

FROM REFLECTION TO RELEASE

A FRAMEWORK FOR VALUES, ETHICS AND
ACCOUNTABILITY IN NONFICTION FILMMAKING





TABLE OF CONTENTS

2 Introduction

Our Vision

About the Framework

Our Assumptions

8 Six Core Values for Nonfiction Filmmaking

10 Six Phases of Nonfiction Production

11 Phase 1: Reflection

16 Phase 2: Research & Development

20 Phase 3: Pre-Production

24 Phase 4: Production

28 Phase 5: Post-Production

32 Phase 6: Release & Impact

38 Glossary of Terms

40 Resources

42 Who We Are

44 Credits & Contributors

INTRODUCTION

The Documentary Accountability Working Group (DAWG) considers values, guiding principles and ethics that inform the practices of filmmakers, and shape their relationship to the story, the participants, the audience, funders and other stakeholders.

The working group grew organically in 2020, during an evolving public conversation about the future of documentary filmmaking. The documentary film industry was becoming a big business, with predictable scandals about extractive and unethical behaviors. Extractive documentary filmmaking—work that exploits the stories of others for profit and/or sensationalism—is ever more common in the Age of Streaming. While some filmmakers may intentionally practice extractive filmmaking, others may do so unthinkingly, by not incorporating intentional processes of transparency and consent. At the same time, the racial reckoning in the wake of George Floyd’s murder lent urgency to longstanding questions about how to make non-extractive, ethically responsible films. We came together with a common question: Could documentary filmmakers articulate best practices on documentary accountability and ethics?

Our work explores that question, starting with the development of guiding principles that can support equitable and just filmmaking in films made with, for and about marginalized, vulnerable people. We are conducting open dialogues with filmmakers, festival leaders and funders.

We launched public dialogue at the International Documentary Association’s Getting Real conference in October 2020. Since then, we have refined a set of guiding principles through a series of convenings we coordinated with more than 100 documentary filmmakers who aspire to non-extractive filmmaking, and 40 individuals featured in documentary films. We sought feedback and filmmaker recommendations from staff of organizations including Chicken & Egg, POV, and Black Public Media, program officers at the Ford Foundation, Perspective Fund and MacArthur Foundation, and professors at universities such as Spelman University, UC Berkeley and USC.



We've also led panel discussions and workshops at a series of film festivals, film schools and artist-serving organizations, including BlackStar Film Festival, New Orleans Film Festival, ITVS, Getting Real 2020, Sundance Film Festival, Double Exposure Film Festival, Camden International Film Festival, and Gotham Week. We have prioritized marginalized members of the filmmaking community in our conversations, especially BIPOC and makers living with disabilities. We learned from our conversations that filmmakers concerned with equity and justice embrace six core values for ethical and accountable nonfiction filmmaking, which we detail later.

OUR VISION

More diverse and accessible than ever, documentary films now entertain and enlighten audiences across the globe. In the midst of great shifts in the film industry, and within an increasingly profit-driven marketplace, a values-based filmmaking process is critical to ensuring that the form reaches its highest impact while minimizing potential harm, both to individuals and communities. When filmmakers are intentional about their process, and when they ground that process in core values, their films can be transformative not only for audiences, but for the film crew, the participants, their families and communities.

For filmmakers whose communities have not had the resources to document and distribute their own stories, the act of documentary filmmaking can be particularly liberating. A values-based process of creation, truth-telling and world-building can be simultaneously liberatory for the steward of the story and the storyholder. It is important for filmmakers to be bold in their artistic process, while also considering the sacred act of story stewardship by centering the needs and experiences of the person or communities who have entrusted the filmmaker with their story.

We hope this framework will spur deep reflection among all artists engaging in nonfiction storytelling about people and communities whose stories have not been heard enough, if at all, and inspire a commitment to a values-based filmmaking practice. With this work we aim to flatten power dynamics as much as possible (which sometimes means conceding or challenging power) between participants, crew, funders/distributors and audiences, and to center transparency and care in all relationships.

While we created this framework with and for filmmakers—from newbies to seasoned producers—we believe there is value in all stakeholders in the ever-expanding documentary ecology to consider how these six core values apply to their work, and how their work supports a values-based filmmaking practice, or impedes it. We believe this is only a first step toward a sturdy field consensus around practices that can hold documentary filmmakers to account for ethical and just practices.



ABOUT THE FRAMEWORK

We believe that sharing values more widely can spur open conversations, encourage transparency, align practice with values, create pathways for accountability, calibrate industry norms, and create community.

As a result, this framework is not a code of ethics, a checklist of behaviors, nor a tool for industry accountability. The values filmmakers find here may be applied differently in different situations, and for different kinds of films. People may disagree about interpretation, and some people may not feel empowered to live their values at every stage of production. The framework is also not an end-point, but a long-delayed beginning to a wider conversation in the field about how industry practices inform values, and how a values-based practice can reform the industry. If the framework is to support a wider shift in industry practices, it must be internalized by filmmakers, shared by artist-serving organizations, adopted by film educators, and supported by funders, festivals and distributors.

In short, we think that **the process is the product**. We believe it is possible to employ values without sacrificing a film's quality or a filmmaker's creative expression.

OUR ASSUMPTIONS

We frame our thinking in critical communications theories. The basic concept that guides the rest of our thinking is the observation that reality itself is constructed, through human communication. As Stuart Hall—the great Jamaican intellectual and one of the founders of cultural studies—explained, reality (that is, how we make sense of the world) is different from the mass of sensory data we receive. We are constantly bombarded with a jumble of ideas, facts and patterns in the world. Our shared understanding of all of these things, an understanding that is created through communication with each other, is our reality—our interpretation of what all that data actually means.

