

Thumbs Down 2018: Film Critics and Gender, and Why It Matters

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First conducted in 2007, *Thumbs Down* is the most comprehensive and longest-running study of women's representation and impact as film reviewers available. This report considers individuals working for print, broadcast, and online outlets during spring 2018. The study is sponsored by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University.

Key Findings

•**The majority of print, broadcast, and online film reviewers in the U.S. are male. There are approximately 2 male reviewers for every 1 female reviewer.** Men comprise 68% and women 32% of all film reviewers (see Figure 1).

•**On average, men wrote slightly more reviews than women during spring 2018 (13 vs. 11).** Men wrote 71% and women 29% of all reviews (see Figure 2).

•**Male writers outnumber female writers in every job title category.** For example, men comprise 77% and women 23% of *film critics*. Men account for 68% and women 32% of *freelancers*.

•**In every type of media outlet, male reviewers dramatically outnumber female reviewers.** For example, men account for 70% and women 30% of individuals writing for trade publications such as *Variety* and *The Wrap*. Men comprise 68% and women 32% of reviewers writing for newspapers.

•**Men comprise the majority of those writing reviews about films in every genre.** For example, men write 78% and women 22% of reviews about horror films. Men write 70% and women 30% of reviews about dramas.

Figure 1.
Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers

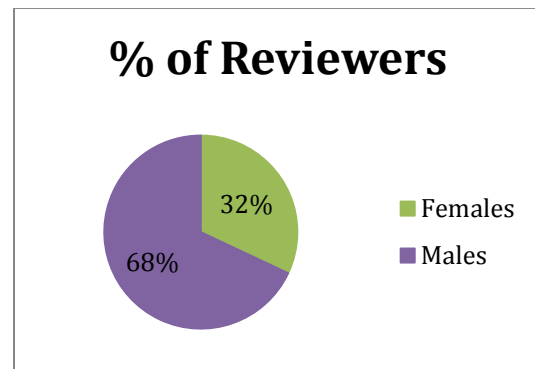
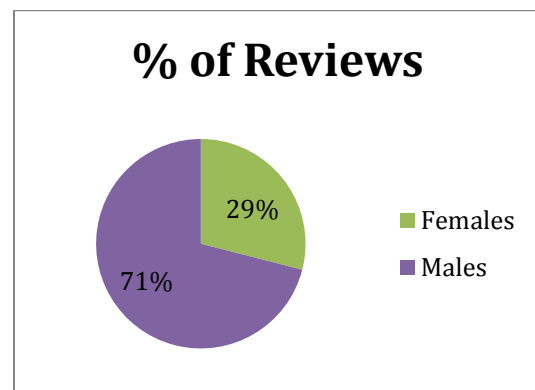


Figure 2.
Percentages of Reviews Written by Males and Females



•**A larger proportion of films reviewed by women than by men feature female protagonists.** 51% of reviews written by women but 37% of reviews written by men are about films featuring at least one female protagonist. Conversely, a higher proportion of the reviews written by men than by women are about films with exclusively male protagonists. 63% of reviews written by men but 49% of reviews written by women are about films featuring male protagonists only. It is unclear whether these differences are due to the preferences of writers or assignments made by editors.

•**83% of all female critics are white, 14% are minorities, and 3% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity.** 82% of all male critics are white, 9% are minorities, and 9% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity.

•**On average, women reviewers award higher ratings than men to films with female protagonists.** Women writers award an average rating of 74% and males an average rating of 62% to films with female protagonists. The two sets of critics differ less in their ratings of films with male protagonists. Women writers award an average of 73% and men 70% to films with male protagonists.

•**A larger proportion of films reviewed by women than by men are directed by women.** 25% of films reviewed by women but 10% of films reviewed by men have female directors. Conversely, 90% of films reviewed by men but 75% of films reviewed by women have male directors. It is unclear whether these differences are due to the preferences of writers or assignments made by editors.

•**When reviewing films directed by women, female writers are more likely than males to mention the name of the director in their reviews and to speak about the director in exclusively positive ways.** Female reviewers mention the name of a woman director in 89% of their reviews and males in 81% of their reviews. Further, female critics make only positive comments about those women directors in 52% of their reviews. Men make exclusively positive comments about women directors in 38% of their reviews.

