Thumbs Down 2016: Top Film Critics and Gender

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Key Findings

This study considers the representation of women and men as “top critics” on the film review aggregator site, Rotten Tomatoes. As these film writers work for the largest newspapers, general interest magazines and websites, and entertainment trade publications in the U.S., their reviews reach the greatest numbers of viewers, listeners, and readers.

•The vast majority of “top critics” on the Rotten Tomatoes website are men. In spring 2016, women comprised just 27% and men 73% of these individuals.

•Regardless of job title, male writers outnumber female writers. Men accounted for 74% and women 26% of individuals working as *film critics* for media outlets. Men comprised 75% and women 25% of *freelancers*.

•In every type of publication, male reviewers dramatically outnumber female reviewers. For example, males comprised 80% and females 20% of individuals writing about film for trade publications. Men accounted for 71% and women 29% of those writing about film for large U.S. newspapers.

•Male writers are more likely than female writers to belong to at least one professional critics organization. 54% of male reviewers and 37% of female reviewers belong to one or more professional organizations, such as the National Society of Film Critics or the Los Angeles Film Critics Association.

•Men write more reviews of films in all genres than women. The greatest discrepancy between male and female writers occurred for science fiction features. In spring 2016, men penned 84% and women 16% of reviews in this genre. The greatest parity occurred on romantic comedies and dramas. In this genre, men wrote 57% and women 43% of reviews.

•A larger proportion of the films reviewed by women than by men feature female protagonists. 34% of reviews written by women but 24% of reviews written by men featured female protagonists. Conversely, a higher proportion of the reviews written by men than by women had male protagonists exclusively. 76% of reviews written by men but 66% of reviews written by women featured male protagonists only. It is unclear whether these differences are due to the preferences of writers or assignments made by editors.

•On average, male and female reviewers do not differ in the quantitative ratings they award films featuring female protagonists, whether the ratings are expressed as stars, reels, grades, or some percentage score. In spring 2016, female writers awarded an average rating of 66% to films with female protagonists. Male writers also awarded these films a rating of 66%. However, male and female writers differed slightly in their ratings of films featuring male protagonists only. Female writers awarded these films an average rating of 69% whereas male critics gave the films an average rating of 65%.

Method

This study examines the representation of women and men as film reviewers on the popular aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes over a three-month period in Spring 2016. The study reports and compares the percentages of female and male writers, their job titles, the publications they work for, their membership in professional organizations, and their quantitative evaluations of films.

The study considers 5,776 reviews written by 247 “top critics” on the Rotten Tomatoes site. According to the site, writers considered top critics “must be published at a print publication in the top 10% of circulation, employed as a film critic at a national broadcast outlet for no less than five years, or employed as a film critic for an editorial-based website with over 1.5 million monthly unique visitors for a minimum of three years. A top critic may also be recognized as such based on their influence, reach, reputation, and/or quality of writing, as determined by Rotten Tomatoes staff.” In addition, in order to be included in the study, individuals must be U.S.-based critics and have written a minimum of three reviews during February, March, and/or April 2016.

The findings of the study are divided into three major sections. The first section reports the numbers of women and men writing reviews, their job titles, the publications they work for, and their membership in professional organizations. The second section provides a breakdown of the reviews by women and men writers by film genre. The third section reports on the

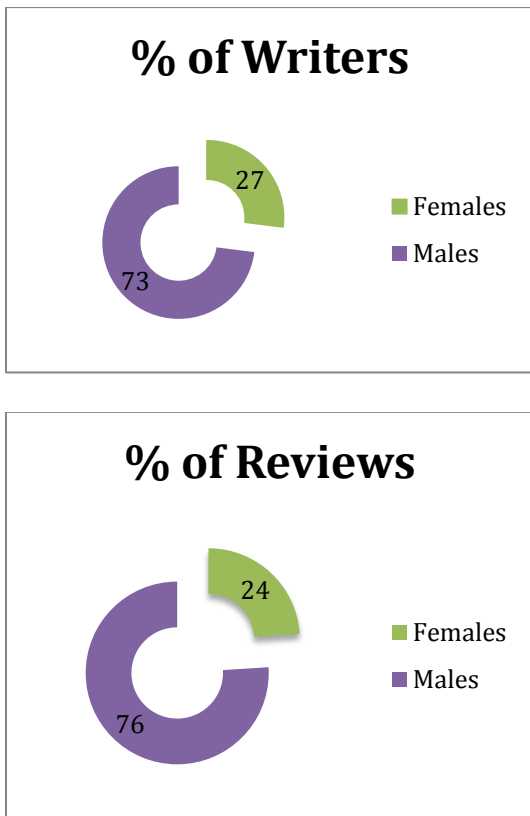
relationship between the sex of film writers and number of reviews written about films with at least one female protagonist versus films with exclusively male protagonists. For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told. This section also considers the relationship between the sex of writers and their quantitative assessment of films (i.e., assignment of stars, grades, etc.) with at least one female protagonist versus films with exclusively male protagonists.