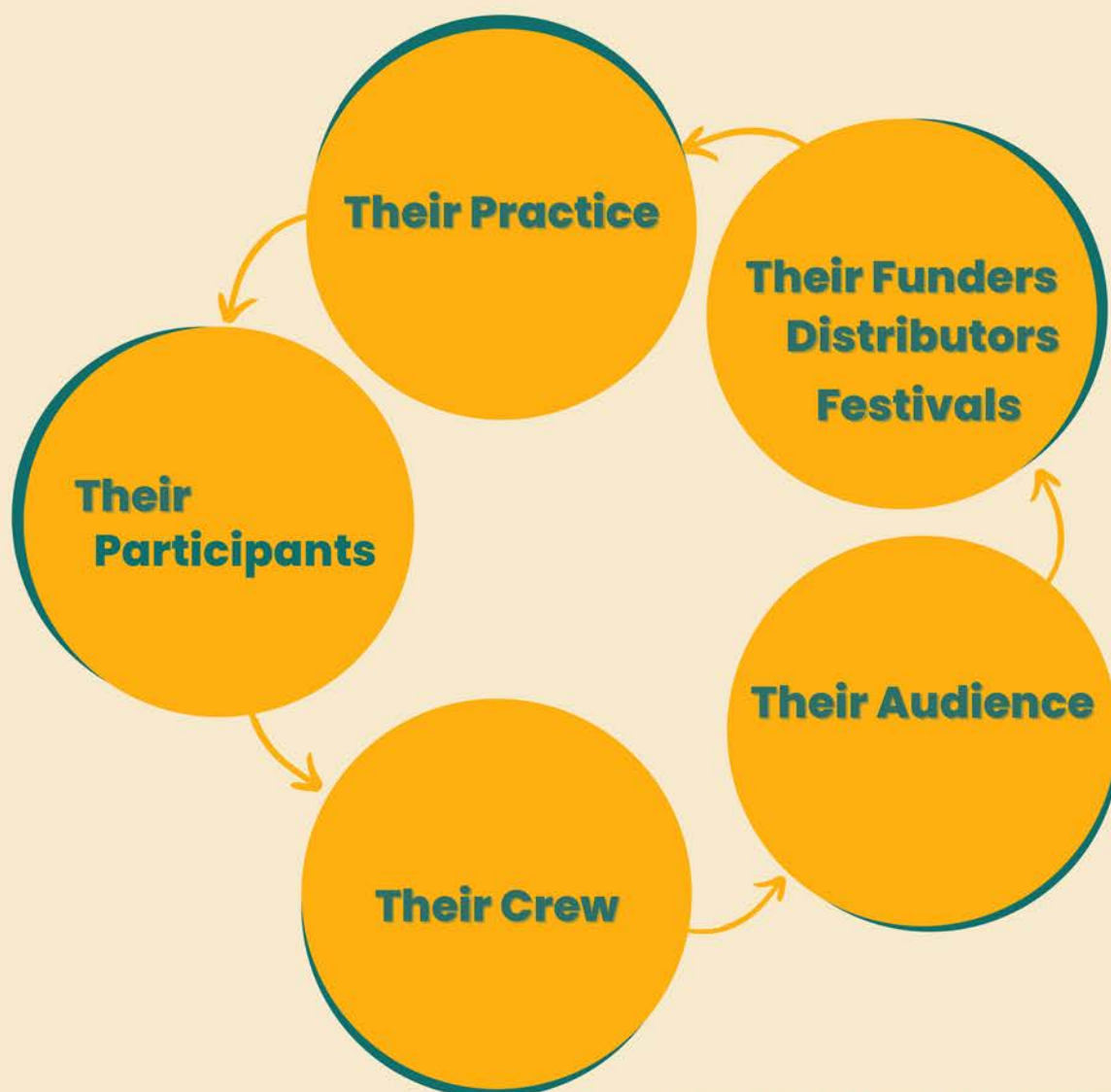
So creating reality is an act of power, made all the more powerful when done in community with others who share, and practice, similar values. Reality is never stable; and as the result of a struggle of power, it's a daily battlefield in an eternal war. There is no neutral ground. The stakes are control of the dominant, or hegemonic, shared meanings. The act of representing puts in motion acts of communication that affect the power relations in our world. When filmmakers select their stories, participants, distributors, and engagement strategies, they are making—consciously or not—choices about how to reaffirm or challenge power relationships. As Chinese-American civil rights activist Grace Lee Boggs succinctly put it, “Conversation is revolution.”

This is why Stuart Hall, an activist intellectual, not only wrote books and taught classes, but worked directly with emerging Black British filmmakers such as Isaac Julien, John Akomfrah and Gurinder Chadha, to create filmic art coming out of the lived reality of the Black British experience. His scholarship became the intellectual touchpoint for a new generation of Black British artists. And this is why he worked with activists opposing police violence. Their report, *Policing the Crisis*, was a powerful critique of law and order campaigns responding to the racial reckoning of the era, and a point of mobilization for Black British activists. We strive to emulate that same spirit in both understanding and leveraging the power of communication.



RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS

Filmmakers are in relationship with, and are mutually accountable to, different groups throughout the creative process:



SIX CORE VALUES FOR NONFICTION FILMMAKING



1

INTEGRATE ANTI-OPPRESSION PRACTICES INTO YOUR WORK

As part of a filmmaker's commitment to tell honest, independent, under-told stories in their work, they are clear about what being anti-oppressive means for each film they produce. They consider whether or not they are the best person to tell this story/make this film. Additionally, they consider whether or not this story should be told in the first place, and how their telling of the story supports or undermines the agency of the person or people whose story is being documented. Filmmakers also consider how their work will challenge existing dominant assumptions that maintain inequitable and unjust practices.

2

BE TRANSPARENT IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

Filmmakers explain to participants, supporters and funders what they are attempting/doing, and why. This kind of transparency engenders trust, reduces the chance of misunderstanding, and registers respect.

3

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR POSITIONALITY

Filmmakers assume the ability to shape and interpret stories—their own and those of others. A values-based filmmaking practice requires an acknowledgement and examination of a filmmaker's lens, preconceptions, and the responsibility they hold as a steward of stories. Regardless of the power a filmmaker possesses in their daily life based on their own intersectional identity, when they pick up a camera they wield power.

4

RESPECT THE DIGNITY & AGENCY OF THE PEOPLE IN YOUR FILM

Participants are experts in their experience, and their feedback and can be useful in the production process. Listening to their thoughts engenders trust, provides nuance to the film, and communicates a filmmaker's respect for their expertise.

5

PRIORITIZE THE NEEDS, WELLBEING & EXPERIENCE OF THE PEOPLE ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR FILM

Typically, the director controls most elements that shape the experiences of the crew and participants. Filmmakers consider how they and their team can cede and shift power to ensure that the production experience of their participants and all production and crew members is healing, empowering and ultimately fulfilling. By assuming the role of interpreter and director of a particular story, filmmakers have the opportunity to prioritize the needs, wellbeing, dignity and experience of all those associated with their film.

