BALANCING ETHICS OF CARE, INCLUSION AND JOURNALISTIC AUTONOMY

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TAKEAWAY

Documentarians' collective work over the last decade, asserting national ethics standards around participant care and including long-suppressed voices, has laid the foundation for crucial next steps for a resilient, contextualized ethical framework for documentary. Journalistic ethics standards, particularly around journalistic autonomy, have sometimes challenged documentarians in implementing care-centric practices. But a close look at today's journalistic standards reveals ample evidence of journalists' valuing care, and shows how journalists implement caring practices. These examples can become a spur to a more public conversation between journalists and documentarians about how to use a range of ethical values in holding power to account.

KEY POINTS

- Ethics of care and inclusion have become a core concern in many documentary projects, including for funders of documentary.
- Documentarians have often hidden their care practices from distributors and media outlets to avoid running afoul of formal standards & practices.
- Journalistic autonomy is a bedrock ethical principle for journalists, so they can show that their work is free of outside influence, pressure or manipulation.
- But ethics of care also inform journalism, and care values are central to some journalistic documentary practices.
- Both for journalists and documentarians, these issues come to the fore in projects where the media makers and the participants establish longer-term relationships, or where participants face known risks.
- Journalists and documentarians have both grappled with this problem in ways that can help each other. We can see the care journalists have offered toward sources/participants in:
    - Journalistic codes of ethics, both professional and corporate.
    - Targeted guidance for trauma-informed and respectful journalism.
    - Journalistic subdisciplines' practices.
- Documentarians and journalists can both build upon both their organizations' standards and those of the other to make their own guidelines more resilient.

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Over the last 15 years in the U.S. institutional scandals, police brutality, and a resurgence of social movements signalled by hashtags such as #BLM and #MeToo, sent shockwaves through media organizations, professional associations, and journalism classrooms, as leaders addressed their organizations' institutional biases. Meanwhile, in documentary filmmaking, questions of equity, justice and integrity infused controversies. For example, the films *Sabaya* and *Jihad Rehab* (later *The Unredacted*), some believed, put participants at risk without their informed consent. A planned Tiger Woods biography became controversial for lack of any black filmmakers on the roster.[1]

EVOLVING DOCUMENTARY ETHICS

In response, documentarians joined coalitions, hosted conversations at national events, and formed organizations to assert, for the first time in the institutional history of U.S. documentary, ethical standards around participant care and inclusion of historically suppressed voices in documentary.[2] Guidelines by organizations such as the Documentary Accountability Working Group, the disability-rights group (FWD-DOC), and the Archival Producers Alliance[3] have been used to make adjustments to production practices (including in films produced with public broadcasting funds), grant applications (private foundations' "common application" form), and broadcast standards (PBS standards & practices).

These guidelines reflect back to the documentary professional community and provide a value-based justification for them. In particular, documentarians have long practiced participant care, in projects that evolve over weeks or months and especially ones that involve marginalized communities.

A 2023 national survey[4] of more than 600 respondents found that 2/3 of responding filmmakers offered financial support to participants—mostly reimbursement of expenses, location or licensing fees. As well, 2/3 also offered nonfinancial support, including transportation or meals. Three-quarters of filmmakers said they showed the finished work to participants in advance of its first public screening, often to prepare them and sometimes to check for accuracy. Most documentarians responding to the survey would have done more for participants, including offering support for mental health, had finances permitted. But documentarians, like journalists, have not yet openly confronted how care values interact with other ethical norms in nonfiction storytelling—particularly the role of journalistic independence and autonomy in maintaining credibility.

Documentarians sometimes hide ethical choices when they fear they would violate standards or expectations set by distributors. For instance, both any kind of benefit offered and previewing final work might violate standards & practices guidelines that support journalistic autonomy. Yet overwhelmingly filmmakers believe that, in some circumstances, both defraying participants' costs and showing them work before public airing are ethical choices. These practices, drawn from a commitment to honor the human rights and dignity of all, also enhance trust. That trust comes both from participants—who might come from communities long distrustful of media, and have untold stories and perspectives—and also potential audience members, who might be concerned about exploitation of participants.

