

# EUROPEAN SCREENWRITERS' INCOME IN 2012

## AN OVERVIEW

A report analysing the findings of a survey  
of European screenwriters' income, conducted  
by the Federation of Screenwriters in Europe

NOVEMBER 2013





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# INTRODUCTION

The survey was undertaken to inform a series of workshops for screenwriters' guilds in European countries entitled *Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining in the Digital Economy*, a project supported by an initiative run by DG Employment of the European Commission and organised by UNI-EUROPA (Euro-MEI) and the Federation of Screenwriters in Europe (FSE).

The online survey, asking seven questions, was distributed by 21 European screenwriters' guilds belonging to the FSE. 700 professional screenwriters working in over 25 countries responded and provided information about their income in 2012.

The anonymous survey provides factual information to illuminate the discussion about authors remuneration. As one respondent noted :

**“** *There is no open discussion about pay. Writers who are working are not willing to discuss this, which I can appreciate, but because there are no minimum amounts or contracts that protect the writer then no change can come.*



# KEY FINDINGS



## The survey yielded the following key information :

- Screenwriters' median income, after tax, from screenwriting in 2012 was € 22,000.
- 57 % of the writers surveyed earned less than € 30,000 and only 7 % earned more than € 100,000, showing the disproportionate range of yearly income.
- Only 23 % of all screenwriters polled reported an increase in pay from 2011 to 2012 with a majority of all respondents (57 %) depending on income outside of screenwriting.
- Most writers worked in multiple fields of screenwriting, but a strong minority (34 %) depended solely on television for their yearly income.
- Collective Management Organisations (CMOs) provide 61 % of respondents with less than 10 % of their total screenwriting income.



# Net Income

The radical variation of screenwriting incomes is evidenced by the categorization in Figure 1.

The broad range of net income from screenwriting for 2012 inflates the average income to €31,300, making the median income of €22,000 a more realistic number from which to draw conclusions.

49 of the 700 writers, or 7 %, earned top salaries of €100,000 or more in 2012, but 62 survey participants (8 %) earned the bare minimum of €1,000. The majority of screenwriters earned less than the average screenwriting income in 2012, as seen in Figure 1.

The 399 screenwriters comprising the Lower Income Group earned just 19 % of the total income reported to the survey, while the select few of the Higher Income Group earned 35 % of the total income reported.

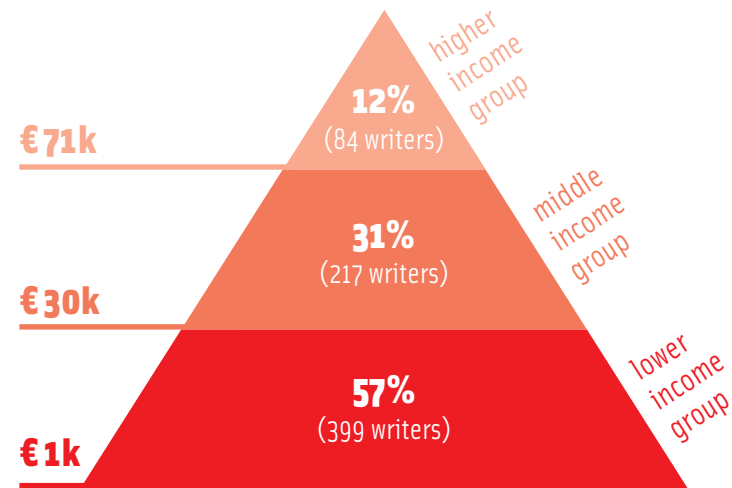


Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents per Income Group



# Yearly Trends

The majority of writers who earned money from screenwriting in both 2011 and 2012 reported that they noticed either no change or a drop in income in 2012 when compared with the previous year (Figure 2).

