PEACE IS LOUD

REAL PEOPLE, REAL STORIES

Ensuring the Well-Being of Documentary Participants

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Telling your story in a documentary film can be a powerful act—but it can also leave participants feeling vulnerable, especially if telling and retelling stories of personal trauma.

In 2024, Peace is Loud and DocuMentality partnered on a research initiative to understand how the experience of being in a documentary film affects participant's health and well-being. The research was conducted through focus groups with documentary film participants from around the world.

Our findings show that both relationships and practical concerns impact documentary participants' well-being. Participants particularly highlighted that the presence or lack of the following things greatly impacted them:

- **Transparency** around the production process including the filmmaker's aims, funding, compensation, and distribution of the film.
- **Consent** to how the filming process happened and how they were represented in the film.
- **Filmmaker's Understanding and Sensitivity** around a participant's lived experience including boundaries, identity, culture, power dynamics, and legal situation.
- **Support Provided** by filmmakers for participants including physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual support required for comfortable participation in the film process.
- **Unexpected Impacts** both positive and negative, after the film's release—for some, shifting the course of their lives in unpredictable ways.

We have translated these insights into 8 strategies for care, which are further detailed in the final section of the report:

1. **Transparency**
Filmmakers initiate open discussions about the production process and intentions for the film from pre-production through distribution.

2. **Informed, Ongoing Consent**
Through transparent dialogue with filmmakers, participants are able to exercise informed, ongoing consent and agency.

3. **Care**
Filmmakers practice care for participants by treating them with respect, being sensitive to their needs, and adjusting filmmaking processes accordingly.

4. **Support for Emotional Well-Being**
Filmmakers prioritize participants' emotional well-being and supply resources to support them.

5. **Representation and Education**
Filmmakers educate themselves rather than relying on participants to teach them about the film's subject matter, and are intentional about representation on both sides of the camera.

6. **Ensuring Accessibility**
Filmmakers proactively ensure that participants have everything they need to facilitate their full participation.

7. **Exploring Compensation**
Filmmakers find ways for participants to benefit from their involvement in films, through financial compensation, new opportunities, or other methods.

8. **Support After the Film is Complete**
Filmmakers provide guidance to help participants navigate the practical and emotional aspects of the film's release.

We hope this report is an opportunity for filmmakers, funders, and the industry as a whole to reflect on how we can prioritize and support well-being for documentary film participants.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Peace is Loud + DocuMentality conceived of and led focus groups with documentary film participants from around the world to learn more about how the experiences of being in a film affected participants' health and well-being. This report shares the findings.

PROJECT GOALS

We hope this report will help the documentary industry better understand the experiences of film participants and consider how we, as a community, can prioritize participants' health and well-being.

We invite filmmakers, funders, distributors, and others to join us in conversations about how we can honor participants in the filmmaking process.

This report also aims to share and validate the experiences of documentary participants, and to offer insight to anyone who might consider being in a documentary in the future.

METHODS + DEMOGRAPHICS

The research that forms the basis of this report has been drawn from three focus groups conducted with 22 documentary film participants in early 2024. The focus groups were led by Malikkah Rollins and Rebecca Day of DocuMentality, and one group was also co-led by Nika Khanjani.

The participants shared aspects of their identities with us to ensure we represented the full diversity of the documentary community. Of the 22 participants:

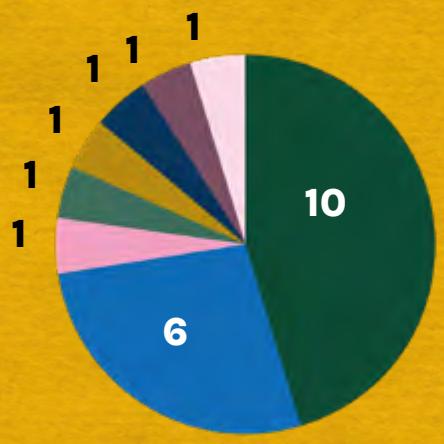
+13 identify as BIPOC

+5 identify as LGBTQIA+

+9 identify as disabled

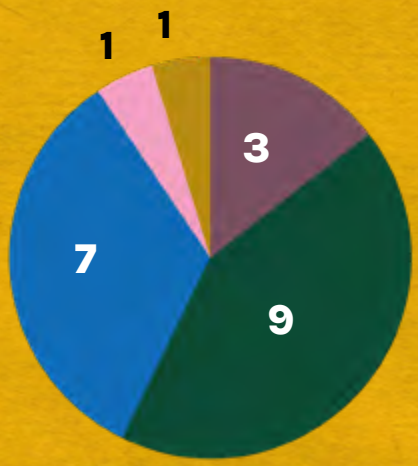
+1 prefers to self-identify as queer

GENDER:



- Women
- Men
- Nonbinary
- Trans + nonbinary
- Cisgender + dysphoric
- Gender fluid
- A version of female
- Chose not to share their gender

AGE RANGES:



- 21-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 61-70
- Unknown

Participants in our focus groups live in a variety of areas including the United States, England, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa. Focus groups were conducted in English.

Note: All participants' contributions have been anonymized to ensure they could contribute freely. To this end quotes within this report have been edited to omit or alter identifiable information, as well as for clarity and brevity.

DEFINITIONS

Who is considered a documentary participant?