Representation of Film Writers by Sex, Job Title, Publication, and Membership in Professional Organizations

•Women comprised 27% and men 73% of “top critics” with reviews appearing on Rotten Tomatoes in spring 2016. This represents an increase of 5 percentage points from 2013 when women accounted for 22% of top critics (see Figure 1).

•Women wrote 24% and men 76% of the reviews by “top critics” during the study period. This represents an increase of 6 percentage points from 2013 when women wrote 18% of reviews appearing on Rotten Tomatoes (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1.
Percentages of Male and Female Writers and Reviews by Male and Female Writers*

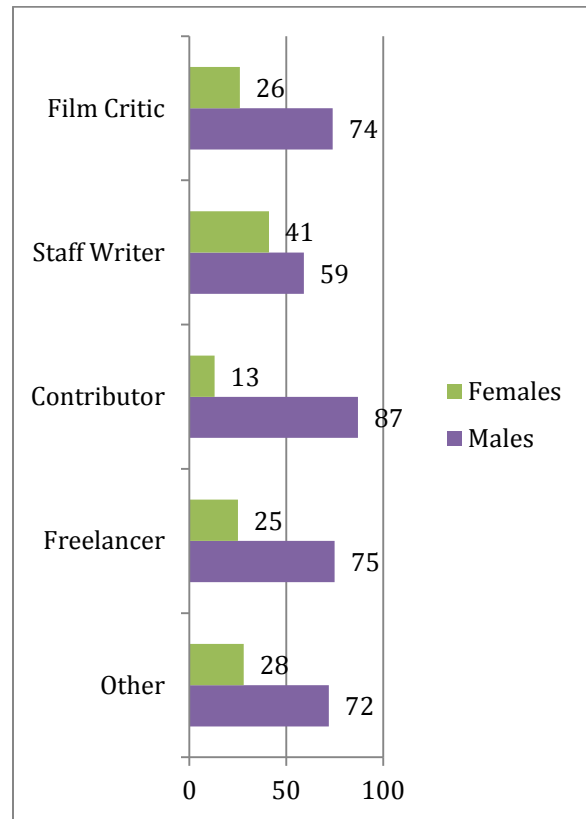


•In spring 2016, female “top critics” wrote an average of 15 and male “top critics” an average of 17 reviews.

•Men outnumbered women in every job title category considered. Men comprised 87% of contributors, 75% of freelancers, 74% of film critics, 72% of individuals with other titles (e.g., television critics, features editors, etc.), and 59% of staff writers (see Figure 2).

In contrast, women accounted for 41% of staff writers, 28% of individuals with other titles, 26% of film critics, 25% of freelancers, and 13% of contributors.

*Figure 2.
Percentages of Male and Female Writers by Job Title*



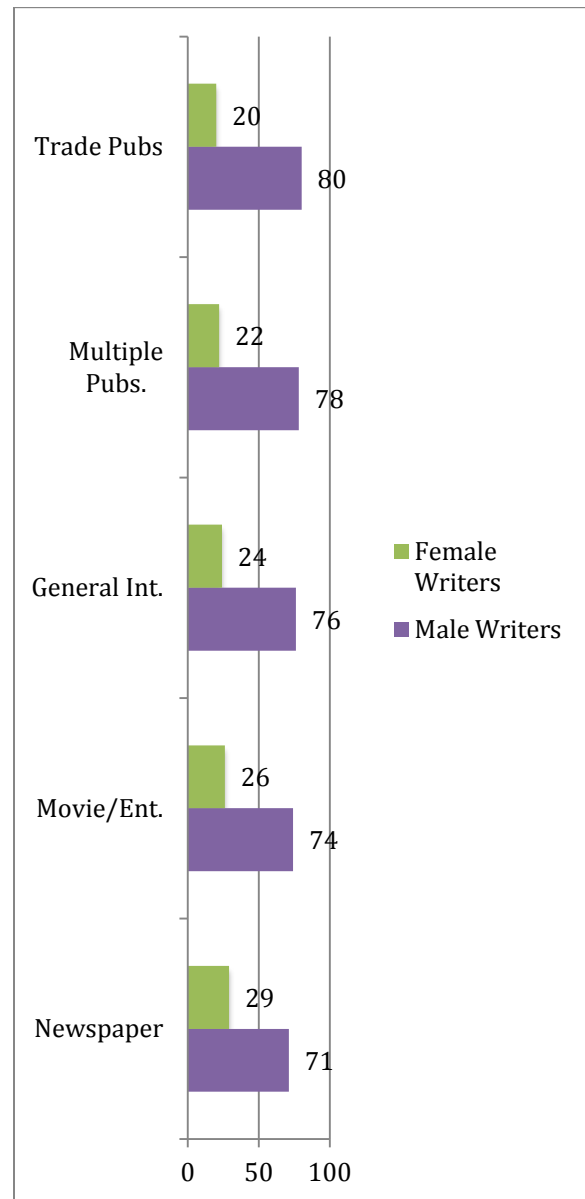
•Male writers outnumbered female writers in every type of publication considered. Men accounted for 80% of those writing for trade publications such as *The Hollywood Reporter*, *The Wrap*, and *Variety*, 78% of individuals writing for multiple publications, 76% of those writing for general interest magazines and websites such as *Time* and *Salon*, 74% of individuals writing for movie/entertainment magazines and websites, and 71% of those writing for newspapers (see Figure 3).