However, while lowered wages are to be expected during times of economic recession, **declining screenwriting fees** have concerned industry members for some time according to these respondents:

“ Working for 13 years with work contracts... [in] television production. In these 13 years my fee was gradually reduced (5-10 %) compared with [the] baseline.

“ I've been writing for film and television many years now (I'm 55 years old). Over the years I've seen the fees for scriptwriting go down steadily. In my view, an important reason for this is that our government and/or organisations operating on its behalf prohibit the implementation of standard minimal fees, because this would be 'cartel-forming' and bad for the free market. Only producers benefit from this as they are much more adept at 'playing the market.' I think European legislation could play a useful part here.

As well as the growing **culture of non-payment** for elements of screenwriting work, which was a concern for another 8 % of respondents :

“ Option Deals are rare and the level of exploitation where production companies get writers to write a first draft and do re-writes for free is now becoming a standard.

“ ... not paying [writers] seems to be becoming the norm for many producers in the UK for films of a certain budget and it's very difficult to break out of that as many scripts don't get made.

“ A lot of work I have done was for free or for writing credits to lead on to other work.

Year to Year Earnings Comparison  
(2011 –2012)

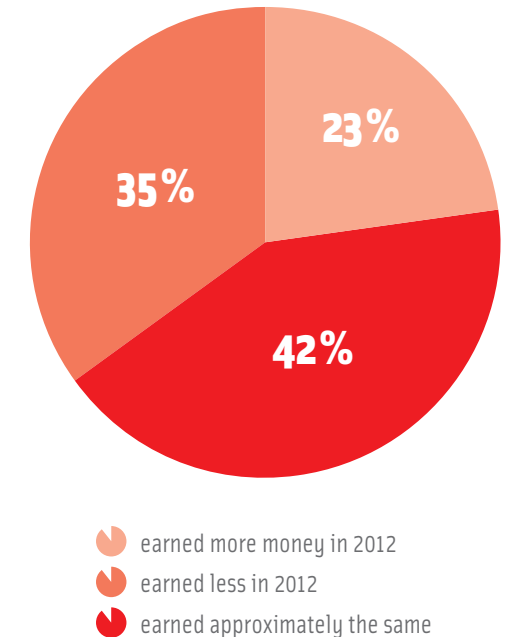


Figure 2. 2012 Net Income Compared to 2011 Net Income  
for Screenwriters Surveyed

# Supplementary Income

Over half of those surveyed relied on non-screenwriting income in 2012 with those in the lower income bracket making up the majority of writers who worked part time to supplement their screenwriting income.

