

The Women Who Produce the Media: A Podcast Series

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Abstract: In 2018, only 26% of the top 250 grossing films were produced by women. Still, there are statistically more women working as producers in the film industry than any other Above-the-Line position. Through a three part podcast series that includes interviews with six women working as Line Producers, Production Supervisors, and Executive Producers and a paper, *The Women Who Produce the Media: A Podcast Series* sheds light on the current state of the film industry in the wake of the #MeToo movement from the perspectives of women working in it. Organized through the lense of the past, present, and future of women in film. The Women Who Produce the Media: A Podcast series explores the intersection of the film industry and current women's issues, along with setting out a solution for how to expand diversity among the film industry.

Keywords: Digital Media Production; Digital Media and Journalism; Communication Studies; Women Gender and Sexuality Studies; Female Producers; Film; Film History; Producers; Women in Film; Television, Commercials; Audio; Podcast; Diversity; Representation;

Women working in Above-the-Line positions in movies and TV is not new to the film industry. Since the Silent Era of film and the early pioneers of cinema, women have been a part of creating films through writing directing and cinematography; still the female pioneers of film are not widely known today, instead, the public is shocked when a female director cinematographer is nominated for an Academy Award. Women working in Above-the-Line positions in film today is widely unspoken about, aside from research which reminds us of how few women in positions of power in Hollywood and on film sets. Above-the-Line is the term used to describe roles of a film production that are “essential” to the project’s success. This usually includes directors, writers, producers, and lead actors. These positions have been highlighted in recent years in the light of the #MeToo movement, which put a spotlight on Above-the-Line career veterans, for their roles in sexual assault and harassment around movie sets with other crew members, and as most widely reported, actresses. The impact of the #metoo movement has forced our society to challenge how the film industry functions internally, along with how that impacts the content being distributed to the world. Therefore it is important to look at who is behind the content we absorb every day as well as highlight underrepresented voices and narratives. The rest of this paper will focus on the narratives of six female producers working in the film industry, mainly in New York City. Along with discussing their career, the women talked about the impact of the #MeToo movement in the past few years, as well as the way women’s issues tend to intersect with the culture and work of the film industry. This paper is an accompaniment to the podcast series, The Women Who Produce the Media and should be read with it.