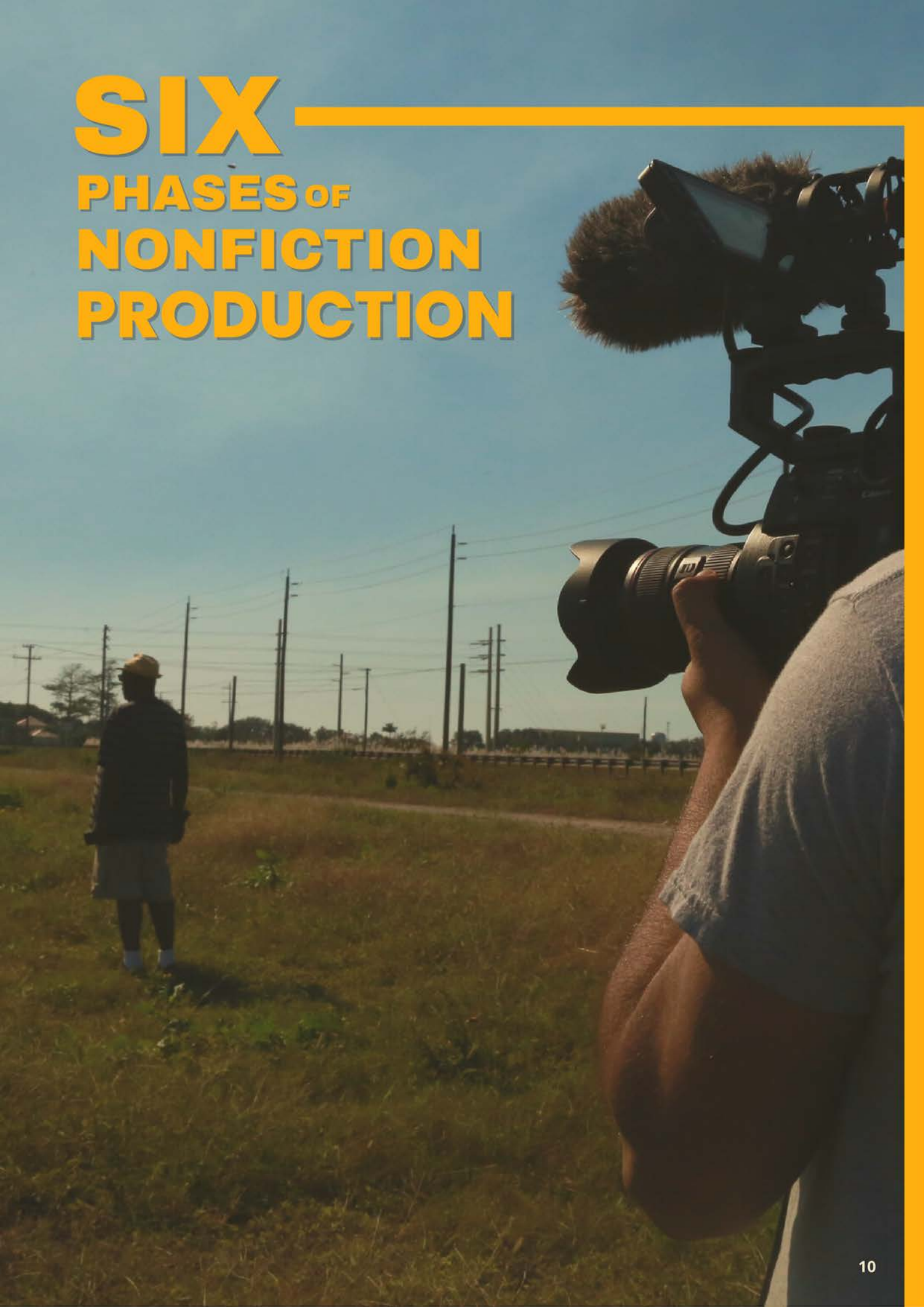
6

TREAT ALL POTENTIAL AUDIENCES WITH DIGNITY, CARE & CONCERN

The people who watch a film, place a profound trust in the storyteller, which should be honored. Good faith with the audience involves transparency, integrity, accuracy and a clear articulation of perspective. Audience members have their own stories and expertise; some may even have more proximity to the story than the filmmaker. Filmmakers consider the ways that their work may be read, interpreted and experienced by the people who have intimate knowledge of the story. Filmmakers are also clear about who their intended audience is, and what information they can add to their already established knowledge. Filmmakers consider how their film could trigger/traumatize those audience members who have more experience with the film's content.

SIX —

PHASES OF NONFICTION PRODUCTION



A film goes through five stages of production: Research & Development, Pre-Production, Production, Post-Production and Release. We have outlined a sixth stage, Reflection, which precedes the Research & Development phase. While Reflection is not typically marked as a phase of production, it is, arguably, the most important phase.

We have illustrated how filmmakers can pursue the incorporation of the core values outlined above during each phase.

PHASE

1

Before a filmmaker begins to pursue any story, they seriously consider if the film should be nonfiction, and if that nonfiction film should be made at all, especially by them. Filmmakers strive to be honest about their intentions around telling the story they're considering in order to help determine the potential for new insights, perspectives, and revelations that they can contribute to information already available about the subject matter.

More importantly, a filmmaker considers the best outcome for telling the story—such as raising awareness, sparking change, and/or pursuing justice. If justice is a goal, then exposing the way power is exerted over others may be more effective than a focus on those who have been victimized by the powerful. Filmmakers consider the ways in which their lens can shift the focus to the perpetrators of harm, rather than those harmed. Filmmakers ask themselves whether the film, or their framing of the issue, has the potential to do more harm than good, especially to the participants who make the film possible.

Harm can manifest in a number of ways. Vulnerable participants can be retraumatized by the thought of recounting painful episodes on camera. This is particularly true if they have not yet received mental health support to process what they experienced. Harm can also occur when a participant views the film and sees their story reflected back to them in ways that do not align with their own understanding of their experience, or when they have to wait to screen the film for the first time along with the general public. And when the film increases their visibility, harm can come if that visibility puts them at greater risk for retribution or isolation from their communities. Harm can also occur when a film contributes to persisting narratives that define communities through the lens of their victimhood, trauma or perceived pathologies. Persistent negative narratives are not only traumatic, but also have a direct impact on the way communities behave and see themselves, as well as how they are seen and engaged with by others.

REFLECTION

By considering the ways a film can create harm, filmmakers can engage in harm mitigation. For instance, filmmakers can reduce harm by crafting more participant-centered agreements and/or contracts, among other things.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

1

Harm can occur even when a filmmaker holds the best of intentions. Has the filmmaker considered the possible negative implications of telling the story, and mapped out potential ways to mitigate that harm?

2

Understanding that access does not equal insight, does the filmmaker have trusted relationships with people with lived experience, or other knowledge holders, which will enable deep insight into the story?

3

How can the filmmaker engage the people or communities at the center of the story to ensure that the narrative dispels myths, and adds nuance to the participant(s) and larger community's experience?

4

Does the filmmaker's telling of the story affect the ability of the community involved to assume agency over their own narratives?

VALUES IN ACTION

FILMMAKERS STRIVE TO

1

ACKNOWLEDGE

their intentions, values, biases and power. Deeply interrogate the extent to which they feel entitled to tell a particular story.

2

CONSIDER

their relationship and proximity to the community or issue they are examining, and how it may influence their understanding, or lack thereof, of the people or issue(s) they seek to document.

3

CONSIDER

the biases and preconceptions they bring to the story based on their education, social status, lived experience and proximity or distance to the issue/community examined.

4

ARTICULATE

to themselves and their team why their collective values and chosen set of truths, among all the truths out there on this topic, person or moment, are important for other people to know.

5

CONSIDER

their relationship to, or complicity with, the source of power they are examining, and how it may shape their interpretation of the issue.

6

RESEARCH

the larger narratives about this issue or community, to be able to put their work in conversation with them.

7

MITIGATE

harm as much as possible. If the proposed film project could cause harm through the process of accessing the story and participants, in particular, consider whether the end is greater than the means.

8

COMMIT

to challenging systems of oppression and control in the design of the production (crew demographics, pay scale, decision-making processes, etc.)



EXAMPLE

What does reflection mean in practice? One of the members of the Documentary Accountability Working Group, professor and filmmaker Natalie Bullock Brown, walked through her thought process.