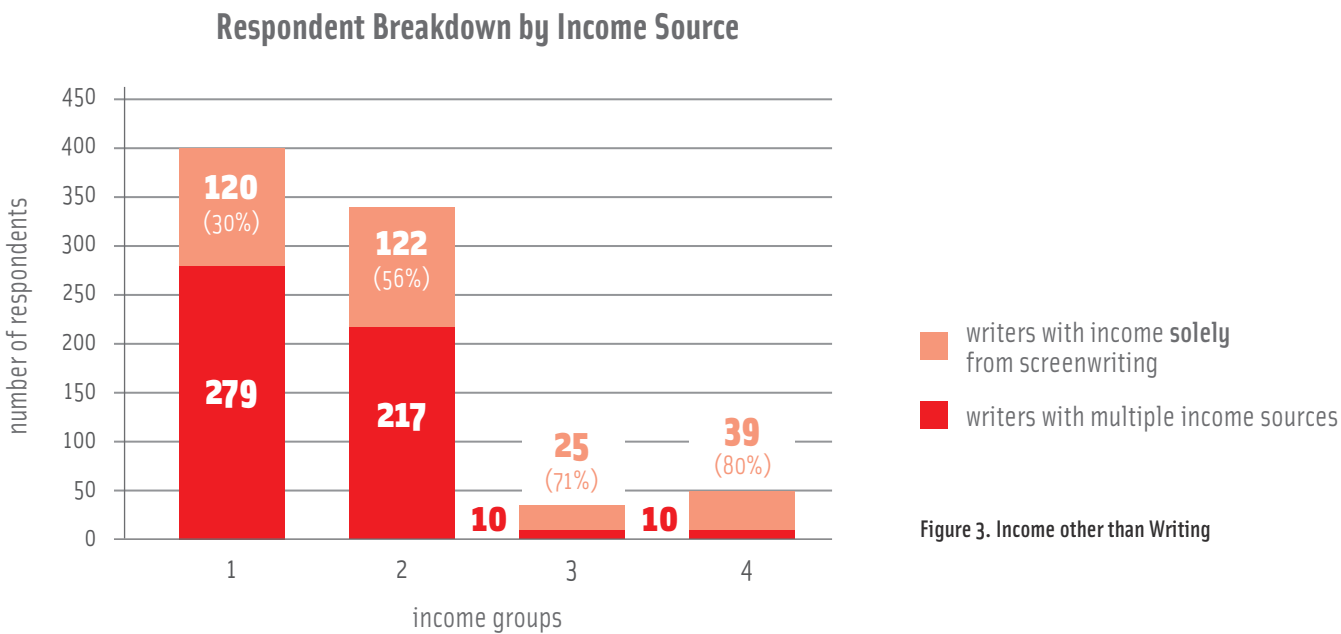


Figure 3. Income other than Writing

In the comments section 10 % of respondents noted the importance of their other incomes to survival. Other sources of income were varied but included university teaching, directing, writing novels and being a comic. One respondent commented on the impact of the financial crisis in Greece on her screenwriting income :

“ Since the finance crisis began – I would not have made it without the financial support of my husband. Though – the year of 2013 seems to be better again – with more new projects in the making – than the last 3 years together. Hope that means that I again can make a living of my own.

## Media Sectors

Respondents gave estimates of the percentage of net screenwriting income contributed by four categories : film, television, old media (e.g. theatre), and new media (e.g. Internet). Results showed television to account for 68 % of respondents' income, film 25 %, old media 8 %, and new media 4 %.

Just under half worked in just one sector, with 70 % of that group working solely in television. Indeed, television seemed to be the breadwinner across the board.

For those who worked in television as well as other sectors, 59 % of their screenwriting income came from television.

## Contracts

The average income per contract for the 72 screenwriters whose income came solely from film was € 13,800, an average number of contracts in 2012 was 1.5.

Those 241 writers seeing income solely from television reported an average income per contract of € 9,900 and an average number of contracts at 3.7 in 2012.

Not surprisingly, those working entirely in old or new media saw an average of less than one contract in 2012.

These factors are further evidence that television provides the most income for screenwriters in Europe.

## Collective Management Organisations

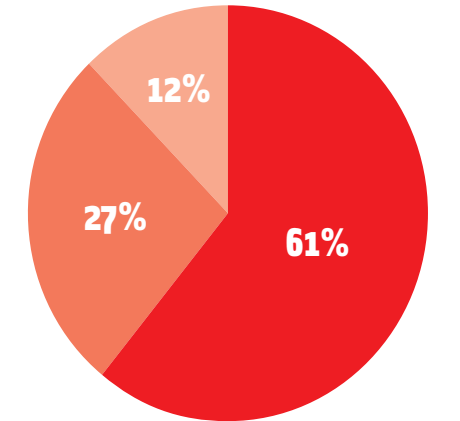
61 % of respondents had 10 % or less of their screenwriting income paid or negotiated for by collecting management organisations (CMOs) in 2012.

For the 51 respondents for whom the overwhelming majority of their income (71-100 %) came via CMOs, the median total screenwriting income was € 11,000. This includes the 24 respondents whose only income that year came from CMOs.

The range of income negotiated or paid by collective management organisations was as illustrated in Figure 4, showing that little over a quarter of all respondents received some income from CMOs that accounted for between 11-70 % of their total screenwriting income.

