



Ethics & Documentary Making

A Guide for Screen Directors



Ethics & Documentary Making: supporting our members

The following is a list of guiding ethical principles for documentary directors which arose from a consultation with SDGI members in January 2022. Each proposed principle is then followed by questions which seek to interrogate if the how practical/useful/appropriate that principle is. These questions were put to our panel of members in order to test the usefulness of each principle. The list also tries to pre-empt any limitations of these principles in real world situations.

There is a natural tension between any proposed list of ethical guidelines and the necessary steps involved in making documentary films and television work. It is absolutely the objective of this process to build these guidelines from the ground up with SDGI members who have the best understanding of the demands of the role of the director and how these could be balanced with any ethical obligations.



1. First do no harm.

The director aims to respect the dignity of those who appear in the film and those encountered during the making of the film.

2. Initial approaches to subjects should be as honest as possible at the time.

These approaches will often take place very early in the process when the full scope of the project is unclear or evolving. The director aims to be as forthright with participants as possible within these limitations.

3. Explain the process and timeframes involved.

With the same provisos as above, directors endeavor to tell participants what the time commitments from them might be or how long the whole process might take?

4. Explain the likely output of the documentary work

Where possible participants should be told where the final piece of work will be shown.

5. Be attentive to off the record and boundary requests.

This will be down to the dynamics of individual relationships since directors tend not to operate strict “on the record” or “off the record” as traditional journalists do.

6. Consent is an ongoing process.

While consent is sought at the beginning of any production process, it may be wise to reaffirm that consent at different points.

7. Be wary of suggesting actions which would not naturally occur

This guideline must ultimately be interpreted by each director based on their approach to documentary work.



8. Showing Rough Cuts or Final Cuts to participants is at the director's discretion.

While there are frequently benefits to doing this, it should ultimately be the decision of the director.

9. Ethical responsibility goes along with authorship.

This proposes that if the director is seen as the ultimate author of the film, as distinct from other members of the creative team, then responsibility for the ethics of the finished film goes along with that.

10. Be cognisant of the potential effects on participants when the final film is seen publicly.

This guideline is offered in a broad sense with the proviso that a director cannot be expected to anticipate all the potential effects of the film when it is released to the public.

If you run into difficulty on your project reach out to the Guild or connect with your Guild members to discuss.