

Abstract: Some stories are important to tell, and documentary filmmaking can give us a method to present those stories. Unfortunately, sometimes telling those stories can lead to causing harm to the people involved. This paper explores if we can find a level of importance that can outweigh the problems it may cause, and whether or not approaching documentary with this attitude is even a good idea. It also explores the morality of documentary filmmaking in general.

Documentary and Morality: When Is It Worth It?

Through the medium of documentary film, many important stories have been told, and many important issues have been brought to light; however, sometimes these important messages are told at the risk of the subjects of the documentary, as well as the crew. For example, in documentaries such as *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, many of the crew members' names were kept anonymous. While the messages of these films are important, the harm that the films could have caused the people involved should not be overlooked. In this paper, I will analyze the question: can the productive things that potentially harmful documentaries do be important enough to still make them? To approach this question, I will focus on four smaller questions that will analyze the question in greater detail: what qualifies as an important message, does taking into account the potential harm make up for the potential danger it may cause, what are instances of documentaries that harmed people and how could they have been avoided, and what are instances of documentaries where harm could have occurred but was avoided in the end? After contemplating these questions, I will look in particular at some of the harm these films can cause and how necessary the harm can be in properly presenting the message the filmmakers want to present.

Before answering these questions, it is necessary to understand what type of mindset this question connects to. Due to the question's design of contemplating how to maximize goodness,

this question is Utilitarian in nature. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Utilitarianism is the belief that “the morally right action is the action that produces the most good.” (Driver) By identifying this question as Utilitarian, it is important to determine if this question is approaching the topic of documentary with the proper mindset. Nichols studies the purpose of documentary in his book *Introduction to Documentary*. While he states that there is no definition for documentary, he also states that one of the purposes of documentary is to “stimulate a desire to know in their audience” (Nichols) This perspective focuses on creating a net positive, which is to encourage people to learn. By approaching the medium of documentary with the concept of creating a positive impact, I feel that this question is a valid question to approach documentary with.

The first question to answer is “What qualifies as an important issue?” Films like *The Act of Killing* were created with the intent to change public perception of events. *The Act of Killing* in particular was published with the intent to “expose this regime [of fear and corruption] and help a reappraisal of the 1965-66 atrocities.” (Britdoc) *The Act of Killing* was released in 2012, which is 47 years after the events that the film presents. These events are very real and had not received very much attention over the almost 5 decades since they occurred. This lack of acknowledgment is a clear indicator that this message needed to be told. *The Look of Silence* further explores the issue that comes from this lack of acknowledgment. Showing that not only the loved ones of the victims suffer due to the silence, but also those responsible for the killings go practically insane in order to convince themselves that they are not responsible for the deaths of all of those people.

What does not qualify as an important issue? I feel that the answer to this question is rooted in helping others. Documentaries like *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* had the

goal to bring justice for people; to bring to light the issues that these people had to suffer through mostly on their own. If instead the goal had been to publicly humiliate those responsible for the killings, the issue they were trying to present would have lost much of its importance. The fact that Anwar, one of the people responsible for the killings, was supportive of the film shows that this film was made with the intent to create good in the world, rather than simply cause contention. If the goal of a film is to simply harm the reputation of one person, then the film is likely not being made with an important issue in mind. In *Dear Zachary*, the filmmaker focuses a lot on criticizing the actions of the “antagonist” of the film, but rather than the film being focused on all the awful things she did, it focuses on all the ways she exploited the Canadian legal system in order to get away with awful things. While the film focuses mostly on the bad actions of just one person, it still presents a message that has a bigger scope than affecting one person.

The next important question to ask is, “Does taking into account the potential harm make up for the potential danger the film may cause?” Most documentary filmmakers assess the potential impact of their film before making it. Despite this, many of these filmmakers still continue forward with their films despite the risks present. According to the Center for Media and Social Impact, experienced filmmakers provide many ways to mitigate any risks that may come up as they proceed forward with their films, such as having a close connection to human rights organizations as well as a willingness to give up if things are too hostile. (Aufderheide) The actions of these filmmakers leads me to believe that by taking into account the issues that may come up during the filmmaking process is not only helpful, but beneficial to maintain the safety of everyone involved in the film being made. Still, I do not think that by planning ahead of time do the filmmakers remove themselves of any responsibility for the negative consequences that may occur from making the film. Even though some negative things cannot be avoided, I

feel that a responsible filmmaker should take responsibility for any harm that comes to people involved with the film.