This study considers 4,111 reviews written by 341 individuals working for print, broadcast, and online outlets in spring 2018 and whose work is included on the Rotten Tomatoes website. Over the years, this study has considered 16,420 reviews written by 919 reviewers. The reviewers were chosen using a systematic random sampling method. Only U.S.-based critics who wrote a minimum of three reviews during March, April, and May 2018 were included in the study. For a description of the criteria RT uses to select critics, go to <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/helpdesk/critics>.

This report includes two major sections. The first section reports the findings on the *representation* of women among the population of film reviewers working for print, broadcast, and online outlets in 2018. Included in this section are the numbers of women and men writing reviews, their job titles, the media outlets they work for, and the film genres reviewed. This section also considers the *impact* of the gender imbalance, reporting on the relationship between the gender of film writers and the gender of

protagonists; the relationship between the gender of writers and their quantitative assessment of films (i.e., assignment of stars, grades, etc.); and the relationship between the gender of writers and the mention and discussion of the gender of directors. The second section considers many of these relationships for “top critics” on the Rotten Tomatoes website. This section also provides historical comparisons of the representation of women, comparing 2018 data, with figures obtained in 2016 and 2013.

Findings/All Reviewers

- The majority of print, broadcast, and online film reviewers in the U.S. are male. Male reviewers outnumber female reviewers by approximately 2 to 1. Men comprise 68% and women 32% of all film reviewers writing for print, broadcast, and online outlets (see Figure 1).

- Male writers wrote an average of 13 reviews in spring 2018. Female writers wrote an average of 11 reviews during the same time period.

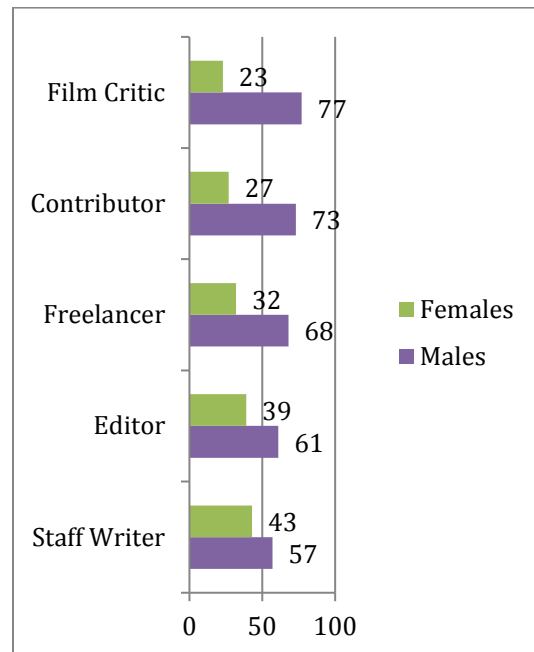
- Men wrote 71% and women 29% of all reviews (see Figure 2).

- The vast majority of film reviewers are white. 83% of female reviewers are white, 14% are minorities, and 3% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity. 82% of male reviewers are white, 9% are minorities, and 9% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity.

- Men outnumber women reviewers in every job category considered. Men comprise 77% of film critics, 73% of

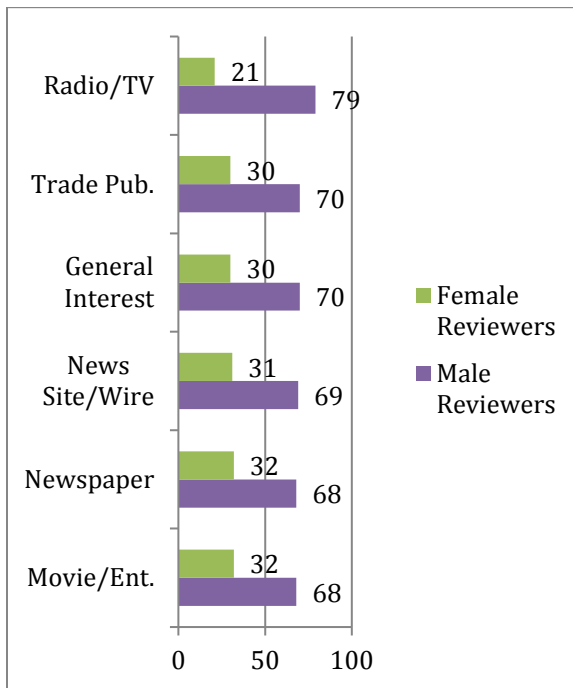
contributors, 68% of freelancers, 61% of editors, and 57% of staff writers. Women account for 23% of film critics, 27% of contributors, 32% of freelancers, 39% of editors, and 43% of staff writers (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.
Percentages of Male and Female Reviewers by Job Title