A Greek respondent commented : *"After the 2009 crisis in Greece, the TV production fell by 90 %"*. They continued to remark that some screenwriters were lucky to have television classics repeated and income generated in this way. Likewise another Greek respondent commented : *"Almost all of my last year's income was due to royalties (author's rights) paid for tv reruns of tv series I had written in the past."*

Income Negotiated or Paid  
by Collecting Societies



- received ≤10 % of income from CMOs
- received 11-70 % of income from CMOs
- received 71-100 % of income from CMOs

Figure 4. Income Negotiated or Paid  
by Collecting Societies





## DETAILED FINDINGS

## Mean and Median Incomes by Nation

Incomes from screenwriting amongst respondents varied by the nation they worked within. Figure 5 (below) illustrates the median income for respondents per country, a more reliable indication of a typical salary in the country than the average (Figure 6 on p.16), which is often inflated by the nation's high earners.

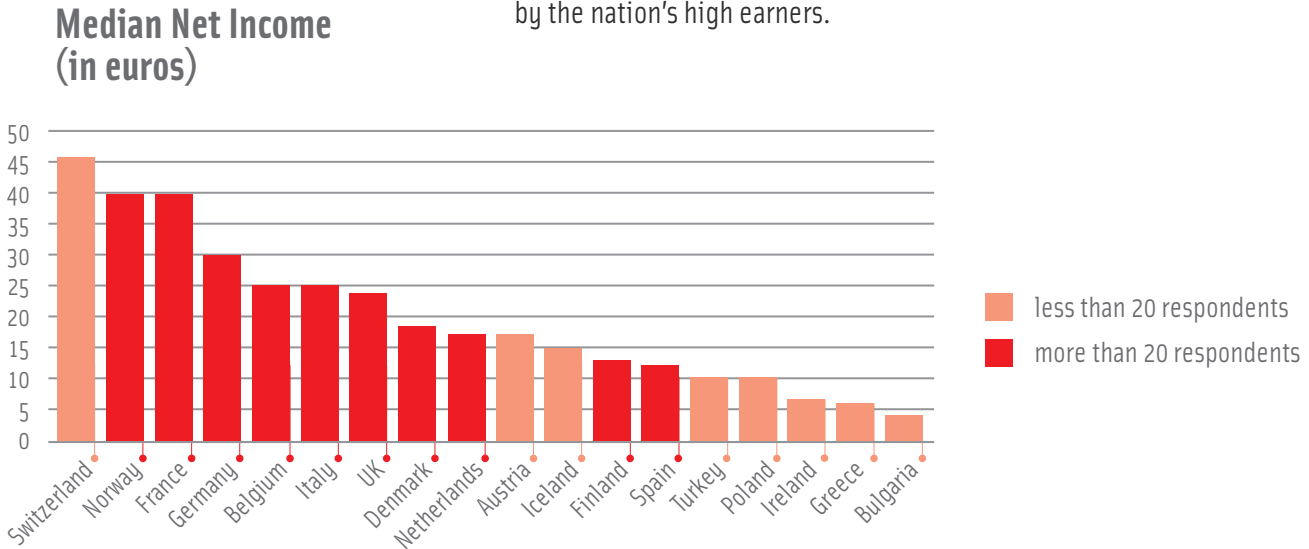


Figure 5. Median 2012 Net Income for Screenwriters organised by Nation Worked Within (Countries with less than Five Respondents Excluded)