A Brief History

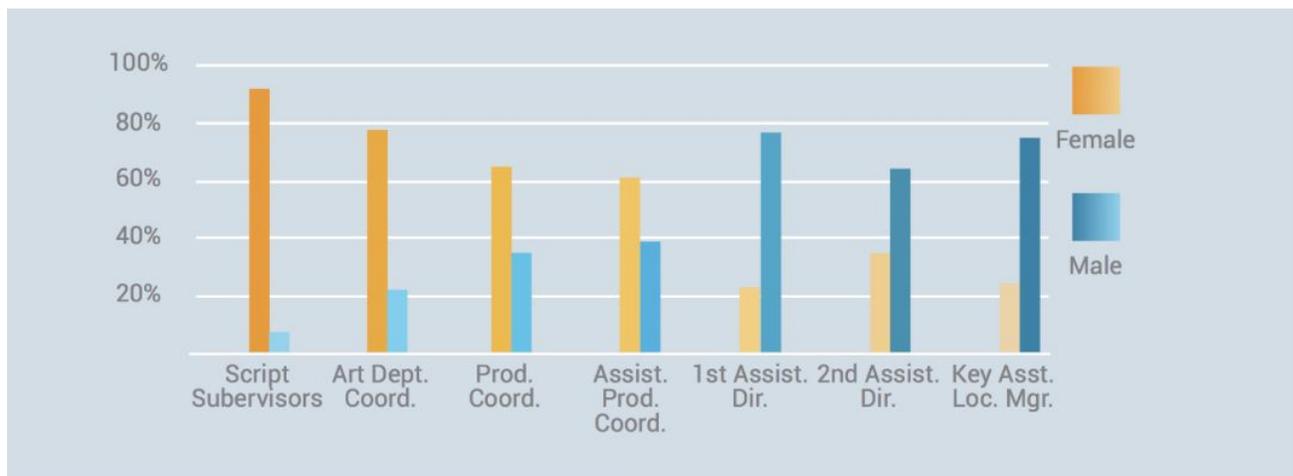
Along with discussing the current state of women in film production, it is first important to take a step back and acknowledge the history of women in film and how the industry has gotten to this point. First, it is important to remember when talking about history that it is shaped through the eyes of who is telling it. In our society, white, straight, cisgendered men are usually the ones telling the stories, therefore we are educated through their eyes, not necessarily what is the reality. Starting in the Silent Era of film, women held positions as writers, directors, and cinematographers, but they were not usually acknowledged for their works. Two of these women, Alice Guy Blache and Lois Weber, were two women who thrived during this era of film. Guy Blache created the first narrative piece of film and owned her own studio and production company, Solax, which was based out of New Jersey. Lois Weber was a revolutionary actress, director, producer, and screenwriter who in 1915 brought the first full-frontal female nude scene to the screen. Along with this, her style included always bringing to light social justice and humanity to her audiences. Women who worked in the early age of cinema did not necessarily see themselves as revolutionary or even as female filmmakers, they saw themselves only as filmmakers because it was easier not to acknowledge gender. Still, as it is taught in every Women Gender and Sexuality Studies class, “the personal is political”, and even if these women such as Alice Guy Blache and Lois Weber, did not want to be seen as women when doing their work, they paved the way for more women to have roles in above the line positions. Moving into the Golden Age of Film, the number of women working in above the line positions decreased drastically. As big film studios began to take over and push out smaller companies, women were pushed out as well. Women were not pushed out entirely but forced into roles like wardrobe, and script supervising, or other roles that were not necessarily “creative”. This goes back to the

concept of socialized gender roles and what is “men's work” (money, being creative), and what is “women’s work” (easy to follow, mundane, and organizational tasks). By the end of the era there was only one female director of the period, Dorothy Arzner, and with her accomplishments like directing 24 films and creating the boom pole, the industry would not have evolved, but still this major drop of women in Above-the-Line positions had a drastic effect of women working those jobs in the future, and the industry has never fully recovered from it.

Why Female Producers?

The recovery of isolating women in the film industry to specific roles still has a major effect on the landscape of Above-the-Line positions and the spread of women among them. According to The Working Idea’s study from June 2018 as shown in Table 1, around 90% of script supervisors working in IATSE Local 871 (Hollywood) are women, compared to 1st Assistant Director where the makeup of women in that role is about 20%.

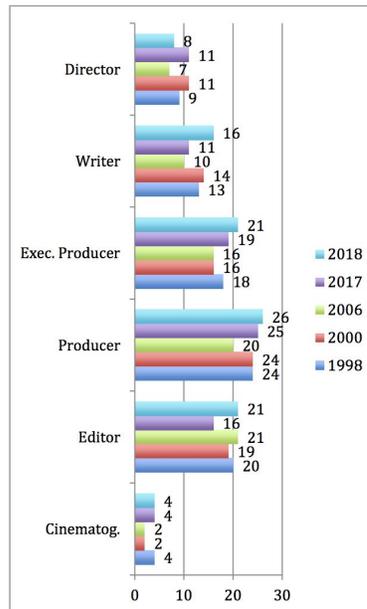
Table 1



This shows how the industry is still stuck in the makeup of the Golden Age of cinema, and how little progress there has been since to merge women back into creative, Above-the-Line production roles. Along with this, information it is important to look at the progress of women working in above the line positions. Table 2 from the Celluloid Ceiling shows the change in women in Above-the-Line positions for the Top-250 grossing films from that year. This distribution of women in roles is important because it showcases the current layout of women's roles in creative positions.