With many documentaries being produced, some of them are bound to end up with a negative impact. Usually, the negative impact involves the suing of the filmmakers and other people involved with the making of the film. The most common form of danger is presented through larger organizations. Usually, the filmmakers are prevented from continuing their film in the form of a cease and desist, but sometimes the filmmaking can result in a lawsuit, which is the reason why many news organizations prefer not to fund documentaries that attempt to critique larger organizations; however, not all of these instances result in failure. For example, Dole sued the filmmakers of *Bananas* but ended up withdrawing it due to the filmmaker's ability to express what they had researched and put together under laws protecting free press. Another example of documentaries pursuing dangerous topics but succeeding are documentaries where the end goal is to help the people who may be harmed by the documentary. In films like *Give Up Tomorrow*, the danger the subjects were in by participating in the film were exactly the dangers they were fighting against. (Aufderheide) The crew of *The Act of Killing* was in a similar situation. If these documentaries were successful at their goal, then the risk they could be in would be eliminated. By creating a successful documentary, these filmmakers were not only able to achieve their goals, but also ensure the safety of everyone involved with the filmmaking process.

Despite all of this research emphasizing that dangerous documentaries can be created while still minimizing the risk for those involved with production, I still find that I struggle to confidently answer "yes" to the question "Can the productive things that potentially harmful documentaries do be important enough to still make them?" From a Utilitarian standpoint, it seems that the ability to minimize issues through calculations and careful planning would mean

that creating a documentary with a positive influence would not only be doable, but would also be the morally right thing to do. Still, a part of me wishes to reject this Utilitarian ideology.

According to Nichols, one of the purposes of documentary is to capture life. By minimizing the impact of the film to numbers and situations, I feel it begins to remove the very human side of documentary; the life captured by the camera. This stance feels like a noble one to take; however, without these calculations and careful planning, the danger that could befall the people involved with the film has a much higher chance of occurring. Therefore, is it more noble to maintain artistic integrity and freedom if it means the harm of the very people who are consenting to help make the film a reality?

It is a commonly misunderstood concept that documentary is exact reality. (Nichols) I too have fallen susceptible to the concept that documentary filmmaking must be exactly authentic in order to properly express a message. The truth is that people act differently when they know they are on camera than when they are not. Since the medium itself is already susceptible to being inauthentic in its inherent nature, then why should I be worried about safeties set in place to help maintain the lives of those involved in making the film? There are many reasons to stand behind authenticity in film, but if inauthenticity could mean the safety of people, then it feels like the more moral approach to treat that preparation with more attention.

Most of these examples of documentaries involve the risks of harming people through the finished product, but what about films where the process of the documentary itself is harming or not preventing harm inflicted on the subjects. Two specific documentaries that come to mind for this are *Streetwise* and *Dear Zachary*. *Streetwise* focuses many of the scenes on young homeless girls in Seattle, usually 14 or 15, entering cars of older men as prostitutes. Not only is the act of prostitution at a young age very dangerous for the psychological well-being of these girls, but the

illegal nature of the acts means that there will be no regulations on what these men will be doing to these girls. The amount of danger that these girls are in is immense and the filmmakers seemingly do nothing to stop it. In *Dear Zachary*, the filmmaker is trying to learn everything he can about his deceased friend and make a film about it for his son. This filmmaker, however, starts to get very invasive and learns a lot about the person likely responsible for the death of his friend. When she runs away with her son and jumps into the river with him due to wanting to get away from the parents of the friend, it seems likely that the constant attention she was receiving caused her to be paranoid, especially of somebody documenting the murder she likely committed. So, did his making the documentary lead to the death of his friend's son?

