



Higher Truth or Just the Facts? *Hell and Back Again* Teaching Note

Case Summary

Much of a documentary's visceral impact comes from its assumed adherence to reality. But documentarians make many decisions about what to include, exclude, and emphasize as they try to whittle down many hours of raw footage to a coherent narrative. At some point in their careers, many documentarians find themselves asking whether it is dishonest to alter the literal truth in one scene in order to communicate a "higher" truth or clear story overall.

This case examines this dilemma through the experience of photojournalist Danfung Dennis as he develops a documentary about the Afghan war. Dennis begins filming while embedded with American troops in Afghanistan, and soon publishes some of his footage as part of a critically acclaimed *Frontline* episode. Eager for greater editorial control than he could have working on another news documentary, he next secures backing for a film for theatrical release about the psychological toll of war. He finds an ideal protagonist in a soldier he had befriended in Afghanistan, Sgt. Nathan Harris. When Harris returns to the US with serious injuries, he gives Dennis permission to film his recovery.

Dennis and his editor, Fiona Otway, sit down to edit the footage determined to limit narration and let the images tell the story. They decide to use flashbacks to intersperse footage from the field in Afghanistan with footage of Harris back in the US struggling to recover physically and psychologically. Cinematic techniques and sound effects help them communicate these transitions, as well as the disorientation and agitation of a soldier struggling with PTSD.

But Dennis and Otway begin to wonder if they might be favoring their own artistic vision over Harris's experience. The flashbacks and sound effects give the impression that they are illustrating Harris's thought processes at particular moments. But they are projecting this; they cannot say with certainty what Harris's mental state was. On the other hand, if they do not use these editorial effects they may fail to meet their primary goal: to communicate the toll war takes

This Teaching Note was written by Ruth Palmer for the Case Consortium @ Columbia. The faculty sponsor was Prof. June Cross of the Graduate School of Journalism. (0113)

Copyright © 2013 The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York. No part of this publication may be reproduced, revised, translated, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the written permission of the Case Consortium.

on an individual's psyche. They also struggle with whether to include graphic images of a mangled body. Again, excluding it risks missing the larger point about the horrors of war. But including it might alienate the audience.

The case reaches a climax when, in the late stages of editing, Dennis and Otway discover that test audiences find Harris's erratic behavior inexplicable and unsympathetic. Harris had been in pain and heavily medicated at the time, but this does not come across from the footage alone. They struggle with how to convey, without narration, that Harris was most likely behaving irresponsibly because he was heavily medicated. One option is to include a scene in which Harris and his physician discuss his medication, but use the cinematic technique of fading in and out to imply that a traumatized Harris is having trouble focusing on the conversation. Students are left to debate whether this option, and the other decisions Dennis and Otway make along the way, cross a line from faithful documentation of Harris's experience as he really lived it, to unacceptable manipulation of the facts.

Teaching Objectives

Use this case to start discussions about literal versus "higher" truth in documentary; documentarians' respective responsibilities to their subjects, their audiences, and their own artistic visions; whether and how documentary might convey subjects' mental states; the documentarian's presence in the finished product; the use of cinematic techniques in documentary; and the use of graphic images, especially when reporting on violence and war.

Begin with the specific question at the end of this case: is it ethical for Dennis and Otway to use a heavily doctored version of the scene in which Harris interacts with his doctor, even if it implies a particular mental state they cannot guarantee Harris experienced at the time? Without the scene, audiences may miss the larger point that Harris's behavior and personality are altered by the heavy—and addictive—medication he must take for his injuries. Does conveying this larger truth justify sacrificing literal truth?

Ask students to debate this particular example then broaden the discussion to ask under what general circumstances it might or might not be acceptable for documentarians to manipulate footage in favor of conveying larger truths. What criteria might they use to determine whether a particular case meets ethical standards? How much manipulation of the footage is acceptable before it morphs from documentary into fiction?