## Average Net Income (in euros)

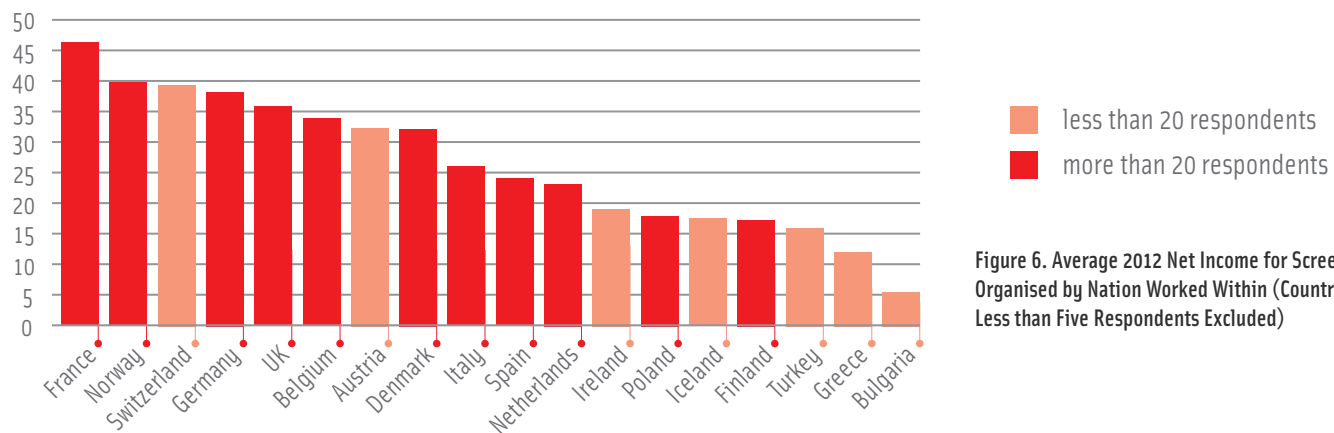


Figure 6. Average 2012 Net Income for Screenwriters Organised by Nation Worked Within (Countries with Less than Five Respondents Excluded)

These figures were examined by participants in a workshop on Collective Bargaining who found that the figures concurred with their experience and with local research where that had been done. For example a report by the Spanish writing guilds, ALMA, FAGA and Fundación Autor, *La escritura de guión en España: Un estudio de la profesión* found Spanish screenwriters' income on average to be approximately € 22,000 per annum over the three years previous to 2012 (ALMA, FAGA and Fundación Autor, 2012). This concurs with our findings.

From the findings we can assemble profiles of screenwriters on different levels of income working within Europe, which indicate in which country and media they predominantly work, on average how many contracts they take on and how much of their income is derived from screenwriting.

## Income Group Breakdown

These profiles built from the data gathered indicate the conditions in which screenwriters are most likely to prosper financially and the situations in which they are faring less well across Europe.

### Higher Income Group (€ 71,000 +)

- 12 % of total respondents fell in the higher income group.
- Figure 7 shows the countries with the greatest percentage of their respondents in the higher income group.
- Most likely to work in television : 81 %.
- Most likely to work solely as a screenwriter (76 % work solely in screenwriting) and to have an average of 4.7 contracts in 2012.

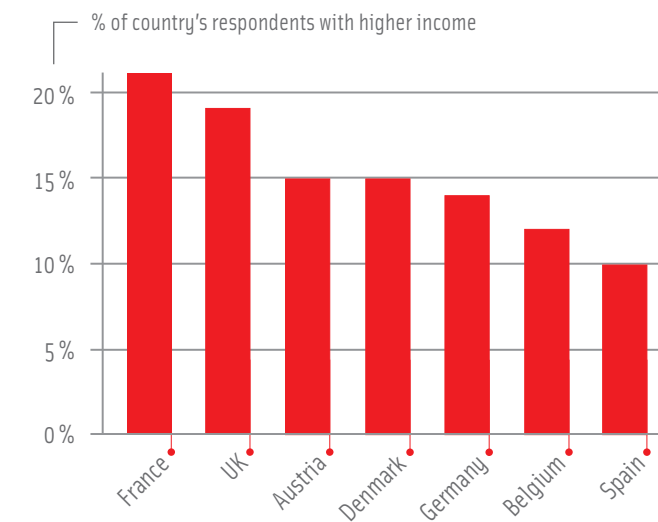


Figure 7. Countries with the Greatest Percentage of their Respondents in Higher Income Group

### Middle Income Group (€ 30,000-70,000)

- 31% of total respondents were in the middle income group.
- Figure 8 shows the countries with the greatest percentage of their respondents in the middle income group.
- Most likely to work in television : 71%.
- 56 % work solely in screenwriting.
- Middle income screenwriters were most likely to have an average of 4 contracts in 2012.