Within this research, "documentary participants" are individuals who have contributed their story to a documentary. We did not include any individuals who were interviewed in documentaries solely for their expertise about a topic without having aspects of their personal stories highlighted in the film.

What do we mean by documentary?

We are using "documentary" as a general term, including short films, feature films, series, and factual TV programs. We set no limit on how recently the participant had been a part of a documentary. At the time of focus groups, a small number of the films had not yet been completed, but the majority have been released and distributed. Many, but not all, of the films show the participants organizing a political or social movement, or tell their story within a larger political context.

What do we mean by filmmakers?

In this report, we use "filmmaker" very broadly to refer to people involved in a documentary's development, production, post-production, and distribution. Most often, we are referring to the directors and/or producers, but occasionally this may also include editors, funders, distributors, production companies, or others.

REPORT STRUCTURE

Part 1 documents participants' experiences during the creation and distribution of a film. It reflects a wide variety of experiences that participants shared within each stage of the documentary-making process.

Part 2 offers reflections on ways that filmmakers can support participants, uplifting what participants found helpful and supportive. We offer a concise list of points for filmmakers to consider when initiating and creating documentaries with participants, as well as additional resources.

DOCUMENTARY PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES

DEVELOPMENT + PRE-PRODUCTION

During development or pre production, filmmakers and participants often determine how participants will contribute to the film. We see this as a negotiation where, ideally, filmmakers and participants both shape the initial filmmaking process through complex and reciprocal conversations. (Funders or other stakeholders might be involved in these decisions as well, though the negotiating power of each party varies between productions.)

In our focus groups, participants shared their experiences during development and pre production. It was clear that some participants had a great deal of input during this phase while others had none at all. We found that there was a continuum along which these conversations happened.

This section will first explore the idea of development processes across a spectrum of consent, before diving into some of the other factors that can also influence a participant's experience on being in a documentary film: the participant's relationship to the story, their relationship with the filmmakers, power dynamics, a filmmaker's unfamiliarity with the subject matter, and compensation.

The Spectrum of Consent

We asked our research participants whether they felt they had given informed consent to being in the film, and whether they felt they could back out if they wanted to. It was clear that every participant's experience was unique and shaped by the specific conditions of their films.

These experiences fall into three broad categories on a larger continuum of consent:

- No Consent
- Uninformed Consent
- Ongoing Consent

To understand the significance of these experiences, we will focus on not only what the consent process looked like, but also the emotional impact these experiences had on participants.

No Consent

In documentaries with No Consent, consent either wasn't discussed or participants signed release forms under circumstances of force, deception, or manipulation.

Many of the participants who participated in documentaries in this category expressed feelings of anger and betrayal. "Consent was very, very awful and slippery, and I'm still angry about it years later. As a participant I had no power. The filmmaker lied and said they had release forms that they didn't. I tried to say no, and they would sneak cameras in!"

Some participants reflected that they were asked to sign releases without explanation and did not understand the significance of what they were signing. One participant was surprised and upset to find the production company owned the rights to her story and image, as she summarized it, "in perpetuity, forever and ever, on Mars and beyond."

Failing to discuss consent does not necessarily come from a deceptive place. Some participants in the focus groups shared that there was no consent process because the filmmaker of their film was inexperienced or just unaware of the need for it. It is important to note, however, that the intentions of the filmmakers were largely irrelevant to the experience of the participant. "The filmmaker didn't have a clear vision. She just started filming people, and I said to her, 'Are you talking to them or are you having us sign things so we know what we are agreeing to?' And she was like, 'Oh, no,' really casual about it. That's why I became so involved in the production process, because it gave me a little bit of control, which made me feel a little bit safer."

"The movie was in the final, absolute final stages of editing before we even saw a consent form. It was really played down like, 'Oh, this is just a legal thing we have to do to make sure that we don't get in trouble, that you knew that a camera was there.' In no way did we have any idea of the impact a film might have and the profoundness of the film and what it showed. I really thought it was going to be one of these ten-minute YouTube movies. I had no idea it was an hour-and-a-half documentary. We were just kept in the dark."

Uninformed Consent

In our focus groups, some participants shared experiences where consent was discussed at the beginning of the process, as part of the legal formality of signing a release form. However, because there were not ongoing discussions about the production process, these participants felt there were aspects of the process to which they did not consent, or that information was withheld from them that would have changed their willingness to consent. One participant noted that there are actually multiple "layers of consent," not just one choice.

Some participants pointed out that they could not have truly consented when filming began because no one knew what was going to happen.

"I had given written consent from very early on, before we ever started filming. However, I still had no idea how much I was consenting to. We didn't know if that was going to be two weeks or two years. It ended up being four years of my life filming. I had no idea what the intentions were with where this film would go, and we never really talked about that. Is this film going to be in Sundance or just going to be on YouTube? You can't consent unless you know those things. I don't think they knew the answers in the beginning either, but I was not kept in the loop about the production process at all."

Ongoing Consent

On the furthest end of the spectrum, some participants shared experiences of being in films where consent was an ongoing conversation, and their preferences and needs shaped the filmmaking process. These contributors felt they could back out of the films if necessary.

