The Journalism School
Knight Case Studies Initiative
Columbia University

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Frontline's "The Last Abortion Clinic": What's Fair In A Video World? Teaching Note

Case Summary

Telling a story using video is a complex process that raises a host of editorial, logistical, and even ethical decisions for producers. These choices become more significant, and also more difficult, if the narrative grapples with a contentious subject. This was the case for independent documentary film producer Raney Aronson in 2005, when she and her team undertook to conceptualize, shoot and edit a one-hour news film for PBS' *Frontline* that focused on abortion.

"The Last Abortion Clinic" centered on Mississippi and its single abortion facility. The piece had two main narrative components: legal and personal. The former focused on developments in the abortion debate since the landmark Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision of 1973, which established a woman's right to have an abortion. The second narrative strand comprised interviews with women on the front lines of the abortion debate in Mississippi—either as administrators, medical personnel or clients. The film followed both those who favored abortion and those who did not.

This video-rich case study provides a history of *Frontline*, and follows the documentary's evolution from a concept to a finished product. Students learn about the respective roles in a *Frontline* documentary of the executive producer, executive editor, producer and production team. They confront the myriad decisions that are part of telling a visual story, including how to balance dramatic interviews and images against dry documentary evidence or visually dull talking heads; how to weave together narrative strands; what to include; what to leave out; and the process of deciding what is "fair."

Students also assume the role of producers by watching film segments and deciding if, and where, the video clips belong in the final story. The case includes footage from the final documentary as well as rare outtakes provided courtesy of *Frontline*.

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Teaching Objectives

This case was designed to bring alive the challenges involved in documentary filmmaking and visual storytelling. It offers an unusual opportunity to work with actual documentary footage—not as a technical exercise but as an exercise in editorial judgment. The case touches on a number of topics that can be developed in class.

The central issue in the case study is "fairness." *Frontline* is clear that this term "does not mean equal time for conflicting opinions," but rather "acknowledgement of, and responsible statement of, those conflicting opinions." Instructors might ask students to comment on this definition (do they agree or disagree?) and use it as a launching pad to explore related subjects such as objectivity in journalism.

Aronson is clear that journalists should not express their personal opinions. "It doesn't matter what I believe because I'm going to actually be able to put my personal point of view aside," she states. Her comment goes to the heart of the longstanding debate in journalism over the possibility, and desirability, of achieving objectivity, and provides students with a basis for discussing this journalistic norm and its relevance in an increasingly subjective world.

Story framing has long attracted the attention of communication scholars (see suggested readings) interested in learning to what extent, if any, the way that information is portrayed impacts the way an audience understands and relates to a given topic. Raney Aronson must decide how to frame the abortion issue, and contemplates several options, such as chronicling the evolution of the legal environment since Roe v. Wade, or creating more of a human interest film. She and Fanning ultimately opt for telling the legislative story but "enlivening it with personal scenes from the frontlines of the abortion debate." What do students think of this framework? What are its implications? What other approach might *Frontline* have used to achieve similar goals?

Access, both physical and emotional, is a significant challenge that Aronson and her team face in reporting their story. Students are encouraged to think through the issue of access, to consider the various elements needed in securing cooperation and to discuss the boundaries to which they think journalists should adhere when they try to secure a story.

A related topic for discussion is a journalist's obligation to his/her sources. Aronson and the *Frontline* team need people to go on the record. She works hard to persuade sources to appear in the program—including an abortion clinic director who has not appeared on camera for 13 years for fear of reprisals. Instructors may chose to pursue this issue by asking students what responsibilities they believe journalists have to their subjects (especially if his/her participation in the story jeopardizes their safety), or does sole responsibility rest with the source who agrees to take part?

How does visual storytelling differ from print? The case study provides a basis for a classroom discussion that considers how and whether the conceptualization, reporting and production of the "Last Abortion Clinic" would have been different if it had been intended as a newspaper or radio feature.

Finally, another, albeit tangential, issue raised by the case is the rise of the Internet as a source of news and entertainment. As the "Frontline: Brief History" section highlights, this development has challenged broadcast network news programs, which have seen ratings fall and been compelled to create imaginative websites that host post-show transcripts and related material. Students are encouraged to consider "The Last Abortion Clinic" in relation to this increasingly competitive and changing media environment, and to think about the impact this may have on story choices, content and editing.

Class Plan

The case can be used in a class on editorial decision-making, broadcast media, documentary filmmaking, public service broadcasting or bias/objectivity in journalism. Instructors may find it useful to compare this case to, or teach it in conjunction with, another case study that focuses on editorial decision-making: *From Concept to Story: Time Magazine and "America at 300 Million."*

Study questions. The students should be told to watch all the video in the case—it is not optional. The instructor could help students prepare for discussion by assigning the following questions for their consideration as they read the case:

1) Unlike newspapers or magazines, *Frontline* producers work on their product for months before a program airs. According to Executive Producer David Fanning, this requires editors and producers to intuit "where the zeitgeist is going to be" in the future. Imagine you are pitching a potential story to *Frontline*: suggest at least one topic that you predict will reflect the "zeitgeist" a few months from now.

2) How would you tell your story visually and intellectually? What research would you need to do? What components would you need? What characters? Where would you go?

