

# THE LENS REFLECTED

What Stories & Storytellers Get the Green Light  
in Documentary's Streaming Age?

Race, Gender, and Topics in Documentary Films Distributed Across  
Cable, Streaming, and Public Media (2014-2020)

2022



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# INTRODUCTION AND MISSION

The creative and journalistic process, products, and distribution of documentary film and TV have always been paradoxical.

On the one hand, nonfiction storytelling has historically provided meaningful ways for communities to assert cultural and civic power by telling and sharing their own stories, and by artistically translating the lived experiences of people and realities that have been traditionally neglected—or altogether omitted—in the mainstay of entertainment film and TV. Documentary also often acts as a corrective against damaging historical narratives about people and places. On the other hand, this same documentary tradition is never far from its colonial roots, both then and now, when filmmakers tell stories about places and people about whom they have little real understanding or lived experience. And yet, over the past two decades, the massive shift from analog to digital has unquestionably democratized the ability for new artists to play with the craft of nonfiction storytelling. With parallel timing, the rise of YouTube and social media has opened new doors for creative artists to tell their stories.

None of this, however, guarantees full audience access to the diverse spectrum of stories that should be possible to watch in a pluralistic society. Nor does this radically transforming media industry moment guarantee the ability for more than a handful of documentary filmmakers to sustain a full career in the business. Among other issues within documentary film and TV, concern over who is telling the stories most readily available to broad audiences, who is telling whose stories, and what these stories are reflecting about the world we inhabit, are perennial.

*The Lens Reflected* is the first study to raise and answer those questions in a moment when new distribution patterns are settling in, commercial outlets are making outsized investments in documentaries as entertainment, and millions of new audience members are tuning in to watch them—

some for the first time, given the ease of anytime/anywhere programming. The timing and context of this exploration, then, is meaningful. Studies about the diversity of filmmakers and on-screen characters in entertainment film and TV nearly always exclude nonfiction storytelling, and a mythos has developed: many believe that documentary is more welcoming to BIPOC and women-identifying filmmakers and stories than scripted Hollywood. But is this true, beyond anecdotal individual successes for a handful of directors and films?

As with many issues in the nonfiction film industry, a rich ecology—a community—of filmmakers, foundations, and organizational leaders often identify critical questions for the field, and then find ways to get the job done. This study arose in such a fashion, amid the racial justice uprisings in the summer of 2020. Our leadership working group came together to ideate a study that could reveal the reality of diversity and representation within documentaries distributed by some of the dominant, most important, and widely-watched networks in the United States (and indeed, around the world, if we consider their real and potential reach outside the U.S.).

The goal of this exploration is to begin to create a clear portrait of documentaries distributed by major media outlets in the streaming age; it examines whose stories, which storytellers, which on-screen protagonists' experiences, and what topics are distributed to wide audiences across cable, streaming, and public media. It interrogates, as the title suggests, "the lens reflected." With this knowledge, documentary distributors, funders, film organizations and festivals, investors, and filmmakers will have a better and more accurate understanding of the accurate reality—not the mythos—about nonfiction storytelling in the contemporary media age. In so doing, we can see clearly which stories, audiences, and storytellers are not reflected in the cultural mirror—and as a next step, we might discuss how this absence impoverishes us all, and what to do about it. Structural inequities are perpetuated with silence. Data can make them visible.

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**Caty Borum, Sonya Childress, Ani Mercedes**  
*Leadership Working Group, *The Lens Reflected**

# ABOUT THE STUDY

## Primary Themes and Questions

*The Lens Reflected* identifies the racial and gender representation of credited directors and primary on-screen protagonists for 1,232 documentary films. These films reflect every documentary that was available to stream by major networks of three platforms at the time of this study—cable, streaming-native, and public TV—in the “streaming age” of documentary, which began in 2014. Given their dominance in contemporary nonfiction documentary, we studied the films distributed on (1) CNN Films and HBO Films (representing “cable”), (2) Hulu and Netflix (representing “streamers”), and (3) PBS (*Independent Lens* and *POV*, two separate nonfiction strands, representing “public media”). Beyond filmmakers and protagonists, the study also reveals the primary narrative and topics of these films—that is, what the films are about.

We trace documentary’s “streaming age” to the first film acquired and distributed by a streaming-native entertainment network. *The Square*, the Emmy-Award-winning film about the Egyptian revolution, premiered on Netflix in 2014, marking documentary’s first entry into the contemporary streaming universe.<sup>1</sup> Other streaming-native networks followed suit, and in the ensuing years, nonfiction storytelling has been increasingly available across the streaming capabilities of cable, broadcast, and public TV. Given that this research was shaped in late 2020, with data gathering and analysis conducted throughout 2021, it reflects films distributed from 2014 through 2020, the most complete year of programming at the time of the study.

### The primary research questions are:

- *Who is Telling the Stories?* Documentary Directors’ Race and Gender
- *Who are the Stories About?* Documentary Protagonists’ Race and Gender

- *Who is Telling Whose Stories?* Directors and their Protagonists’ Race and Gender
- *What are the Stories Telling Us About?* Social Issues and Entertainment Topics

## Methodology

### Study Method and Topics of Interest

The leadership working group for this study worked together to identify and outline the initiative’s primary goals and major variables of interest. Based on this field-informed foundation, the research team at the Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) employed content analysis, a well-established quantitative social science method that allows researchers to make conclusions about realities depicted on screen for a large dataset (in this case, 1,232 individual nonfiction films). This research process is summarized here:

First, a diverse research team of coders was recruited and trained with a carefully crafted coding instrument capturing the study’s precise variables and interests. After successfully testing the reliability of the research instrument, each researcher watched their assigned portion of the available films and “coded” them according to evident visual reality and contextual cues in the storytelling. As established in content analysis, this study employs “phenotypic visual coding,” which means that coders are able to code what they are reliably able to see and identify on screen, rather than inferring other meanings based on subjective interpretation.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, only broad racial (“BIPOC” or “White”) and gender identification (“woman,” “man,” and “nonbinary”) are possible for this study; other important demographic categories of interest (disability, LGBTQ+ identification, social class, precise racial and ethnic identification) were not captured, as these variables (i.e., not readily able

<sup>1</sup> Borum Chattoo, C. (2020). *Story Movements: How Documentaries Empower People and Inspire Social Change* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).

<sup>2</sup> This approach has been used in other industry studies of film and TV diversity and representation, including Borum Chattoo, C. (2018). Oscars so White: Gender, racial and ethnic diversity and social issues in U.S. documentary films (2008-2017). *Mass Communication and Society*, 21(3), 368-394. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2017.1409356>; Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., Pieper, K., Case, A., & Marsden, J. (2016, September). *Inequality in 800 popular films: Examining portrayals of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBT & disability from 2007 to 2015* (Rep.); Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., Pieper, K., Gillig, T., Lee, C., & DeLuca, D. (2015, August 14). (2015, August 14); Smith, S. L., Pieper, K., & Choueiti, M. (2017, February). *Inclusion in the director’s chair? Gender, race, & age of film directors across 1,000 films from 2007-2016* (Brief).

to be categorized reliably based on phenotypic coding alone) require smaller samples and a different research method to do responsibly. We acknowledge that these demographic characteristics are vitally important to study in future research.

In addition to filmmakers and on-screen protagonists, we also coded and categorized films by their primary narrative focus—either “entertainment story” or “social issue story.”<sup>3</sup> When a film was categorized with a dominant narrative focus of an “entertainment story,” coders were asked to identify the topic that the film’s story was most about. When a film was categorized with a dominant narrative focus of a “social issues story,” coders were asked to identify—from a list of Gallup’s long-running monthly “Most Important Problems Facing the Country” poll – the social issues at the heart of the film’s story.

### Research Team Composition and Approach

The composition of our full research team, a multicultural ally group, is meaningful: four identify as BIPOC, and three identify as White (four identify as women, two identify as men, and one as nonbinary). To eliminate the possibility for human bias in any one researcher’s view of visual reality, we employed intercoder reliability testing to ensure that each coder, after proper training, would reliably code each film in the same way, and thus, findings are not a reflection of any one individual researcher’s idiosyncratic way of seeing the world. To facilitate intercoder reliability, all of the trained coders were assigned to watch the same representative sample of films and code each variable of interest (for example, broad racial and gender identification of the on-screen protagonist); then, we performed statistical analysis to examine the level of agreement across coders on each variable. A high level of agreement—“intercoder reliability”—means the observations did not happen by chance alone, but were in fact objective interpretations of reality, regardless of which researcher watched and coded the film. In the case of this study, intercoder reliability statistics for all variables of interest reached and exceeded the appropriate statistical threshold ( $\alpha > .66$ ).<sup>4</sup> To code the broad racial and gender identification of credited directors, researchers were directed to examine images at film festivals, IMDb, and media coverage; every credited director of a film was coded, which means that some films had more than one.<sup>5</sup> All variables reported in this study were subject to intercoder reliability testing, and only those results above the acceptable statistical threshold are reported here.

### Films Studied

We studied every publicly available film distributed between 2014 and 2020 across two selected documentary-distributing outlets for each of three “platforms” (cable, streaming, public media): CNN Films and HBO Films (“cable”), Hulu and Netflix (“streaming”), and PBS (two individual nonfiction strands, *Independent Lens* and *POV*, “public media”). In total, we studied 1,232 films, which represents all films that were distributed during those years (since the beginning of the documentary “streaming age”) and that were publicly available for the research team to watch and code (during the months of February to October, 2021, when the study was conducted).<sup>6</sup> We recognize that these outlets do not represent every distribution network for documentary storytelling in the United States and around the world; to make this study possible given available resources, we made the decision to limit distribution scope to these networks for the first iteration of this study, but we anticipate studying additional distributors in the future. Similarly, it’s important to note that this study represents the films that were distributed across these identified networks, but not every film that was produced (or distributed via different means) in this time frame.

### How to Interpret the Findings

We performed statistical analysis on every point of comparison noted below (an example “comparison” question is: “Are streaming networks more or less likely than public media to distribute films made by BIPOC directors?”). Each comparison reported here is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), which means that each noted “difference” is a real one; it did not occur just by chance. For most results, we report findings based on several levels of summary and analysis: (1) general findings (across all networks over time), (2) findings by platform (cable, streaming, public media), (3) findings by media sector (commercial vs public media). Each level of analysis reveals a slightly different story and reality, and our hope here is for various readers to find value in all or some of them.

### How to Read this Report

To understand a broad portrait of *The Lens Reflected*, the Executive Summary—seen in the next section—highlights findings in brief. Following the Executive Summary, the Complete Findings section provides the details of every finding, along with graphs and graphics to visualize them.

