

Isabel Brown

Prof. Dionisio; mentor Prof. Kevin del Principe

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Proposal for Rules of Documentary Filmmaking:  
A Study of Ethical Relationships and Representation

Isabel Brown

Abstract: My project is inspired by one overarching question—is it possible to craft a standard, useful ethical code for documentary filmmakers to follow? The beauty of documentaries is also the danger: as an audience, we can easily lose the fact that we are still seeing reality through the lens another person or team has constructed. For my project, I propose to put together an ethical “rulebook.” These ethical expectations primarily center on the topic of filmmaker/subject relationships, and the combating potential for exploitation that those relationships entail. I plan to look at both existing scholarly research and the personal experiences of filmmakers working in LA and New York. For my deliverable, I will make my own short about a topic that I choose myself, applying the points in my own “rulebook” to test their usability.

A documentary film depicts real life as closely as possible, often with the intention of raising awareness about or even changing the way society reacts to a person, event, industry, or social issue. A filmmaker has the power to shape the way such topics are seen by the public, who may know little to nothing about a given topic. In digging for information or by depicting sensitive imagery, filmmakers may cross boundaries and bother, exploit, or even endanger the very people they may be trying to aid. While documentaries depict “real life,” any film is still a controlled narrative, a view of reality that is shaped by the director, writers, cinematographers, etc. in much the same way as a traditional narrative film (Bershen). This fact isn’t often easily recognized by the casual viewer, who takes in the footage they’re being sold as some sort of whole truth. That’s where the importance of ethical standards comes in to play. At present, there is no body or standard that regulates documentary films in the same way as scholarly research (Schrag). One may think that this should be the task of the Institutional Review Board, which is a “specially constituted review body established or designated by an entity to protect the welfare of human subjects recruited to participate in research functions.” (“Glossary”). Documentaries do not technically constitute human subjects research, since they are not intended to promote widely generalizable statistics. Yet for all their possible topics, most documentaries *do* focus on human subjects that should be treated with respect. Any code of conduct for documentary filmmaking would have to be applicable to nuanced situations. So, would it in fact be possible to create a standard ethical code for documentaries, and if so, what would a film that follows the “standard” look like?

The summer following my freshman year, I met Chris Gajilan, who is a staff producer in the documentary division at CNN and a former executive producer for the OWN network. In our conversation over lunch, we discussed the people and places she’d filmed. I learned that her

work included subjects as diverse as Paralympians, tsunami survivors, and individuals fighting AIDS. (Gajilan) These were people whose stories needed to be told; they were also people whose stories needed to be told the *right* way.

In my first screenwriting class for my minor, we read “Screenwriting with a Conscience: Ethics for Screenwriters” by Marilyn Beker. For the first time, I was made to formally consider issues that had plagued my mind while watching certain movies, such as hidden sexism, the ethics of depicting graphic violence, or the responsibility of depicting a real-life person (Beker). In the weeks that followed, I kept returning to my conversation with Ms. Gajilan. I’ve seen a number of well-written, interesting documentary films. The most groundbreaking were often the ones that got up close to the subjects, showcasing controversial issues in detail. Yet, I realized, how many of these were made with seemingly little thought for setting boundaries? I realized that the questions I was made to ask about narrative film still apply to the constructed reality of documentary films. I wanted to learn more.

At the early stages of research, I collected information from a wide range of sources, casting a broad net over necessary facts about the industry. The goal of this work was to set down some solid, objective information and statistics about “the industry.” Then, I researched filmmakers’ challenges and successes by collecting subjective information from interviews, scholarly articles, op-eds, film reviews, and lectures. From that, I decided to narrow down my focus to maker/subject relationships and the issue of exploitation.

