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Bill Schlotter

WRITING FOR FILM AND TELEVISION REMAINS THE ALMOST EXCLUSIVE PROVINCE OF YOUNG WHITE MALES, ACCORDING TO UCSB STUDY

When they first studied the age, gender and ethnicity of writers working in Hollywood's television and film industries in 1985, Denise and Bill Bielby, professors of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, found the profession dominated by white males.

Seventeen years later, little has changed, according to Bielbys' latest study, "Hollywood Dreams, Harsh Realities: Writing for Film and Television," just published in the Fall/Winter 2002 edition of "Contexts," the magazine of the American Sociological Association. Indeed, despite efforts to dismantle discrimination, the situation has worsened, with middle-aged and senior white male writers joining women and minorities on the sidelines watching white men under 40 get most of the jobs.

"Over the past two decades, women and minorities have made advances in almost every profession," Denise Bielby said. "Writing for film and television is a stark exception, where white males continue to dominate the telling of Hollywood's stories. In addition, the relentless pursuit of younger audiences has eroded career opportunities for many older writers, who now find themselves working at the

margins of the industry."

The injustice extends beyond the writers who are denied employment, the Bielbys said. It is also of concern that the ideas and perspectives of women, minorities and older people are being denied access to Hollywood's immense national and international audience.

"In short, it's a matter of whose stories get told," Denise Bielby said. "Even when we see persons of color or minorities featured in prominent roles in a Hollywood production, the story is almost always told from the perspective of a white, male writer."

After the Bielby's initial findings were published in 1987, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) -- the union that represents film and television writers -- and civil rights organizations made substantial efforts to fight discrimination.

In their latest study, the Bielby's discuss the factors they believe caused those efforts to fail:

Hollywood projects often are financed by foreign investors who, believing that movies featuring minority themes and performers do not sell overseas, refuse to bankroll such projects.

Producers sell projects to investors based on the reputations of the people -- including writers -- they have assembled to do the work, thereby shutting out those not already working in the business.

There is no system of equal opportunity accountability in Hollywood, and arbitrary and subjective hiring practices go unchallenged. Given that movies and television programs are made by a partnership between a production company, a studio, and a financier, it is unclear who would set up such a system and who would oversee it.

In an industry that often uses stereotypes to tell its stories, typecasting of writers and others is rampant. A program targeting a young audience has young writers; African-American writers get assignments on programs featuring African-American themes but can't get hired elsewhere.

As in other industries, women are seen as outsiders in the clubby, male-dominated executive boardrooms and are denied access to important personal relationships and networks that are vital to working in Hollywood.

In their paper, the Bielbys point out that writers have recently taken their cause to court. Class action suits against 23 of the largest networks, studios, production companies, and talent agencies are scheduled to be heard in Los Angeles Superior Court on Jan. 10, 2003. About 150 writers are plaintiffs.

A television writer has filed a related individual action suit against the WB Network Partners and Twentieth Century Fox Television alleging that he was passed over for promotion and ultimately terminated from his writing position because of his age.

The cases have ramifications that extend beyond the parties involved, the Bielbys said. In the conclusion of their paper, they write: "The stakes are high, not just for fairness in employment, but also for whose stories get told to a global audience."

Note to editors: Denise and Bill Bielby can be contacted directly: Denise Bielby (805) 893-4264, bielbyd@soc.ucsb.edu.

Bill Bielby (805) 893-3228, bielbyw@soc.ucsb.edu.

Copies of the article are available by contacting Johanna Ebner in the Public Information Office of the American Sociological Association at (202) 383-9005 or pubinfo@asanet.org.

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