But is there an ethical gulf between documentarians' concerns for participants and journalistic practice? We looked at three ways that journalists incorporate care into both the values assertions of their own organizations. We found that journalists have always valued care as part of their ethical pledges, and a way they establish trust with the public. At the same time, we found that journalists incorporate care under the umbrella of other ethical terms, such as fairness and inclusion.

Thus, documentarians and journalists have both produced rich material that could result in a more resilient, robust and contextualized approach to ethics, for all nonfiction media that holds power to account.

POWER AND PARTICIPANTS IN DOCUMENTARY

The Documentary Accountability Working Group asserts caring values when making documentaries with people from marginalized communities:

- **Build anti-oppression values into all processes;**
- **Be transparent;**
- **Acknowledge the storyteller's power;**
- **Prioritize the well-being of all the people participating in your film;**
- **Respect the people who watch the film, and honor their trust.**

(Excerpted from *From Reflection to Release.*)

DISABLED FILMMAKERS' ADVICE ON CARE FOR SOURCES

- **Treat disabled people (and characters) as people with the full complement of strengths and flaws.**
- **Be willing to bring D/deaf and disabled expertise into your projects from the beginning and respect their knowledge and recommendations.**
- **Try to understand the systemic nature of exclusion and oppression as it applies to disability and how that shapes the lives of individuals. It impacts real lives; it will impact your project/story.**
- **Examine the protocols and processes you use in your creative projects to see if they are exclusionary or based on harmful stereotypes. If so, change them.**

(Excerpted from NEXT-DOC Toolkit.)

JOURNALISM AND CARE

In contrast to documentary, the profession of journalism has well-established ethics codes. Public debate, lawsuits, college courses, academic publications in journals such as Journal of Media Ethics, and discussions at journalism conferences have further deepened widespread understanding of core ethical principles. As well, in the same historic decade of 2014-2024 that documentarians were addressing exploitation in documentary practice, journalists and scholars of journalism were also scrutinizing journalistic practice for inequities, and emphasizing the role of care.[5]

Journalists depend on ethics standards to uphold the public credibility of reporting, because of the importance for journalism in democracy to hold power accountable. To do that, journalists must be able to win public trust that their work is conducted without fear or favor, serving the public good and not private interests. Ethical values in journalism return to the challenge of winning and maintaining public trust in the integrity of the published work. For decades, journalism has emphasized the independence and autonomy of the journalist above all, as a guarantor of the promise to produce work without fear or favor.

But care is also present pervasively in both what they say and what they do.

ETHICS CODES

Journalistic ethics codes themselves recognize the importance of care for participants and for users, within the goal of maintaining public trust. Our 2025 study[6] about publicly-available ethics codes from the 16 most-trusted U.S. news and public affairs media and from the profession's seven major organizations identifies five almost universally-embraced values: accuracy, fairness, transparency, inclusiveness, independence.

FIG. 2: VALUES IN PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION ETHICS CODES

ASSOCIATIONS	ACCURACY	FAIRNESS	TRANSPARENCY	INCLUSIVENESS	INDEPENDENCE	INDEPENDENCE (conflict of interest)	INDEPENDENCE (conflict of interest)	CARE	CARE FOR SOURCES	CARE FOR THE PUBLIC	CARE FOR JOURNALISTS
National Association of Science Writers	X	X	X		X	X		X	X		
National Press Association	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Association of Business Journalists		X	X		X	X	X	X	X		
Radio Television Digital News Association	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
American Society of Newspaper Editors	X	X	X		X	X		X			
Society of Professional Journalists	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
National Association of Black Journalists	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