In some cases, the film production team initiated this ongoing consent process and continually held transparent conversations about the film's next steps. Participants in our focus groups who had experienced this approach expressed great appreciation and felt that the open dialogues increased trust and strengthened their relationship to the filmmaker and film. "They always kept me in the loop and went over the pros and cons of each next step, so I could make an informed decision if I wanted to proceed or not. They wanted me to make sure I knew what I was getting myself into and if I was okay with it, and made me feel I was actually being seen and appreciated, like they were taking care of me." Another participant had a similar experience. "My opinion was not only listened to, but actively honored and respected along the way. There was a lot of communication about the whole production process." These participants felt the process had been empowering for them.

On the other hand, one focus group participant shared that there was a process of ongoing consent in their film only because they were able to advocate for themselves.

"I had to fight for consent and educate the filmmakers. I would say, 'I don't want to do this. I can stop filming if you don't agree.' It was a little tense at some points, but I always felt like the director wanted to understand, and she did learn. Maybe it makes it tough to work with sensitive stories like mine if the person is super loud and wants everybody to be a part of the process. The director didn't like it but she still hung in there. We always worked towards consent."

Power Dynamics

Documentary making is filled with complex power dynamics. Participants in our focus groups pointed to the ways that structural inequalities and prejudice in the wider world, including racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and ageism, were mirrored in the production processes of their films.

When a filmmaker has substantially more knowledge about the filmmaking process than the participant does, that contributes to an imbalance of power. "I did not have any experience in the film world. I had no idea even what to ask or how to be proactive and advocate for myself. It was just like everything was done to me."

A participant noted that the power dynamics become even more stark when filmmakers from the Global North film in the Global South. "When foreign film crews come to African countries, they don't really consider the subjects. A lot of times, consent for Africans is dependent on if you can speak and understand English. Consent is not only individual but a broader issue."

Participants pointed out that filmmakers who are aware of and sensitive to power dynamics can help mitigate them. One participant noted that the filmmakers used plain language, not jargon, when talking about consent, and explicitly acknowledged their power, positionality, and how their presence would impact her community. She and other participants felt better equipped to actively consent because of the transparency in these dialogues.

There are also power dynamics created by legal and financial obligations, even when the participant is also the filmmaker. One participant was coerced into filming themselves and making a decision that was harmful to their health for the sake of the story.

"I wasn't keen to be on camera but all the funders were very persuasive. I went in kicking and screaming. Things didn't go the way I expected them to, and I had a lot of depressive episodes and spiraling into shame. I really wanted to pull out, but the funders had given me the money, and there were many stakeholders involved. How would I report to them that I wanted to stop? I felt compelled to go all the way. Looking back, I feel like I was really violating myself. If I had been making the film about somebody else, maybe I would have been gentler."

Participants' Relationship to the Story

Many participants said that they decided to be in a film because of the personal meaning the film's story held for them or the potential impact of sharing their story. While some felt reluctant to be filmed, or wanted to stop, they decided to participate because they felt the story was more important than their own comfort. "I wasn't really sure that I wanted to be in it. It was really hard for me to say yes, but it felt important because the political issue is an important one and the story needs to be told. I'm still confused as to whether I should have been in it or not, but I felt like I couldn't back out."

Another participant said, "Certain scenes that I was in, I didn't want to be there. There were times when I was certain I was putting too much of myself out there. But the more I thought about it, I could see the importance of this film for me. I was sacrificing myself, but it mattered to me that the story and the film got out there."

For another participant, reaching a vulnerable audience was the chief motivator.

"The film talked about what it's like to live with mental health struggles. Since I was a kid, I felt isolated in my brain. The film was kind of like coming out. Finally, I knew I wasn't alone. I knew that I could back out of the film if I needed to, but it was also important for me to continue. I wanted to share the message with anyone else who believed there was something fundamentally wrong with them, so they know they are not alone and mental health is something you can manage."

PRODUCTION + POST-PRODUCTION

In our focus groups, participants shared a wide variety of experiences during production and post production. From this, several themes emerged as significant to a participant's experience: the quality of their relationship with the filmmakers, the impact of a filmmaker's unfamiliarity with the subject matter, compensation or lack thereof, comfort during filming, and level of involvement in the edit.

Personal Relationship with Filmmakers

Focus group participants told us that the quality of their relationship with the filmmakers or crew had a significant impact on their overall experience of being in the film. For many, their relationship was friendly, and in some cases, it was so significant that it impacted their lives well beyond production.

Some had a positive and caring relationship with the filmmakers, or were in films made by friends or family. One participant shared, "One of the members of the crew was my best friend. It's the only reason I ever did the film to begin with. I had a lot of trust for my film crew, and they treated me almost like the team leader of this outfit. It was very empowering. I watched people who I knew and loved use these cameras to shield me and protect me. There was definitely a symbiotic relationship for me and the cameras, because their presence basically protected my livelihood and my reputation."

Filmmakers who made an intentional effort to connect with participants and demonstrated ongoing care had a big impact. "They came into my home and they were so respectful and caring. For two years after that day of filming, they called me every month just to check in and see how we were. Once we started traveling with them with the movie openings, they treated us like family, I really appreciated that. Now, 15 years later, they continue to reach out to me. They didn't forget about us."

On the other hand, some participants in our focus groups experienced a tense, disrespectful, or antagonistic relationship with the makers of their film, and for many this had lasting detrimental impacts. They shared stories of filmmakers attending their personal, confidential meetings against their will, sexualizing them both on and off camera, and crossing boundaries in a threatening way.