Table 2

*Figure 2.
Historical Comparison of Percentages of
Women Employed Behind the Scenes on
Top 250 Films by Role*



Looking at the Table above, it is clear that there has been little to no change over the past 10 years among how many women are working in Above-the-Line roles, but looking at the numbers there is one role that stands out, and that is producing content. The role of Producer comes off very vague on paper, essentially, the Producer is the person who takes on many roles, depending on the stage of production the project is in. From hiring the director and screenwriters of a project to pitching it to networks for distribution, the producer is the overseer of all the departments, and the position is deeply rooted in communication skills. Looking at Table 2 and according to Women and Hollywood.com, out of the top-grossing 250 films from 2018, 26% were produced by women and 21% had female executive producers. Statistically, there are more women producing than in any other above the line production job. This is the reason Female Producers are the focus of this project. To dive into the reasons the film industry has the gender make up it does, it is important, to begin with, roles where women already have their foot in the door, not saying that 25% women in the role is enough, but it is a start.

The Producers Interviewed: Background

The goal of this research project was to try to interview as many female producers as possible from different areas of the industry, whether it be TV, film, or commercials. In the end, 6 different female producers were interviewed, and the interviews compiled into 3 separate podcasts. Two one-on-one interviews and one round table discussion were compiled as primary research for this project (they will be linked after the work cited). Each woman opened up about their own experiences, struggles, and motivation, showcasing a wide array of reasons why women produce and the challenges they face.

The first woman interviewed was Willa Goldfeder, and we had a one-on-one sit down interview. Willa is a commercial line-producer living in New York City. She is married, and her partner also works in the film/media industry and together they have two young children. Willa was the only woman I talked to who was working in the advertising side of the industry as well as the only producer with small children. Her perspective on having a family and working in the industry, along with the fact that she was the youngest woman talked to gave her a unique perspective as well as more insight about what the future of the industry will look like as more young people come into different Above-the-Line or positions of power in the film and media industry.

The second one-on-one interview was with Kati Johnston, who is the Executive Producer on the CBS TV show, Bull. Kati considers herself to have worked on more hours of TV than many other producers working in New York City, and her resume can speak for itself. She has worked on shows including the original Law & Order, The Naked Brothers Band, Limitless, and Imagination Movers. Kati was also the only women interviewed that went to film school, making her pathway to Executive Producer different from the other women interviewed. During the interview, we talked a great deal about why she tends to hire women for Above-the-Line positions and how important diversity is to create meaningful content. Also, Kati is a single-mother but has children who are much older, so her perspective on motherhood in the industry was important.

The third podcast, “Girl Power”, consists of a round table discussion featuring four female producers, three of which are colleagues on the in-production HBO limited series The Undoing, which is set to premiere in 2020. Among the three women working on the limited

series, two of them, Celia Costas and Deb Dyer, are a producing team that has worked together for most of their career. Celia is a two-time Emmy award-winning Executive Producer for her work on HBO's *Angels in America*, which she and Deb worked on together. Deb came up to producing through the accounting department, and when asked, both her and Celia consider each other to be their mentors and credit one another for their success. Celia and Deb brought two other women along with them, Kelsi Russell, and Molly Allen. Kelsi is the Production Supervisor on HBO's *the Undoing* and has worked on shows like *30 Rock* (her first job in the industry) and *Limitless* in the past. It was important that she was a part of this conversation because of the fact that she was the only woman of color talked to for this project, and as the film industry struggles with a gender problem, they face an even larger problem with diversity. The last woman involved in the discussion was one of Celia and Deb's friends, Molly Allen, who is an Executive Producer working in Hollywood. She has worked on films like *Iron Man*, and *Fences*. Since Molly works on the West Coast, her perspective was unique, as everyone else interviewed for this project worked in New York City.

In general, these 6 women are all powerhouses. Throughout the interviews, they mention their sacrifices, their passion, and how much they love to work. The way the podcasts are structured include that all the women were asked the same set of questions, and based on their answers the conversation was driven in different directions. For example, during Willa's interview, the concept of motherhood came up often, so that is the central idea of the podcast. Overall, these 6 perspectives shed light on what women working in the film and media industry looked like in the past, what the current reality is, and what the future of women working in the

film will look like. To showcase this, highlights from all three podcasts were taken to showcase issues and common themes that were common between all three podcasts.

