

# A Question of Ethics: The Relationship between Filmmaker and Subject

BY WANDA BERSHEN

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Any filmmaker who sets out to make a documentary faces multiple challenges, not the least of which is a set of ethical issues inherent in the process. How to portray the subjects of the film? What to shoot and what not to shoot? How to edit so that the film is true to its topic and subjects, yet also works as a compelling story for the audiences? If a filmmaker is working in a foreign country or culture (or subculture), how to represent people with dignity and sensitivity to that place, time and experience? Most people not involved in filmmaking are not entirely aware of the power of the camera and editing to structure events in ways they would never expect. At the heart of documentary production is the relationship between filmmaker and subjects--not often an equal balance of power. And for the most part, it is the filmmaker who determines how that will be managed.

A recent report from the Center for Social Media at American University explored the ethics issue through interviews with 40 documentarians from a wide range of ages and experiences. Titled "Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work," it has generated considerable discussion in the film community. One of the key points in the report is the assertion that there is a major difference between the work of documentary filmmakers and that of news reporters. The report observes, "Many documentary filmmakers work with people whom they have chosen, and typically see themselves as stewards of the subjects' stories. As one filmmaker noted, 'I am in their life for a whole year. So there is a more profound relationship, not a journalistic two or three hours.'"

We asked several documentarians about their experience on recent projects and how they handled a variety of ethical issues that occurred.

*Restrepo* focuses on the experience of soldiers in combat in all its difficult and draining aspects: the constant danger, the loss of comrades, the discomforts of living for weeks and months in a distant outpost in Afghanistan, and even the boredom between battles. Directors Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington both have had extensive experience covering wars and

war-torn countries. They embedded themselves with a platoon of US soldiers and spent 14 months, beginning in May 2007, in the Korangal Valley of Afghanistan. Each spent about a month at a time and then switched off with the other, sometimes overlapping for periods of time. Both were well aware they would be working in one of the most dangerous regions--far from any military bases and accessible only by helicopter.

Asked how they gained the trust of the unit, Junger and Hetherington remark that just choosing to go to that region sent a message that they were prepared to put themselves at the same risk as the soldiers. The filmmakers followed the men into many battles and recorded the terrible fear and tension, never knowing what would happen next. And both directors were wounded while covering the battles. "I tore my Achilles and Tim went back, and then he broke his leg and I went back," Junger recalls. "The fact that we kept coming back gave us a lot of credibility with the soldiers."

Asked about restrictions from the military, Hetherington says there were none, other than a stated agreement not to film wounded American soldiers, or get their permission later. The Army did ask to see a rough cut, but had no issues with it. The filmmakers deliberately avoided any graphic representations of violence, feeling that would be a distraction from what they wanted to show. Junger and Hetherington regard their work on the film as journalistic; their primary concern was to counter many representations of war on film that are "limited and can't quite reveal the humor, boredom and confusion inherent in combat. It's something we felt was important to represent."

As the founder of Kartemquin Films in Chicago in 1966, Gordon Quinn has many years of experience with documentary production. Known for tough, issue-driven documentaries, Kartemquin is particularly devoted to fostering, as it states on its website, "the growth of emerging filmmaking voices passionate about social issues and media policy." Asked about the balance of power between filmmaker and audience, Quinn notes he makes a point of trying to give the viewer a sense of how the story is being told and what the filmmakers' relationship with the subject is like.

For Kartemquin's recent film *In the Family*, about predicting breast and ovarian cancer and how women live with the risk, director Joanna Rudnick was having a difficult time finding a woman who shared the BRCA gene that she had. She felt that the most effective way of building trust with her subjects was to share her own story on camera with them, which enables viewers to see how that relationship between filmmaker and subjects evolves over time.

Quinn recently completed *Prisoner of Her Past*, a film about a childhood Holocaust survivor who is suffering from Late Onset Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, obviously a topic requiring

sensitive and delicate handling. While he had permission from her son, the legal guardian, Quinn wanted her permission as well. She was ambivalent, and Quinn captures that in an interesting way. She had said on camera that she would not give permission. Nevertheless, she allowed filming and at several points addresses the camera directly. In a painful and fraught scene where she meets a Polish cousin from childhood, she refuses to acknowledge him and asks him to leave the room. Then she turns to the camera on Quinn's shoulder and says, "Excuse me, I am talking to this gentleman," referring to the filmmaker. In the last shot of the film, she turns to the camera and says, "Goodnight, ladies and gentlemen," before heading off to her room. Quinn kept these scenes in the film to give the audience a clear sense of her character and his relationship with her.

Director Liz Mermin had a different set of concerns with her recent film, *Team Qatar*, about five high school students from Qatar training for the World Debate Championship in Washington, DC. In order to establish trust with the kids, she spent a lot of time talking with them off-camera, explaining the film and answering questions about herself, and she made it clear that anytime they wanted her to stop filming she would do so. "That didn't mean I didn't try to get them to change their minds," Mermin explains. "Sometimes I would explain why I thought it was important to the story, and they'd decide it was okay, but sometimes they were adamant and I wouldn't push because I didn't want to hurt them. Even if I thought they were being silly, there was a possibility I didn't know what they were up against at home, and it would run the risk of destroying our relationship, or ruining the film."

Dealing with cultural sensitivities and the safety of these kids after the film was completed was perhaps the most challenging issue for Mermin. A key scene occurs when the Qatar kids, particularly religious Muslim girls, react to the London Gay Pride parade, which provokes an intense debate. Mermin needed to balance what would work well for the film with concerns for her subjects in the long term. "Would we get the girls in trouble with conservative friends and family by showing that they were at the event at all?" she reflects. "Would we hurt them in the future by showing their uninformed homophobic reactions? I had to walk a line conveying their feelings and their work coming to terms with what they'd seen without keeping them on record forever with ignorant or bigoted views. That was about very careful editing. A very complicated emotional and cultural clash had to be reduced to a four-minute scene, and that's never easy."

Another tricky situation occurred when the Qatar kids came to Washington for the final competition. They got to meet students from Latin America and Israel, went out for ice cream and hung around in their hotel rooms. Mermin decided not to shoot this despite its potential interest. "The presence of the camera would have made it artificial," she notes. "The kids from

Qatar trusted us and didn't care, but the other kids didn't know us, didn't want cameras in their personal time and didn't want to be extras in someone else's film."

Mermin strives to observe, listen and provoke thoughts and questions without telling anyone what to think. She aims to "create the feeling of being there, where there is a world they wouldn't otherwise know. If audiences come away with vastly differing opinions, arguing about what they've seen, I feel I've done my job well."

Each of these filmmakers' stories serves to underline one of the best descriptions--by film scholar Bill Nichols in an essay that appeared in the [March-April 2006 Documentary](#)--of how filmmakers must grapple with the ethics of documentary: "These questions boil down to questions of trust--a quality that cannot be legislated, proposed or promised in the abstract so much as demonstrated, earned and granted in negotiated, contingent, concrete relationships in the here and how."

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