Participants shared that many filmmakers were well intentioned, but could have been more sensitive to the relationship. One person gave the example of a filmmaker asking the participant's family to be quiet while in her house, which felt insulting.

Another participant shared a struggle with a filmmaker who didn't respect the participant's agency.

The filmmaker "was hypersensitive and respectful to the point that it was disrespectful. I proactively consented to her filming me in extremely vulnerable situations, like where I was having a breakdown. But instead, she would stop filming, put the camera down and try to comfort me. I had made it clear that if she was wanting to get an accurate picture of my life, she had to film that part of my life, yet she made the decision that I shouldn't have that on camera. She believed she was being sensitive and respectful, but it felt like I was not getting an accurate depiction of my story told."

Educating the Filmmakers

In our focus groups, some participants shared that they had been negatively affected by filmmakers who were not familiar with the nuances or implications surrounding the lives and experiences of the participants in their films. One participant commented, "I think when it comes to shooting particular topics, from mental health to queerness to race to gender, things like that, you need people on set who are not only allies, but people who are familiar with the topic."

Even when filmmakers had the best intention to understand participants' experiences, multiple participants highlighted the toll of the emotional labor required to educate filmmakers. One participant, who is also an activist, shared that she had to explain in detail how filming could put her in legal jeopardy, and wished there was more sensitivity around the security risk. Another explained, "The filmmaker is non disabled and was pretty new to disability as a topic. I did a lot of emotional labor to educate her about disability, in addition to just sharing my reality, and finding the capacity to be vulnerable with someone that I had never met before, knowing that I would be representing an entire community with my disease on screen."

Conversely, filmmakers who educated themselves on participant needs had a positive impact.

"My experience felt very pleasant and I felt respected because the team had mindfulness about accommodations that I might require to make it as accessible an experience as possible. They did not use lack of resources as an excuse."

Compensation

Participants in our focus groups each had different experiences with compensation, which reflects the documentary industry's lack of norms on this topic. The majority of the participants in our focus groups did not receive direct payment for being in their film. Many received compensation through other means, such as location fees or payment for impact campaign work. Often when participants were asked to travel with a film to a screening or film festival, their travel, accommodation, and meals were paid for, though not always.

One participant noted that many film participants do uncredited, uncompensated work during production, including, in their case, being a fixer. "Some of us played a role connecting these film crews into our community. This is a skill in the industry. Knowing what I know now, I would've demanded a producer credit on this film. I didn't know that was a possibility. Filmmakers should do that for subjects who are geared toward connecting them and helping them figure out the components of filming. I think if the people participating in the film play a role in production besides being on camera, they deserve proper credit. If some rich person can be an executive producer, then my equity is worth something as well."

Another participant highlighted that while most documentaries never make any money, some are very profitable. They felt it was unjust for production companies to make large profits from the stories of people who had not received any compensation.

Another participant offered that in their film, "each participant received a stipend for participating in the movie. Initially I thought, 'Oh, well, this isn't bad, you know, at least it's a little something.' And then a few years later, I found out that the movie made millions of dollars. And I'm like, 'What?' We didn't see any of that. They wouldn't have had this money if it wasn't for our contribution. Our life stories."

Filming

Time spent filming the documentaries varied for the participants in our focus groups, spanning from one day to many years, and as a result, production impacted each person differently. One focus group participant shared, "The filmmaking process itself is quite taxing and emotionally draining." Another participant pointed out that being filmed required some adjustment. "I wasn't very used to having cameras in my space. People really stare when you are shooting outside."

Participants reported that they appreciated when filmmakers were flexible and worked to make the filming process easier or less demanding. "We were filming the interview. I got really emotional. I was like, 'It's time to take a break.' And that was it. We took a break. No question. No trying to manipulate the situation. We just stopped. And that was so important to me as the person being filmed, sharing something that was really hard."

"We filmed a lot in my partner's house, but then we had quite a complicated break up. I should have been thinking about the breakup, but I was thinking, 'Wow, how are we going to film this now?' But the filmmaker said we could just redo what had already been filmed. I felt that was really helpful. I was glad that the breakup didn't need to become part of the story."

Editing

In our focus groups, there was a divide between contributors who participated in the editing process, and those who did not.

Of the latter category, some participants were not invited to be part of the editing process, while others chose not to be part of it. One participant shared that they chose not to participate in the edit because they trusted the editor to tell their story. "I saw the first real cut of it with the rest of the world when it premiered at a film festival. I was really doing a major trust fall into the filmmaker's hands. I didn't want to steer her. I said, 'You tell me if this is a story and you do what you can with it.' I think that the film benefited from that trust. It was transformative in a way that none of us expected. I can look at the film and I can watch myself evolving. It's been very triggering, but it's a very positive trigger to have."

Some participants who were not a part of the editing process were surprised or disappointed by the way that a filmmaker had chosen to tell their story. One participant observed that they spent a lot of time and labor scheduling a variety of activities for the filmmakers to shoot, but only the most sensational scenes were chosen in the edit. They understood that the director was trying to captivate an audience, but felt angry and hurt that the intimate moments that showed the participant as a multi dimensional person didn't make the cut. "You're being asked to perform your best life, in a sense, and the filmmaker gets to choose what it is, what to actually document and what sells." Another participant explained that they were worried about how they might be represented on screen. "If someone had taken the time to maybe just spend one hour talking to me about my role, that would've gone a long way."