The filmmaker was captured by a tweet: a story about the criminalization of grade-school children in rural Tennessee over a playground spat. She thought she might make a documentary about the story, which would highlight the way in which Black and Brown children are pre-emptively judged, treated, and traumatized..

As a result of her work in the Documentary Accountability Working Group, Bullock Brown asked herself two questions about her obligations to the potential participants of her film idea: “How will I take care of the children throughout the filmmaking process? And what do I have to know or think about in order to mitigate any harm to the greatest extent possible?”

Bullock Brown thought about the ways she could, inadvertently, retraumatize the young people she would interact with, as well as their parents. She thought about the ways in which the documentary process—often drawn out, and involving other family members—could further put participants at risk. She thought about the fact that she was not from the community that was affected. Finally, she thought about what might be the most appropriate unit of analysis. Was she trying to make people feel bad for the kids who were maltreated? Or was the point to identify and call out the systems that lead to this particular instance of victimization?

Ultimately, Bullock Brown decided not to pursue the film she had originally envisioned. But she continues to ruminate on the ways she can tell stories about the systemic forces and patterns that lead to individual and communal tragedy. Read her essay here: [**Considering a Trauma-Informed Process In Documentary Filmmaking.**](#)



“**CONVERSATION IS REVOLUTION**”

– Grace Lee Boggs



PHASE

2

In this phase, filmmakers assume the challenge of making a film, and begin their homework. They thoroughly research their subject matter, and begin to plan how they will observe and cinematically document their participants. They also identify and begin to establish informed consent with key participants, including a review of all agreements and contracts. Filmmakers do this to develop the trust that will form the foundation of the collaborative relationships central to the filmmaking process. In this phase, filmmakers establish open lines of communication to allow for frank conversations about their vision and hopes for the film, their commitment to telling the story, and the factors they can and cannot control.

They explain the basics of the documentary process, including, when relevant, the possibility that the filmmaker does not know exactly how the participant's insights will be used, exactly how much time they will need from the participant, or when the work will be complete. Transparency at this stage ensures that participants can weigh the implications of telling their story publicly, ask questions about the process (including the potential length of their commitment), and surface their own hopes, concerns and expectations. This is also an important moment to demystify for participants how much a film costs to produce, how productions are financed, how those resources are typically spent, and what any of that might mean for the participant (e.g., possible compensation for their participation in the production, distribution or impact phases).

As filmmakers develop their budgets, they strive to include line items to address the time and resources needed to cultivate a trusting relationship with, and care for, participants and the production team, especially if the film will revisit trauma.

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

“In everything we do we are accountable to community.”

- Justin Deegan

(Citizen of the Three Affiliated Tribes -
MHA Nation) 4th World Media Fellow



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

1

How can the filmmaker invest time to develop trust and respect from the person or community at the heart of the film?

2

What information about the filmmaking process should be shared in this phase to affirm informed consent?

3

What are the budget line items needed to establish trusting relationships and care for participants and production staff?

FILMMAKERS STRIVE TO

1

CONSIDER

their primary target audience, and how other audiences might receive or engage with the material.

2

EDUCATE

themselves on the historical context and/or persistent narratives that frame the people or issues they are bringing to light.

3

TRUST

that the people they want to participate in their film are experts of their own experience.

4

COMMIT

to challenging systems of oppression through critical analysis of race, class, gender, and other avenues of oppression and control as you produce and shape your story.

5

CONSIDER

how people with access to power have historically shaped the narrative of the issue. Consider ways to elevate other voices of authority.

6

AVOID

coercion when appealing to potential film participants, to avoid retraumatizing and entrenching power dynamics.

7

SEEK

informed, unforced and affirmative consent, cooperation and collaboration with film participants.

8

INFORM

participants about the real costs of R&D, film production and distribution, and the potential financial impact of the film.

9

ADOPT

an ecologically mindful and sustainable approach throughout.

EXAMPLE

Film director Jacqueline Olive was developing a documentary (Always in Season) dealing with the history of lynching in America when in late August of 2014, she learned of the death of a high school student, Lennon Lacy, in Bladensboro, NC who was found hung on a swing set near his home. The police and news reported Lennon's death as a suicide. The family was certain it was murder. Olive was faced with the problem of how to meet the family, and build enough trust to interview them in real time when she had no ties to the community. She also faced the challenge of wanting to investigate this unfolding whodunnit, while as a mother herself, she recognized the limitless pain and priority of honoring the family's grief and shock. Before going to Bladensboro, the filmmaker connected with Pierre Lacy, Lennon's big brother. Olive and Lacy spoke for two weeks by phone.

Those conversations were critical to share the filmmaker's background and intent, as well as to hear from Lacy what was going on from the family's point of view, including his mother, Claudia Lacy. Spending time in advance, building even a basic level of understanding, helped the family realize some common ground with the filmmaker. Although she was an outsider, the filmmaker and the family were both committed to finding out what actually happened to Lennon. Olive communicated compassionately, and she was clear from the outset about her role as a filmmaker: "I am here to learn as accurately as possible what happened to Lennon. There may be things I am surprised by and you are surprised by, and I am there to find out what is going on. I am here to figure out what's going on rather than just here to tell your story or your side of things."

This level of professional objectivity and straightforward statements of intent laid the groundwork for ongoing consent as the filmmaker began to communicate directly with Lennon's mother. When speaking with Claudia Lacy and other participants about the goals of the film, the filmmaker stated clearly, "I don't know what the final film will look like." She gave them enough to understand that in the research and development phase of filmmaking, the process is fluid. Their interviews may or may not appear in the film, she reminded them.

Olive had to stay alert to safety issues, since the town had become polarized around aspects of the Lacy case. Claudia Lacy chose to no longer film outside of her home, once it was clear that people were starting to understand there was a filmmaker in town. Olive tried not to make things worse for her, or to put her in an unsafe situation.

In the Research & Development phase the filmmaker and the participant(s) not only built rapport, they aligned around their desire for the truth. While this was not an activist film-in-the-making, it was clear that Olive was making a film that would address larger themes and realities of racial justice.