<sup>3</sup> This schema was developed and used originally in peer-reviewed research: Borum Chattoo, C. (2018). Oscars so White: Gender, racial and ethnic diversity and social issues in U.S. documentary films (2008-2017). *Mass Communication and Society*, 21(3), 368-394. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2017.1409356>.

<sup>4</sup> For more about intercoder reliability for each study variable, please see the Methodology Appendix.

<sup>5</sup> This follows the approach used in this peer-reviewed study: Borum Chattoo, C. (2018). Oscars so White: Gender, racial and ethnic diversity and social issues in U.S. documentary films (2008-2017). *Mass Communication and Society*, 21(3), 368-394. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2017.1409356>

<sup>6</sup> In order to capture a representative portrait of available documentaries distributed between 2014 and 2020 this study identified a total universe of 1,678 films, reflecting every film posted on the platforms at a single point in time (in December 2020). During the coding process (between the months of January to October, 2021), 446 of these films were discovered as “unavailable to stream” on the platforms of interest to this study (Netflix, Hulu, HBO, CNN, PBS), due in part to a common practice among some of these networks to remove earlier films from availability for viewing throughout the year. This resulted in a final universe of 1,232 films being identified as publicly available for streaming and coding (728 from streamers, 310 from cable, and 194 from Public Media).

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What can we say about the overall portrait of documentary films distributed across three major platforms—cable, streaming, and public media—over the full streaming era of entertainment media?



Generally speaking, **the stories distributed across major entertainment outlets are directed by White, men-identifying filmmakers, featuring men protagonists.** This portrait changes when we look at films directed by BIPOC and woman-identifying directors, who are more likely to feature protagonists of color, women, and stories that address race in some way.



**BIPOC filmmakers are the least represented among credited directors, and BIPOC women-identifying directors are nearly invisible** across major platforms in the streaming media age. Out of 1,423 directors, only 19% were BIPOC, and just 7% of credited documentary directors were BIPOC women.



While BIPOC directors primarily tell stories about BIPOC protagonists, and White filmmakers tell stories about White protagonists, **White filmmakers are more likely to tell stories about BIPOC main protagonists than BIPOC filmmakers are to tell stories about White main protagonists.**



**“Mixed” film teams (BIPOC and White filmmakers working together as credited directors) are much more likely to center stories of BIPOC protagonists** than White directors working alone.



**Public media is more likely than commercial media to feature stories made by BIPOC and women-identifying filmmakers,** and stories that are about BIPOC and women protagonists. Commercial media are much more likely to distribute films made by White filmmakers, and men filmmakers, than public media.



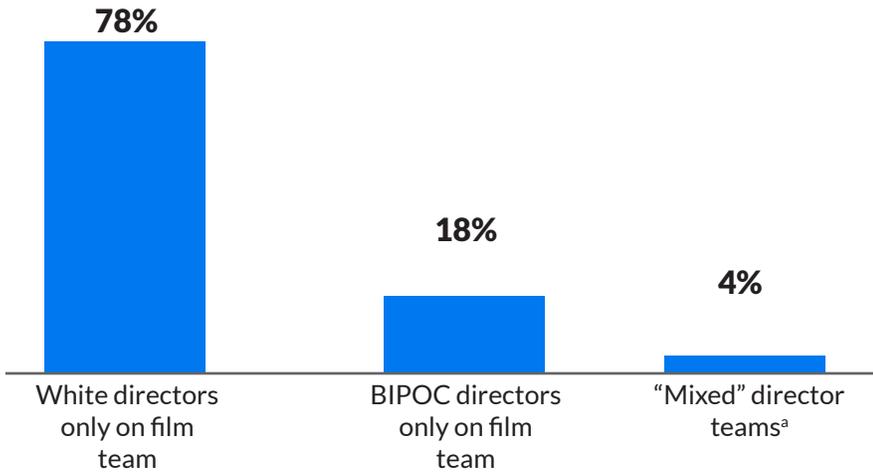
Public media documentaries are more likely to tell stories about social issues than commercial media (cable and streaming). **Streamers are more likely to distribute entertainment stories, than any social issue story, and cable distributes a relatively equal mix of entertainment and social issue-focused stories.**



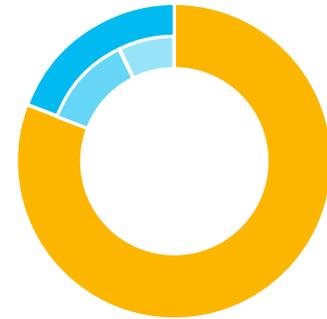
**White directors acknowledge the realities of racism in their films far less often than BIPOC and Mixed film teams.** About one-quarter (26%) of films by White directors acknowledge racism in any way; whereas 49% of films by BIPOC creators, and 52% of films by Mixed film teams reflected realities of racism in any way. **Nearly half of the films distributed by public media (47%) acknowledge or address realities of racism in any way, compared to 29% of films distributed by commercial media that do so.**

# WHO IS TELLING THE DOCUMENTARY STORIES DISTRIBUTED ACROSS PLATFORMS? [DIRECTORS]

## RACE: DIRECTORS (FILM LEVEL)

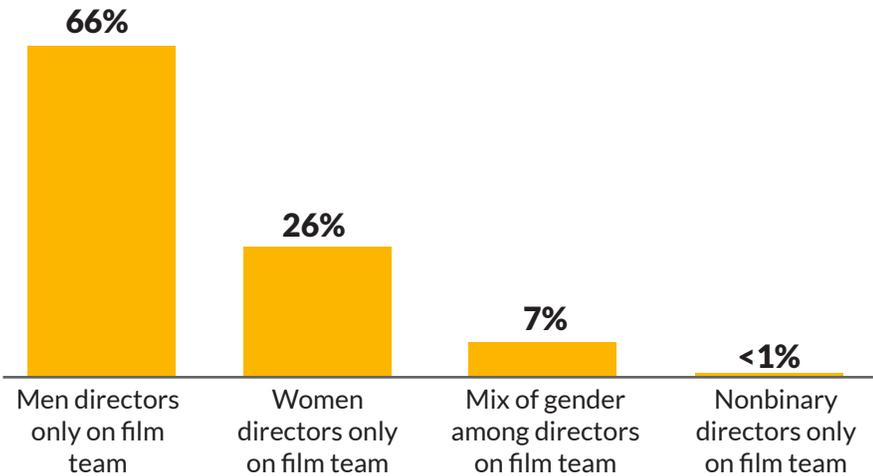


## RACE AND GENDER: ALL DIRECTORS (INDUSTRY LEVEL)



- 81% of total directors were White
- 19% of total directors were BIPOC
  - 12% of directors were BIPOC men
  - 7% of directors were BIPOC women

## GENDER IDENTIFICATION: DIRECTORS (FILM LEVEL)



## RACE ACROSS PLATFORMS: DIRECTORS (FILM LEVEL)

● BIPOC ● White ● Mix of both

Streamers



Cable



Public TV



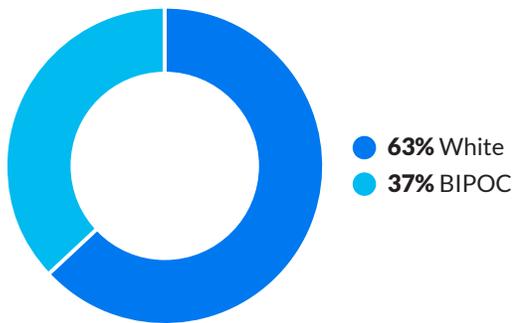
<sup>a</sup>BIPOC and White directors working together

# WHO ARE THE STORIES ABOUT?

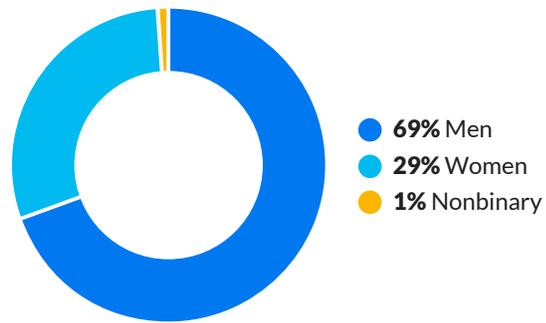
## [PRIMARY ON-SCREEN PROTAGONISTS]

Across platforms, primary on-screen protagonists are more likely to be White and men.<sup>7</sup> Public media distributes more films that feature BIPOC and women protagonists than commercial media (both cable and streamers). Here, “main protagonist” refers to the individual who the documentary is centrally about. If the documentary centered around two or more characters, or if it wasn’t abundantly clear if the film had a singular character focus, then the film was coded as not having one main protagonist.

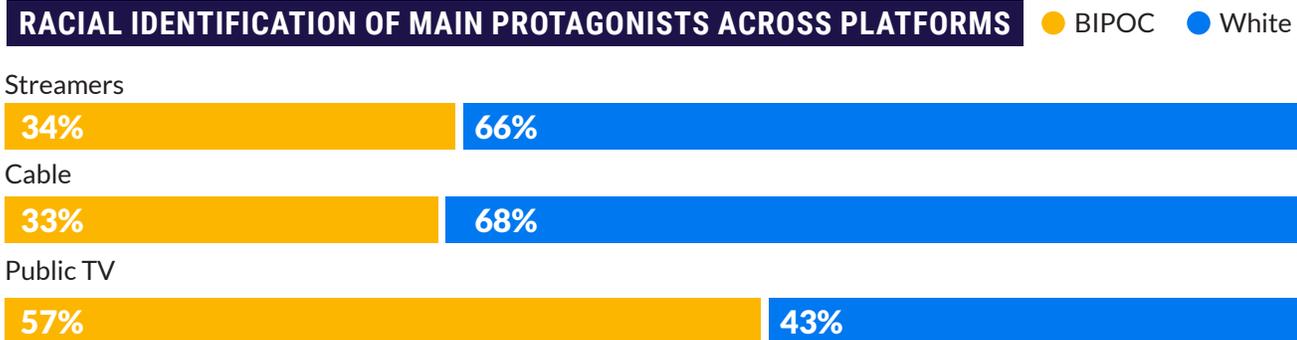
### RACIAL IDENTIFICATION OF MAIN PROTAGONISTS



