

The REALity of Ethics in Documentary Editing and Reality Television Documentaries:

A discussion of ethics in documentary editing and how editing and the ethics applied impact the reality television documentary.



Chris Latson

cclatson@earthlink.net

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Ethics are a set of moral principles or values or a theory or system of moral values (Ethics, 2003). However, ethics are related to morality, but are not the same thing. Ethics are not a set of written laws that forbid someone from performing a particular action. Ethics vary from person to person, and from community to community, and the definition or interpretation of what is right and wrong can also vary greatly.

When dealing with documentary you are making a film that is suppose to be indicative of real life events. "Documentary filmmakers tend to adhere to their definition of a documentary: a film of real people in real situations doing what they usually do" (Dancyger, p. 300). Although there have been documentaries in the past that make use of actors and reenactments for the purpose of presenting a side of the story that must be recreated for the audience to get the just of a particular story, most documentaries make use of newly shot footage and archival footage to present their film.

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This is why the documentary film is basically found and shaped during the editing process (Dancyger, p. 300). Unlike fiction films, the documentary subject or theme might not be discovered until the editing of the film begins, and then a storyline and focus of the film are determined. The editing of a documentary is when the film is laid out in its final form for the audience to see. During the editing process of a documentary the editor, filmmaker, and other postproduction crew that are involved, make decisions on how to formulate the film into a story and retell the events on screen. It is virtually impossible to film every single moment of a subject's life or every single moment of an event during the production phase of a documentary. It is even harder to attempt and use every single frame of the footage that is shot, not to mention that doing so would probably end in the creation of a long, non-rhythmic film.

Documentary editors consider themselves as filmmakers, just like the directors. (Oldham, p. 7). Sam Pollard, an editor from Spike Lee Films believes, "In the documentary, most producers don't have a formed idea about what the film is going to be, the film is found in the editing. As the editor it can be my responsibility to become the director when I get the footage" (Soper, 2003). In the documentary sequence the editor has a crucial and creative function, which gives editors more freedom than in the editing of a dramatic film. (Dancyger, p. 300). But that freedom is not without its responsibility and ethical issues.

During the editing process, ethics comes into play as soon as the postproduction of a film begins. During the editing process, things such as character development, character portrayal, designation of primary and secondary subjects, storyline, and many

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more important aspects of a documentary film are decided. Editing plays a huge roll in the development of a documentary film, and helps piece together a film that otherwise would just be a collection of random shots. This is due to the fact that during the production phase of a documentary, the subject that a filmmaker is following is not in a controlled environment, and the production cannot be broken down into a series of deliberate shots that articulate part of a plot. (Dancyger, p. 300). Sam Pollard acknowledges the difficulty of editing and says, "I've always thought that editing a documentary was a more challenging experience (Soper, 2003).

When dealing with a fiction film, the shots and sequences used are all deliberate and part of a master plot. In documentary film, the shots and footage are just a quick glance into a subject's life or the occurrence of an event. When you edit these quick glances of a subject of event, it will usually lead to a distortion of the event, whether it is intentional or not. This distortion could lead to a misrepresentation of the subjects in the documentary, and compromise the integrity of a film or show. But editing is a necessary process in order to form the footage into something presentable with a storyline and purpose. While the act of editing itself could lead to distortion or misrepresentation, personal and community ethics standards and practices should be applied, or at least considered, by the filmmakers and editors when cutting footage,

Although ethics play an important role when editing a documentary film, both documentary filmmakers and documentary editors sometimes allow the ethical issue to be superseded by the need to present a particular point of view (Dancyger, p. 301). This is different from mainstream fiction films, because unlike the dramatic film, the goals of

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the documentary are not entertainment and economic success (Dancyger, p. 301). However this is not true with all documentaries, as networks are primarily concerned with rating and advertising money. This is important because filmmakers, and more importantly, editors of the documentary film must keep this in mind when cutting the film. Often the success and future of television programming is based on the ratings that the programming generates, and the networks assessment of those ratings in relation to other programming on that station. Most times these assessments not only apply to fiction programming and dramas, but also to non-fiction programming as well.