- Men outnumber women writers in every type of media outlet considered. Men account for 79% of those writing for radio/TV, 70% for trade publications such as *Variety* and *The Wrap*, 70% for general interest magazines and websites, 69% for a news website or wire service such as the Associated Press, 68% for newspapers, and 68% for movie or entertainment publications.

*Figure 4.
Percentages of Male and Female
Reviewers by Type of Media Outlet*

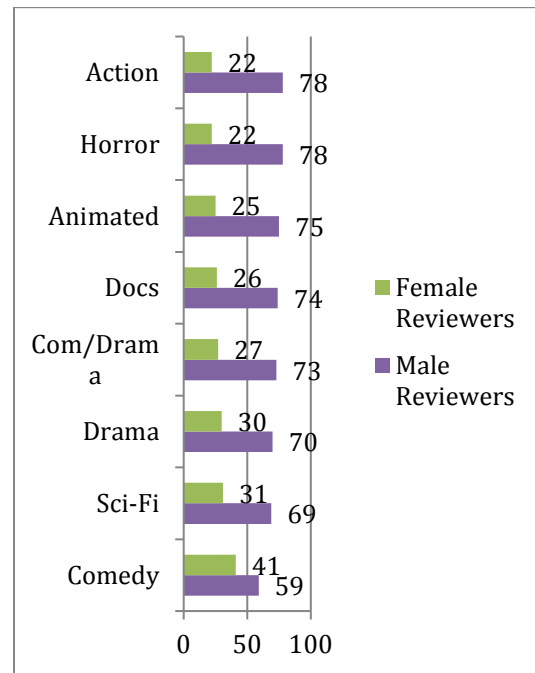


Women comprise 21% of those writing for radio/TV, 30% for trade publications, 30% for general interest magazines and websites, 31% for news websites or news wire services, 32% for newspapers, and 32% for movie or entertainment magazines and sites (see Figure 4).

•Men comprise the majority of those writing reviews about films in every genre. Men account for 78% of those writing reviews for action and horror features, 75% writing reviews for animated features, 74% writing reviews for documentaries, 73% writing reviews for comedy/dramas, 70% writing reviews for dramas, 69% of those writing reviews for science fiction features, and 59% of those writing reviews for comedies.

In contrast, women make up 22% of those writing reviews for action and horror features, 25% writing reviews for

*Figure 5.
Percentages of Male and Female
Reviewers by Genre*



animated features, 26% writing reviews for documentaries, 27% writing reviews for comedy/dramas, 30% writing reviews for dramas, 31% writing reviews for science fiction features, and 41% writing reviews for comedies (see Figure 5).

•A larger proportion of films reviewed by women than by men feature female protagonists. For the purposes of this study, protagonists are the characters from whose perspective the story is told. 51% of the reviews written by women but 37% of the reviews written by men are about films featuring at least one female protagonist.

Conversely, a larger proportion of films reviewed by men than by women have exclusively male protagonists. 63% of the reviews written by men but 49% of those written by women are about films with male protagonists. It is not clear

whether these differences are due to writer preferences or to editorial assignments.

