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Gender, Genre, and Power in the Theatre Blogosphere

University of Windsor Research Results Summary

Principal Investigator: Dr. Michelle MacArthur

This study is part of a larger project, led by Dr. Michelle MacArthur (University of Windsor) and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, that aims to map the demographics and generic characteristics of the Canadian theatre blogosphere and analyze its findings in light of current studies and activism surrounding gender equity in theatre. As the first phase of that project, this study had three goals: (1) to understand the demographics of who is writing about theatre online, where and how often are they writing, who is getting compensated, and what forms this compensation takes; (2) to examine how online theatre writers understand themselves, their goals, and the impact of their work; and (3) to understand whether, or to what extent, the digital age is levelling the playing field for women and other marginalized groups, who have traditionally been under-represented as theatre critics in Canada.

Participants across Canada were recruited through channels such as the Canadian Theatre Critics Association, the Canadian Association of Theatre Research, individual websites, and social media to complete an online survey. In order to qualify for the study, writers had to publish at least four reviews per year on any of the following platforms: publications with a print equivalent (e.g. *Globe and Mail*, *NOW* magazine), single- or multi-author online publications or blogs (e.g. johnsmith_theatrecritic.com, *Intermission*, *Mooney on Theatre*), and social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. The survey was completed by 103 qualifying participants within the several months it remained open in 2019.

Study results show that people who write about theatre online in Canada tend to be highly educated, with the majority of respondents holding at least an undergraduate degree and nearly half holding graduate degrees. Survey respondents identified more as female than male; a small percentage identified as non-binary or other. In terms of racial/ethnic identity, the majority of respondents identified themselves as caucasian or white, while just under a quarter of respondents identified as visible minorities. Almost one third of respondents identified as LGBTQ2S+. Nearly half of respondents were Millennials, constituting the largest demographic group of online theatre reviewers in our study; they were followed by Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, who were represented in fairly equal numbers.

Multi-author online publications or blogs (e.g. *ReviewVancouver*, *Apt613*, *Mooney on Theatre*) were the most common platforms for theatre reviewing amongst survey respondents. Roughly a quarter of respondents reported writing for/on each of the following platforms: publications with print equivalents, single-author blogs or personal websites, or Facebook or Twitter. Respondents often reported publishing on multiple platforms, with the average being two different platforms (e.g. posting a review on Facebook and on a personal blog). Respondents saw themselves as writing for a fairly average theatre audience for a variety of reasons, most concerned with supporting theatre as an art form and engaging critically with the production.

Including free tickets, the majority of respondents reported being compensated in some way for their writing, but most respondents did not earn a significant amount of their overall income from their theatre reviewing. Indeed, just over half of all respondents reported receiving forms of compensation *other* than free tickets (mostly, financial compensation), with the largest group paid by a rate per article. Other forms of compensation included honoraria, annual salaries, and compensation in other forms such as ad revenue, Patreon accounts, or personal donations.

While demographic findings show that a greater diversity of people are writing about theatre online than what one might expect from traditional print media, it is still unclear whether the digital age is creating a more democratic and accessible theatre reviewing landscape. On the one hand, the survey found that male-identified and older respondents were more likely to write on higher-paying and more prestigious platforms, such as publications with a print equivalent, which might suggest that the power structures of the print world of ‘traditional’ criticism are being reproduced online. On the other hand, slightly more survey respondents reported *reading* reviews published in multi-author online publications or blogs than publications with print equivalents, which might suggest the growing influence and popularity of platforms that feature a greater diversity of writers.

This study is now concluded, and its findings will be disseminated in more detail in forthcoming journal and trade (theatre industry) publication articles. The next phase of the study will undertake qualitative analysis of the review samples collected from participants. It will attempt to determine if there are gendered differences in writing and communication styles.