After grounding my knowledge in some basic issues that pertain to ethical filmmaking, I’ll continue to attend relevant events and meet with filmmakers one-on-one. I plan to travel to both New York City and Los Angeles to meet with documentary filmmakers—that is, once my plans to interview are approved by LMU’s Institutional Review Board, which does consider such

communication (though not documentaries!) to be human subjects research. In New York, I will meet with Chris Gajilan of CNN, who has also formerly worked for the OWN network. As an Emmy-winning, genre-spanning producer and filmmaker, she has had years of experience in the more structured documentary work that is funded by major corporations and nonprofits (Gajilan). I hope to speak to her and other members of her team about their general experience crafting documentary segments for Anderson Cooper and Dr. Sanjay Gupta, among others (Gajilan). I hope to stay there for two weeks to collect information from her and her colleagues based on their schedules.

I will do most of my work in Los Angeles, with a month-long stay that includes both research and work on my deliverable. I plan to meet with Gregory Ruzzin, associate professor of production at LMU's own SFTV. In November, I attended his faculty pub night, in which he discussed their documentary-based transmedia project, "The Magic Chair." The goal of the "Magic Chair" is to collect a variety of self-told stories from people with disabilities ("Faculty"). The documentary centers around a Jesuit school in Dublin, Ireland for special needs children ("Faculty"). In addition to the documentary, there will be a website, video games, and VR experiences designed to build empathy ("Faculty"). When I speak with him again, I wish to gain information about how to allow the marginalized to tell their own stories, while still maintaining some sort of digestible narrative structure. I will also meet with John Feist, an Emmy-winning independent producer/director who has a good deal of experience in making documentaries that are supposed to be representative "tours" of foreign countries such as New Zealand, Jordan, Israel, Ecuador, and Mexico ("John Feist"). For him, questions will focus on avoiding generalization and stereotyping. In Los Angeles, I will conduct the majority of my individualized research and work on my deliverable documentary.

There are a few types of resources that are necessary to complete my project. I have the connections to meet with specific filmmakers who I have either already met or know of, and hopefully they will be a resource for me to expand my field of inquiry. I will need money for the plane tickets to both of those cities. I can stay with a friend for free in New York, but I would need some sort of budget for housing in Los Angeles. Considering that the cost of living in those two cities is quite high, a budget that I can put towards transportation—subway, buses, or Uber, since I won't have my car—would be extremely helpful in facilitating my project. Finally, I would need to borrow a camera, microphone, slate, etc. from LMU's film department. My budget would look something like this:

- Airfare:
  - Flight from DFW to JFK (mid-June)
  - Flight from JFK to LAX (late June)
  - Package price: \$397
    - American Airlines website as of 12/10/17
- Housing:
  - NYC, 2 weeks: no housing needed
  - LA, 1 month: \$800 to rent a room with a friend near LMU
- Food:
  - \$400 for six weeks of groceries in NYC and LA
- Equipment:
  - Camera and other equipment from LMU's film department, with approval
- Transportation:
  - \$100 to defray costs of Uber/bus and subway

- Total: \$1,697

As the result of my project, I believe I will in fact be able to put together a broad set of guidelines for how to create respectful maker/subject relationships and promote representation. I will close out my project with a short documentary of my own making, a documentary which follows the rules I set for myself based on the research I have conducted. There are two directions this documentary could go. First, I could make a short documentary that focuses on the challenges and successes of the filmmakers I meet while conducting my research. This documentary would consist of a combination of interviews and visual statistics. Preferably, time and subject permission allowing, I would choose the second option: make my own documentary about a separate subject that I am passionate about, applying the ethical rules that I established from the broad research I had already done. I will likely make a short film about Girls' Inc. mentorship at Lifeline Charter School, a low-income middle school in Compton where I work as a mentor. The second option is contingent on forces that are currently outside my control, but if all goes well, I would lean towards that plan.

Through my research and my resulting documentary, I plan to prove that it is both necessary and possible to find a code of conduct that can be applied to a broad variety of films. Other disciplines that work closely with human subjects, such as academic research or journalism, have codes of ethics that professionals must abide by. Few disciplines include as long-form and up-close involvement in the day to day lives of human beings, and few have as much risk for human exploitation. Hopefully, my work can promote greater understanding of the need—and real possibility—of implementing rules that protect documentary subjects, without hindering the artistic creation of important films.

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