A great example of this is the current trendy reality television documentaries, which have taken the television world by storm. Although reality television documentaries may seem to have only recently burst on the scene, reality television documentaries have a long history. The first reality television documentary was *Candid Camera*, which in 1948 began airing tapes of random people on the street being subjected to pranks of all sorts, unaware they were on camera. (Xu, 2003). Reality television documentaries then moved on to the 1970s with *An American Family*, which was a documentary, which was the first to put an openly gay man on television. Then came *Cops* and MTV's *The Real World* in the 1990s, leading us to the current explosion in the present day.

Some might argue that the term reality television or reality television documentary is not the correct term or description to use when addressing these programs. "Reality is not enough. We are obliged to document as well as to record. So

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let's agree that whatever the terms mean, 'reality' in the external world and 'truth' in video and film are not the same thing" (Achtner, 2002).

Other people might argue that the reality television documentaries of today are more a genre of imaginative documentaries. "The imaginative documentary uses the tools of editing to fashion a unique interpretation from documentary footage" (Dancyger, p. 316). In an imaginative documentary, the editor has many options for creating a new interpretation of reality. (Dancyger, p. 316). The word interpretation is important here because, it represents a particular adaptation of the documentary that was filmed (Interpretation, 2003).

The imaginative documentary consists of interpretations in a documentary film that would not be derived by the audience from straight documentary footage of a subject or event (Dancyger, p. 316). Different editing techniques and tricks are used in order to formulate the story and allow it to progress in the manner intended by and vision of the filmmaker. The editor can choose to crosscut sequences or other shots to elicit another meaning from the visuals displayed to the audience (Dancyger, p. 317).

Although this might seem like a lie or attempt of deception of reality to the audience, it merely is a technique that can be used by the filmmaker and editor in order to portray the work and present the documentary in the way in which was intended by the filmmaker and/or editor. However, the imaginative documentary is just one type of documentary style, and should not be used as an excuse by an editor to form a complete untruth or blatantly misrepresent subjects and events in a film. A documentary

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editor must still remain conscious of the reality of their material, and remain true to the subject, without distortion, prejudice, or fabrication. (Oldham, p. 8).

This is not to say that a documentary must be without drama and suspense, which are usually indicative of a fiction script. “Drama in a documentary comes out because you let things play themselves out” (Oldham p., 37). All too often, documentaries bend over backwards to try and create drama and suspense. (Oldham, p. 47). This is another aspect of a film that can be achieved through editing. Background music, sound effect, and many other editing techniques can assist an editor in creating drama or suspense.

This creation of drama and suspense, illustrate how, in addition to serving as an equal to the filmmaker, the documentary editor, also acts and works as a writer for the film, since there is no script (Oldham, p. 105). In a documentary film, the people are real, but the editor has to find the story on his or her own (Oldham, p. 105). The documentary editor creates a line, the tension, the interests, and directs what the story has to say to an enormous extent (Oldham, p. 247). It’s similar to a writer preparing a biography for someone, in which the filmmaker is that someone. The editor essentially is the writer, and takes the subject and events of the filmmaker, as well as their vision, and attempts to make a completed work that will serve the purposes and goals of the filmmaker. As the writer, the editor usually had no bearing or influence on how the material was filmed, framed, or attained, but they have a humongous bearing on how the final product will turn out.

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Another perception of the documentary editor, that is particularly prevalent in reality television documentaries, is that these documentaries are not true to the documentary form or style and provide an unreal picture of reality, caused by editing techniques and decisions made in the editing room. The problem is that the use of actual on-the-scene footage, and especially the faked versions of it that have become epidemic, may be called "reality" television, but they do not equal realism because they don't offer the whole story. (Christian Science Monitor, 1991). In a situation where we're seeking to make contact with real people, reality television seems to be falling short. (JBC Online, 2003).