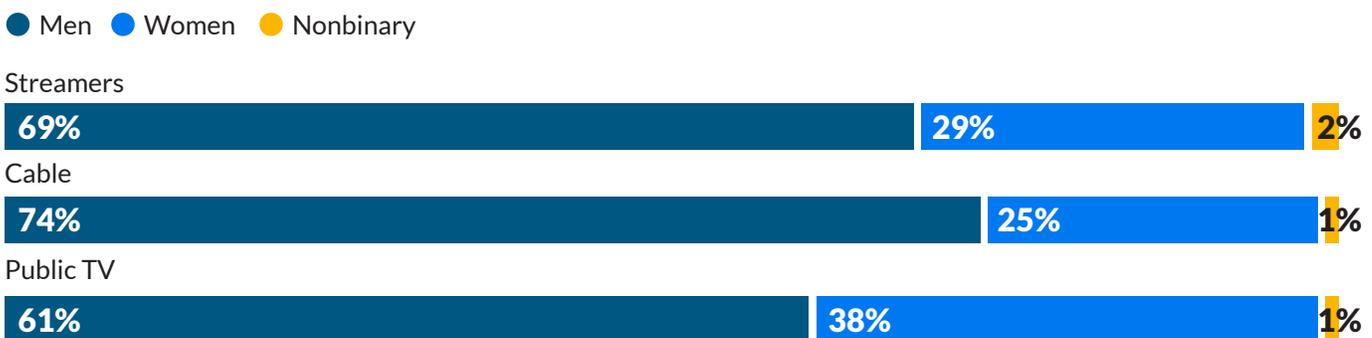
### GENDER IDENTIFICATION OF MAIN PROTAGONISTS



### RACIAL IDENTIFICATION OF MAIN PROTAGONISTS ACROSS PLATFORMS



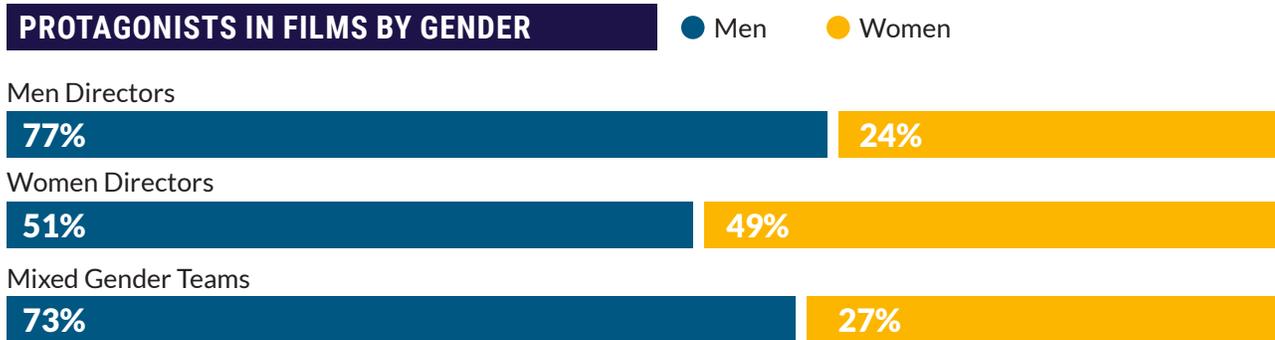
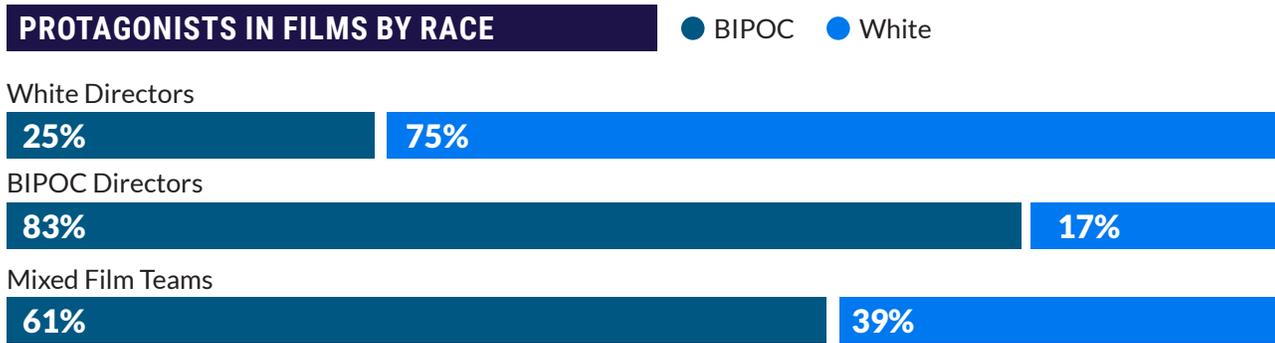
### GENDER IDENTIFICATION OF MAIN PROTAGONISTS ACROSS PLATFORMS



<sup>7</sup>We identified 530 films with an identifiable primary on-screen protagonist.

# WHO IS TELLING WHOSE STORIES?

White filmmakers primarily tell stories that feature White protagonists, but they are also more likely to tell BIPOC stories than the other way around. BIPOC directors and “mixed” film teams (BIPOC and White director working together) are far more likely to feature primary BIPOC protagonists in their stories than White directors. Men-identified documentary directors predominantly tell stories about men, while women-identifying directors tell stories equally about women and men.



# WHAT ARE THE STORIES ABOUT?

Public media documentaries are far more likely to tell stories about social issues – like race relations and racism, war, criminal justice, and democracy – than commercial media (cable and streaming). Streamers are more likely to distribute entertainment stories—like travel, arts, murder, and sports—than any social issue story, and cable distributes a relatively equal mix of entertainment and social issues stories. Given the history and tradition of documentary storytelling serving as journalistic watchdog, among other functions beyond entertainment alone, it is meaningful to note that entertainment documentaries now comprise nearly half of the genre’s focus in the streaming-age.

## SOCIAL ISSUES VS. ENTERTAINMENT (PRIMARY NARRATIVE)



## PRIMARY NARRATIVE (SOCIAL ISSUE VS. ENTERTAINMENT) ACROSS PLATFORMS

● Social Issues ● Entertainment

Streamers



Cable



Public TV



### TOP FIVE ENTERTAINMENT FILM TOPICS<sup>8</sup>



Travel



Sports & Leisure



Murder



Arts Culture & Entertainment, and Food



Science & Technology

### TOP FIVE SOCIAL ISSUE FILM TOPICS<sup>9</sup>



Government/Democracy



Racial Justice



War and Conflict



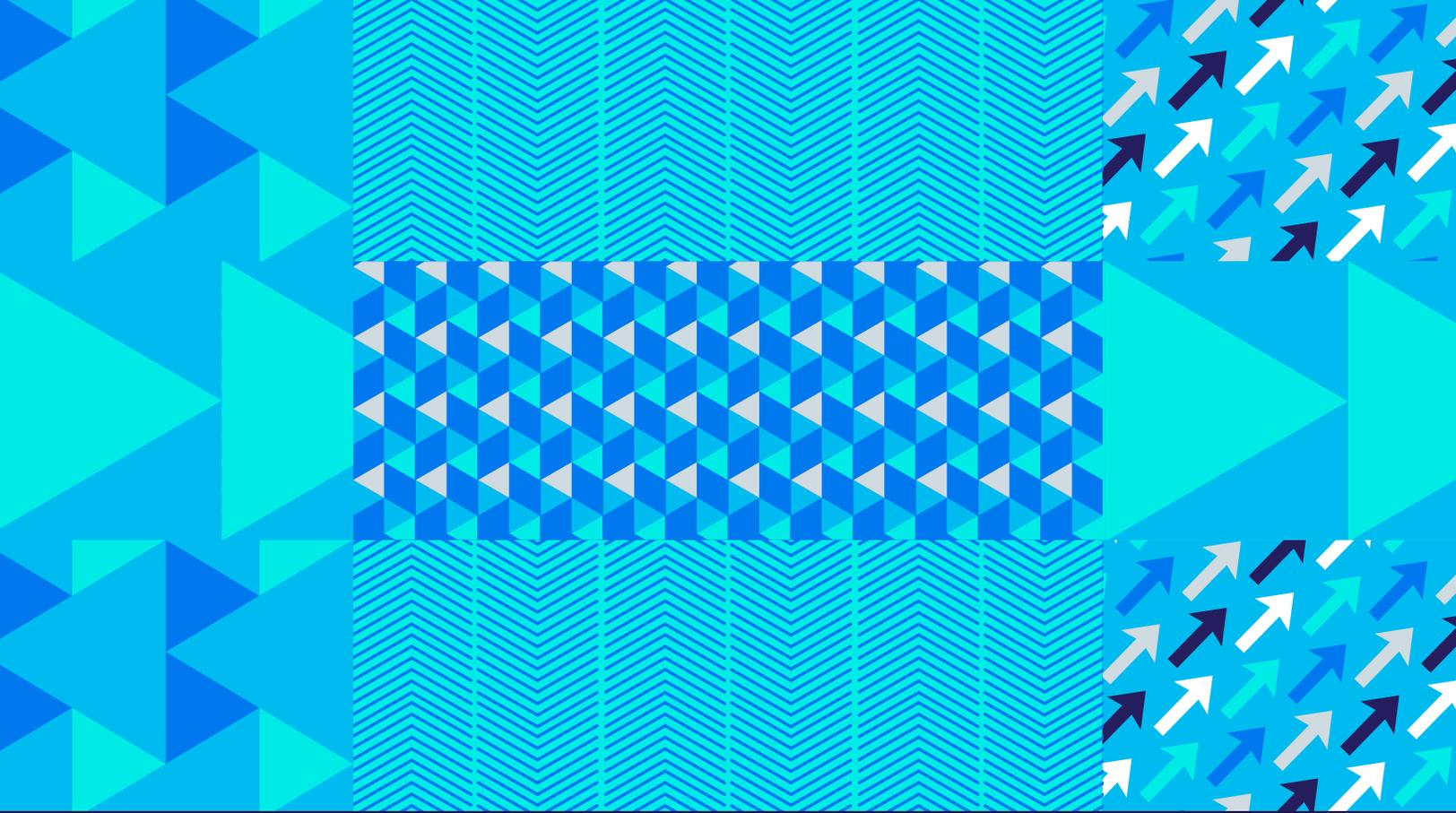
Criminal Justice



Environment

<sup>8</sup>Note: This was only coded/categorized for films coded as “entertainment” stories, not “social issue” films.

<sup>9</sup>Note: This was only coded/categorized for films coded as “social issue” films, not “entertainment” stories.



