

## Imagine the Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Student Filmmakers

Shara K. Lange/East Tennessee State University

*Imagine the Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Student Filmmakers* was originally part of a series of assignments about integrating ethics into an entry-level production course that I wrote about for the Journal of Media Education (<http://en.calameo.com/read/00009178989899f1688e0>). Here, it has been adapted as a stand-alone exercise for EDIT Media's teaching materials database. The guide to ethical decision making referenced in this article comes from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University. <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/a-framework-for-ethical-decision-making/>

*This assignment was designed for entry-level production students who were preparing to embark on the production of their first documentary project.*

CLASS ONE: Imagine the Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Student Filmmakers

### Lecture & Assignment Presentation:

1. Filmmakers face innumerable ethical issues, including:
  - a. Representing people from backgrounds that might be different than their own. Some communities are stereotyped in media and have difficulty accessing the means to tell their own stories. An example of a film that deals with this issue in Appalachia is *Stranger with a Camera*: <https://appalshop.org/shop/stranger-with-a-camera>
  - b. Accuracy. Documentary films use disparate fragments to tell stories. How do we determine which aspects of a film must be factual and where we have room to be expressive or interpretive? What is your responsibility to the subjects and audience of your film? An example that addresses this issue is *Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain* <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-gastronomy/the-ethics-of-a-deepfake-anthony-bourdain-voice>
  - a. Dissemination: Once you've filmed something, how will you be sure it does or does not reach appropriate audiences? Have you communicated your intent and plans for the documentary to the people you are filming? Have you secured a recorded-verbal or signed release? A film about a filmmaker versus corporate power is *Big Boys Gone Bananas*: <https://www.bigboysgonebananas.com/welcome?splash=1>
2. The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics offers us a *Framework for Ethical Decision Making* to think through ethical decisions you will inevitably face as you make films and videos.
3. As you prepare to create your own documentary, it is helpful to consider the ethical challenges that other students have faced. For homework read "What to Do About Documentary Distortion? Toward a Code of Ethics," by Bill Nichols and watch one of the student-produced documentary films on the following sites:

East Austin Stories (UT Austin) <https://rtf.utexas.edu/east-austin-stories>

Prague Stories (UT Austin) <https://rtf.utexas.edu/programs-initiatives/prague-stories>

Write: Imagine the ethical dilemma(s) faced by the filmmakers whose documentary you just watched.

1. Think about potential ethical issues as you watched the film. Include a paragraph in your response addressing ethical issues as they pertain to:
  - Subject
  - Characters
  - Action (what happens)
  - Conflict
  - Themes
  - Images
2. Imagine that you are the filmmaker(s) who made this film. Consider the six questions below and discuss how you would approach the ethical dilemmas presented by the film you chose.

Markkula Center for Applied Ethics: A Framework for Ethical Decision Making:

1. Recognize the issue
  2. Get the facts
  3. Evaluate options
  4. Make a tentative decision and test it
  5. Act on the decision
  6. Evaluate the outcome
3. Discuss how this quote from Bill Nichols applies to the film you watched:

“The difference in the power of filmmakers and their subjects can often be best measured by their relative access to the means of representation. Do subjects have the means to represent themselves? Do they have alternative access to the media apart from that provided by a given filmmaker? To the extent the answer is "no," the filmmaker's ethical obligation to avoid misrepresentation, exploitation and abuse rises correspondingly. Subjects who are dependent on the filmmaker to have their story told--subjects, that is, who occupy the lower social strata generally and who can most readily be cast into the position of victim--are most vulnerable to misrepresentation and abuse.”

CLASS TWO:

1. Class discussion: screen films watched by students for the homework assignment. Discuss their responses to the films.

2. Break into small groups to discuss potential ethical dilemmas in their upcoming documentary projects.

#### SOURCES:

Lange, Shara K. 2018. Integrating Media Ethics and Production. *Journal of Media Education*. <http://en.calameo.com/read/00009178989899f1688e0>

Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University. A Framework for Ethical Decision Making. Retrieved from <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/a-framework-for-ethical-decision-making/>

Nichols, B. (March/April 2006). *What to Do About Documentary Distortion? Toward a Code of Ethics*. Retrieved from <http://www.documentary.org/content/what-do-about-documentary-distortion-toward-code-ethics-0>

#### FILMS:

East Austin Stories (UT Austin) <https://rtf.utexas.edu/east-austin-stories>

Prague Stories (UT Austin) <https://rtf.utexas.edu/programs-initiatives/prague-stories>

*Stranger with a Camera*: <https://appalshop.org/shop/stranger-with-a-camera>

*Big Boys Gone Bananas*: <https://www.bigboysgonebananas.com/welcome?splash=1>

*Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain* <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-gastronomy/the-ethics-of-a-deepfake-anthony-bourdain-voice>