While there might be some truth in those perceptions, for the most part this is not true. First off, you actually alter reality in any documentary as soon as you turn on your camera (Oldham, p. 286). While editing is a very manipulating device that can change environments and create similarities and relationships between scenes that have absolutely nothing in common, it also serves as a tool that allows a filmmaker and editor to present a large amount of information in a short span of time. Like anything else in the media world or life in general, this tool can be used in a creative and positive way, or in a manipulative or negative way. Things share relationships in time and space not because of the editing but because of their actual, historical linkages (Nichols, p. 28).

Documentary filmmaker and editor Jon Else says, "When I was growing up, you made a documentary for PBS, ABC, NBC, or CBS and that was it." (Linecker, 2000). But as cable became more prevalent and the number of television stations increases, networks are constantly looking for new ways to make profits. For the networks, it has

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always been cheaper and easier to produce reality shows or reality documentaries than regular shows, mostly because writers and actors aren't needed, nor are rehearsals. (Xu, 2003).

As mentioned before, in a reality documentary, the editor has the dubious task of cutting the final product and balancing the purpose and integrity of reality in the documentary, while not losing sight of the goals and needs of the networks that produce them and expect to see success in ratings and profits. Because of these factors, some call these reality documentaries assisted reality. "We have to assist reality. Reality is boring." (Nason, 2003). "In real life situations, things happen or they don't. If they aren't happening, it is just too bad for you if the event is slow, boring, visually uninteresting, etc. That's the way life is" (Achtner, 2002).

But when you talk about assisted reality, many questions might emerge, which inquire about the editor's role in documentary, and whether just by doing their job, they ruin or assist in changing a documentary into docudrama or fiction project. If you assist reality, to keep it from remaining boring or unprofitable, are you remaining true to the documentary? Is reality or anything close to reality even slightly possible with producers controlling so many of the external factors? (Manuel, 2003). Are reality television documentaries solely the product of crafty and deceptive editing?

These are just one set of questions about reality television documentaries that arise. However, some people believe that questions and actions such as these, have no influence on reality, and in turn do not in any way distort the documentaries presented. In these cases, the editing process of documentary serves as a tool used for fine-tuning a

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work, and does not recreate or drastically change the reality or integrity of the work. "As a matter of fact, part of the public is actually convinced that programs like MTV's *Road Rules* and *The Real World*, and other similar shows like CBS's *Survivor* are an accurate representation of reality" (Achtner, 2002).

Editing is one of the main parts of the un-reality of reality television documentaries. The majority of the things that happen during the production phase of a documentary are not shown to the audience, who thus only receive highlights of the footage that was filmed. (JBC Online, 2003). Documentary clips are single trees in a forest too big and complex for most television formats to accommodate (Christian Science Monitor, 1991). One of the main errors of trying to stuff reality into a box comes from confusing the 'truth' of the documentary with the 'actuality' of the situation in which it was shot. If it happened, it's real, the argument went. And if it's real, it's true. (Achtner, 2002).

Although the viewing audience constantly questions the realism of reality television, its overall appeal is the sensationalist content which viewers recognize can be heightened by the use of selective editing by the editors during postproduction (BBC News, 2003). "What you see is real...but the order in which you see it is not necessarily real. What it means is not necessarily real. And the drama behind it is not necessarily real." (Nason, 2003).

The claim to reality of reality television has been widely deconstructed by critics (Ryan, 2003). To some reality shows are proof positive of a total lack of self-editing (Lindley, 2003). They feel that the viewing audience is cheated and deceived not

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because of editing techniques, but because the people in the documentaries are not presenting a valid representation of themselves, due to the presence of cameras. But one could also argue that this is true with any documentary. "It's not horrible or anything, reality television in itself is sort of an invasion of privacy, but if that's what some people want to see, I guess it's fine" (Xu, 2003).

Critics also argue that in reality television documentaries, filmmakers, editors, and other personnel involved in the making of the documentaries are basically fooling themselves into thinking they are documentary filmmakers and editors, and are making documentary films. The filmmakers could, and did, record events as they happened, and because they filmed real people, and not actors, doing real things in a real situation, it was almost inevitable that they began to think of nonfiction filmmaking as documenting reality. (Achtner, 2002).

