

## **Lesley Chilcott Discusses Film CODEGIRL And Why Closing Tech Gender Gap Is Crucial To Economy**

Lesley Chilcott, acclaimed co-producer of mega documentaries such as “An Inconvenient Truth” and “Waiting for Superman,” is now shining a big laser-like spotlight on encouraging young women to enter computer programming through her latest documentary “[CODEGIRL](#).” By 2017, the app market will be valued at \$77 Billion and over 80% of these developers are male. Lesley Chilcott produced CodeGirl with hopes to shed light on this major tech gender gap and help change the face of future app developers.

Released on YouTube for free last November 2015, and now available for download [online](#) through multiple platforms, CodeGirl follows the story of 5,000 girls from 60 countries as they compete in a real global coding competition by [Technovation](#). The Technovation Challenge aims to empower girls worldwide to solve a community problem, conduct research, develop a business plan, and create an app for competition.

Chilcott and her crew worked around the clock and around the world filming these girls. From a small affluent town in Massachusetts to indigenous areas in countries such as Nigeria and Moldova, Chilcott beautifully captured each team’s goals of holding their own in the world’s fastest-growing industry with a [projected](#) job surge of 131%. The winning team gets \$10K to complete and release their app; but every girl discovers far more valuable lessons on this bold journey.

During a recent phone conversation, Chilcott candidly discussed taking on the daunting task of following these teens all over the world, the biggest challenges facing girls and women in coding and STEM fields, how supporting a recent \$4 billion dollar computer science initiative is a non-partisan issue, and what the prolific documentarian is up to now.

### **Lumoid: Why did you feel compelled to do the CodeGirl documentary?**

**Lesley Chilcott:** Three years ago, I was making a very short film (5 minutes) for the launch of a new non-profit called [code.org](#). I was interviewing some rock stars of the coding and tech world and it was obvious there weren’t a lot of women. They exist, but only 7% of tech companies are founded by women. A few weeks later I needed a classroom to film in LA where young kids were learning to code and I came across Iridescent, and their contest just for girls called Technovation. Teams from around the world enter the contest and have three months to design a mobile app. The only parameter was that it must address a problem in their community. I thought this was one of the coolest ideas I’d ever heard and I knew I had to make a film about it.

### **Lumoid: The journey to film across the world sounds daunting. What was the experience like? Why did you have the girls do most of the narrating in the film?**

**LC:** I wanted CodeGirl’s primary audience to be teen girls, then of course their parents,

teachers and people that work at tech companies too. But in order to really reach the girls, I found it best if teams told their own story. Initially, I thought I would have experts explaining the dismal statistics about women in tech, but the girls really wanted to see girls, just like them, taking on a new idea and seeing it all the way to reality. In the process, the girls hit on all the stereotypes and how lonely it is to be a girl coder, and this is more powerful than someone talking at you.

You are right, the journey was very daunting. My producer Tracey Karka, editor Steve Prestemon, and I really had some logistical and story issues to deal with! There were girls literally all over the world and no one had any idea whose app would work or turn out well or who would advance. I had to make peace with the idea that the girls I followed at the beginning of the film would not be the girls I followed at the end at the finals, which is called World Pitch Night. It ended up working out because I got to show girls from countries like Moldova, Mexico, Brazil, Nigeria, India and all over the US, so everyone could hopefully see a little of bit of themselves in at least one of the team members.

**Lumoid: What are the biggest challenges facing young girls in STEM fields? And with statistics like, "only 18% of women make up computer science graduates in the U.S.," what's your overall view of the tech gender gap?**

**LC:** It sucks! Technology is all-pervasive now. We can talk about the positives and the negatives, but the biggest negative right now is that 51% of the population is often left out of the design and decision-making process. If there aren't women early on in the process, just as if there aren't other ethnicities besides white men, we cannot have the diversity we need to best serve the population as a whole. This will have long-term consequences. In addition to coding skills, women add leadership, intelligence, creativity, empathy, team building, and important design skills. Not to mention we're huge users of technology. We can't just use tech, we also have to write and make it. And there needs to be more paths open to women to do this.

As Susan Wojcicki said at the recent Grace Hopper Conference: "Men have no special skills that enable them to run technology companies. "

**Lumoid: With the political race heating up, what initiatives do you think our next president should take in terms of the STEM movement?**

**LC:** President Obama announced a plan to put \$4 billion in computer science that will hopefully improve diversity in technology. Approximately 25% of K-12 schools in the US offer computer science that includes coding, and about half of the states allow computer science classes to count towards high school graduation. So not only do we need to increase the availability of coding classes, but we need to support diversity initiatives as well. And it's not just high school. There is a leaky pipeline where women that actually enter the tech field as adults often drop out because of the workplace environment. The tech companies all recognize this is a problem and are developing

their own initiatives to help increase diversity and to also keep the women they do have. But there has to be skilled women and minority coders to draw from. So it needs addressing at all levels. Supporting this \$4 billion initiative is a great idea, and it's a non-partisan issue.

**Lumoid: What do you hope CodeGirl will accomplish? And do you still keep in touch with the teams?**

**LC:** To me, a CodeGirl is a girl who looks around her and says, hey, I see a problem. How can I help solve it using technology? It's important to learn some computer science no matter what field you intend to go into. But as I learned from Tara Chklovski, the CEO of Technovation, what's more important is for every girl (and woman) to learn how to solve a problem using technology.

When we did our four and a half day "freemium" window on YouTube, I was amazed that nearly 1 million people viewed CodeGirl in that time. Now that it's out on iTunes, Google Play, Xbox, Steam, VHX (and Netflix on April 1) and you can request to host a screening from our website, I hope the viewing parties continue. It's amazing for me to hop online and see how many people are hosting screenings and using CodeGirl to not only inspire girls, but to help bring awareness to the lack of diversity in tech. Some organizations use the film as reason to discuss the issue or talk about what their companies are doing around it.

Yes, I'm still in touch with many of the teens. Girls from Team Ameka and Team Puppy Sized Elephants went to a screening at the Department of Education last week in DC and received a White House tour. Many of them are continuing to develop their apps, one team has funding, and some are creating new apps. The contest has really made a huge impact on their lives.

**Lumoid: Any future projects in the works?**

**LC:** I hope so. One project I hope to do is about a cheetah, a long-distance runner, and a drought, but that's all I can say!

For more information or to watch CodeGirl, please visit their [website](#).

All photos courtesy of Lesley Chilcott.