FIG. 3: VALUES IN MEDIA BUSINESSES' ETHICS CODES

ASSOCIATIONS	ACCURACY	FAIRNESS	TRANSPARENCY	INCLUSIVENESS	INDEPENDENCE	INDEPENDENCE (conflict of interest)	INDEPENDENCE (conflict of interest)	CARE	CARE FOR SOURCES	CARE FOR THE PUBLIC	CARE FOR JOURNALISTS
Associated Press	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X
Fox News	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
The Wall Street Journal	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Buzz Feed	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
PBS	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
The New York Times	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Vox Media	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Business Insider	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
HuffPost	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		
The Daily Caller	X	X	X						X	X	
CBS News	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		
Newsweek	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
The Washington Post	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Washington Examiner	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
NPR	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
USA Today	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

We found care concerns registered throughout the ethics codes, associated with journalistic values to honor the mandate to maintain credibility. For instance (we have italicized expressions coded as acknowledgments of care in our study):

FAIRNESS AND CARE: EXAMPLES

The PBS ethics code states, "While reporting on both civil and criminal proceedings is often in the public interest, the principle of fairness requires that producers must be *sensitive to the potential effects* of pre-trial coverage on those accused of wrongdoing." *The New York Times* asserts that fairness includes extending civility to all: "Civility applies whether an exchange takes place in person, by telephone, by letter or online." NPR notes that fairness includes "*Respect for sources and subjects of coverage; respect in sensitive circumstances; respect for our audience.*" The Radio TV Digital News Association notes, "Preserving privacy and protecting the right to a fair trial....deserve consideration and to be balanced against the importance or urgency of reporting." The National Association of Black Journalists states, "NABJ members should treat all subjects of news coverage *with respect and dignity, particularly victims of crime and tragedy and their families.*"

ACCURACY AND CARE: EXAMPLES

The Associated Press states, "interviews with a person not speaking their native language, it is especially important that their ideas be accurately conveyed. Always, *we must be careful not to mock the people we quote.*" It also notes, "We balance the newsworthiness of a story with respect for *privacy* and *safety interests* when pursuing images." *USA Today* states, "We will treat people with *respect* and *compassion*." Vox notes, "We *respect* individual *voices* and *identities*." Most codes, both associations and news outlets, reference the importance of maintaining confidentiality when it is promised, as the cost of garnering accurate information.

OVERARCHING CONCERNS: EXAMPLES

Words that connote concern for participants and users, e.g. *empathy, sensitivity, respect, protection of people in vulnerable situations, civility, honor, courtesy, taste, professionalism, anti-harassment, integrity*, and references to large concepts such as privacy and safety of sources were used throughout these codes. For instance, the *HuffPost* ethics code states, "We report with empathy and put people at the heart of every story." *The Washington Post* says that the *Post* journalist is marked by "professionalism, empathy, collegiality and a focus on the facts." *Business Inside* expects its journalists to avoid actions "invasive of the *privacy* of others." NPR states that "with all subjects of our coverage, we are mindful of their *privacy* as we fulfill our journalistic obligations."

Concern for care ethics in the codes was expressed in relation to three kinds of people: sources, journalists themselves, and the public/audience.

SOURCES

Care for sources was present in the overwhelming majority (21) of the codes, reflecting a common concern to minimize harm and observe human rights.

THE PUBLIC

Most (17) of the codes also expressed care for the public, going beyond the mission of serving the public with knowledge to specify, for example, avoiding gratuitously violent, offensive, and sensationalist content. General guidelines on courtesy, professionalism, and empathy overlapped between care for sources and for the public.

JOURNALISTS

Care for journalists themselves was a value present among the ethics codes of about half (13) of the entities. This included ensuring a good work environment for journalists and treating peers in other media companies with respect.

Thus, journalism's most public-facing statements about ethical values carry strong messages about concern for care for both sources and the public. Further, those concerns are expressed as part of the core mission of holding power to account, including by garnering trust.