Students should also consider Dennis' responsibilities to his subject, to his audience, and to his own artistic vision. For example, at specific moments in their narrative Dennis and Otway fall back on some fairly heavy-handed editing techniques, including flashbacks and canned sound, to integrate footage from Afghanistan with that from North Carolina. But they concede that at those specific moments they were unsure what Harris was actually thinking. Is implying that they did

dishonest? If students feel it was acceptable, ask if Dennis and Otway are prioritizing their own narrative and the audience's understanding of it over Harris' actual experience. Or use this as a springboard for a broader discussion about whether there are standard rules documentarians should abide by when juggling their responsibilities to their subjects, audiences, and themselves. Should one of these generally hold primacy over the others?

Part of what makes Dennis and Otway's job tricky is that they are trying to convey the psychological journey of a soldier returning home. But other people's mental states are difficult to know, much less document. Ask students to consider whether it is appropriate for documentarians to attempt to capture their subjects' mental states, and how they might do so ethically. For example, students should consider whether Dennis and Otway should have asked Harris outright what he was actually thinking or feeling at some key moments. The case notes that they did not do this. What might be gained or lost by asking him directly?

Another theme of the case is the documentarian's presence, whether during filming or in the final product. Dennis explains that he always tries to minimize his own impact on the action during filming, but whether this is disingenuous or not is up for debate. Encourage students to consider whether the presence of an additional body, especially one with a camera, always affects the action.

Even more central to this case is the question of how the documentarian's presence comes across—or is hidden—in the final product. By opting not to use narration or exposition, Dennis and Otway try to erase their own presence as much as possible from the finished product. But this forces them to rely on fairly heavy-handed editing techniques to convey basic information that might otherwise be easily communicated through voiceovers or other forms of overt exposition. The filmmakers' involvement in shaping the story may be less visible, but whether it is actually reduced is open to debate. Students should discuss the pros and cons of the narrative versus non-narrative approaches.

Instructors might also focus students' attention on the specific techniques of using flashbacks and adding non-native sound to particular scenes, and ask them if they find these problematic. Flashbacks raise questions not only about the implication that the subject's mental state is being illustrated, but also about chronology. Is it important that a documentary stay faithful to the chronology of events, or is this unimportant if it is clear to the audience that the flashbacks refer to an earlier time? What if the flashbacks and added sounds are not faithful to the subject's experience in the present day? One could argue that both of these introduce a fairly obvious layer of artistic manipulation into the documentary, which makes the documentarian's role more evident. Is this more honest than the alternative, or might it actually undermine the credibility of the work as a faithful representation of reality?

Finally, students should consider the inclusion of graphic images of fallen soldiers. First, is it gratuitous to include images of mangled bodies or wounded soldiers, or is it essential to communicate the reality of war? What guidelines for publishing these should journalists and documentarians follow? Push them to consider whether in the US the standards are, or should be, different for American vs. foreign soldiers. For example, this case includes two cases of footage of dying or dead soldiers being published: in the first, Dennis is careful to consult the American soldier's family before doing so. In the second, he expresses concerns about the Afghan soldier's family seeing the images, but opts to proceed anyway, apparently without securing their approval. Ask students if they noticed this apparent double standard when reading the case, and if they think it is problematic.

Class Plan

Use this case in a class on journalism ethics; documentary; war reporting; editorial decision-making; or film editing.

Pre-class. Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1) Should Dennis and Otway include the edited version of the scene between Harris and his doctor? If so, justify your answer. If not, what alternative do you suggest and why?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions: The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) What are the pros and cons of including the edited version of the scene between Harris and his physician? Is this a case in which it is justified to sacrifice literal truth for higher truth?

b) Do you agree that sacrificing literal truth for higher truth is sometimes crucial to documentary filmmaking? When might this be justified and when might it cross the line?

c) Consider Dennis's respective responsibilities to his subject, his audience, and his artistic vision. Do you think he is prioritizing one over the others? Should he?

d) Do you think it is acceptable for documentarians to try to convey the mental states of their subjects? Is it ethical in this case? What techniques might they use to do so responsibly?

