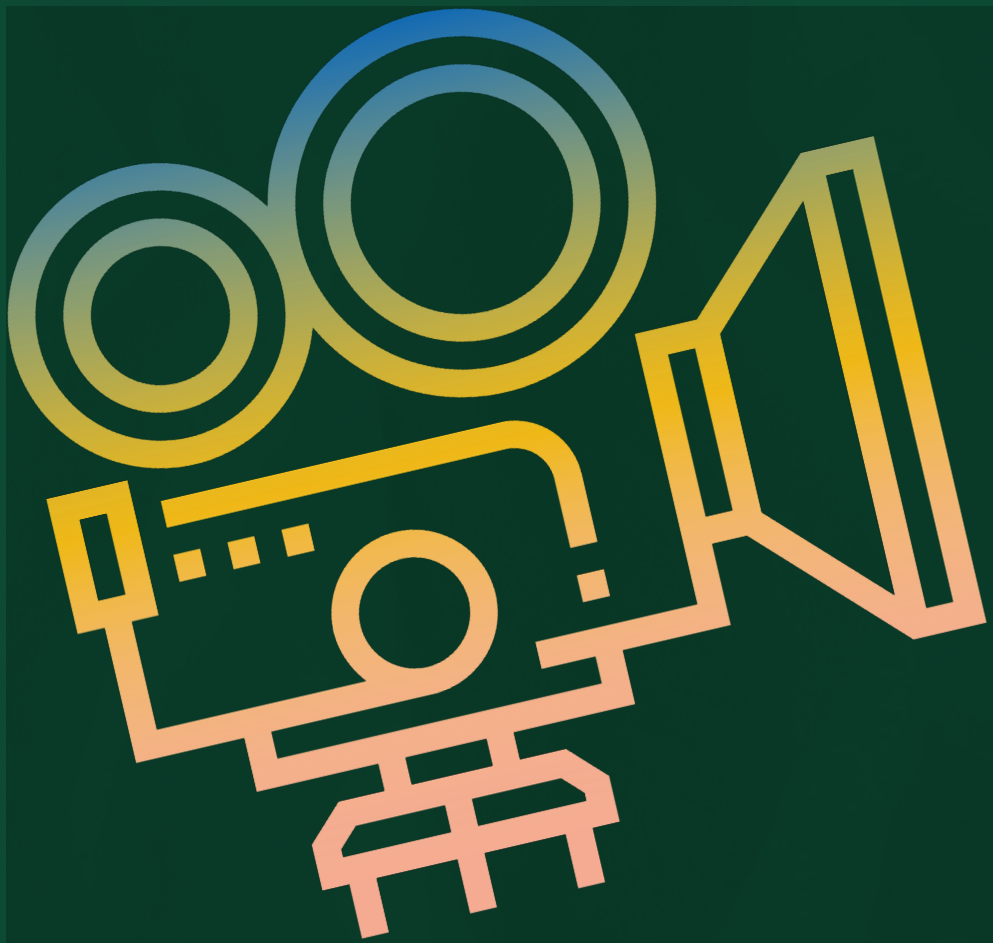


# Beyond the Lens:

The State of Participant Care in  
Documentary Film



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# Introduction

This report shares Peace is Loud's findings about the state of participant care throughout the documentary field, as well as possibilities for its future.

At Peace is Loud, we approach all of our work—including our documentary impact campaigns and Collective Lens filmmaker impact workshops—through the lens of care. In 2022, we took on our first participant care consultancy, where we helped the *Fire Through Dry Grass* team strengthen their foundation of equity, safety, and representation for all participants. This work inspired us to identify spaces where we could be most additive around this issue and create resources to support the well-being of documentary participants. We worked with partners including director Jennifer Tiexiera, filmmaker and participant Margie Ratliff, and DocuMentality, and had conversations with 27 thought leaders and practitioners about their work and the state of the field.

It's important to note that others have been doing this work to a greater extent and for longer periods of time. We hope this document collects and uplifts the incredible work being done, and reflects back the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. We don't see ourselves as "experts," but rather part of a larger community engaged and committed to collective efforts necessary for change. There are also limitations to this document. In the future, we aim to expand this work to include a deliberate analysis of how a participant's race, gender, sexuality, disability, religion, and class intersect with their experience being in a film.