In contrast, women comprised 29% of individuals writing for newspapers, 26% of those writing for movie/entertainment magazines and websites, 24% of individuals writing for general interest magazines and websites, 22% of those writing for multiple sites, and 20% of individuals writing for trade publications.

•One measure of professional involvement and visibility is membership in organizations such as the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, New York Film Critics Circle, and National Society of Film Critics. Among the “top critics” considered in this study, men were more likely than women to belong to professional critics organizations. 40% of men belonged to one professional organization, 11% to two organizations, and 3% to three or more organizations. 46% did not have membership in any professional organizations.

In contrast, 26% of women belonged to one professional organization, 8% to 2 organizations, and 3% to 3 or more organizations. 63% did not belong to any professional organizations.

Figure 3.
Percentages of Male and Female Writers by Type of Publication/Site



Sex of Film Writers and Genre

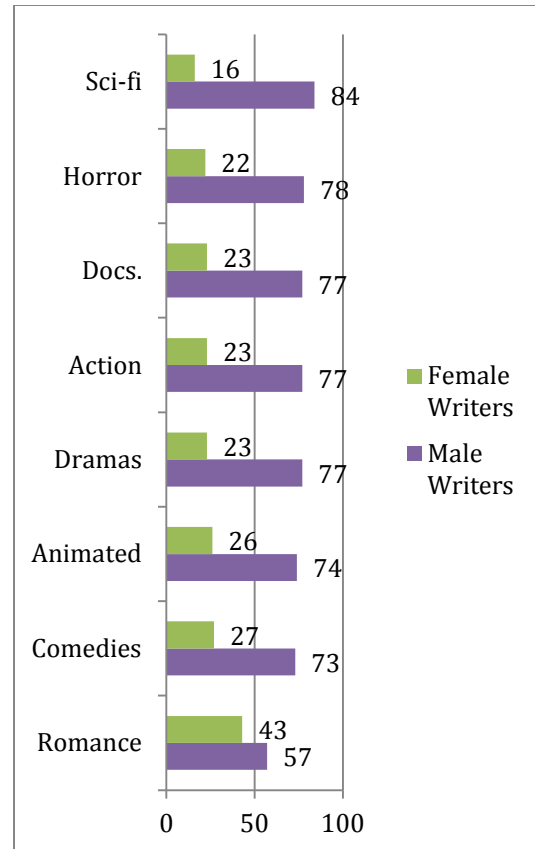
•Men wrote more reviews of films than women in all genres. The greatest discrepancy between male and female writers occurred for science fiction features. Men penned 84% and women 16% of reviews in this genre. The greatest parity occurred for romantic comedies and dramas. Men wrote 57% and women 43% of these reviews. It is unclear whether women prefer and thus choose to review films in certain genres or if editors tend to assign films in certain genres to women (see Figure 4).

•In other genres, men wrote 78% and women 22% of reviews about horror features. Men wrote 77% and women 23% of reviews about dramas, action features, and documentaries. Men wrote 74% and women 26% of reviews about animated features. Men wrote 73% and women 27% of reviews about comedies.

Sex of Film Writers and Sex of Protagonists

•A larger proportion of the films reviewed by women than by men featured female protagonists. For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told. 34% of reviews written by women but 24% of reviews written by men featured at least one female protagonist. (When considering all of the reviews written by males and females, 26% of the reviews were about films with female protagonists.) It is not clear whether this difference is due to the preferences of writers or to editorial assignments.

*Figure 4.
Percentages of Male and Female
Writers by Genre*



Conversely, a larger proportion of the films reviewed by men than by women had male protagonists only. 76% of reviews written by men but 66% of reviews written by women featured male protagonists. (When considering all of the reviews written by males and females, 74% were about films with male protagonists.) It is not clear whether this difference is due to the choices made by writers or their editors.

•On average, male and female writers did not differ substantially in the quantitative ratings they award films featuring female protagonists, whether they are expressed as stars, reels, grades, or some percentage score. When all of the various scoring systems used by writers are standardized into a percentage system, female writers awarded an average rating of 66% to films with at least one female protagonist. Similarly, male writers awarded an average rating of 66% to films with at least one female protagonist. However, male and female writers differed slightly in their ratings of films featuring male protagonists only. Females awarded these films an average rating of 69% while males gave these films an average rating of 65%.

About the Center

The *Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film* at San Diego State University is home to the longest running and most comprehensive studies of women's behind-the-scenes employment and on-screen portrayals. Dedicated to producing extensive and timely research on women in film and television, studies generated by the Center provide the foundation for a realistic discussion of women's employment and representation. For more information, visit the Center's website at <http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu> or contact Dr. Lauzen at lauzen@mail.sdsu.edu.