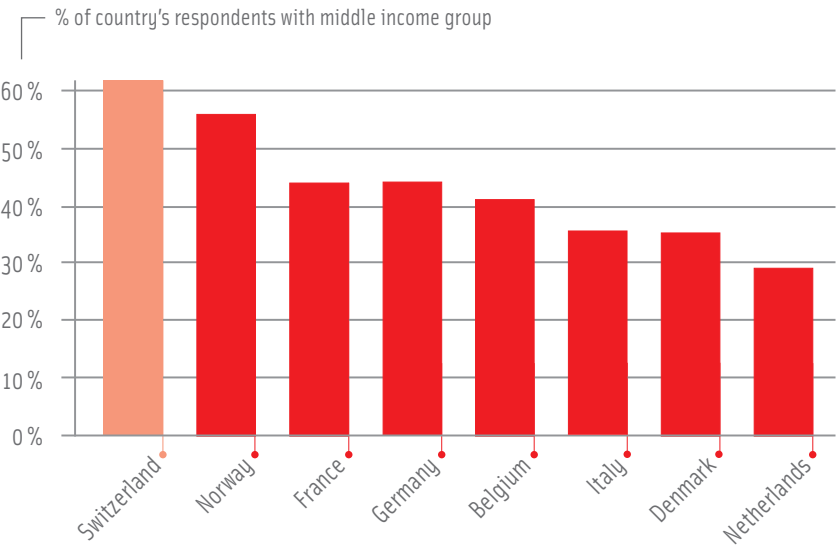


Figure 8. Countries with the Greatest Percentage of their Respondents in Middle Income Group

■ less than 20 respondents  
■ more than 20 respondents

### Lower Income Group (under € 30,000)

- 57 % of total respondents were in the lower income group.
- Figure 9 shows the countries with the greatest percentage of their respondents in the lower income group.
- Most likely to work across different media predominantly in television (54 %) and film (28 %) with a higher proportion working in old media (11 %) and new media (6 %).
- Most likely rely on other sources of income also : 70 % respondents had non-screenwriting income and had an average of 2.1 contracts per year.

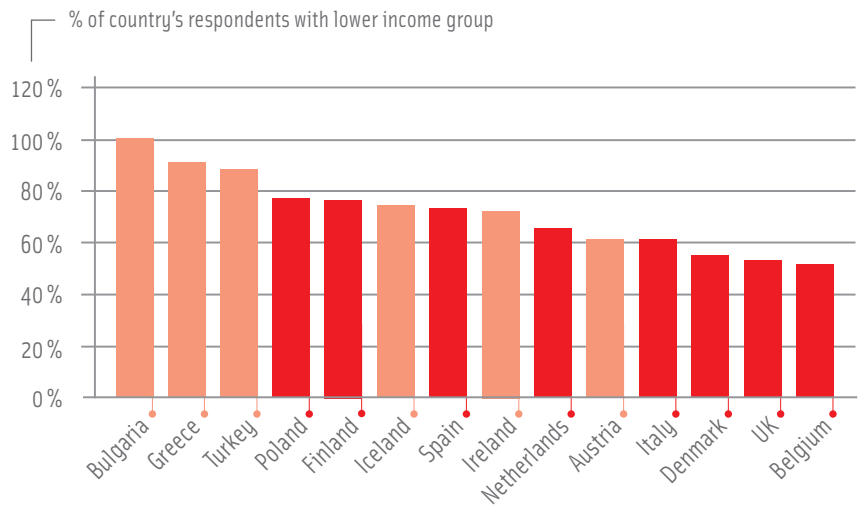


Figure 9. Countries with the Greatest Percentage of their Respondents in Lower Income Group