PHASE

3

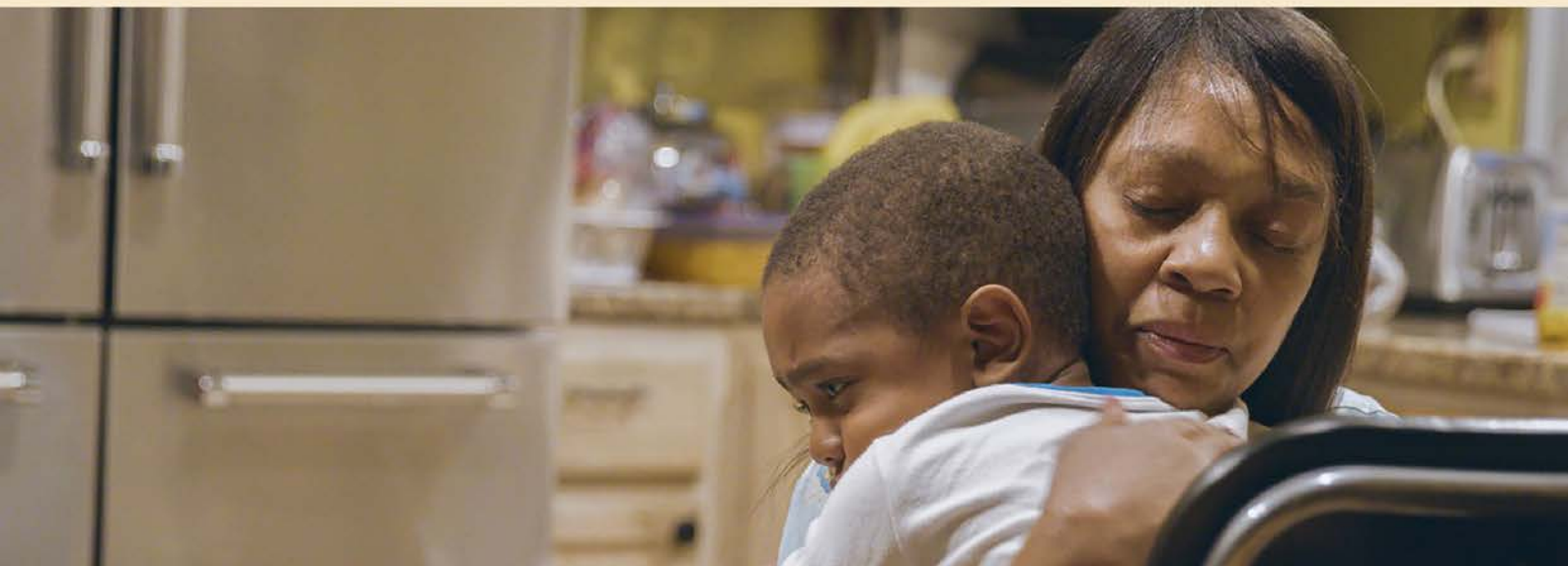
In this phase, filmmakers begin the work of identifying participants beyond those whose stories will be central to the film's narrative. Filmmakers secure access to these secondary participants, schedule interviews and time to film with all participants, and begin to think about and hire the production team and crew(s). It is in this phase that filmmakers consider the race, gender and class of their main participants, and seek to reflect back to those participants people who look like them throughout the production process. More importantly, filmmakers are intentional in ensuring they have creative and decision making partners on the production team who will provide important perspectives and insights to enhance and deepen the storytelling. The production team (ie. the director, producer, associate producer, interns, etc.) routinely discusses how best to care for both the team and the participants.

Participants need to know as early as possible how much time will be required of them. For interview-based films, the production schedule should be arranged around the availability of participants. For verité films, filmmakers share with participants the extent to which the production crew will be with the participants throughout their daily lives, and discuss the participants' comfort level with that reality. Consent during production may require multiple touchpoints as trust evolves, as circumstances shift, and new storylines reveal themselves. Filmmakers are willing to work with participants on their comfort level and the impact on their lives, so that participant needs are not sacrificed in favor of the needs of the film. Filmmakers consider the economic impact of production on participants, and brainstorm appropriate payments for expenses, such as paying for transportation, childcare, and lost-work payment.

PRE-PRODUCTION

“Empowering Indigenous folks to be the shapers of their own stories is a vital component in cultivating perspective and raising consciousness. It is also an act of sovereignty.”

– Brit Hensel (Cherokee)
Nia Tero Reciprocity Project



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- 1 How can the filmmaker work toward diversity in the production team and crew, in ways that will enhance the production experience for the participants, and broaden the perspectives that inform the film?
- 2 How can the filmmaker consider creative methods of appropriate compensation for participants?
- 3 What practices, on- and off-set, will offer the greatest care for participants, production team/crew, and the filmmakers themselves?
- 4 How can participants be included in the pre-production phase in ways that are meaningful to them, and that help make the film better?

FILMMAKERS STRIVE TO

1

CONSIDER, WHERE APPROPRIATE, COLLABORATING

from the onset, with someone who is in sync with the normative values of the participant(s), and who is well networked within the part of that culture that you are telling a story about.

2

PRIORITIZE

hiring of and accommodation of members of underrepresented groups, including BIPOC, disabled, gender-diverse, neuro-atypical and others, in positions with decision-making and creative power.

3

INCORPORATE

members of relevant underrepresented groups, including participants, in pre-production and story planning.

4

SHARE

their mission/goal/value with participants, so they understand the filmmaker's lens and what is at stake.

5

AVOID

"casting" participants or editing storylines in service of formulaic plot points that diminish the complexity of the human experience or responsibility, or that ignore the systemic patterns that hold power in place.

EXAMPLE

Filmmakers Jennifer Tiexiera and Camilla Hall set out to examine the complex experience of documentary participants after navigating complicated film productions. To begin their R&D process, they reached out to a number of former film participants, including Margie Ratliff, who was a participant in *The Staircase*, a Netflix true-crime series released in 2018.

The concept for *Subject* came into focus through a series of conversations with Ratliff, who offered her own insight into the range of emotions one experiences as the focus of documentaries, and how filmmakers and the industry might reconsider practices to avoid compounding harm for those experiencing trauma. Ratliff assumed the role of co-producer and helped the team build relationships with other former documentary participants, by first sharing her own story. At this stage, Ratliff was still deciding whether she wanted to take part as principal participant on camera, or rather stay behind the scenes. It was her proximity to the issue and support of it that helped garner trust from other potential participants.

As Ratliff helped to coordinate and attend interviews with the participants, her feelings about her role evolved and shifted. She pulled back from a more hands-on approach when the interviews triggered her own experiences. Finding people with similar experiences was extremely powerful but also overwhelming, because there was so little support for documentary participants at the time. As the project evolved from strength-to-strength, Ratliff saw the importance of taking part as a principal participant and she and the filmmakers decided to move forward and chart her full story.

What emerged from Tiexiera's and Hall's relationship with their participants was the concept of "Continuing Consent." This practice can take the form of a calendar with consent milestones: such as, before participants are followed on camera; before a teaser is shared to raise money; the determination of whether or not interviews should be anonymous or not; and, the instances when physical safety and emotional/legal risk are evaluated.

The relationship between Ratliff and the directors revealed a posture towards all participants that begins with the question: "How can we create an environment where we feel confident that a participant has truly consented and has received support to reach a conclusion that is right for them?"



PHASE

4

In this phase, filmmakers are realizing, on set, all that has been planned and considered in pre-production. Filmmakers are mindful of the tone they set (on shoots) in terms of their power dynamic with participants and crew members, and the production culture created to reflect the values identified during the reflection phase. Filmmakers are thoughtful about their presence within a community during the production process, especially if that community is marginalized.

Some productions may need a mental health practitioner on set to mitigate harm either to participants or film staff, (see [DocuMentality](#) resource). In some cases, filmmakers even give some participants credits and back-end profit participation.