**COMPLETE  
FINDINGS**



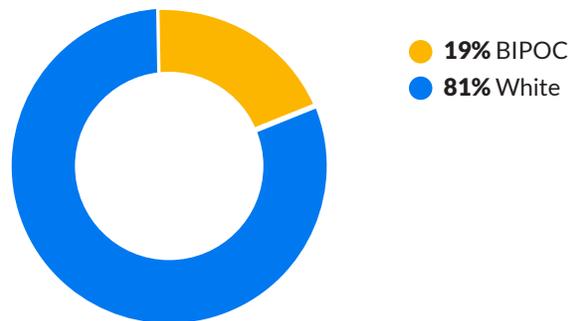
# WHO IS TELLING THE NONFICTION STORIES DISTRIBUTED BY MAJOR PLATFORMS? [DOCUMENTARY DIRECTORS]

To examine directors, we offer two separate categories. First, an “industry level” diversity analysis reflects an analysis of all the directors coded for across the 1,232 films analyzed in this study (this is meaningful given that some films have more than one credited director, so the “industry level” accounts for all directors across all films).<sup>10</sup> Second, findings from a “film level” diversity analysis are reported, which split the films into discrete categories based on the gender and BIPOC profile of each filmmaker. All subsequent analyses of director characteristics by platform and sector are conducted at the film level.

## DOCUMENTARY DIRECTORS: BIPOC AND WHITE

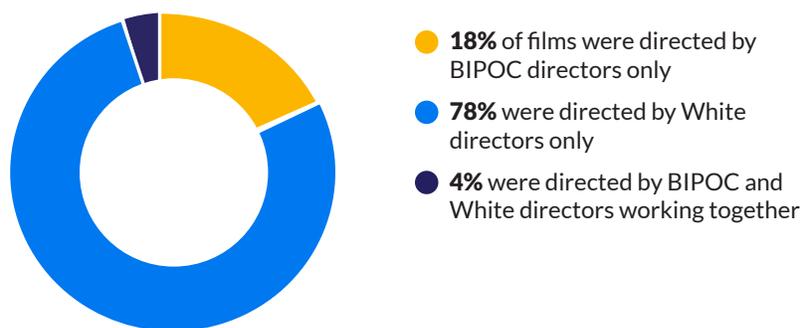
The reality of racial and gender inequity within the community of documentary directors is real and stark. A total of 1,423 directors were identified across the 1,232 films. Of these 1,423 directors, 81% are White and 19% are BIPOC.

**Documentary Directors: Racial Identification of Total Filmmakers (Industry Level)**



About 8 in 10 films (78%) distributed between 2014 and 2020 were created by White-only directors, while 4% were produced by “mixed” film teams (credited BIPOC and White directors working together).<sup>11</sup>

**Documentary Directors: Racial Identification (Film Level)**



<sup>10</sup> Out of the 1,232 films analyzed, 1136 had at least one director who could be identified for coding; 23% (260 out of those 1136) also had a second director that was identified and 2% (27 of those 1136 films) also had a third director identified. To ensure representativeness, this study only coded the first three directors listed on a film’s credits.

<sup>11</sup> Out of the 1,232 films analyzed, 1136 had at least one director who could be identified for coding; 23% (260 out of those 1136) also had a second director that was identified and 2% (27 of those 1136 films) also had a third director identified. To ensure representativeness, this study only coded the first three directors listed on a film’s credits.

When it comes to distribution, streaming and cable platforms (“commercial media”) show greater racial inequities than public media. Taken together, 16% of documentaries distributed by commercial media (streaming and cable combined) were directed by BIPOC filmmakers, and 81% were directed by White filmmakers; 3% of the documentaries available for streaming on commercial media platforms since 2014 were created by White and BIPOC directors working together. In comparison, 29% of the films showcased on Public TV were made by BIPOC filmmakers, and 6% were created by mixed director teams with both BIPOC and White credited directors.

### Documentary Directors: Racial Identification Across Platforms

● BIPOC ● White ● BIPOC and White Allied teams

Streamers



Cable

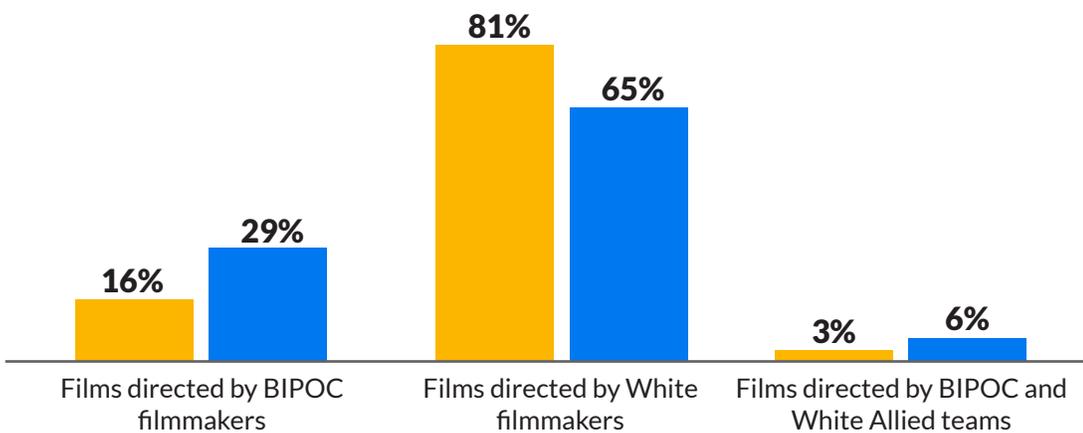


Public TV



### Documentary Directors: Racial Identification by Sector (Commercial vs. Public Media)

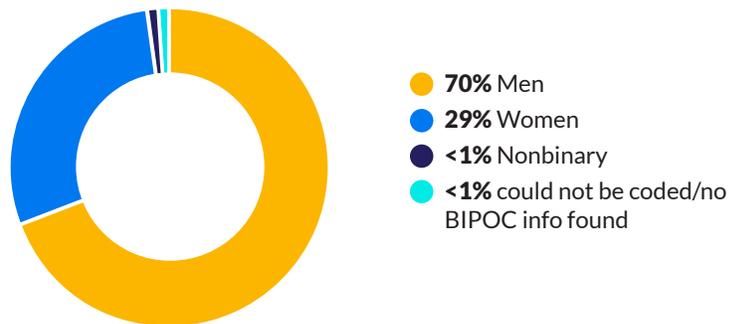
● Commercial Media ● Public Media



## DOCUMENTARY DIRECTORS: GENDER IDENTIFICATION

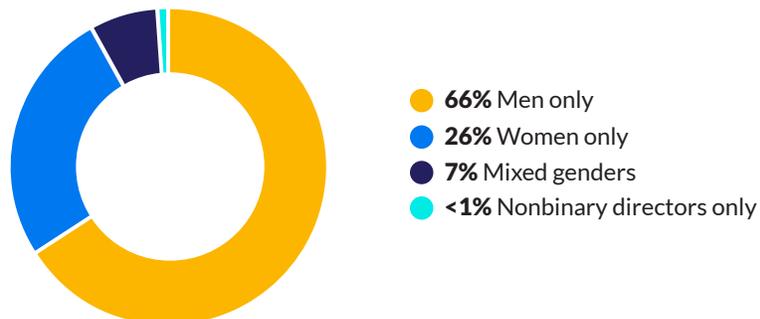
When it comes to gender diversity, there are a number of notable trends. Across the 1,423 directors in the films distributed across the three platforms, about 70% identify as men, and 29% identify as women. Less than 1% (.03%) of the 1,423 documentary directors of the films distributed by the three platforms identify as nonbinary.

### Documentary Directors: Gender Identification of Total Filmmakers (Industry Level)<sup>12</sup>



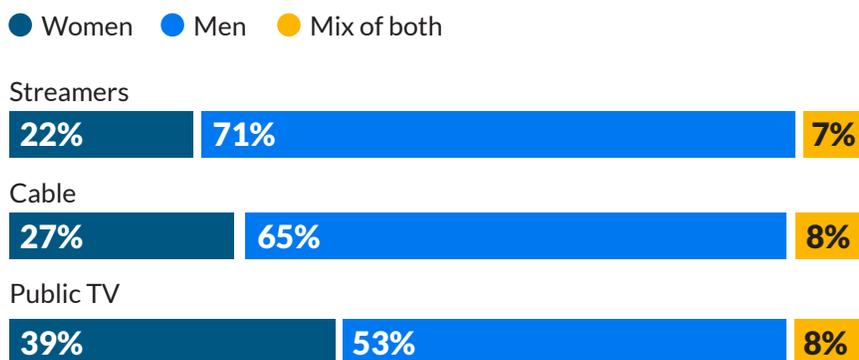
While multiple director teams were slightly more likely to reflect gender diversity than racial diversity, the inequitable pattern holds for gender.

### Documentary Directors: Gender Identification Across Films (Film Level)<sup>13</sup>



The majority of films on streaming and cable platforms are directed by men (71% and 65%, respectively). Only about one in four films on streamer and cable platforms are directed by women (22% and 27%, respectively). Collectively, this means that less than one-quarter (24%) of the 937 films available to stream on commercial media are directed by women, while almost 7 in 10 films (69%) are directed by men and only 7% are directed by teams inclusive of more than one gender. By contrast, about half (53%) of documentaries available on Public TV are directed by men, compared to 4 in 10 (39%) by women and 8% by mixed gender teams.

### Documentary Directors: Gender Identification Across Platforms

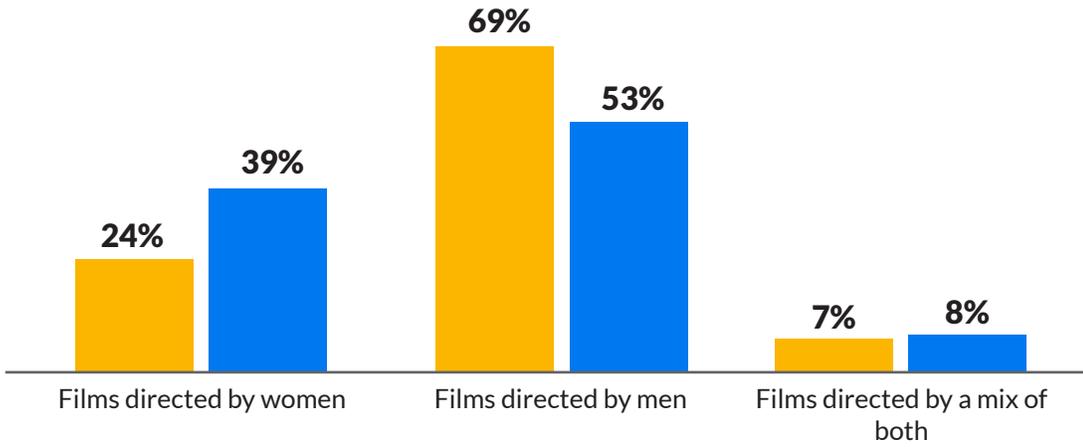


<sup>12</sup> 1,423 total directors coded across all the films (up to three directors coded if the film had more than one credited director).