■ less than 20 respondents  
■ more than 20 respondents



## Other Concerns

### Falling Income in 2012 : Nations Badly Affected

It can be noted from the country by country survey results to this question that nations hardest hit by the Eurozone crisis had the highest percentages of screenwriter respondents with a falling income in 2012 compared to 2011. 91 % of Greek respondents reported a drop in income between 2011 and 2012, but Greece also had a low response rate of only 11 writers. 61 % of Italian screenwriters meanwhile reported a lowering in income in 2012 and Italy had a much larger group of 39 screenwriters participate. Of Spain's 77 participating screenwriters, 56 % saw a fall in income from 2011 to 2012.

### Comparisons with the USA

By comparison, working members of the Writers' Guild of America West in 2011 earned more than 5 times the average European screenwriting wage, bringing in an average income of €160,282 (210,165 dollars). Chuck Slocum, Deputy Executive Director of the Writers Guild of America, estimates the median to be closer to 100,000 dollars.

NB. It is common that screenwriters in Europe and the US can have no income from screenwriting in a year, hence this survey monitored only the 4000 (approx.) screenwriting members of the WGAW earning fees in 2011, out of an overall total of just under 8,000 members.

### Other Comments by Respondents

Several respondents (8 % of comments) who had over ten years' experience in the industry noted that there had been a long term decline in fees for screenwriters and many called for European legislation to implement minimum fees.

Other comments marked distress at very low levels of pay (9 %) and included remarks on other sources of income (10 %), of which details are included above. The majority of the comments from respondents explained their responses to questions further.







## METHODOLOGY

The online survey consisted of seven questions to provide a foundation of current knowledge about European income for the Collective Bargaining project. It was available in nine languages—English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish—to encourage broad participation.

The survey opened on Monday 11 February 2013 and closed, after six weeks, on Sunday 24 March 2013. 21 European screenwriting guilds emailed their professional screenwriter members with a link to the survey and information about its purpose.

Comments were also collected from respondents and included in this report.

### Responses Collected

The response rate to the survey is well above the common 10 % rate for paper and online based surveys (Denscombe, 2012, p.20).

It is not easy to count those writers with no income in any clear way. However, based on experience of Guilds and making comparisons with equivalent studies conducted in the US we can say that, particularly for writers of feature films, a significant percentage of professional writers will have years with no income from writing.

Of the writers surveyed, only 6 worked in markets outside of Europe in the USA, Mexico, and other countries. The remaining 99 % worked in European nations.

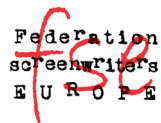
### Challenges in Collecting Data

The sensitive nature of surveys addressing income levels often dissuades potential participants from engaging (Denscombe, 2012, pg19). Despite the online survey having a healthy response rate from nations hit badly by the current economic crisis, with Italy contributing 39 responses and Spain 78, those faring less well financially may have been reluctant to contribute. Alternatively, general cultural disinclination to discuss income may have inhibited screenwriters from participating whatever their income.

Despite potential reservations, a significant number of European screenwriters shared their income with us, enabling us to analyse them and create this report.



Comments and questions on this study ? Please feel free to contact FSE : [info@scenaristes.org](mailto:info@scenaristes.org)



The Federation of Screenwriters in Europe (FSE) is the voice in Europe for more than 6,000 professional screenwriters working mainly in the film and television industry. It represents 25 associations, guilds and unions of screenwriters in 20 countries.

More information at [www.scenaristes.org](http://www.scenaristes.org)



UNI Global Union - Media Entertainment and Arts (UNI MEI) - represents 170 national unions and guilds affiliating more than 375,000 creators, technicians and other workers in the media, entertainment and arts worldwide.

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