Participants who were part of the editing process all had different levels of involvement, but nearly all agreed that it was a positive and empowering experience for them. Some attended a single screening of a final edit where they were able to request changes. Others were deeply involved in reviewing footage or cuts and offering opinions or feedback.

One shared, "I feel that having access to ongoing cuts of the film and reviewing them with the team allowed us to have an ongoing conversation about consent. After each cut of the film, the filmmakers would ask, 'What are your thoughts?' We would have a little debrief, and at the end of this conversation, they'd ask, 'Do you feel comfortable moving forward?' This simple question, it brought things out in the open so that I didn't have to initiate these conversations. I know that could be very nerve racking for the team and the filmmakers. Whereas it was a big relief for myself, because I knew at least I was informed, and that at any point I could stop."

Another participant noted that "we participants had agency. We were able to make decisions. If you give your participants what they feel comfortable with, you'll probably have a better movie because they'll feel happy doing it."

However, when participants were involved in the edit but not treated with care, they found the experience retraumatizing and detrimental to their well being.

DISTRIBUTION

Participants reflected that their experience changed dramatically when the documentary premiered. Suddenly, an audience of hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people watched the participant's story unfold on screen. Participants told us that without preparation, this shift could be jarring.

One participant described this experience, "Being in a theatre and hearing other people react to your story in the moment... How do you make sense of that? For some audiences, certain parts are funny, and for other audiences, they're crying at that same part. I wish there could have been language about these very different and distinct experiences of just living life and then suddenly becoming a spokesperson and doing Q&As."

Film Premiere

Some participants viewed their documentaries for the first time at the premieres, while others saw the film in advance. Almost every participant who saw the film in advance reported that this was a positive experience. (One participant reported feeling worse after filmmakers disregarded serious feedback she provided.)

For most who had not seen the film in advance, there was a great deal of trepidation and stress associated with the premiere. One participant described seeing herself on screen as experiencing "shell shock" and continued, "The theater for the premiere was full of famous people and other people who were in the movie. All of a sudden [my family] came up on the screen. It was very overwhelming. I'm sitting in the middle of the theater sobbing, flooded with memories. It was a shock because I wasn't prepared. I would have liked to have known what clips they had chosen. I think it would have helped."

One participant was upset when she learned that the filmmakers had ignored their request for Spanish subtitles. "I had told them this was non negotiable. And they did actually do subtitles, for English speakers while I'm speaking Spanish, but they did not do Spanish subtitles. I was really upset at myself for failing to make them listen to me." Another participant shared, "To this day, I am annoyed that our community did not see it first."

Promoting the Film, Press, Festivals, and Impact Campaigns

One of the biggest surprises for many participants was the myriad ways, positive and negative, that their life was affected by the promotion of the film, including at film festivals, Q&As after screenings, impact campaign tours, and press.

Several participants whose stories carried a great deal of personal meaning took on advocacy or activist roles after the release of the film. For some, this was a very positive experience. One participant shared that after the premiere of their film, "this activism piece started kicking in. I'm no longer just living my story, but I'm taking on this public spokesperson role. I feel proud of how I transitioned into that. I'm blossoming and growing and getting incredible opportunities." Another participant talked about the sense of purpose they gained from this experience and how it affected them when that ended. "The movie opened doors for us to work with many people. I testified before Congress and spoke before schools. But then it ended. We had been out there fighting for our cause, and then we were back home and I felt useless, because I wasn't doing anything anymore. I wasn't valuable. I became depressed, but it wasn't because of the filmmakers."

Other participants expressed that they felt they had been exploited during this stage. "I went on a festival circuit for a year promoting this film, speaking on panels, at festivals, and at colleges. I was not offered any financial support, and I have not to this day been paid by the film production to do anything. The film has impact campaign funds associated with it and I found out later that other people were getting paid for 'impact,' for the thing that I've spent my life and equity and blood on. It's made me look at it in a different light. Colleges might pay me an honorarium to speak, but this film does not and that annoys the hell out of me. They had all this power and control over the impact funding and impact campaign. It should have been something that we talked about when they knew the film was going to have an impact."

Other participants felt pressured to "support the film" while it toured festivals.

"When the film first came out there was all of the press and the fame and the interviews and all of that. But one of the participants really saw what was happening and felt like we were all being taken advantage of and used. He chose to cut down his level of participation, and he was ostracized, bullied and threatened by the filmmakers, the producers, and the distribution company. The other participants were like, 'Hey, come on, get on board, what's wrong with you?' Then, a year and a half later, we realized everything he said was absolutely on point."

A number of participants found audience Q&As to be stressful. One participant pointed out how important it can be to have a good facilitator. “At Q&A sessions, sometimes audience members didn’t ask kind questions. My depressive spirals came from those rare people that I wasn’t protected from by the moderator.” Another participant reflected on their decision to stop participating in Q&As. “I felt really exposed by the movie, especially when people watched it and then asked me questions. I said, ‘I’m not doing it.’ There was pressure from the director to say yes to the screenings, but I just wasn’t going to do it.”