<sup>13</sup> 1,136 total films that had at least 1 director coded, but the sample size for this analysis is 1,134 because gender identification could not be identified for two single-director films.

## Documentary Directors: Gender Identification by Sector (Commercial vs. Public Media)

● Commercial Media ● Public Media



# WHO ARE THE STORIES ABOUT?

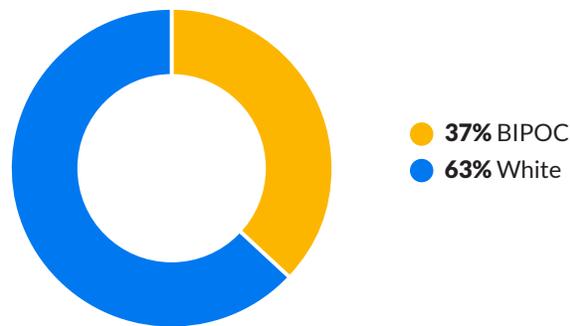
## [PRIMARY ON-SCREEN PROTAGONIST]

As with directors, the racial portrait among documentaries' on-screen protagonists is distinctive. Among the 1,232 films,<sup>14</sup> 530 (or 43%) had one main protagonist.<sup>15</sup> The main protagonist was defined through a set of widely agreed-upon terms, which could effectively be summarized as being the individual who the film is most about, who appears on screen, and who is dominant in the film's primary story.

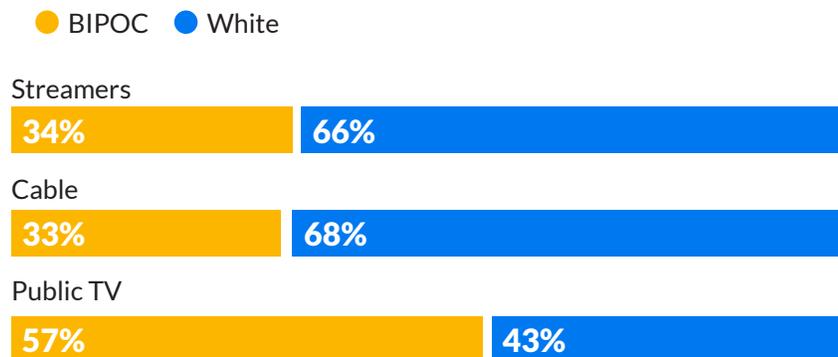
### PROTAGONISTS: BIPOC AND WHITE

Among the 530 protagonists, 334 (or 63%) were White; while 196 (or 37%) were BIPOC. These portrayals are largely being driven by streamers (34% of streamer main protagonists are BIPOC, 66% White) and cable platforms (33% of cable main protagonists are BIPOC, 68% White). On the other side, Public TV is reflecting a notably different portrait; 57% of the documentaries made available through Public TV include main protagonists who are BIPOC (43% are White).

#### Racial Identification of Main Protagonists (Industry level)



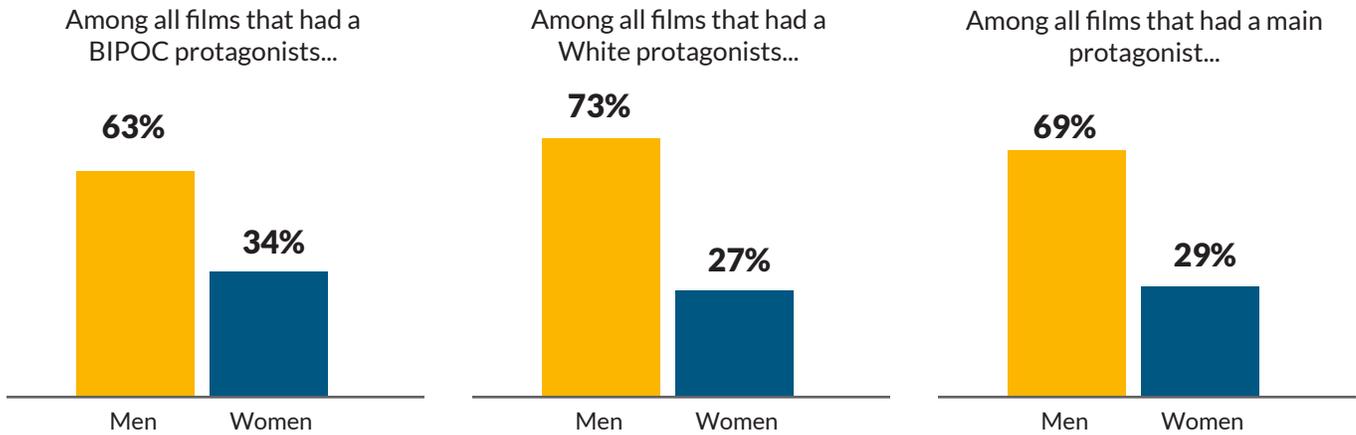
#### Racial Identification of Main Protagonists (Platform level)



<sup>14</sup> Data for 1231 films were used for this section's analysis. A total universe of 1232 films were analyzed in the study, but the data for one of these films is missing.

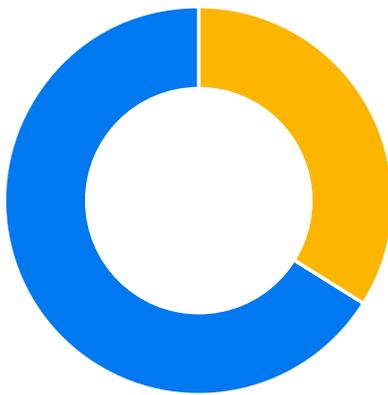
<sup>15</sup> A total of 57% of the films (n=702) either did not have a main protagonist or had multiple "main" characters, or did not feature any particular individual in the story of the film (i.e., many science, technology, and historical films did not have any "main protagonist")

## Protagonists Race and Gender<sup>16</sup>



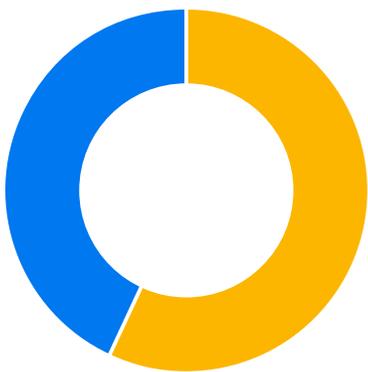
## Racial Identification of Main Protagonists by Sector (Commercial vs. Public)

In commercially distributed films, there are nearly twice as many White main protagonists featured than BIPOC main protagonists.



- 34% BIPOC main protagonists
- 66% White main protagonists

In public media, films are more likely to feature a BIPOC main protagonist than a White main protagonist.



- 57% BIPOC main protagonists
- 43% White main protagonists



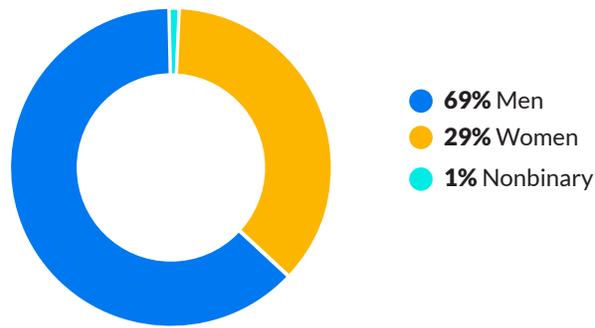
*BIPOC women-identifying directors and protagonists are nearly invisible in the streaming era of documentary.*

<sup>16</sup>Percentages do not all sum to 100% because nonbinary protagonists (n=7) were left out of analyses.

## PROTAGONISTS: GENDER IDENTIFICATION

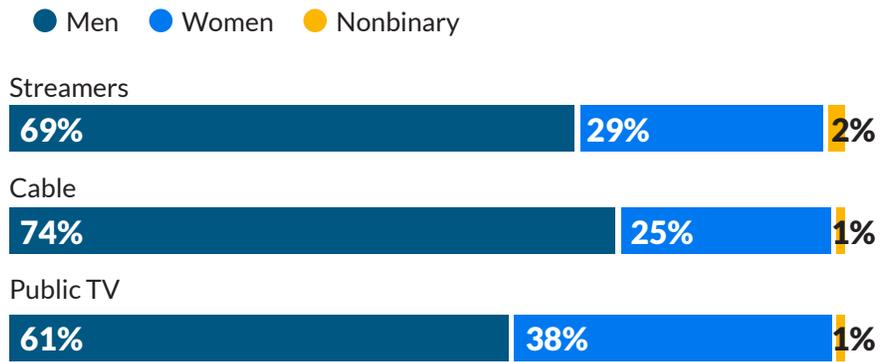
Of the 530 films with a main protagonist, 69% were men, 29% were women, and less than 1% identified as nonbinary (only 7 main protagonists identified as nonbinary across platforms).

### Gender of Main Protagonist



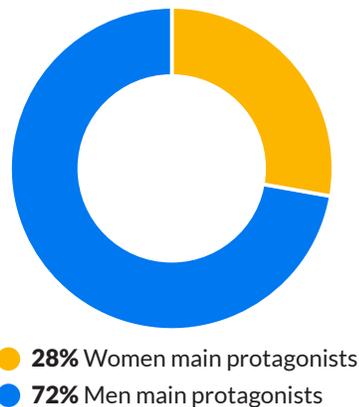
A lack of gender diversity is evident across the platforms studied. Among the 330 protagonists featured in the big streamer documentaries, 69% are men and 29% are women. Similarly, among the 126 protagonists featured by cable, 74% are men and 25% are women. Collectively, this means that 28% of main protagonists depicted through documentaries on commercial platforms are women, while 72% are men. There is slightly more gender diversity represented among the main protagonists on public TV, where 61% of protagonists are men, 38% are women, and about 1% identified as nonbinary.

### Gender Identification of Main Protagonists Across Platforms Studied

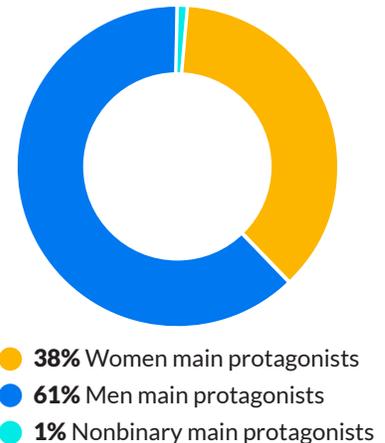


### Gender Identification of Main Protagonists by Sector (Commercial vs. Public)

In commercially distributed films...



In films distributed through public media...