Filmmakers are mindful of the ways that power is shared and expressed with the production team and the crew and consultants. They share the estimated time commitment of the crew, and discuss any limitations, seen or unseen, that a crew member might have that require accommodations. They are careful not to exceed the boundaries of the standard, 10-hour day expectation, and offer rest and meal breaks throughout the day.

Current in-person production protocols have been greatly altered by the risks associated with the COVID pandemic, and in a world always vulnerable to health risks, we can learn from best practices around safety for crew and participants developed during the pandemic. See: [Producing with Care in the COVID Era: Considerations from the Community](#).

PRODUCTION

“Wherever we go, we are blessed to know the power and love of the land, and in doing so, take on the responsibility of including the land in the stories we guide into being.”

– **Raven Two Feathers**

(Cherokee, Seneca, Cayuga, Comanche) –
4th World Media Fellow



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

1

How might the filmmaker discuss and negotiate employment terms with the crew, and have contracts and agreements in place before production begins?

2

How might the filmmaker clearly articulate to participants the production schedule, and the possible economic and emotional ramifications of production, to enable informed consent before the crew arrives?

3

How can the filmmaker ensure the participant has access to trained mental health professionals, when relevant?

FILMMAKERS STRIVE TO

1

CONSIDER

physical, legal safety concerns for particularly vulnerable people (children, undocumented immigrants, formerly incarcerated, activists) and create safety plans in the event their livelihoods or safety is compromised as a result of their participation in the film.

2

CONSIDER

how the filmmaker's physical presence is received within a community, and take measures to ensure that their presence does not cause harm.

3

LISTEN

to how people recount their lived experiences and let that inform the direction of the film and storytelling. Assume that individuals are experts on their own experiences.

4

CENTER

the dignity of participants over the inclination to document revealing or even salacious details of the participants' lives.

5

BUILD

transparency and accountability into relationships with funders, donors, and supporters as the story evolves and the film stakes take shape during production.

6

SEEK ACCURACY

on visuals and audio representation. Filmmakers use the actual thing in the world being discussed instead of cheating locations, objects, etc.



EXAMPLE

Outta the Muck, co-directed by Bhawin Suchak and Ira McKinley, is an intimate portrait of the lives of Black community members living in Pahokee, Florida. Centered on the lives of Ira's own relatives who are considered pillars within their community, the directors describe Outta the Muck as a counter-narrative to stories of Black and Brown Americans escaping their communities for a shot at a better life elsewhere. The film instead highlights the participants' deep investment in and commitment to improving their community.

The participants faced significant opportunity costs in order to work with the filmmakers. The production team shared information about funding with them and listened to their feedback about the best way to defray those opportunity costs. The team ultimately decided to pay fees for location use and licensing of family photos, as well as offering targeted compensation for specific lost hours of work time.

Suchak explained that the team's vision of the film did not require including scenes that would reinforce the suffering of participants; he was willing to take out something that would add harm to the participants' experience, or potentially re-traumatize them. The film team regularly shared with participants their thinking about their choices, and listened to participant feedback about them. One especially sensitive scene filmed for Outta the Muck involved the death of a family member. To ensure the family was comfortable, the directors checked in with them several times, seeking repeated confirmations that they were okay with the inclusion of this content in the film, and that including this piece of the story would be valuable to the family.

To help participants understand how footage gets distilled to scenes, and allow them to get comfortable with seeing themselves on film, the film team created short, sample edits while in production. This also increased the participants' level of interest in working with the filmmakers.



PHASE

5

The post-production phase is a great time for a filmmaker who is collaborating with participants to consult with them, before editorial decisions are cemented. Additionally, if filmmakers strive to understand the systems in place that affect and inform the lived experiences of the film's participants, even if those systems are not included in the film, participants will likely feel seen in ways that further cultivate trust.

When sharing a cut of a film with participants, filmmakers consider what resources they may need available during a screening, especially if the film recounts the individual or collective trauma of participants and their communities. As many films have begun to do—including *The Feeling of Being Watched*, which we lift up as an film example that filmmakers can follow—a psychologist or other therapist may be called to engage in a participant screening, to help them navigate through any hard emotions they may experience as they watch the film. The therapist can also be a support to the filmmaker.

Fact checking is a must during the post-production phase, and should be done as early in the process as possible to mitigate harmful mistakes or misinformation that could be spread through the film. This is a professional skill, and needs its own line item in the budget. The fact checking process can be assisted by participants, which further informs the need for participants to be made privy to the rough cut. Sharing a cut with participants who have been collaborators in the storytelling will not only benefit the film, but will also add to the goodwill that filmmakers foster with their participants. Conversely, a filmmaker avoids dependence on sensational or stereotypical tropes often used to define marginalized people, especially if the participants are members of one or more of those groups.

POST- PRODUCTION



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

1

How can filmmakers use and benefit from participant feedback?

2

What resources should filmmakers enlist during the post-production phase for their participants, as well as themselves?

3

What are some creative ways filmmakers can involve participants in post-production that will help foster accountability and transparency?

4

What can filmmakers do to make sure that their editor is on the same page about participant care and accountability? When scheduling editing hours, consider using [The Alliance for Documentary Editors Guide for Documentary Edit Schedules](#)

FILMMAKERS STRIVE TO

1

ENABLE

an audience's understanding of the issues at the heart of the film with a full story. Don't leave out relevant facts or perspectives because they seem inconvenient.

2

AVOID

appealing to sensationalism. Offer an understanding of the systems at play that inform and motivate the characters in the story.

3

CONSIDER

post-production ethics and compensation, and whether or not there are opportunities for you to offer payment to participants in exchange for their assistance during the post-production process.

4

EXPLAIN

to funders the need to build in line items including captioning, visual description, and ADA-compliant websites. Plan for impact/outreach funding as part of the basic funding model.

5

BUILD

transparency and accountability into relationships with funders, donors, and supporters as the story evolves and the film stakes take shape during production.

6

TRUST AUDIENCES

to follow emotional arcs without melodramatic musical or special effects intervention. Allow the authenticity of the participants and their stories to speak for themselves.



EXAMPLE

The Feeling of Being Watched (FoBW) is a film directed by Assia Boundaoui. It tells the story of the immigrant Muslim community in Bridgeview, IL where the director grew up. It weaves the personal and the political as it follows Boundaoui's examination of why her community—including her own family—fell under blanket government surveillance. The Feeling of Being Watched follows Boundaoui as she pieces together this secret FBI operation—"Vulgar Betrayal"—while grappling with the effects of a lifetime of surveillance on herself and her family. She reveals not only the scale of the FBI surveillance, but the corrosive effect it has on community mental health. In film screenings across the country, community members said they experienced a wide range of emotions as they bore witness to Boundaoui's journey to uncover one of the largest counter terrorism investigations ever conducted in the U.S. before 9/11. Community members have described feeling "scared, proud, angry, confused, surprised, discouraged, frustrated, sad, proud and grateful" after watching the film.