Participants who enjoyed Q&As noted that the filmmakers were proactive in supporting them. One said receiving questions in advance helped them feel prepared. Another said they appreciated that the filmmakers asked each participant what they wanted out of the experience before planning the impact campaign.

One participant who wanted to attend Q&As was shocked to discover that the filmmaker did not intend to involve them in the screenings after the film was released. She said the filmmaker knew the documentary was an organizing tool for her activist work, but sometimes unknowingly used language in the film’s messaging that harmed her cause. “I was treated with sensitivity, but the filmmaker wasn’t an expert in this area. They weren’t doing it with bad intentions, but I wasn’t comfortable. The filmmaker’s intention had been to go on the film circuit by themselves. But because of my experience having to teach them about the messaging around my story, I kind of was like, well, I’m going to be there.”

Participants with strong filmmaker relationships discussed feeling taken aback when they were treated differently by press or moderators from what they had come to expect from the filmmakers. One participant shared a striking example. “Another participant and I were invited to be on a talk show. When we watched the episode later, we discovered they had represented the other participant with racist stock footage. She never felt like she could say, ‘That’s not me. Don’t do that.’ She had been used to the film crew who were very sensitive. In the interviews and the things that came after, she didn’t have a sense of agency and understanding of how to represent herself, and I don’t know why she would if there wasn’t anyone else helping with that. I think they relegated her to a stereotype. She ended up stuck in that story.”

Participants also reflected on the complexities of choosing if or how they would promote the documentary film themselves. One participant with a substantial social media following shared, “It felt awkward to promote something that I didn’t create. I’m used to creating my own content about my own story, not promoting something that was someone else’s view of my life. Additionally, it was my story told from a non disabled lens. I’m into disability justice activism and it didn’t line up with what I usually portray to the world.”

Impact of and Ongoing Relationship with the Film

Participants reflected that the release of their film had had profound impacts on their lives, which they had not foreseen or been prepared for. By their nature, documentaries capture a moment in time, and while filming may finish, life continues. Over time, the focus group participants developed nuanced relationships with the films that tell a fixed story of a point in time in their lives.

Some participants raised concerns about their personal privacy and safety. One shared that they had been worried when they heard the film would be hosted on a prominent news platform with a large audience. "I've been doxxed by white supremacists before, so this was to me almost like a big 'No,' because there's so much racism out there and so many people wish me harmed." Another participant and activist wished someone had given her "a heads up that one day people would be recognizing me on the street. Because that was really freaky the first time that ever happened. I would have loved it if the filmmakers sat down with all the other participants and talked about how now that the film has come out, you might want to change your social media settings to private if you don't want a lot of people finding you on the internet. That would have been so beneficial to us."

Others spoke about how they saw the film as a stepping stone on their journey.

"I learned a lot. I learned to see myself as a leader, and that was hugely transformative. And skills-wise, I learned a tremendous amount. I'm working in spaces that I never thought I could enter. I've turned the exposure into actual monetary value for myself by pursuing jobs and gigs that I never would have touched before."

Still, many participants had unresolved concerns related to appearing in their films. One wanted clarity on whether they still had ownership over aspects of their life story that appeared on screen. Another felt lingering guilt for encouraging his family to participate in the film because it ultimately harmed their well being. Many participants expressed that people made assumptions based on what was captured on camera during a singular moment in time. One participant explained, "In the film, I was using different pronouns and I was still part of the church. It's hard knowing that people who watch the film think I'm still that person." Many experienced tension when others struggled to reconcile their expectations from watching them in their film with the multi faceted person they are in real life.

Emotional Support for Participants

Participants in our focus groups reflected that they see a need for support for participants during and after the documentary making process. Many noted that these focus groups were the first spaces they've had to talk about these issues, and that the focus groups themselves helped them process the experience and connect with other people who could relate.

We asked for descriptions of the support participants had been given. One participant talked about the benefit of having connection and support from the whole team of participants and filmmakers. "Everybody needs a support system. That's what really matters. Without having at least one friend or one person, it's hard. You feel alone. When you have a support system, even a little support, it feels comforting." Another participant noted that when their family watched the film, "it was healing."

Some participants were offered emotional and well-being support through the film production, and they found it very helpful.

For one participant because of the circumstances under which they were filming "there was just a lot of stress. We were recommended to have therapists available for everybody on the team. It was extremely helpful to have that support to talk about the various kind of tensions, among the team and deeper tensions from the subject matter. Having a place to be able to go and slow down and talk through what I was feeling really helped. With the actual making of the film, there was a sense of urgency and speed, and there wasn't that space for talking about 'How is this affecting me as a human being?'"

Others reflected that they were not prepared for the emotional vulnerability of the filming process. One participant shared that filming had only recently begun when they realized "I needed a little bit of time to step away from the film. I really needed to work with my therapist to balance myself again and figure out what role I wanted in this film. I talked to the filmmakers and they were so lovely about it. They didn't push back, and they said they needed some time to figure out what their roles would be and what they were doing too. They asked, 'How much time do you think you would need until we check back in with you?' It was just really beautiful. It was during that time we realized that we needed a team psychologist to come on and be a part of the film, because these were really heavy things that we were going to be carrying."