# WHO IS TELLING WHOSE STORIES?

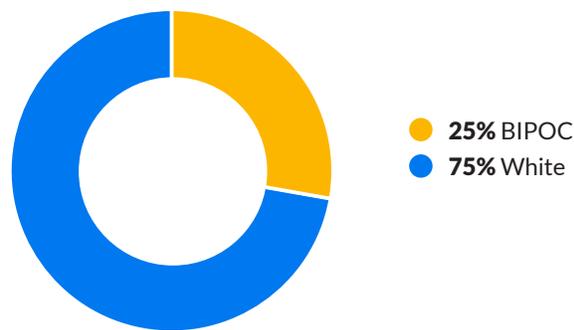
## [DIRECTORS AND THEIR PROTAGONISTS]

Moving beyond analyses about who is making documentaries in the streaming era (the directors) and who is depicted most (the main protagonists), this section moves one step further to examine the relationships between directors and the people whose stories they are telling.

### DIRECTORS AND PROTAGONISTS BY RACIAL IDENTIFICATION <sup>17</sup>

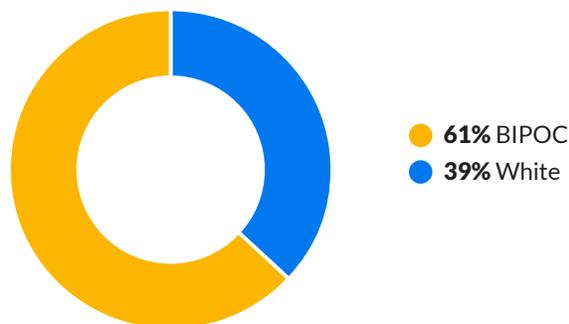
White filmmakers are much more likely to tell BIPOC stories than the other way around. A quarter (25%) of the primary protagonists featured in White filmmakers' stories were BIPOC, while 16% of protagonists in BIPOC filmmakers' stories were White.

#### Protagonists in Films by White Directors



“Mixed film teams”—a credited directing team comprising both BIPOC and White directors working together—are more likely to feature primary protagonists who are BIPOC (61%) than White (39%).

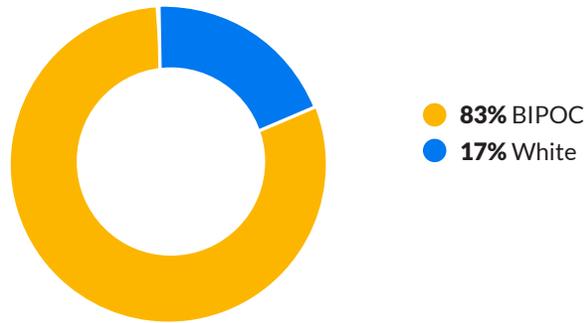
#### Protagonists in Films by Mixed Film Teams



<sup>17</sup> The total sample size here is 498 (not 530) because 32 of the films with main protagonists didn't have identifiable directors.

BIPOC film directors are mainly telling stories that feature BIPOC protagonists; 83% of the primary protagonists in BIPOC-directed films are BIPOC, while 17% are White.

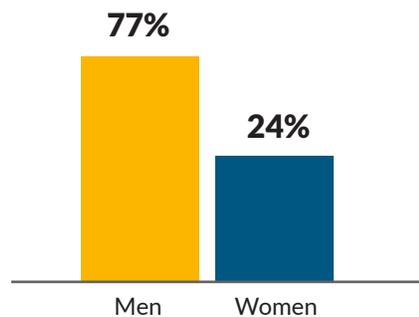
### Protagonists in Films by BIPOC Directors



## DIRECTORS AND PROTAGONISTS BY GENDER IDENTIFICATION <sup>18</sup>

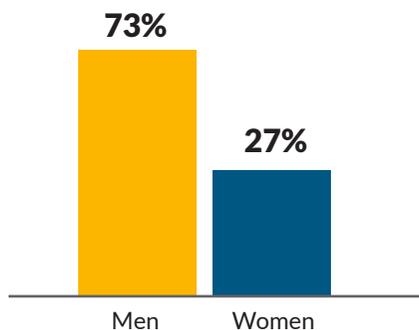
Men-identifying documentary directors overwhelmingly tell stories about men. More than three-quarters (77%) of the primary protagonists featured in films directed by men were men, and less than a quarter (24%) of their protagonists were women.

### Protagonists in Films by Men



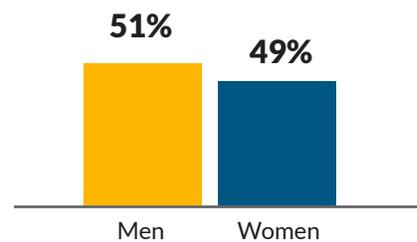
Even mixed-gender film teams—director teams that include women and men—tell stories primarily about men protagonists. In films directed by women and men working together, 27% of the primary protagonists were women, and 73% were men.

### Protagonists in Films by Mixed Gender Teams



By contrast, women-identifying documentary directors tell stories equally about women and men. In films directed by women, 49% of the primary protagonists were women, and 51% were men.

### Protagonists in Films by Women



<sup>18</sup> The total sample size here is 498 (not 530) because 32 of the films with main protagonists didn't have identifiable directors.

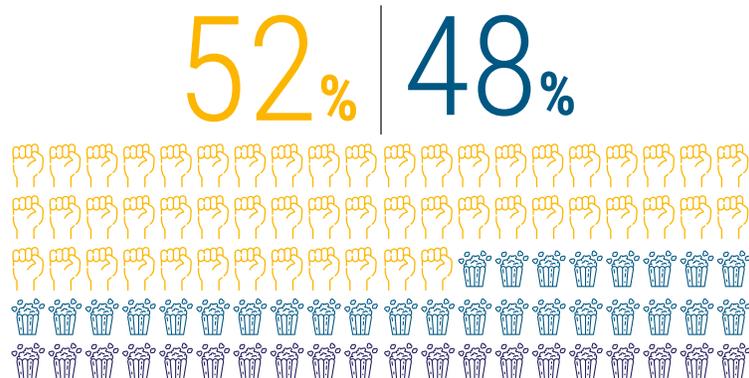
# WHAT ARE THE STORIES TELLING US ABOUT?

## [SOCIAL ISSUES AND ENTERTAINMENT TOPICS]

### ENTERTAINMENT VS. SOCIAL ISSUE FILMS

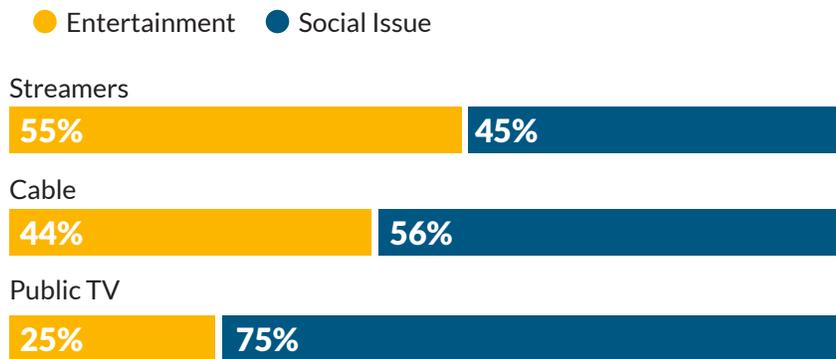
Contemporary documentaries distributed across major platforms are telling entertainment stories almost as much as social-issue topics. A little more than half (52%) of the 1,232 documentaries distributed across major platforms since 2014 are social-issue films; 48% are primarily entertainment-based films.

#### Social Issue vs. Entertainment (Primary Narrative)



The streamers are predominantly distributing entertainment-based films (55% of their documentaries are entertainment-focused, while 45% are about social issues). Cable platforms fall slightly on the other side with 56% of its documentaries having a social issue slant (and 44% being entertainment-based), but they distribute far fewer documentaries than streamers. Collectively, this means 52% of the documentaries distributed by commercial media (streamers and cable combined) focus on entertainment narratives, compared to 48% focusing on a social issue. On the other hand, public TV maintains a strong focus on supporting films with a social issue lens, reflecting 75% of the documentaries it distributes.

#### Primary Narrative (Social Issue vs. Entertainment) Across Platforms



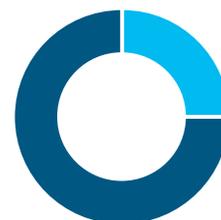
#### Primary Narrative (Social Issue vs. Entertainment) Across Sectors (Commercial vs. Public)

In commercially distributed films...



● 52% Entertainment focus  
● 48% Social issue focus

In films distributed through public media...



● 25% Entertainment focus  
● 75% Social issue focus

## TOP FIVE ENTERTAINMENT FILM TOPICS <sup>19</sup>



Travel



Sports & Leisure



Murder



Arts Culture &  
Entertainment, and Food



Science &  
Technology

## TOP FIVE SOCIAL ISSUE FILM TOPICS <sup>20</sup>



Government/Democracy



Racial Justice



War and Conflict



Criminal Justice



Environment

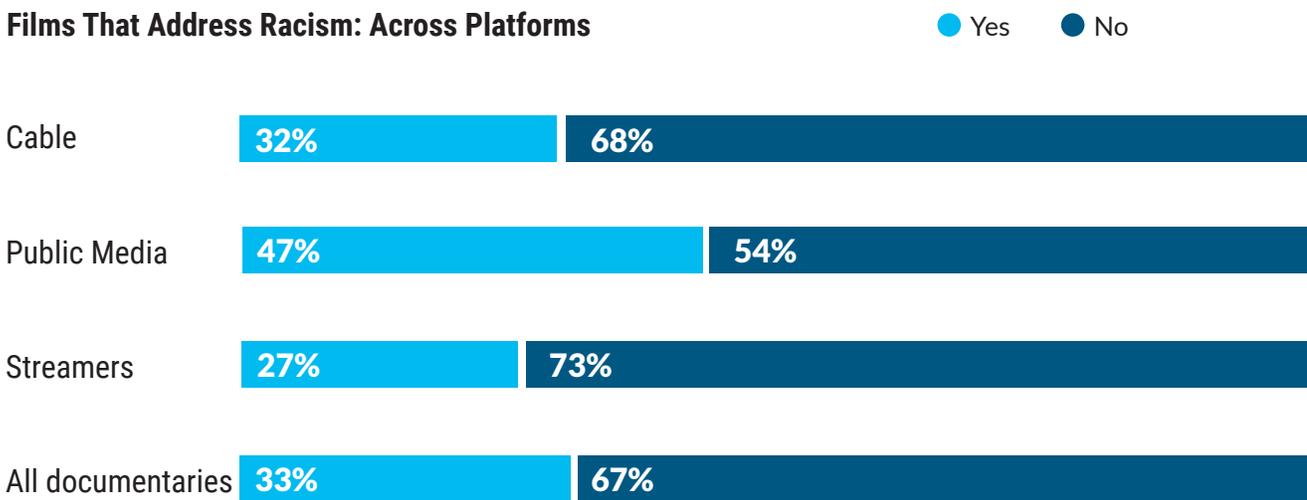
<sup>19</sup>This listing is based on 588 films identified as “entertainment-focused.”