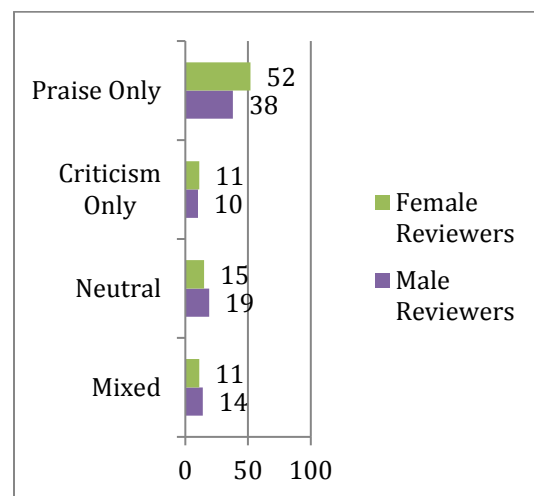
•On average, women reviewers award higher quantitative ratings than men to films with female protagonists, whether they are expressed as stars, reels, grades, or some percentage score. When all of the various scoring systems used by writers are standardized into a percentage system, female writers award an average rating of 74% and males an average rating of 62% to films with female protagonists. Male and female critics differ less in their ratings of films with male protagonists. Women writers award an average of 73% and men 70% to films with male protagonists.

•A higher proportion of films reviewed by females than by males are directed by women. 25% of the reviews written by women but 10% written by men have women directors. Conversely, 90% of the reviews written by men but 75% by women have male directors. It is not clear whether these differences are due to writer preferences or to editorial assignments.

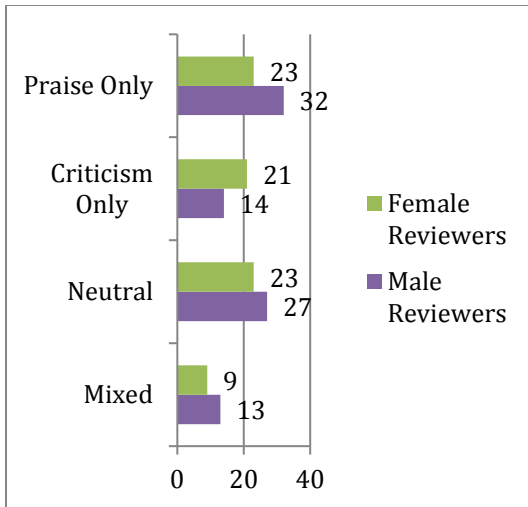
•When reviewing films by women directors, female writers are more likely than males to mention the name of the director in their reviews. 89% of reviews written by women but 81% of reviews written by men mention the name of the woman who directed the film. Conversely, when reviewing films by men directors, male writers are more likely than females to mention the name of the director in their reviews. 86% of reviews written by men and 77% of reviews written by women mention the name of the man who directed the film.

•When reviewing films by women directors, women writers are more likely than men to use only complimentary words and phrases when talking about the skills, work, and/or vision of the director. 52% of the reviews written by women but 38% of those written by men include only positive comments about the woman director (see Figure 6). In contrast, male writers are more likely than females to use exclusively complimentary words and phrases when talking about male directors. 32% of reviews written by men and 23% of reviews written by women use only positive descriptors when talking about male directors (see Figure 7). Examples of the positive descriptors used to talk about both women and men directors include words and phrases such as “master,” “impresario,” and “explosive competence.” Critics also make predictions of future success for both male and female directors based on

Figure 6.
Comparison of Comments Made About Women Directors by Female and Male Reviewers



*Figure 7.
Comparison of Comments Made About
Men Directors by Female and Male
Reviewers*



their current work. An example of this type of comment suggests that the director “will be making movies for a very long time to come.”

- When reviewing films by women directors, male and female writers are about equally likely to include only criticisms about the director. 10% of reviews written by male writers and 11% of reviews written by women make exclusively negative remarks about woman directors. However, male writers are less likely to include only criticisms of a male director. 14% of reviews by men and 21% of reviews written by women include only criticisms of male directors.

Examples of criticisms include words and phrases such as “hack,” “tone-deaf,” and “fails to bring the film to life with any real unpredictability or passion.”

- When reviewing films by women directors, women writers are less likely than males to talk about the director using neutral terms and/or phrases. 15%

of female reviewers and 19% of male reviewers make neutral observations about a woman’s directorial skills and abilities.

Women reviewers are also less likely than their male counterparts to make neutral observations about men directors. 23% of female reviewers and 27% of male reviewers make neutral observations about male directors, such as noting that one director replaced another, without further comment.