Theme 1: Competition Among Women in the Industry

Upon doing research for this project, one of the most common problems women in the film industry said they struggled with was competition among other women. A reason for this is that as mentioned earlier there are statistically very few women working in Above-the-Line positions, and along with this, as shown in Table 3 from the Celluloid Ceiling, most of the Top 250 films from 2018 did not have more than one women working in an Above-the-Line role.

Table 3

*Figure 3.
Percentages of Top 250 Films with No
Women in Roles Considered*

92% had no women directors
73% had no women writers
42% had no women exec. producers
27% had no women producers
74% had no women editors
96% had no women cinematographers

One quarter or 25% of films had no or
1 woman in the above roles

To showcase the extent of this competition women in the industry feel towards one another and the culture around women working in the industry, there is an example of this is from Leigh Janick for the New York Times Article, The Women of Hollywood Speak Out.

Janick says, “I often feel more pressure and intensity from the women I’m in meetings with. Because the scrutiny is on them: If you are favoring a woman, are you doing that just because you are a woman or not? So I think that’s actually the biggest thing that needs to be fixed in Hollywood. Not having women be afraid of other women would be a very nice thing to happen.” (Dowd). This quote sets the scene for what the believable reality is for women in Hollywood. To transfer this idea to the podcast series, the main goal was to see if what Janick is speaking about is the current reality for women working in film in New York City.

The answer the women gave across the board was surprising, none of them had felt that there was competition with women for roles, instead, they mentioned the likelihood for women to feel competition from men for roles. In New York the community of women working in film production is rather small, which according to Celia and Deb, has led to a really wonderful and supportive community of women in the industry, mentioning that they are “like a family”. When interviewing Kati, she spoke about how she has always felt very “supported and uplifted” by other women, because she recognizes their strengths and is not afraid to compliment them on it. From an advertising perspective, Willa speaks about how she has an all-female production team now, and has been working with more female directors than ever before, leading her to feel no real competition with other women just on the fact that they are both women who want to work.

Along with all of their personal perspectives based on the work that they do, the topic of the #MeToo came up. As spoken about in “Girl Power” the #MeToo movement turned the industry upside down (more of which will be discussed in a later section), but one of the biggest and most notable changes since the rise of the movement was a need for women to support, believe, and speak out for one another, leading to a change and rise in more community efforts

among women in the industry. Still, it is important to note that these findings are only applicable to the culture of the film industry in New York City, as Molly Allen noted that the culture around women working in film is different in Los Angeles because it is bigger. Still, even she said that this idea of competition is rare but it would be ignorant to say it did not exist.

Theme 2: Motherhood Vs. The Media Industry

When researching the women being interviewed it was important to understand the ways that personal life impacts their jobs or vice versa. One important women's issue that came up in the research was motherhood and the different societal beliefs that go along with it. These beliefs include the idea the women have to choose between. As stated in the book, *Competing Devotions: Career and Family Among Female Executives*, author Mary Blair-Loy states that "Conflict between work and family is a wrenching contradiction between powerful cultural understandings of who we are as competent and moral adults," (Blair-Loy, 5). She then continues to go into how these cultural understandings do not just shape our personal understandings but also have real-life consequences because they begin to define policy and punishment. A quote from writer and director Miranda July showcases what the culture towards working mothers is in the film industry today. She says, "My husband is shooting a movie, and our son is 3, and everyone around him is not going, 'Oh, my god, what are you going to do with your son?' We give fathers all kinds of permission to focus on their work, to be creatively consumed, but mothers with that same determination make everyone uneasy. The guilt is unreal,"(Dowd).

During recording the podcast, “Girl Power”, all four of the women I was talking to mentioned that they “do not have a personal life.” Upon explanation, what they meant was that none of them are married and none have children. Their main reasoning for this was that with a job that is so demanding, it is nice not to be responsible to anyone but themselves. Another idea they brought up during the conversation was that none of them wanted to be an “absent mother”. The idea of the “absent mother” is interesting because it is a common trope in our society that seems to hold true. The social construction of motherhood says that to be a good mother you need to be fully devoted to your children and constantly be there for them. In contrast, at the same time, women who are stay at home moms face constant shame for not being “driven” enough. The social construction of motherhood is complex and in some ways almost ironic, but to these four women, society has shaped and taught them what a mother should look and act like, and based on what they have learned, they do not believe they are fit to do it.