Some participants reflected that they had paid for private therapy during filmmaking which had been helpful. For others, the experience of being in the documentary itself was what they needed therapy to process. One participant commented, "They should have paid me through providing therapy. That's what I wish every time I'm spending my own money on therapy to process this whole craziness. I'm just so pissed off with it." Another participant found and shared therapeutic support for other participants since it wasn't offered by the filmmakers.

Participants reflected that they'd like to see more consideration given about contributors' well being after the film ends. One participant asked filmmakers to consider, "What can we put in place to support participants? Even knowing everyone reacts differently and we can't completely prepare someone for what happens or what they might feel or experience, can there be continued support for participants after filming that is easy to access and available for a long time?"

Another participant said, "I think there should be an organization that can help out documentarians and participants, because a lot of these documentaries have a very small budget, and I don't think filmmakers have the resources to help participants."

8 FILMMAKER STRATEGIES FOR PARTICIPANT CARE

After speaking at length with film participants about their experiences, we're happy to offer some considerations for the documentary community, and filmmakers in particular. It's important to note that every documentary (and every participant) is different, and we do not suggest a one-size-fits-all approach. There is no magic formula or checklist to follow; we recognize the nuance in this work. Instead, we offer these ideas as a jumping off point for further brainstorming on how the community can best support participants. We hope you consider how they apply—or don't apply!—to your project, and more importantly, continue thinking deeply about the filmmaker-participant relationship, and figure out what works for you.

8 KEY STRATEGIES

In our focus groups, participants shared a wide variety of experiences during production and post-production. From this, several themes emerged as significant to a participant's experience: the quality of their relationship with the filmmakers, the impact of a filmmaker's unfamiliarity with the subject matter, compensation or lack thereof, comfort during filming, and level of involvement in the edit.

1. **Transparency**
   Filmmakers initiate open discussions about the production process and intentions for the film from pre-production through distribution.

2. **Informed, Ongoing Consent**
   Through transparent dialogues with filmmakers, participants were able to exercise informed, ongoing consent, and exercise agency.

3. **Care**
   Filmmakers practice care for participants by treating them with respect, being sensitive to their needs, and adjusting filmmaking processes accordingly.

4. **Support for Emotional Well-Being**
   Filmmakers prioritize participants' emotional well-being and supply new resources to support them.

5. **Representation and Education**
   Filmmakers educate themselves rather than relying on participants to teach them about the film's subject matter, and are intentional about representation on both sides of the camera.

6. **Ensuring Accessibility**
   Filmmakers proactively ensure that participants have everything they need to facilitate their full participation.

7. **Exploring Compensation**
   Filmmakers find ways for participants to benefit from their involvement in films, through financial compensation, new opportunities, or other methods.

8. **Support After the Film is Complete**
   Filmmakers provide guidance to help participants navigate the practical and emotional aspects of the film's release.

TURNING STRATEGIES INTO PRACTICE

For each strategy, participants cited specific practices that helped protect their emotional well-being. While not a complete list, we're sharing examples of the practices that either resonated most or were shared among multiple participants. Not every practice will apply to every project, but we invite you to consider how these ideas might or might not be relevant in your filmmaking process.

Transparency

- Filmmakers held open conversations with and provided updates to participants continually throughout the filmmaking process. This included discussions about each person's dreams and goals for the project, the proposed time commitment, how involved filmmakers might be in participants' lives, the film's storyline, how much the participant is featured in the film, when and where the film will be distributed, among many other things.
- Filmmakers were honest from the beginning about the things that they did not know, including that they could not predict how the project might evolve.
- Participants were able to see the film before it was released and/or watch it with their communities for the first time.

For examples of topics to discuss, check out the resource In the Spotlight: Crucial Questions for Documentary Participants, created by Subject *and* The Staircase *participant Margie Ratliff and Peace is Loud.*

Informed, Ongoing Consent

- The consent process was not simply signing a release form but rather a series of conversations throughout the entirety of the filmmaking process, which may have included the filmmakers asking at multiple points if the participant wanted to continue.
- Participants were able to leave the project or stop filming without guilt or coercion.
- Participants became involved in production, post-production, and/or distribution decisions in a position with power and agency, or viewed at least one cut of the film and were able to give feedback that was integrated into the edit.
- Release forms reflected the participants' wishes and allowed them to retain certain rights.
- Filmmakers acknowledged their race, power, and positionality, and how their presence might impact the participant's community.

For an example of how to structure conversations around consent, check out Holding Ourselves Accountable: A Consent Calendar Resource, created by Subject co-director Jennifer Tiexiera and Peace is Loud.

Care

- Filmmakers formed kind, respectful relationships with participants, intentionally setting time to talk or share meals.
- Filmmakers supported participants' immediate, material needs, like providing masks during the beginning of the pandemic or bringing them meals when they didn't have access to food.
- If a participant experienced distress, filmmakers were flexible and took breaks during shoots, paused production, or re-shot material.
- Participants could opt in or out of activities like press tours, festival and community screenings, and audience Q&As.
- Filmmakers advocated for participants when others, including those in the documentary industry, didn't treat them with care.

Support for Emotional Well-Being

- Filmmakers deliberately checked in on participants' emotional well-being throughout the project.
- Participants spoke to a therapist, participant advocate, or facilitated peer support network provided by the filmmakers.
- Filmmakers slowed the filmmaking process to allow participants to process at their own pace.