- Women reviewers are slightly less likely than their male counterparts to offer a mix of positive and negative comments about a woman director. 11% of female reviewers and 14% of male reviewers make both positive and negative comments about a female director in a single review.

Women reviewers are also less likely than males to make both positive and negative comments about men directors. 9% of female reviewers and 13% of male reviewers make positive and negative comments about a male director in a single review.

Findings/“Top Critics” Only

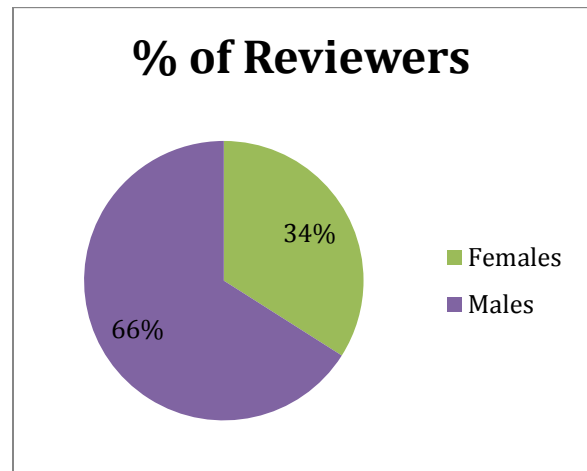
According to the Rotten Tomatoes website, writers considered top critics “must be published at a print publication in the top 10% of circulation, employed as a film critic at a national broadcast outlet for no less than five years, or employed as a film critic for an editorial-based website with over 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 following analysis, individuals must be U.S.-based critics and have written a minimum of three reviews during the study period. As these film writers work for the largest media outlets in the U.S., their reviews reach large numbers of viewers, listeners, and readers.

- In spring 2018, women comprised 34% and men 66% of “top critics” with reviews appearing on the site (see Figure 8).

- The percentage of female reviewers in the larger population of reviewers is slightly lower (32%) than the percentage of female “top critics” (34%).

- Female “top critics” wrote an average of 12 reviews, while male “top critics” wrote an average of 18 reviews over the study period. Men wrote 75% and women 25% of reviews (see Figure 9).

*Figure 8.
Percentages of Male and Female “Top Critics”*



*Figure 9.
Percentages of Reviews Written by Male and Female “Top Critics”*

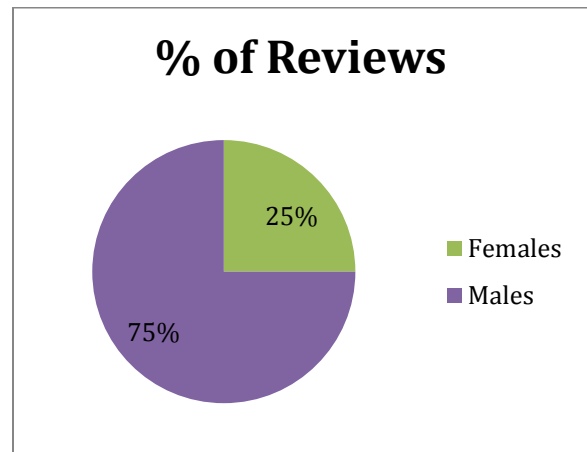
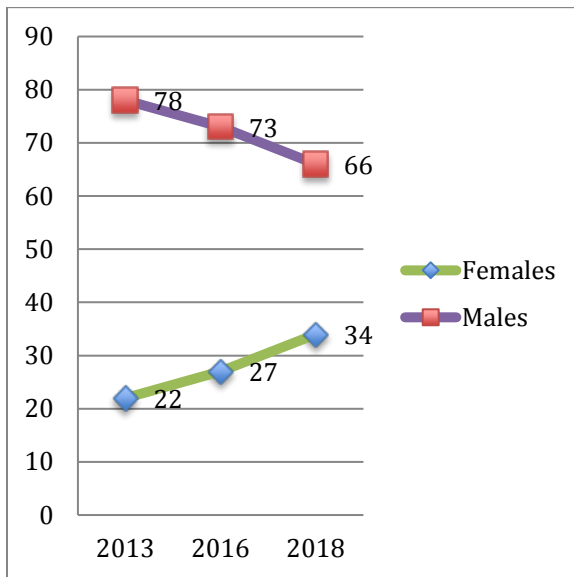