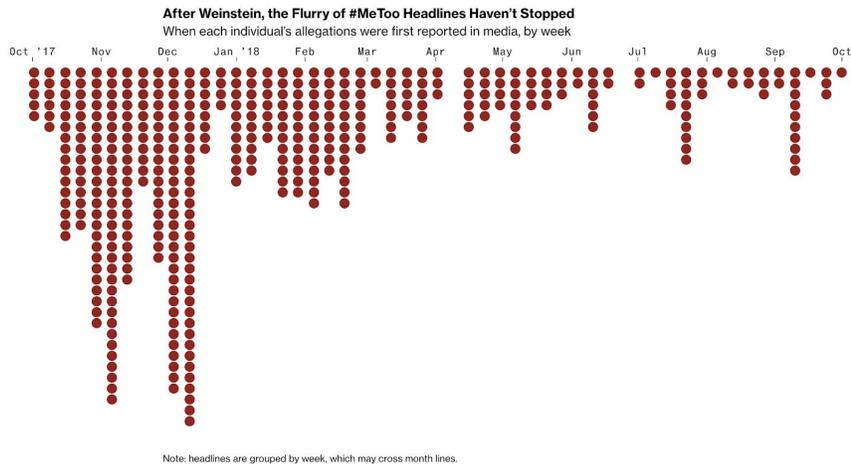
In contrast to the socialized ideas of motherhood, women like Kati and Willa both have family and are in powerful positions within their respective industries. Neither woman mentioned the specific socially constructed view on motherhood, but both did talk about the judgment they have faced from others when questioned about their personal life. Willa talked the most about this, mentioning that she has not been hired for jobs before because of the fact that it was a travel job. Since Willa tends to travel for work, she mentioned that she has been asked countless times when she has been on a job if she “misses her kids” or “who is taking care of your kids?”, to both of these questions she has a single comeback, “would you have asked me that if I was a man?”. Both Willa and Kati are challenging the norms of what it means to be a working mother in the film industry. Willa faces judgment at work, whereas Kati faced judgment

from industry outsiders, and her response to it was to move her family closer to the studio so that she was able to be more present. The way that society constricts the concept of motherhood is slowly beginning to change as younger people join the industry with intentions of working hard and having a family.

Theme 3: The Impact of the #MeToo Movement

It is undeniable that the #MeToo movement it has made major changes to the film industry, solely based on the idea of having the issue of sexual assault and harassment brought to light. Throughout the interviews, all of the women brought up that the #MeToo movement was a huge win for not just women working in the film industry, but the industry as a whole. In the Girl Power Podcast, Molly talks about how the #MeToo movement and what has occurred since then is just the beginning for change. This concept that the allegations about sexual misconduct are not over is shown through Table 4, which documents allegations that have come out since the whistleblower call on Harvey Weinstein.

Table 4



The main takeaways that the women have seen since the rise of the movement are the opening up of communication channels and most importantly the early signs of a change in on-set culture. Kelsi noted that one of the biggest changes she has seen since the need to implement new policies as a result of the #MeToo movement was an increase in Title IX training for crew. Title IX covers that no one can be discriminated on the basis of sex or be excluded from any programs that receive federal financial assistance (Dept. Ed). This training takes place once a season on TV shows, but according to Kelsi they were never taken that seriously, and people would walk out of the training and immediately start making jokes about sexual harassment, but since the #MeToo movement this behavior has stopped. Molly also talked about how the chain of command around sexual misconduct has changed, making fireable offenses more common. Overall, the #MeToo movement has started the slow-burn of changes that need to occur inside the film industry, but this is just the tip of the iceberg, and culture does not change overnight.