The FoBW team partnered with the Muslim Wellness Foundation to develop a healing guide for organizers, activists and audiences in order to tend to the wounds that were revealed while viewing the film. A viewing guide helps prepare audience members before, during and after the film to manage the emotions that may be elicited by the film's content. This tool signals care, thoughtfulness and concern for those directly and indirectly impacted. The guide includes guidelines for organizers, reflection questions, resources and recommended reading. It also serves as a way to facilitate difficult conversations about the psychological impact of racialized surveillance, trauma and collective healing.

In **The Feeling of Being Watched: Community Screening Healing Guide** for Community Screenings, facilitators, particularly those with direct experience with government surveillance, are encouraged to "take time to process the possible triggers you may feel" prior to watching the film, during and after screenings.



PHASE

6

It is never too early to plan for the release and impact phase, to develop and solidify partnerships for distribution and impact, or to pilot and test ideas. Consider the ways that the film's release and plans for impact will affect participants, and have proactive and transparent communication about the options and/or commitments for the release. The vision and goals for release and impact are informed by, or developed with, those who are directly impacted and working to address the issues the film raises, and also consented to and endorsed by participants featured in the film.

RELEASE & IMPACT

The DAWG Framework provides guidance in approaching our work with greater intentionality, alignment with our principles, and the important preparation needed as we create.”

– Jackie Olive

Director/Producer ALWAYS IN SEASON (2019)



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

1

How will your impact campaign and distribution strategies affect and/or benefit the participants and community featured in your film?

2

Are the participants featured in your film interested in being a part of the release and impact efforts? If so, how can they be involved in a meaningful and equitable way, including considerations of time/effort and adequate compensation?

3

How will your values carry through the public release and impact efforts? Do any values or guidelines need to be added and/or communicated?

4

What conversations need to happen between filmmakers and participants to make sure everyone understands and agrees with the plans for release and impact?

FILMMAKERS STRIVE TO

1

DEVELOP

an approach to impact with those featured in the film that's produced, and those with lived experience with the issues the film raises.

2

DEVELOP

guidelines and standard rates for compensation for (and with) participants involved in the impact campaign.

3

CENTER

those whose lived experiences are represented in the story told, and in audience engagement efforts.

4

HONOR

participants' boundaries for rehashing their experience during the promotional or impact phase and have proactive approaches to offering care, support, and security when needed.

5

PURSUE

impact and distribution strategies that will benefit those featured in the film.

6

PURSUE

impact strategies that engage conversations across cultural fault lines.

7

PURSUE

partnerships with organizations and groups directly impacted and already doing work on the issues featured in the film, and ask how the film can best support their efforts.

8

PRIORITIZE

accessibility for key audiences when planning community engagement events and any accompanying actions.

9

PRIORITIZE

vendors that are small businesses headed by members of underrepresented groups and/or those represented in the film.



EXAMPLE

Like many independent documentary makers, directors/producers Nicole Newnham and Jim LeBrecht, and producer Sara Bolder finalized their impact plans for Crip Camp after the film was finished—just weeks before its premiere on Netflix. The vision—ideas for how the film could take the values it embodied in its content into the world, and the way it would engage audiences—had been in the works for more than two years. But completing the film with an upcoming Sundance Premiere and Netflix’s own plans to market and promote the film, had superseded anything else. The filmmakers always knew that the impact campaign had to be led by people with disabilities—in particular, disabled LGBTQ and people of color, who lack visibility in the media, and are at the forefront of disability justice organizing. As the premiere date came closer, the film team shifted course to better align with their values, and they sought impact strategists from within the disability justice movement. Andraea Lavant and Stacey Park Milbern, who both have extensive experience as disability inclusion and justice advocates, were soon hired.

The film and impact team rooted their working relationship in clearly-communicated shared values. A key element of the campaign was to center people living with disabilities, and to meet all audiences where they were on the path toward accessibility, inclusion and justice. The film team also ceded power, reflecting on their positionality as two white, non-disabled women and one white disabled man, and allowed the impact producers to shape the campaign, which took the form of a 16-week, virtual summer camp, featuring trailblazing speakers from the disability community. They intentionally leveraged the film’s acclaim to uplift the work of other disabled activists and artists. Throughout the campaign, which took place at the height of the 2020 pandemic, they embraced the work as a learning process, fully expecting to have to change course and learn from mistakes, while working toward their goals for change. This resistance to have an expectation or impression of perfection in tumultuous times is an antidote to oppression in and of itself.



**THE
PROCESS
IS THE
PRODUCT**

THE FUTURE

This document synthesizes what we have learned from two years of deep conversations in the field, with filmmakers, film participants, educators, film instructors, scholars and documentary film gatekeepers (funders, distributors and festival programmers). There is much more to learn, as these practices evolve. We know the release of this document is a beginning; not an end. We look forward to learning from those who apply the framework's insights in good faith, as the field develops. We are heartened to find so many companions on a journey to a more just, inclusive, and vibrant film production practice. We welcome your participation and thoughts for next steps and actions at:

info@docaccountability.org



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

This glossary outlines working definitions of terms that are used or concepts that are referenced within the framework.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The willingness to solicit and/or accept responsibility for one's actions.

ACCURACY

The quality or state of being correct or precise.

AUTHENTICITY

The quality of being real or true.

EQUITABLE COLLABORATION

Collaboration intended to center equity both in the process and in outcomes. These six elements—adaptive, deliberative, inclusive, responsive, trauma-informed, and truth-seeking—guide how community conversations may be designed and conducted, whether through a single meeting, a community dialogue, or a long-term collaborative change process.

EXTRACTIVE FILMMAKING

Filmmaking that is made for personal or professional gain, in a manner that is transactional and exploitative, and that does not seek to involve or directly serve the documented community. While some filmmakers may intentionally practice extractive filmmaking, others may do so unthinkingly, by not incorporating intentional processes of transparency and consent.

FILM PARTICIPANT

Individuals who are interviewed or documented in nonfiction films.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent requires telling a person exactly how their information or image will be used, ensuring that they understand what they are agreeing to, and that they are not consenting under pressure or duress.

INTERSECTIONALITY

A term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, argues that classifications such as gender, race, class, and others cannot be examined in isolation from one another; they interact and intersect in individuals' lives, in society, and in social systems and are mutually constitutive.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

(cont.)

NONFICTION FILMMAKING

Documenting real events using photography and or moving images to capture said events. There are many subgenres that commonly include documentary filmmaking, journalism and educational films.

OPPRESSION

The use of power to disempower, marginalize, silence or otherwise subordinate one social group or category, often in order to further empower and/or privilege the oppressor. Social oppression may not require formally established organizational support to achieve its desired effect; it may be applied on a more informal, yet more focused, individual basis. Systemic oppression has historical antecedents; it is the intentional disadvantaging of groups of people based on their identity while advantaging members of the dominant group (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, language, etc.).

PERSON-FIRST & IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE

A person's identity and self-image are closely linked to the words used to describe them. Person-first language puts a person before their disability. Identity-first language is language that leads with a person's disability. It is best to ask each individual person which language they prefer and/or research the general consensus of the disability community with whom you are interacting with or referring to. These preferences are evolving and many disability-led organizations have opted to use both person first and identity first language in equal measures with much consideration to positional power.