Figure 10.
Historical Comparison of Gender of
“Top Critics”



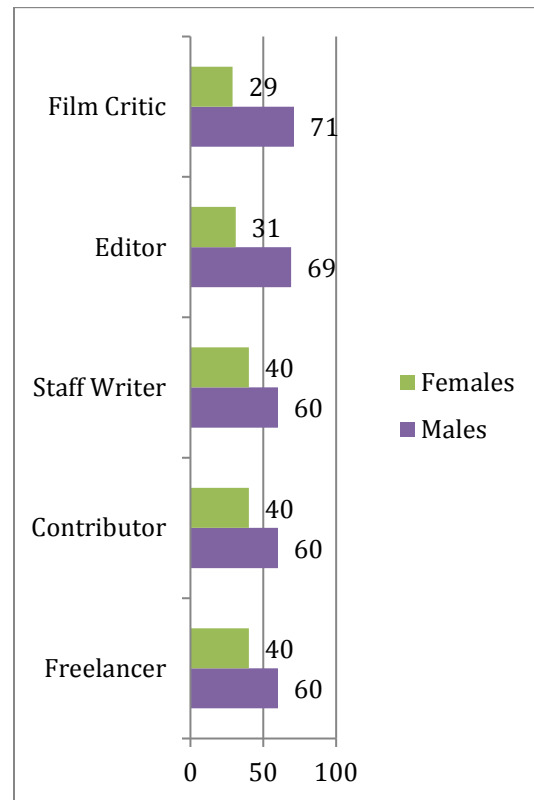
•Over the last 6 years, the percentage of female “top critics” has increased by 12 percentage points. Women accounted for 22% of “top critics” in 2013, 27% in 2016, and 34% in 2018 (see Figure 10).

•The vast majority of “top critics” are white. 81% of female “top critics” are white, 16% are minorities, and 3% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity. 82% of male “top critics” are white, 7% are minorities, and 11% have an unknown racial/ethnic identity.

•Men outnumber women in every job title category considered. Men comprise 71% of film critics, 69% of editors, 60% of staff writers, 60% of contributors, and 60% of freelancers. In contrast, women account for 29% of film critics, 31% of editors, 40% of staff writers, 40% of contributors, and 40% of freelancers (see Figure 11).

•A comparison of figures from 2016 and 2018 reveals that the percentage of

Figure 11.
Percentages of Male and Female “Top
Critics” by Title



women with the title of film critic increased from 26% in 2016 to 29% in 2018. However, the percentage of women working as staff writers stayed relatively stable over the last few years (41% in 2016 and 40% in 2018). Women made substantial gains in the less stable and less prestigious categories of contributors (13% in 2016 to 40% in 2018) and freelancers (25% in 2016 to 40% in 2018).

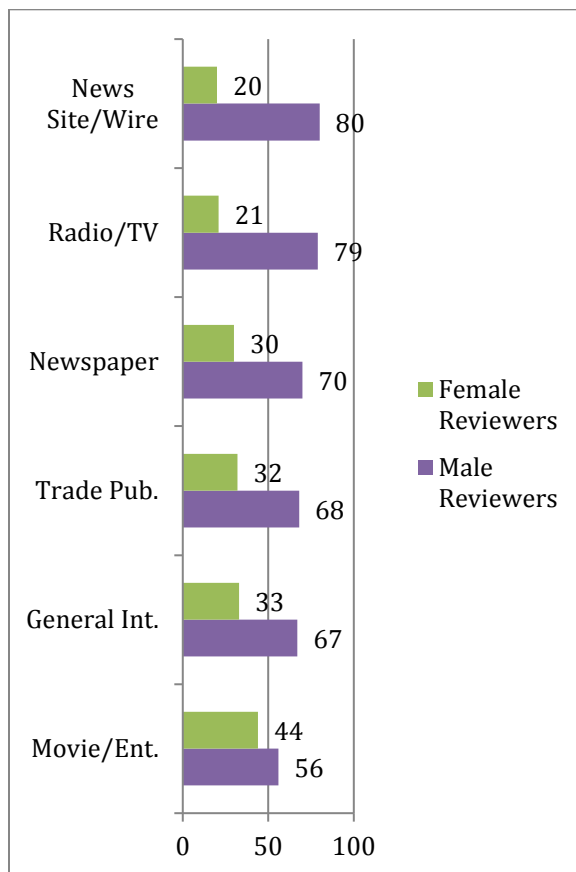
•Male writers outnumber females in every type of publication considered. Men comprise 80% of those writing for news websites and news wires, 79% for radio/TV, 70% for newspapers, 68% for trade publications, 67% for general interest magazines and websites, and