Why Are There So Many Women Producing?

One of the overarching questions of the project was why are there so many women producing and why is it such a statistically larger difference than women in other Above-the-Line roles? The research showed that these women loved their jobs and were good at what they did, there are more women producing than in any other position because of stereotypical gender roles. According to all the women I talked to, the job title comes with some characteristics which are more commonly attributed to women. These characteristics include strong communication skills, organization, and one word that was mentioned often by the female producers, nurturing. A producer is one of the few roles in filmmaking where they follow the project from beginning to end. Willa explained it to be like taking care of a child, helping it grow through the good and the bad. Molly noted that women hadn't always been hired as producers, but instead they are now just more likely to get positions in the film industry in that role specifically. This goes back to the gendered idea that women are the only ones that can nurture something or someone. The basic idea that we as women are born to be mothers and born to nurture, is blatantly sexist but is deeply embedded in our culture. It is bittersweet in some ways because there are women getting hired in this role and many women who have the skills and are prepared to put in the work, but it is culturally assumed at the same time that this is the only kind of work women can do in the industry.

What is the Future for Women in Film?

The interviews with all 6 women were insightful as to what the current state of women in the industry is like, but in conclusion, it is important to look towards to future. When asked about

what they want to the future of women in film to look like, all the women had different answers, but they tended to revolve around the idea of a need for more access. In general, there is a need for more access to the technical skills that it takes to work on a film set. Many people go to film school to study directing or cinematography, but film school does not necessarily produce people who have the technical skills to be Grips, Set Dressers, Accountants or Location scouts. This is shown through the March 2019 USC Cinematic Arts School Hotsheet, where almost every person on the list working in the industry is listed as a writer, director, producer or cinematographer. As almost all the women talked to got into producing by working their way up through locations or accounting, they showcased that there is a need for more trade specific training if not to just have more workers with those skills, but give others a pathway to larger positions.

Along with a need for more training, there is a need for more diversity among roles of power including women and people of color as studio executives. The executive side of the film industry should not be overlooked when talking about diversity and its impact. Since executives are the ones who are pitched stories, they are deciding what kinds of media will be created. If there is more diversity among executives, they will choose to create stories that highlight diversity and to tell a diverse story properly, the production team should be diverse. This would not only open up more job opportunities to minorities but also revolutionize the kind of media being created and consumed.

Lastly, the culture of competition among women in the film industry needs to end. When women are in competition for a role where there can only be one woman, it makes the community of people less collaborative. To create a more collaborative and supportive culture,

more organizations like the Women in Television and Film and Producers Guild Association should offer mentorship programs. Having a mentor is a valuable resource, which should not go unrecognized. Out of the 6 women interviewed only half said that they had a more experienced colleague or friend who was willing to give them advice and help them better themselves. Those who did not have mentors wish that they did. Mentoring could revolutionize the culture of competition because it opens up new opportunities and ways of thinking to women looking to be successful in an industry where there are not many women.

In conclusion, TV, film, and commercials play a huge role in the society we live in. Since we are consuming so much, it is essential to look into who are the people behind the content. Most times, it is not a very diverse group. With producing, women have gotten their foot in the door, and although the deeply rooted justification may be in gender norms, the 6 women interviewed for the podcasts showcase that women are coming to the film industry ready to work hard, take on different issues, and are not going anywhere anytime soon, giving hope to the idea that even in the era of #MeToo, women are standing their ground and speaking up more than ever for themselves and need need for more women in Above-the-Line roles in film and TV.

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The Women Who Produce the Media: A Podcast Series Links

“Would You Ask Me That if I Was a Man?” - Willa Goldfeder

<https://soundcloud.com/maxine-gross-994492622/would-you-ask-me-that-if-i-was-a-man-willa-goldfeder>

“Like It’s the Best Job in the World” - Kati Johnston

<https://soundcloud.com/maxine-gross-994492622/like-its-the-best-job-in-the-world-kati-johnston-2>

Girl Power

<https://soundcloud.com/maxine-gross-994492622/girl-power>