POSITIONALITY

One's social position, status, access and privilege relative to others.

STEREOTYPES

A widely held but fixed oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing

TRANSPARENCY

Disclosure about relevant conditions, terms, frameworks of production, which can increase both understanding and trust.

UNCONCIOUS BIAS

Bias that results from the tendency to process information based on unconscious associations and feelings even when these are contrary to one's conscious or declared beliefs.

ARTICLES & ESSAYS

- [Considering a Trauma-Informed Process In Documentary Filmmaking \(2022\)](#)
- [R. Kelly's been convicted. Now it's time to focus on the safety and future of survivors. \(2021\)](#)
- [The Documentary Future: A Call for Accountability \(2020\)](#)
- ["The Ethics of Documentary Production in a Pandemic" \(2020\)](#)
- ["The Dominance of the White Male Critic" \(2019\)](#)
- ["Self Reflection in Theater Two" \(2019\)](#)
- ["Documentary Power: A New Manifesto" \(2019\)](#)
- ["The Space for Change" \(2019\)](#)
- [Nothing About Us, Without Us, is For Us: Taking a Stand Against a Gross Misrepresentation of our Student Movement" \(2019\)](#)
- ["Documenting the Invisible: 'The Undocumented Everyday' Challenges the Idea of The Other" \(2019\)](#)
- ["Place at the Table: Doc Filmmakers with Disabilities on Building Careers and Disproving Stereotypes" \(2018\)](#)
- ["Beyond Empathy" \(2017\)](#)
- ["Building Visionary Non-fiction by, about and for Our Communities" \(2017\)](#)
- ["#DocsSoWhite: A Personal Reflection" \(2016\)](#)
- ["Navigating the River: The Hidden Colonialism of Documentary" \(2016\)](#)
- ["Doc Ethics: Let Core Values Drive Your Decisions" \(2016\)](#)
- ["Respect the Feathers': Who Tells Standing Rock's Story?" \(2016\)](#)



RESOURCES (cont.)

REPORTS, TOOLKITS & FRAMEWORKS

- StoryShift
- REIMAGINE: LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY-ACCOUNTABLE MEDIAMAKING, **coming soon from Detroit Narrative Agency**
- On-Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nationals, Metis, and Inuit Communities, Cultures Concepts & Stories
- Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work
- Documentality
- BBC Editorial Guidelines
- Society of Professional Journalists
- PBS Editorial and Funding Guidelines
- Cultural Community Benefits Principles Toolkit



FILMS

- ALWAYS IN SEASON- Director, Jackie Olive
- CRIP CAMP- Co-Directors, Nicole Newnham and Jim LeBrecht
- THE FEELING OF BEING WATCHED - Director, Assia Boundaoui
- OUTTA THE MUCK - Co-Directors, Bhawin Suchak and Ira Mckinley
- RECIPROCITY PROJECT - Produced by Nia Tero
- SUBJECT - Co-Directors, Camilla Hall and Jennifer Tiexiera

WHO WE ARE



Natalie Bullock Brown (she/her)

Natalie is an award-winning and Emmy-nominated producer, and a Teaching Assistant Professor in Interdisciplinary Studies at North Carolina State University. She is director/producer of *baartman, beyoncé & me*, a documentary work-in-progress that explores the impact of the beauty standard on Black women and girls; and is a producer on award-winning filmmaker Byron Hurt's upcoming PBS documentary, *HAZING*.



Dr. Kameelah Mu'Min Rashad (she/her)

Dr. Rashad is the founder of the Muslim Wellness Foundation and established the Omar ibn Said Institute for Black Muslim Studies & Research. She is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Psychology and Muslim Studies at Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS) and CTS' Director for the ASPIRE Project: Engaging Diverse Faith Communities in Anti-Racist Work. She is an Executive Producer for the film *Subject* and leading expert in trauma-informed considerations and practices in documentary filmmaking.



Sonya Childress (she/her)

Sonya is the co-director of Color Congress, a new national collective of majority people of color-led and serving organizations with programming aimed at centering and strengthening nonfiction storytelling by, for and about people of color. She previously served as Senior Fellow at the Perspective Fund and spent twenty years as an impact producer with organizations like Firelight Media and Active Voice. Sonya also serves on the board of the Center for Cultural Power.



Molly Murphy (she/her)

Molly is the Director of Partnerships and Innovation at Working Films, a U.S. based nonprofit that leverages the power of documentary film to advance social and environmental justice. Molly serves on the board of Justice for My Sister, a collective that trains women of color, non-binary youth, and foster youth with a trauma-informed approach to telling stories through a gender equity and racial justice lens.

WHO WE ARE

(cont.)



Patricia Aufderheide (she/they)

Pat is a scholar and public intellectual on media and social change, and an expert on fair use in media creation and scholarship. She is a University Professor at American University in Washington, D.C., where she has worked since 1989 and directed the Center for Social Media, later the Center for Media & Social Impact, beginning in 2000. She has received multiple awards and honors for her journalism and scholarship.



Bhawin Suchak (he/him)

Bhawin is an educator and filmmaker, and the co-founder of Youth FX, a media arts organization focused on empowering young people of color by teaching creative and technical skills in film and digital media. He is also the co-founder and co-director of NeXt Doc, a year-round fellowship program that exists to amplify the voices of documentary filmmakers of color ages 20-24. Bhawin has directed three feature documentaries including *Outta The Muck*, which will air on Independent Lens in 2023.



Sherry Simpson (she/her)

Sherry is Senior Director of Engagement and Impact Innovation at the Independent Television Service (ITVS). ITVS is leading incubator and presenter of independent film, partnering with filmmakers to bring untold stories to public television and to communities around the world. Sherry is an Emmy and Sundance Award winning producer whose critically acclaimed film *Amandla! a revolution in four part harmony* documents the role of music in the South African struggle for freedom.

www.docaccountability.org

PROJECT COORDINATION

The Documentary Accountability Working Group has been coordinated by **Maya Sudarkasa**, PhD Graduate Student in the Department of History at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; **Hannah Hearn**, Impact Coordinator and Fellowships Lead at Working Films; and **Marissa Woods**, Adjunct Instructor, School of Communication, American University.

FUNDERS

The Documentary Accountability Working Group is supported by **The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation** and the **Perspective Fund**.

TOOL KIT CREDITS

WRITERS

Patricia Aufderheide
Natalie Bullock Brown
Sonya Childress
Molly Murphy
Dr. Kameelah Mu'Min Rashad
Sherry Simpson
Bhawin Suchak

COPY EDITOR

Bedatri D. Choudhury

DESIGN

Darian Henry
Bhawin Suchak

DESIGN COLLABORATOR

Amalia Renteria

IMAGES

Courtesy of the following films and organizations

Always In Season
BlackStar Film Festival
Change The Name
Crip Camp
Decade of Fire
Hazing
Nia Tero
O'SHO (What They've Been Taught)
Outta the Muck
Standing Above The Clouds
Subject
Through The Night
The Feeling of Being Watched
Trina's Documentary (WT)
Weckuwapok
Youth FX