56% for movie or entertainment magazines or websites. In contrast, female writers account for 20% of those writing for news websites and news wires, 21% for radio/TV, 30% writing for newspapers, 32% writing for trade publications, 33% writing for general interest magazines and websites, and 44% writing for movie or entertainment magazines and websites (see Figure 12).

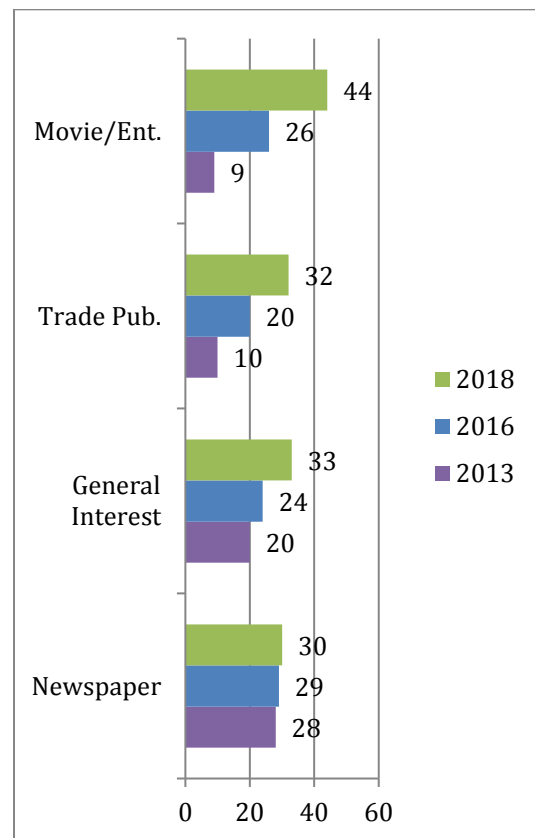
•A comparison of women working at various types of publications over time reveals that the female “top critics” have made steady gains across the types of publications considered. Women made

the greatest gains at movie and entertainment magazines and websites, and the smallest at newspapers. At movie and entertainment magazines and websites, women comprise 44% of reviewers in 2018, up 35 percentage points from 9% in 2013. At trade publications, women account for 32% of reviewers in 2018, up 22 percentage points from 10% in 2013. At general interest publications and websites, women comprise 33% of all reviewers in 2018, up 13 percentage points from 20% in 2013. At newspapers, women account for 30% of reviewers in 2018, up 2 percentage points from 28% in 2013 (see Figure 13).

*Figure 12.
Percentages of Male and Female “Top Critics” by Type of Publication*



*Figure 13.
A Historical Comparison of Female Reviewers by Type of Publication*



•A larger proportion of the films reviewed by female “top critics” than by males feature female protagonists. 55% of reviews written by women but 37% of reviews written by men are about films featuring at least one female protagonist. Conversely, a larger proportion of the films reviewed by men than by women have male protagonists only. 63% of reviews written by men but only 44% of those written by women are about films featuring a male protagonist only. It is not clear whether these differences are due to writer preferences or to editorial assignments.

•A larger proportion of the films reviewed by female “top critics” than male “top critics” are of films with women directors. 28% of reviews by female critics but only 11% of reviews by male critics are for films with women directors.

In contrast, 90% of reviews by male “top critics” but 73% of reviews by females are about films with men directors. It is not clear whether these differences are due to writer preferences or to editorial assignments.

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 in film and television. Dedicated to producing the most current research available 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, <https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu>.