<sup>20</sup>This listing is based on 643 films identified as “social-issues.”

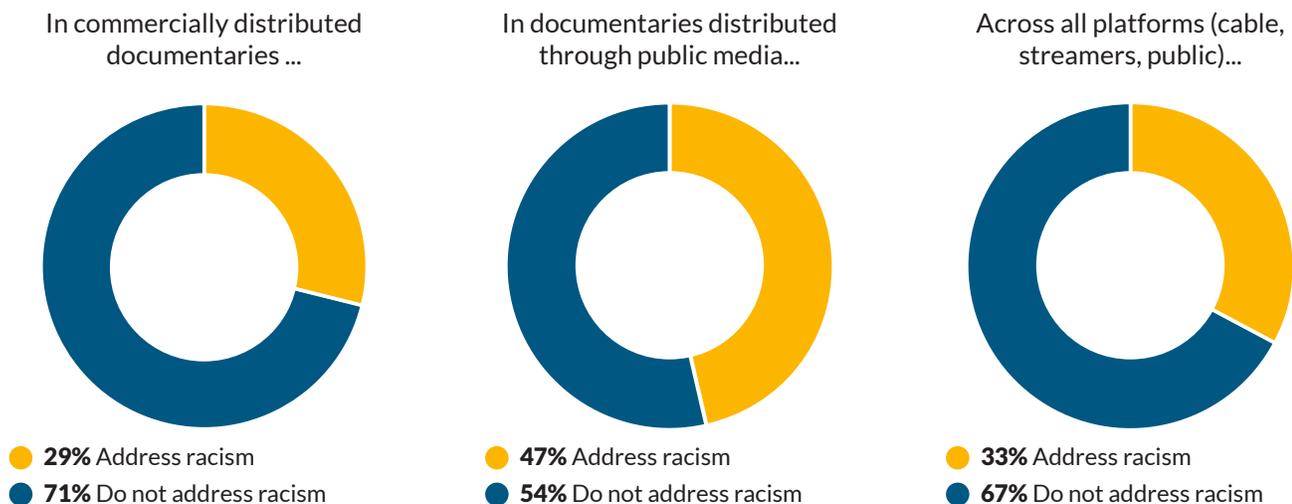
## RACISM AS AN ACKNOWLEDGED REALITY

Within the category of social-issue films, this analysis went a step further to explore whether the issue of institutional racism was made explicit in the documentary, given the dominance of structural racism as a contributing factor to many social problems. Of these films, 29% of commercially distributed documentaries (within the “social-issues” category) included any reference at all to racism or institutional racism, whereas 47% of those documentaries distributed by public TV address racism in some way. Overall, just 33% of social-issue documentaries included any reference to racial justice or race relations as a topic (67% did not). The criteria for identifying a story that addressed racism were intentionally broad. Any documentary which raised race or racism, even through a single quote or reference, was captured. In other words, the documentary did not need to be singularly about issues of structural racism, or dedicate significant time to unpacking or investigating issues of racism, but it did need to explicitly raise the existence – or an individual’s experience with – “race relations” or racism in some way.

### Films That Address Racism: Across Platforms



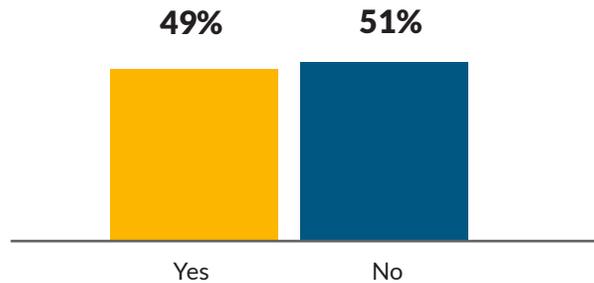
### Films That Address Racism: Across Sectors (Commercial vs. Public Media)



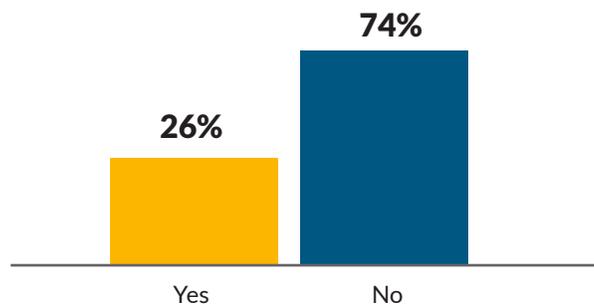
## Who is Telling Stories That Address Racism?<sup>21</sup>

When it comes to acknowledging or addressing the existence of racism in the world of a film or the lives of its protagonists, BIPOC film directors are far more likely to acknowledge realities of race and racism in their documentaries than White directors. While 49% of social-issue films directed by BIPOC filmmakers referenced the reality of racism at some point in their film, only 26% of White directors did so.

Did Films by BIPOC Directors deal with racism in any way?

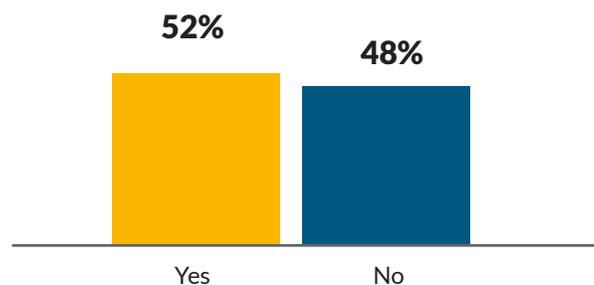


Did Films by White Directors deal with racism in any way?

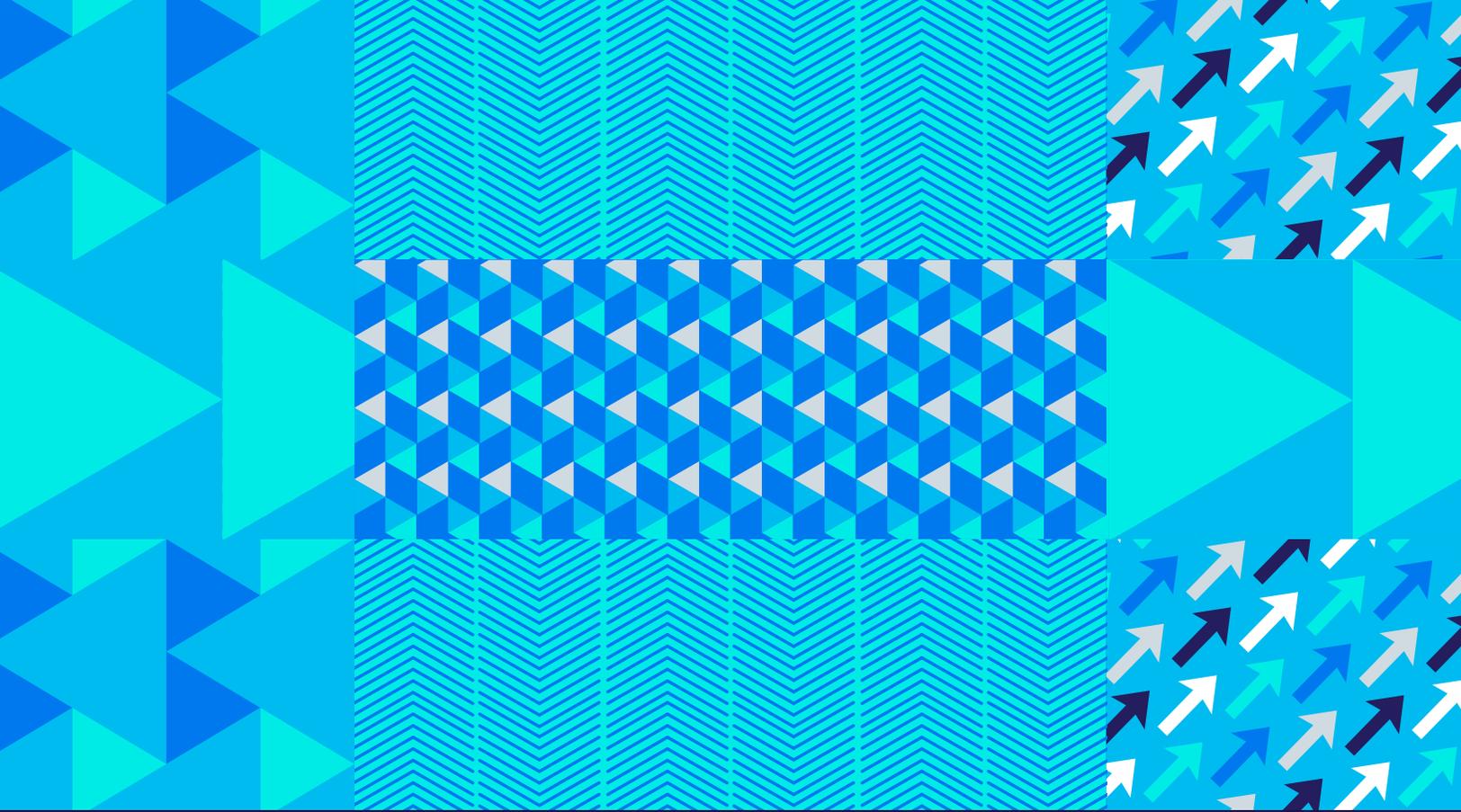


By contrast, BIPOC and “mixed” directing teams (that is, films with BIPOC and White credited directors working together) were much more likely to produce films that explicitly acknowledge racism than White directors working alone. Mixed film teams and BIPOC directors are equally likely to acknowledge race and racism topics in their films; 52% of social-issue films from mixed directing teams included race relations or racism as a dominant theme, 49% of films from BIPOC directors did so, compared to 26% from White filmmakers.

Did Films by Multiracial Film teams deal with racism in any way?



<sup>21</sup> Based on 638 cases (6 cases were missing).



# IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This is an investigation, unprecedented in its scale and focus, of the documentary directors, stories, and topics distributed by major commercial and public U.S.-based media outlets in the streaming era of nonfiction, from the first year of the streaming nonfiction age (2014) to the present—more than 1,200 films. By examining whose stories, which storytellers, and what protagonist experiences are selected to be distributed to wide audiences, these findings offers eye-opening data on the reality of representation in the documentary field today. In so doing, this study centers the trends—not the myths—behind nonfiction storytelling in the contemporary media age. This data, coupled with anecdotal reflections that proliferate the industry, provide a clear pathway to design meaningful reform measures. The inequities and patterns revealed in *The Lens Reflected* raise important questions about the state of the contemporary documentary industry and its system of access, gatekeepers, funding and commissioning, and distribution. Among its findings, for instance, one portrait becomes clear: BIPOC storytellers and primary protagonists are not yet integrated fully into the growing media system that distributes documentary storytelling, and women and nonbinary people also are not nearly as likely to be heard from (as directors) or seen (as protagonists on screen) relative to men. Of all groups, BIPOC women are the least likely to have their nonfiction films distributed across major media networks, or to be seen as primary protagonists on screen.

This portrait reveals an industry-wide system that does not yet reflect the reality and demographics of diverse storytellers and audiences in the United States and around the world. Comparing these findings to any number of similar studies that examine fiction film and TV, it would seem that the legacy decision-making structures and systems of scripted Hollywood, which rely heavily on a stable of vetted filmmakers and production companies, are being replicated in the business of contemporary nonfiction film and TV. What should we make of all this, and what's to be done? Several themes and questions emerge here, not simply as conclusions, but as suggested paths and areas for urgent discussion.

## Addressing Persistent Pipeline Barriers to Access Is Vitally Important, Beyond Distribution Alone

It's crucial to contemplate these findings within a broader context of the full pipeline—funding, creating, and selling a film successfully for distribution (or work commissioned by a distributing network). Films and filmmakers also depend on their social capital networks and some degree of relational power to even access meetings to discuss and present their work. Persistent gender and racial inequities suggest the barriers that exist throughout the pipeline are both cultural and structural. This raises questions: What films are greenlit for production? What is the rationale behind certain stories being chosen? Why are stories about and by White men preferred by media decision-makers even as nonfiction audiences expand in size and diversity? What is funded and commissioned at the network level, not only by philanthropic funders? From a business perspective, we suggest that this is also an economically missed opportunity for networks, who are failing to engage rapidly changing audience demographics.

## Democracy Suffers When We Fail to See or Hear From a More Representative Reflection of Lived Experiences

From a broader societal point of view, when we only see films that are predominantly shaped by and portray very specific and consistent realities, what lives, perspectives, and stories are completely left out of the cultural landscape? How does this impact public opinion and perspectives about people and communities? Stated in the reverse, if more films directed by BIPOC and women filmmakers reached audiences, what stories would we see? What experiences and histories might we better understand? What impact does the loss of these stories have on society, and indeed, on the public perception of documentaries as “authentic and truthful” in a post-truth climate?

For decades, documentary storytelling has occupied a space that is both artistic and journalistic. Documentary conveys a kind of promise of accuracy and truthfulness given its very form. Of course, these are aspirational pursuits, not always achieved, and yet, nonfiction film—at its best—can act as a trusted source of information and a portal to vital context beyond headlines that often are missing in fiction or traditional journalism. Along parallel lines, if documentary storytelling is to continue to perform a function as watchdog and portal, what is the loss to society when the power of this genre is dominated by celebrity content? What does it mean when dominant documentary distribution channels privilege entertainment stories over social issues? Similar questions have been raised in journalistic circles for decades, perhaps now more than ever as journalism faces an existential crisis of confidence, economic viability, and dwindling resources in the digital era. These are questions that should concern us all, far beyond the bounds of media as a business.

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## Investments in Diversity Incubation Pipelines Should Help to Yield Diverse Programming Over Time

Despite an increased number of initiatives designed to increase access for BIPOC and women filmmakers, distributed films do not yet show the fruits of these investments. Perhaps more explicitly, without networks fully participating in these incubators and pipeline diversity programs, filmmakers of color and women are treated as perpetual beginners—accessing training, yes, but still not seeing their films picked up by big distributors. Until and unless gatekeeping networks themselves work to open and shift the overall composition of films and TV programs that are distributed to wide audiences, which requires opening these gates to diverse filmmakers and production companies that are considered for both commissioned and acquired work, change will not happen, and audiences will not see themselves and their stories represented on screen. Still, new initiatives from media networks and philanthropies have emerged over the last several years in particular, so we identify this as a hopeful note. Consistent scrutiny through research can help reveal reality over time, alongside active collaborations with organizations who help to support and source diverse storytellers.

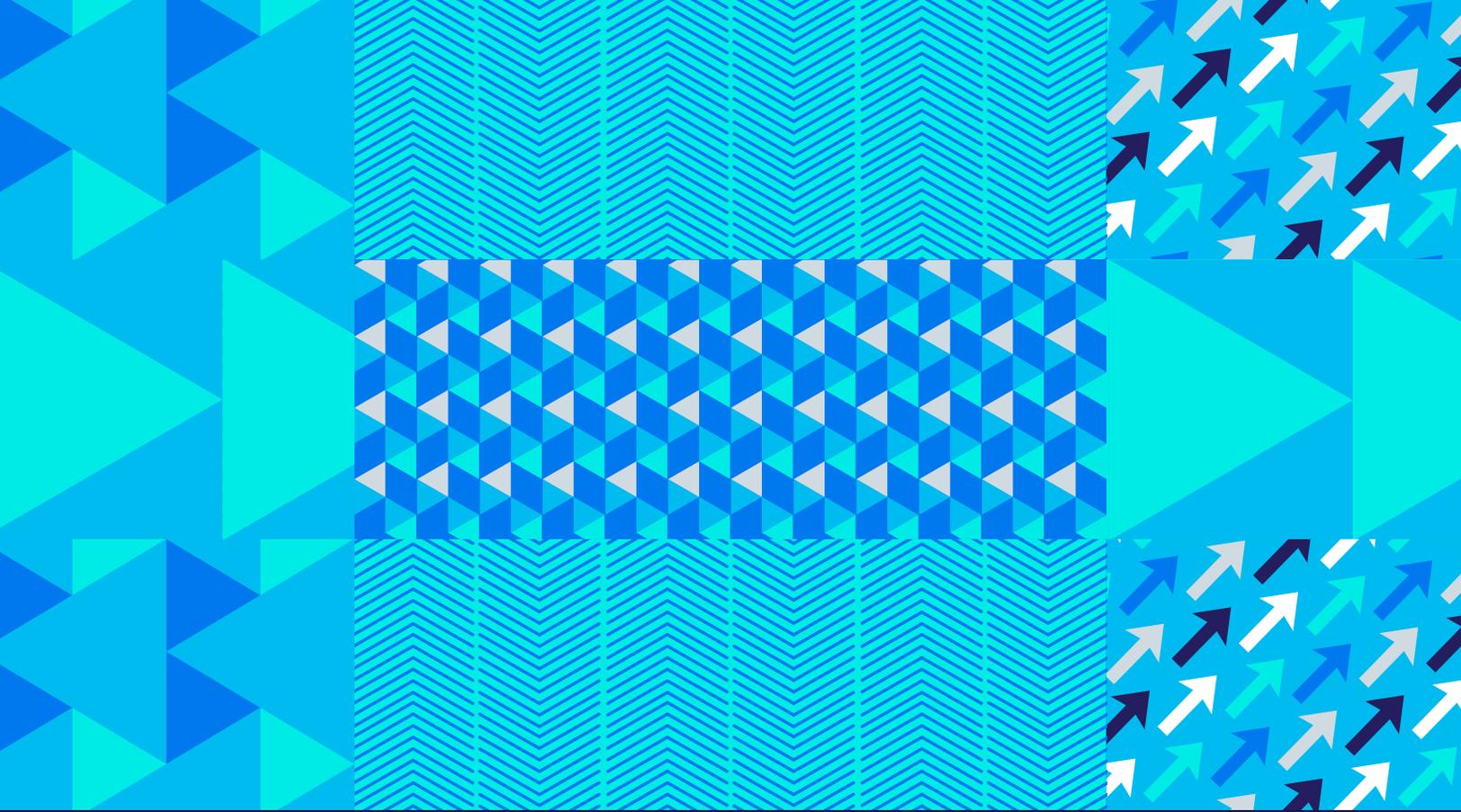
And yet, there's more to consider here. Perhaps the current interventions and “solutions” do not match the problem. Several diversity pipeline programs are years and even decades old, so if a lack of diverse storytellers was the structural problem, then pipeline development programs surely would offer the sole path forward. And yet, despite the vocal and visible presence of BIPOC and women filmmakers across the documentary industry, their work is still not reflected in the media marketplace on parallel footing with those of White, men-identifying filmmakers. Something is preventing these talented, financially-resourced makers from getting their work seen, completing distribution and licensing deals and thus, offering their stories to a broad cross-section of audiences. It stands to reason, then, that the end-road decision-makers at festivals and distribution companies need to be engaged in the same structural equity work as pipeline programs. And if social networks and social capital continue to enforce the status quo, then shifting the composition of decision-makers who program, commission and acquire documentary films would also be an important step.

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## Filmmaker Ownership—and Film Access and Preservation—Is Perilous In the Streaming Media Age

Purely as an artifact of facilitating this research, we discovered that the commercial networks—and streaming-native outlets in particular—are not always preserving their film libraries beyond initial licensing deals. This means that some filmmakers have no power to preserve their work, researchers cannot study it, and audiences cannot access it. We hope this can spark a conversation about access to films now and in the future, in the digital media space and physical realm.

As we look toward the future, with this data and the research that will follow, the hope is for industry-wide conversations to begin to take place, alongside meaningful collaborations and real work to invest in stories and storytellers that will contribute stories that reflect and serve a pluralistic global audience.



# **METHODOLOGY**

# **APPENDIX**



Intercoder reliability testing was conducted on a random sample of 10% (n=167) of the total universe of potential study film (n=1,678). A team of five coders—the same coders that coded the full study data—participated in the test. Each film was coded by two coders. Coders were randomly assigned to films in a way that ensured all possible combinations of coder pairs across the test sample. ReCal OIR, an open-source software program (Freelon, 2013), was used to calculate Krippendorff’s alpha, a measure of interrater reliability. The k alpha coefficient ranges from 0 (no agreement) to 1 (perfect agreement). Krippendorff’s alpha was chosen for its rigor and ability to accommodate the study’s mix of nominal and ratio variables.

<b>Variable Name/Description</b>	<b>Krippendorff’s alpha</b>
Identifiable Main Protagonist	.74
Main Protagonist Gender	.75
Main Protagonist BIPOC	.82
Film primary narrative	.70
Film genre	.74
Film primary topic	.71
Racism (Does the film deal with racism in any way?)	.80
Director Gender	.93
Director BIPOC	.71

# THE LENS REFLECTED

What Stories & Storytellers Get the Green Light  
in Documentary's Streaming Age?

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