e) Dennis and Otway are concerned that using flashbacks makes it seem they are illustrating what Harris was thinking at the time, although they do not actually know that. According to the case, they never asked him what he was thinking at these moments. Should they have asked him? What difference would it make if they had?

f) Dennis is determined to limit narration and exposition, opting to let the images tell the story. What are the pros and cons of the two approaches?

g) Is the use of cinematic techniques like flashbacks ethical in news documentaries? What are the arguments for and against it? Can the same effect be achieved using other means?

h) Dennis opts to use canned sound to convey the psychological truth of certain scenes. Do you agree that this was a good decision? When might the use of canned sound in documentaries cross an ethical line?

i) Dennis tries hard to limit his own impact on the events he is documenting. Do you believe it is ever possible for a documentarian to do this effectively?

j) Do you agree with Dennis's decision to include the footage of the dead Afghan soldier? Justify your answer. Would your calculus be different if the soldier were American?

k) To what extent has technology such as lightweight digital cameras eased the challenges for a news documentary filmmaker? To what extent has it complicated matters?

Suggested Readings

Bill Nichols, "What to do About Documentary Distortion? Toward a Code of Ethics," *Documentary Magazine*, March/April 2006.

SYNOPSIS: This article for the magazine published by the International Documentary Association reviews some of the most common ethical challenges faced by documentary filmmakers, and makes the case that the community should develop a shared code of ethics. Nichols divides ethical concerns into those concerning 1) the subject who, he argues, generally has considerably less power than the filmmaker, and 2) the audience, whose trust the filmmaker must be wary of abusing. He suggests that a useful starting point for a code of ethics might be, "Do nothing that would violate the humanity of your subject and nothing that would compromise the trust of your audience."

<http://www.documentary.org/content/what-do-about-documentary-distortion-toward-code-ethics-0>

Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real II: Documentary: Grierson and Beyond*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2008.

SYNOPSIS: For instructors and students looking for a book-length discussion of the history, theory, and ethics of documentary film, this is an excellent place to start. Winston traces the idea of the documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality,” up to the present, culminating in a discussion of the many new forms of documentary that now call old ideas into question.

David W. Dunlap, “Behind the Scenes: To Publish or Not?” Lens Blog, *The New York Times*, September 4, 2009.

SYNOPSIS: This article explores the current and historical debate surrounding the decision to publish photos of mortally wounded soldiers. The author focuses on the Associated Press’ decision to publish photographs of a gravely wounded Lance Cpl. Joshua Bernard against his family’s wishes. While critics decry the decision as salacious and insensitive, the AP justifies publishing the photos for the same reasons Dennis justifies including the images of a dead Afghan soldier in this case: “to show the complexity, the sacrifice and the brutality of the war.” But given that the family disapproves, it can be interpreted as a controversial example of journalists prioritizing their larger story over the preference of their subjects.

<http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/09/04/behind-13/>

Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in their Work, Center for Social Media, School of Communication, American University, September 2009.

SYNOPSIS: The executive summary of this interview-based study of how documentary filmmakers think about the ethics of their work provides excellent background for instructors who are going to teach this case, and students who would like a firmer grounding in the issues it raises. The study concludes that documentarians face consistent ethical challenges, as practical concerns conflict with moral ones, and that “they often justified the manipulation of individual facts, sequences, and meanings of images, if it meant telling a story more effectively and helped viewers grasp the main, and overall truthful, themes of a story.”

<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/making-your-media-matter/documents/best-practices/honest-truths-documentary-filmmakers-ethical-chall>

Jan Krawitz, "Ethics and Documentary Production," *Knowledge Quest*, vol. 8, Issue 4, March/April, 2010, 48-51.

SYNOPSIS: A good, short read about teaching documentary ethics from a college instructor's point of view. Krawitz does not teach news documentary, instead guiding students to create "the cinematic equivalent to the 'op-ed' page," in which they have a clear point of view on their topic, and filter what they see in the field through that perspective. Precisely because of this, Krawitz emphasizes that the filmmakers' first concern should be for the wellbeing of their subjects.