

REAL PEOPLE, REAL STORIES

Ensuring the Well-Being of
Documentary Participants





OVERVIEW

In 2024, Peace is Loud and DocuMentality held focus groups with film participants around the world to understand how the experience of being in a documentary affects participants' health and well-being.

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.

In this resource, we have translated these insights into eight filmmaker strategies for participant care, as well as examples of how others have employed these strategies in their filmmaking practice. We hope this will help the documentary industry consider how we, as a community, can prioritize participants' health and well-being.

We invite filmmakers, funders, distributors, and others to join us in conversation about how we can honor participants in the filmmaking process. Email us at care@peaceisloud.org.

To read the full report with our focus groups findings, visit peaceisloud.org/participant-care

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.

CREDITS

Project Co-Creators

**Rebecca Day, Malikkah Rollins,
Stephanie Palumbo**

Report Writer

Clair Maleney

Report Co-Writer and Editor

Stephanie Palumbo

Additional Editor

Malikkah Rollins

Graphic Designer

Lani Rodriguez

Focus Group Facilitators

**Rebecca Day, Nika Khanjani,
Malikkah Rollins**

Funded and Supported by:

**Peace is Loud and the Robert
Wood Johnson Foundation**



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.

<http://www.DocuMentality.org>



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>

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0>

You may distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon this material in any medium or format under the following conditions: You credit the original creators, you use your work for noncommercial purposes only, and if you allow others to modify or adapt the material, they must follow identical terms.