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USC Annenberg Study Shows Recent Top Films Lack Females on Screen and Behind Camera

Los Angeles--February 23, 2010. A recent study of the 100 top-grossing films of 2007 by the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism found that females continue to be a large minority both on the screen and behind the camera. However, when women are decision-makers behind the scenes, the number of female characters in a film increases.

The research, led by communication professor **Stacy L. Smith** and her team, showed that only 29.9 percent of the 4,379 speaking characters identified in the films were female, while 83 percent of all directors, writers and producers were male. Smith said Hollywood has been male-dominated for decades, and the recent data show not much has changed. Top-100 films were based on cumulative box office revenue as compiled by Nielsen EDI Film Source.

“Our findings show a representational roadblock for females in film,” Smith said. “They do not occupy ‘half of the cinematic sky’ – far from it. There is a dearth of females working in the movie industry no matter which way you look at the data.”

The study showed the number of female actors grows when women have influential roles in the production of a movie as writers, directors and producers.

Smith said the most powerful way to increase the number of female actors may be to increase the number of women who direct or co-direct movies. The number of female actors in movies with at least one female director rose from 29.3 percent to 44.6 percent when compared to movies with only a male director. She said those findings should be interpreted with caution because only three of the top 100 films in 2007 had a female director, however, a previous study by Smith and her research team on Academy Award-nominated films from 1977 to 2006 in the Best Picture category showed similar results.

“The encouraging finding from this report is that women behind the scenes matter,” Smith said. “The presence of women in these important gate-keeping positions was associated with increases in the number of girls or women on screen. We suspected this would be the case and the data confirmed our expectations.”

Movies with one or more female screenwriters had 34.9 percent female actors (compared to 28.1 percent with only male writers), while movies produced by one or more females had 30.8 percent female actors (26.4 percent with only male producers).

This year-long study was the first in an annual series funded by USC Annenberg to study race and gender in film.

“We’ve made it a priority at USC Annenberg to examine issues related to diversity,” USC Annenberg Dean **Ernest J. Wilson III** said. “It is vital for researchers such as Professor Smith to demonstrate through data what key industries are or aren’t doing well. This study illustrates the impact communication scholarship can have on issues of social importance. Our hope is that an open dialogue about lack of diversity in cinema will lead to a positive shift in the status quo.”

"These important findings provide valuable insights that we will utilize as we continue to engage content creators to improve gender representation and portrayals," commented Geena Davis, founder, The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media.

“Future research should explore women’s experiences in film – both on-screen and behind the camera—as well as the relationship between the gender of studio executives and portrayals of character gender in cinematic content,” Smith said.

The complete research report can be found online at
<http://annenberg.usc.edu/News%20and%20Events/News/~media/PDFs/07GenderReport.ashx>

About the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism

Located in Los Angeles at the University of Southern California, the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism (annenberg.usc.edu) is a national leader in education and scholarship in the fields of communication, journalism, public diplomacy and public relations. With an enrollment of more than 2,200 students, USC Annenberg offers doctoral, graduate and undergraduate degree programs, as well as continuing development programs for working professionals, across a broad scope of academic inquiry. The school’s comprehensive curriculum emphasizes the core skills of leadership, innovation, service and entrepreneurship and draws upon the resources of a networked university located in the media capital of the world.