JOURNALISTIC GUIDANCE AND PRACTICE ON IMPLEMENTING CARE

Journalistic organizations also address how to implement the care expressed in codes, within the journalistic mandate to hold power to account. The Poynter Institute in 2023 published "Journalists' Toolkit for Working with Vulnerable Sources," and also tips on how to include more "vulnerable voices" in reporting. The latter includes advice on recognizing the need to wield power accountably that echoes the Documentary Accountability Working Group. For instance: "Recognize the power imbalance: A vulnerable source has far less power than the reporter. That could stem from a source's economic, legal or social status, and age, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion and other factors."[7] Poynter ethics training includes topics on working with vulnerable sources including children and best mental health practices for both journalists themselves and in working with their sources. Whistleblower journalism historically requires a range of practices to ensure that whistleblowers understand the risks they undertake, and to protect them from harm.[8] Whistleblower support organizations such as Signals Network work with journalists to protect whistleblowers with a range of protections, including mental health as well as legal support.

Trauma-informed journalism is the central concern of the Global [previously Dart] Center for Journalism & Trauma. Its "Trauma-Informed Journalism Toolkit" provides extensive resources, including for interacting with children, indigenous people and communities, and sexual violence survivors. It also provides case studies and study guides.

PBS makes public not only an ethics code but—unlike any other mainstream U.S. media organization—its standards & practices. Standards & practices implement the values expressed in ethics codes, for the particular organization. PBS' ethical values—independence, accuracy, fairness, transparency, inclusiveness and accountability—are interpreted here within contexts, and concern issues such as avoiding sensationalism, avoiding unnecessary harm, and providing viewers with clear information about any contributions to the final work by participants.

Finally, journalistic subfields focused explicitly on the less-powerful, including "community," "participatory," "solidarity," and "vulnerable" journalism,[9] have developed and shared perspectives on the ethics of their work. One year-long project in participatory journalism, following survivors of sexual trauma through their experience with police and courts, resulted in a field guide to such work.[10]

SHARED GOALS AND REALITIES

Documentarians have played an important role in openly asserting non-exploitation as a key value in ethical practice. They deserve to be in closer dialogue with journalists, who have a long and rich ethical tradition, and experience with participant/source care standards.

Documentary and journalism organizations express care concerns differently for participants and the public, but they share a larger mandate to hold power of all kinds to account. Ethical values for both use similar logic to counter the predictable commercial exploitation of sources/participants and users. For both, earning the respect of sources/participants and users is crucial to the credibility on which the success of the entire truth-telling enterprise rests. The heavy weight of unjust history affects crucial questions of access and trust, which can only be addressed with care.

Care is a feature of good-faith relationships of all kinds. Both documentarians and journalists inevitably need to interact with participants or sources to do their work, and so they just as surely have some kind of human relationship with them. Questions of care are not about whether either journalists or documentarians think it's important to offer, but just about the context and range of ways of offering appropriate care, given different power dynamics.

Documentarians have recently made publicly visible, through their ethics work, many aspects of power that storytellers carry into their relationships. Journalists have also long asserted publicly the importance of considering power imbalances in the relationships they develop with sources, and have developed strategies to invoke care within certain contexts.

How care is enacted inevitably varies, according to the tenor of the relationship, each party's contributions, the length of time involved, and the relative power of all parties involved. An interview with Elon Musk and a months-long chronicling of a grieving murder victim's mother for justice require different considerations about power imbalances and accountability. The kinds of care are thus context-dependent. Documentarians and journalists, as truthful storytellers pledging to tell their users what happened with honesty and integrity, have both recognized that—in public, and in writing.

The moment, thus, is ripe for a franker, more public conversation about how care functions and can function within and beyond existing ethical frameworks, to strengthen the good work of telling truth to and about power. Documentarians' recent contribution to the ethics discussion in nonfiction storytelling is the next step in a never-ending process of ethical norms-setting, in a field mission-driven to shape reality itself by what it reveals.

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