This field scan was informed by our experiences, research, and, most crucially, interviews with the following people, without which it could not exist: Sekou Campbell, Jennifer Chien, Sonya Childress, Rebecca Day, Jess Devaney, Camilla Hall, Rahi Hasan, Set Hernandez, Jennifer Huang, Penny Lane, Asad Muhammad, Molly Murphy, Marianna Olinger, Dr. Kameelah Mu'Min Oseguera, laurie (pea) prendergast, Alex Pritz, Margie Ratliff, Gini Reticker, Malikkah Rollins, Denae Peters, Bhawin Suchak, Sherry Simpson, Stephanie Sunata, Jennifer Tiexiera, Sarah Wainio, ill Weaver, and Robert Winn.

This report is a living document that we aim to update over time. We invite you to email us at [care@peaceisloud.org](mailto:care@peaceisloud.org) with your feedback or questions.

# The Moment

Participant care, or respect for documentary film participants' health, safety, and well-being, has been a frequent topic of conversation in the industry over the past several years.

The documentary **Subject**, and the article "**The Documentary Future: A Call for Accountability**," by Sonya Childress and Natalie Bullock Brown, provide a concise history of both extraction and collaboration over the past century of filmmaking. But many in the field have observed a recent acceleration of participant care efforts, advocacy, and resources, and are responding to the tension that has come with this moment of reckoning and its potential for change.

Over the past three years alone, filmmakers of color have led campaigns that have exposed unethical practices that primarily impacted participants of color in films such as **Sabaya** and **Jihad Rehab**, where coercive filmmaking practices and imbalanced power dynamics led to issues like lack of informed consent, risks to participant safety, and the creation of dehumanizing and inaccurate narratives.

At the same time, the documentary *Subject*, about the experience of participating in a film, and the Documentary Accountability Working Group's **filmmaking framework**, were released to widespread praise. Industry convenings and festivals featured participant care panels or workshops, and multiple educational and advocacy efforts gained steam.

In spring 2024, the *Washington Post* **reported** that an Afghan man was targeted and killed by the Taliban after appearing in the documentary *Retrograde*. Despite warnings that showing participant identities could put them in danger, the film's director, Matthew Heineman, decided not to blur their faces. According to the *Post*, eight other Afghan participants are now in hiding, because they, too, were featured in the film. The film's distributor, National Geographic, has since pulled the film from their platform, but not before it streamed for more than a year on Hulu, and a clip was shared across Afghanistan on TikTok.

This report is not a response to *Retrograde*, nor is it about one particular film or one director. Instead, it is an attempt to present a window into the current moment of participant care—the efforts to advance care, the challenges facing the field, and the opportunity to build a different future. It is a repudiation of the systems and structures that fail to safeguard participants, even as, in some cases, filmmakers profit from their life stories. This is a call for resourcing alternative visions, and an argument that providing duty of care to participants is a shared responsibility across the entirety of the documentary field.