In-class questions. During classroom discussion, the instructor could pose any of the following questions in order to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) *Frontline* makes several key decisions and adopts a number of important strategies in the course of planning, reporting and filming "The Last Abortion Clinic." What are they? (Chart on board.)

b) Which do you think was the most important of these decisions, and why?

c) *Frontline* guidelines state: "If the intent is seen to be fair, whatever message the program carries is reinforced. When a program seems to the viewer to be unfair, it defeats itself. On a controversial subject, the ideal program is one whose tone is persuasive, not argumentative." Do you agree?

d) *Frontline* guidelines distinguish between fairness and balance, and privilege the former over the latter. "It isn't a balancing test, it's a fairness test, for all our programs," Executive Editor Louis Wiley states in the "Fairness Policy" section of the case study. To what extent do you agree with this distinction? Is it useful? What are the implications of giving greater weight to one as opposed to the other?

e) In "Choosing the Lineup," David Fanning states: "It's not actually so much what the subject or the film is going to look at: it's the angle of vision. If you can find a way to kind of move the chisel over to another place and hit it sharply, you might just crack it open." Based on what you know about the documentary, to what extent do you think that Aronson and her team succeeded in "moving the chisel" in the debate over abortion?

f) In the "Fairness Policy" section, Raney Aronson states that, as a professional journalist, "it doesn't matter if I have a strong point of view on abortion. I'm not going to share it. It doesn't matter what I believe because I'm actually going to be able to put my personal point of view aside and report on the issue." Do you agree with Aronson that a journalist's personal point of view "doesn't matter"? And do you believe that a journalist is ever able fully to put aside personal views?

g) *Frontline* producers agree to focus on one state that illustrates how effective the pro-life movement had been. Do you agree with this decision?

h) Aronson ultimately decides to call the two sides of the abortion debate what they call themselves: pro-choice and pro-life. Do you agree with this decision specifically in this case, and in general? For example, what about people who call themselves freedom fighters, but whom others call terrorists?

i) In order to get access to the out-of-state abortion clinic that it wants to film, *Frontline* agrees to several requests made by the clinic director: that there be no interior or exterior shots, that the state remain anonymous and that her name not be used. What do you think of these requests, and of *Frontline*'s compliance in order to gain access to the facility?

j) There are a number of compelling reasons to use footage of the abortion support group—not least its rarity, its dramatic impact and the fact that it illustrates the pro-life position. But there are also objections to using the material, including time restrictions, doubts over consistency and

the producers' concerns about manipulation. Should any footage from the abortion support group be used? If yes, which clips? What are the pros and cons for using each one?

k) The producers worry that they are "being used" by interested parties in the abortion debate. Should this preclude them from using footage that they suspect may be staged or agenda-driven? Should such footage be contextualized or qualified? Or are the motivations of those being filmed largely irrelevant?

Suggested Readings

Brent Cunningham, "Rethinking Objectivity," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Issue 4, July/August 2003.

SYNOPSIS: This cover story from 2003 is useful for students exploring Aronson's professed adherence to the objectivity norm. While noting that "objectivity has persisted for some valid reasons" that are duly elaborated, the piece goes on to assert that "our pursuit of objectivity can trip us up on the way to "truth," that "objectivity excuses lazy reporting," it "exacerbates our tendency to rely on official sources" and "makes reporters hesitant to inject issues into the news that aren't already out there." This critique of a fundamental US journalistic value is a good complement to the more scholarly piece by Michael Schudson.

http://cjrarchives.org/issues/2003/4/objective-cunningham.asp

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Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

SYNOPSIS: In this seminal book, Iyengar evaluates the effect that television news and its framing impact the way that Americans think about the issues depicted in a story. He finds that it significantly influences and shapes public understanding of the causes of, and solutions to, central political problems. The book provides students with a basis for thinking about the importance of framing in the *Frontline* documentary.

Michael Schudson, "The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism," *Journalism*, 2(2), 149-170, 2001.

SYNOPIS: Aronson believes in putting her own point of view "aside"--in essence, objectivity. This article by leading communication scholar Michael Schudson provides students with a clear and thoughtful grounding in the issue. It examines the establishment of objectivity as a norm in American journalism, why it became more popular in the United States as opposed to Europe, and the conditions that led to its rise.

http://jou.sagepub.com/cgi/rapidpdf/2/2/149.pdf

"The Documentary and Journalism: Where They Converge," *Nieman Reports*, Vol. 55. No. 3, Fall 2001.

SYNOPSIS: This edition of Harvard's Nieman Reports is founded on the premise that "at a time when so much of journalism is quicker, shorter and hyped to grab the public's presumed short-attention span, the documentary—with its slower pace and meandering moments—is finding receptive audiences in many old places and some new ones as well." The report asks those who "document our world to explore how their work converges with ours. How is what they do related to journalism? And what does the documentary form allow its adherents to do in reporting news or exploring issues that other forms of journalism do not?" Students are presented with a range of material and viewpoints related to documentaries in print, radio, television, film and photography.

Of particular relevance to the *Frontline* case study is Philip S. Balboni's article "Documentary Journalism Vanishes from Network and Local Television" (p. 47), Michael Kirk's piece on "Striking a Balance Between Filmmaking and Journalism" (p. 50), and Cara Mertes' "Where Journalism and Television Documentary Meet" (p. 53).

http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/01-3NRfall/NRfall01.pdf