

White, male documentary filmmakers dominate Academy Award recognition

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Days before the Oscars, American University School of Communication's Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) announced new diversity and inclusion research targeting the Academy Award category Best Documentary Feature. CMSI researchers found trends that reflect a persistent lack of diversity in the genre and the industry.

The study, "[Journey to the Academy Awards: An Investigation of Oscar-Shortlisted and Nominated Documentaries \(2014-2016\)](#)," uncovered that 89 percent of film directors shortlisted for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature have been white, and 77 percent have been male over the past three years. Lead researcher [Caty Borum Chattoo](#), CMSI co-director, and team systematically gathered, archived, categorized and coded data for 45 total films across 2014, 2015 and 2016 along the road to the Academy Awards. A total of 56 formally-credited directors were examined for this analysis, as several films have more than one credited director.

"It's an amazing moment to make, watch and celebrate [documentary](#) films, which are such an important part of our cultural landscape, reflecting stories crucial to our democracy and entertaining us at the same time," said Borum Chattoo. "There may be a myth that the diversity challenges facing other Academy Award categories - and the entertainment business in general - are not observed in independent [documentary films](#), but based on our research there is clearly a long way to go."

Researchers looked into, "what does it take for a documentary film and its director and producer to make it to the top—the Oscars shortlist, the nomination and the win? Which film directors receive recognition—in terms of race and gender? Are the shortlisted films about pressing social issues, or slice-of-life entertainment stories? How are the top documentary films distributed—by major studio distributors or smaller independent companies?" With close investigation of the Oscar-shortlisted documentary films, the study brings to light what it takes to reach the highest level of achievement.

Research results:

- Over the past three years, Oscar shortlist recognition in the Best Documentary Feature category consistently favors white documentary directors.
- Academy Award recognition of female documentary makers remains consistently rare.
- Documentaries that work at the intersection of investigative journalism and film - addressing pressing social issues and possibly influencing them -regularly receive recognition by the Academy in the shortlist process.
- Film festivals are crucial to these top filmmakers not only because of the exposure to audiences, critics, media and distributors, but also because of their connection to major awards.
- Film festivals and online streaming platforms dominate Oscar-shortlisted and nominated films' distribution plans.

The study represents preliminary key findings from a forthcoming larger CMSI study due later this year. The Center for Media & Social Impact at American University is an innovation incubator and research center that creates, studies, and showcases [media](#) for [social impact](#). For more information, visit <http://www.cmsimpact.org>.

Provided by American University

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