However, others believe that reality is in the eye of the beholder, and how it is presented, with or without embellishment, isn't important (Tedford, 2003). To these persons no matter what an filmmaker or editor does or does not do, the idea and perception of realism in a documentary will also depend on the person who views that documentary.

Besides classifying themselves as reality television, reality television documentaries are slowly edging themselves towards the routes taken by independent and mainstream documentary films. Riding the momentum of reality television documentaries popularity, the reality television documentaries are trying to expand into film as well. *The Real Cancun*, from the producers of MTV's *The Real World*, is a film

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that documented students on a drunken Mexican holiday trip, in a filming style much like its television counterpart (Xu, 2003).

Reality television documentaries are also opening doors for documentary filmmaker and producers of reality television. The ratings successes of such reality television documentaries as *Survivor* and *Joe Millionaire* have opened up the small screen to many more documentaries of their kind and beyond. "Television is essentially just a fire hose for crap and junk. That's fine. It's good for democracy. But with it, you'll find there are many wonderful documentaries that otherwise wouldn't get made. If there are great documentaries mixed in with the junk, that's fine" (Linecker, 2000).

However, one cannot deny that editing can play a major role in deceiving an audience. Dr. Will Kirby, the winner on *Big Brother 2*, appeared in a segment of Bravo's *The Reality of Reality*, illustrating the ways in which producers can massage film footage to create pretty much any impression they want. (Nason, 2003). During the sequence, Dr. Kirby and Fox talk show host Rob Nelson, are shown pitching a series idea to network executives, with the meeting edited two different ways; one showing the meeting going well, and the other showing the idea falling flat. (Nason, 2003).

This represents one of the major concerns held by critics, audiences, and even documentary participants themselves. There is a concern about accuracy in the documentaries, and viewers say that storylines should be realistic and based on some element of factual accuracy in the documentary (BBC News, 2003).

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“Contestants can feel particularly violated if they feel a show was somehow unfair to them and that they therefore endured some humiliation for no apparent good reason” (Levak, 2003). If through editing techniques, filmmakers and editors were able to make them appear to be something they are not, perform an act in which they did not perform, and appear to say or insinuate a statement they did not intend, does this represent accuracy in a documentary, or transform it into a fiction television documentary?

Joe Millionaire contestant Sarah Kozer makes a number of accusations, including that producers deliberately used subtitled noises and other editing techniques to make it seem as if she was having oral sex with the title character, Evan Marriott. She also says she was asked to shoot a scene in her bathrobe that had nothing to do with the reality of the show, in which the scene was later used to make it appear as if she had spent the night with Mr. Marriott. (Manuel. 2003).

All in all, it really doesn't matter if you are a fan of reality television documentaries or not, or whether you consider the genre a class of documentaries or something completely different. The point here is that these reality television documentaries might very well be the future of mainstream documentary film and television series, as more and more of them appear each season. While there are plenty of arguments for and against their inclusion and description as a documentary, and questions of ethics regarding the way the footage is edited, manipulated, and presented, they are simply a creation of the public's want and desire for programming of their kind. Because they are aired on networks which use ratings to decide what will be

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produced, they may be in fact be manipulated and altered in a way that gives the public what it wants, and takes away from the reality and honesty in these documentaries. However, this must be assessed on a documentary to documentary basis, and not on the genre as a whole.

The editing process plays an important role in both fiction and non-fiction films, but the editing process plays an even more important role in the reality television documentary. The editing can transform the reality television documentary into many different forms or versions of the original footage and either stay true to form or create extravagant storyline similar to what occurs in fiction films and soap operas. But in the end, editing equipment is simply a tool to be used by the editors and filmmakers, and it is their responsibility to provide the film or show with a shape, form, and vision, in hopes of producing an entertaining film or show, while still maintaining their integrity, if that is their goal.

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