Representation and Education

- Filmmakers and/or crews shared identities or experiences with participants, so representation happened both on and behind the camera.
- If they were filming people with different lived experiences, filmmakers thoroughly educated themselves about relevant issues, didn't rely on the participant to teach them, and asked questions that were sensitive and trauma-informed.
- Filmmakers proactively understood and protected participants' safety, and respected participants' agency if they could not engage in risk.

To learn more about accountable filmmaking, check out the Documentary Accountability Working Group's From Reflection to Release: Framework for Values, Ethics, and Accountability in Nonfiction Filmmaking.

Ensuring Accessibility

- Filmmakers made proactive accommodations for needs and disability including translators, subtitles, audio descriptions, childcare, access to private spaces, and accessible locations and accommodations.
- Filmmakers and participants worked at a healthy pace, avoiding physical or emotional exhaustion.
- Filmmakers used plain language and not jargon when discussing the filmmaking process.

To learn more about accessibility, read FWD-Doc's Changing the Narrative of Disability in Documentary Film: A Toolkit for Inclusion & Accessibility.

Exploring Compensation

- Participants received a credit and salary for their contribution to the film.
- Participants were paid location fees or to license their archival materials.
- Participants were paid for working on the distribution or impact campaign and/or shared in the film's profits, if any.
- When traveling with the film, the filmmakers covered participants' travel, accommodation, and meals, and provided a stipend.
- Filmmakers trained participants in aspects of production or helped them acquire a new skill.

Support After the Film is Complete

- Filmmakers prepared participants (and their communities) for what they might experience upon the film's release, including media training, advice on digital safety and privacy, and guidance on the impact of becoming a public figure.
- Filmmakers didn't pressure participants to attend screenings or do Q&As, asked screening hosts to send questions in advance, and ensured facilitators were trained to shut down harmful questions.
- Filmmakers created rapid response plans to be implemented in case of backlash or threats to participant safety.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR FILMMAKERS

Distribution and Pre-Production

1. How have you discussed consent with participants in the past? What has worked well? What has felt challenging?
2. Are you aware of any power dynamics that existed in films you worked on? How did these power dynamics affect you and/or the participants? Have you discussed these power dynamics with participants or other filmmakers?
3. What relationship did your participants have to the film's story? Why did they choose to participate?

Production and Post-Production

1. How familiar have you been with the topics in films you have made? When making a film about someone whose experience is different from your own, have you discussed how they would like to be portrayed on screen?
2. How have you approached compensating participants? Are there any risks to consider?
3. How have you addressed a participant's comfort during filming, or discussed their preferences in advance?
4. Have you involved participants in the edit of your film? Would your film benefit from conversations with participants about how they are portrayed in the film?

Distribution

1. Have you had discussions with participants about the potential impact the film could have on them before its release?
2. How have participants been involved with promotion, press, festivals, and impact campaigns? What support has been available to participants during this work? What have they expressed about it?
3. Do you know how the films you have worked on have impacted participants? How do the participants feel toward these films in retrospect?

RESOURCES

Holding Ourselves Accountable: A Consent Calendar Resource
Jennifer Tiexiera and Peace is Loud

In the Spotlight: Crucial Questions for Documentary Participants
Margie Ratliff and Peace is Loud

From Reflection to Release: Framework for Values, Ethics, and Accountability in Nonfiction Filmmaking
Documentary Accountability Working Group

Changing the Narrative of Disability in Documentary Film: A Toolkit for Inclusion & Accessibility
FWD-Doc

DocuMentality
DocuMentality's aim is to create dialogue and collaborative change to the key mental health and well-being challenges currently facing the documentary community: filmmakers, crew and participants.

Peace is Loud
Peace is Loud researches, advocates, and develops resources to help the documentary industry prioritize care for film participants.

Documentary Participants' Empowerment Alliance
The Documentary Participants' Empowerment Alliance's mission is to bring vital resources to all those who have appeared in or are considering appearing in documentary films. These resources include legal, mental health, counseling, mediation, and mentorship opportunities. We also aim to educate documentary and "based-on-true-life" filmmakers in how to ethically engage with their film participants and characters.

Film in Mind
Film In Mind advocates for better mental health in the film industry, providing consultation and therapy for the filmmaking community. Their offerings include Supervision, a reflective space for filmmakers to work through all of the professional issues that they are dealing with on a regular basis in a non-judgmental and impartial environment. Sessions include work on ethics in practice; duty of care and protection for filmmakers, crews, participants, and audiences; and relationships and power dynamics.

CONCLUSION

First and foremost, we want to thank the documentary film participants who took the time to share their stories with us. This research would not have been possible without your contribution and we are immensely grateful for your vulnerability, honesty, and courage.

We want to invite filmmakers and others in the documentary industry to join a conversation with us. We hope these stories and strategies help spark new ideas in your work.

We would love to know how has this landed with you? Have you found it helpful? Have we missed anything? If you have tried integrating these strategies into your work, how has that gone?

Email us at care@peaceisloud.org to share your stories with us so we can continue learning!

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http://www.DocuMentality.org

PEACE IS LOUD

Peace is Loud harnesses the power of storytelling by women, trans, and nonbinary change makers to mobilize strategic collective action grounded in equity and care.
http://www.peaceisloud.org