First, let us investigate the situation of *Streetwise*. While the things that the filmmakers documented were horrifying, to these girls this was normal. Now the fact that these girls thought that was normal is a horrible reality, but by showing what reality is for these girls without interfering, the filmmakers are better able to draw attention to the serious issues of the homeless epidemic in Seattle. While there is still much to do regarding the issues it presents, *Streetwise* has become an incredibly well acclaimed documentary, meaning more and more people are able to see and hear about the issue it presents. (Hedden) *Dear Zachary*, while the making of the film may not have resulted in all of the best personal impacts, it eventually led to Bill C-464 to be passed as law in Canada in 2010, which gives courts the power to refuse bail to people who may be deemed dangerous to children under the age of 18. (OpenParliament) This is a very clear case of a documentary bringing to light a very serious problem and helping to prevent that problem from ever happening again. Both of these documentaries have very clear negative things that may or may not be associated with the filmmakers, but the impact these films have had has led to exactly the noble things that the filmmakers were fighting for.

Still, is it moral to make these films when the risks are known? The filmmaker of *Dear Zachary* was just as shocked by the events that transpired as everyone else was, so he unlikely quite understood what making his documentary would mean, but the filmmakers of *Streetwise* knew exactly what they were filming. In a way, making films like this is still exploitation. While the creator of *Dear Zachary* was very close to the issue and was very passionate and angry about the film he was making, the way it was put together was still intended to use the events that transpired over the course of the making of the film in an exploitative way to latch onto the emotions of the viewers. *Streetwise* also uses similar tactics, in the way it purposefully shows moments of these children's lives that are horrifying to the average well off person, therefore gaining their sympathy. Still, as Nichols puts it, one of the ways that documentary persuades people is through presenting history or events as they are. It may be giving up on some moral standings to film girls going off to work as prostitutes, but in order to properly show the issues at hand, the filmmakers need to show the events as they are. It is exploitation, but it is not exploitation with sinister motivation. The purpose of most film, fiction or non-fiction, is to evoke a reaction from the audience. These films use the harm of others to evoke an emotion in the audience, but the intent behind it is based in a desire to cause change and to prevent the very thing that is being shown, rather than to make money by exploiting the difficulties of others.

Sometimes, this attempt to evoke emotion can leave audience members feeling exploited rather than being filled with a desire to create change in the world. With *The Act of Killing*, some people felt that the film seemed to be exaggerating the events that the film chronicles, leaving them feeling less inclined to assist in what the film hopes to accomplish. (Cribb) *Streetwise* received similar criticism, with people calling the film inauthentic, due to the staging of some scenes and the closeness of the filmmakers to the subjects. (Hedden) While many of these

criticisms come from a place of being unwilling to change the very real issues, it is important to acknowledge people who may feel like this. Acknowledging these reactions is important, since if the film only is treated as inauthentic, then the horrific things that the subjects had to endure over the course of the film would practically be for naught, since the film is not able to establish the change that the filmmakers wanted the film to cause.

The topic of morality in documentary is a touchy one. Documentaries have the power to make change in the world, which can be both positive and negative. Documentaries can help make lives of the future better, but they can also destroy the lives of people in the moment. That is why it is important to ask questions like “Can the productive things that potentially harmful documentaries do be important enough to still make them?” I do not know about every documentary ever made. Many new documentaries are being made every day, so I cannot know every instance of how documentary filmmakers handle this topic; however, I can confidently say that the answer to this question is yes. There are many important issues that need to be told, and to tell them can cause harm to many people. The risks may be severe, but responsible filmmakers can properly prepare for them and take responsibility for their actions. There are many instances of films where harm ended up resulting on people involved with the making of the film. Despite these difficulties, real change can be made through perseverance. Some documentary films can use harm inflicted on the subjects in order to better present the message that the filmmakers want to share, usually to the success of bringing the issue to light. All the research I completed to answer my question led to a resounding yes. Documentary is an excellent art form where real issues and concepts can be presented in a way that other mediums cannot. By limiting what can be done with documentary in order to eliminate all harm would limit the potential of documentary to help make the world a better place.

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