# The Players

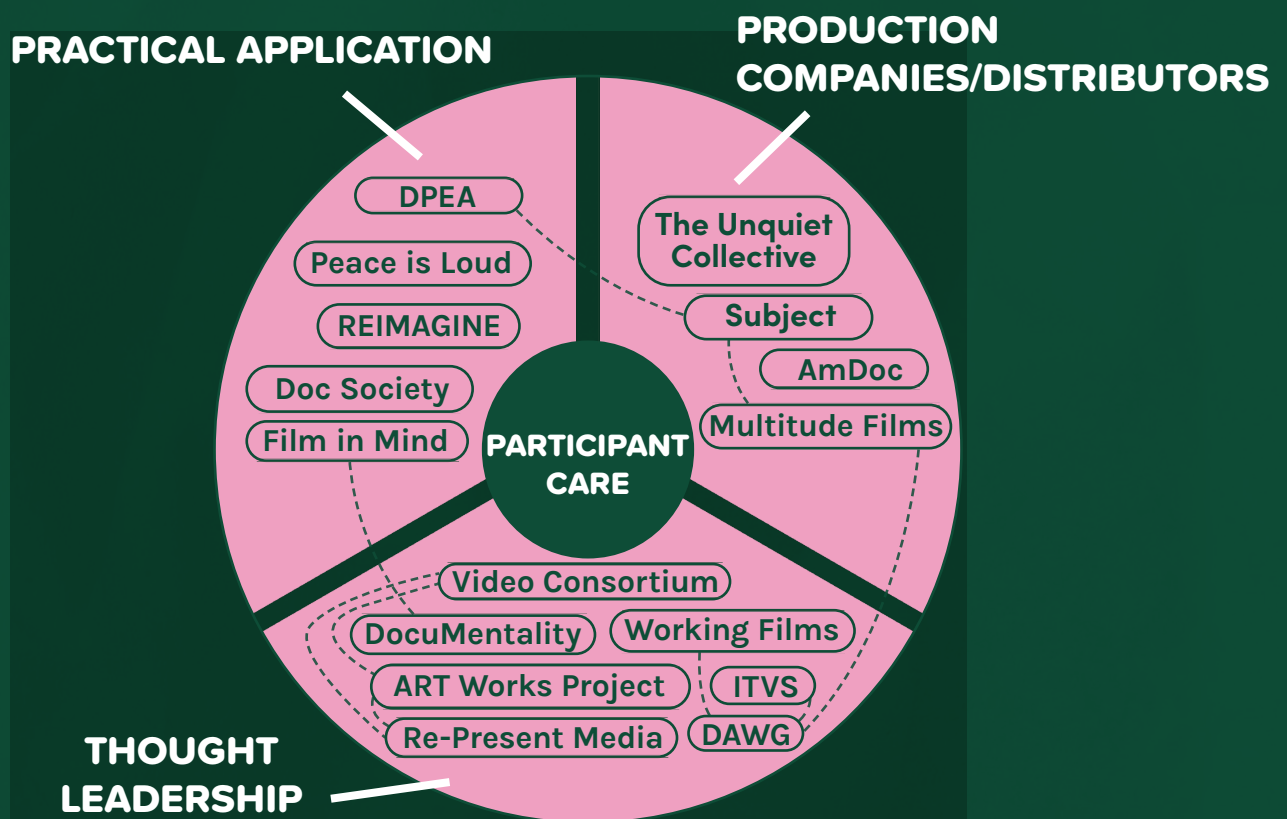
Below we have compiled a list of the organizations leading field-wide interventions to support participant care in the documentary film industry—but first, a few notes.

We focused this list on organizations and not individuals. There are many filmmakers and others in the field who practice or advocate for care on an individual basis but here we're surveying organizational spaces where this work has coalesced in the shape of a working group, nonprofit, or production company, among other examples, with dedicated time and resources to support future collective efforts.

Many of these organizations contribute to participant care but have a broader overall mission, like advancing ethics, accountable filmmaking, or mental health support. As far as we know, only one group, the Documentary Participants' Empowerment Alliance, focuses solely on direct participant support.

The organizations listed here primarily operate in the US and UK, so this does not represent global efforts, and we aim to update it more fully in the future.

Finally, this is not an exhaustive list by any means, so please drop us a line at [care@peaceisloud.org](mailto:care@peaceisloud.org) if you have additions or want to share your own work.



## **Thought Leadership**

These groups envision new models of being and working, create resources to support these models, and share their learnings in educational or advocacy measures. They primarily focus their interventions on filmmakers or funders, with participants as a beneficiary, but don't often provide direct participant support. Among these groups, the leaders are predominantly (though not all) women of color.

### **The Documentary Accountability Working Group (DAWG):**

The Documentary Accountability Working Group considers values, guiding principles and ethics that inform the practices of filmmakers, and that help shape their relationship to the story, the film participants, the audience, funders, and other stakeholders. DAWG's framework, **From Reflection to Release: Framework for Values, Ethics, and Accountability in Nonfiction Filmmaking**, is widely recognized as a unique and crucial resource, not only for filmmakers, but also funders, programmers, professors, and others in the industry. It has reached thousands of people, has been endorsed by over twenty individuals and organizations, and is being adapted into curriculum. DAWG also leads events and workshops, has influenced changes to the Documentary Core Application, and aims to further establish and seed new duty of care protocols for filmmakers and participants. DAWG is led by Director Natalie Bullock Brown and is composed of thought leaders in the field: Patricia Aufderheide, Sonya Childress, Molly Murphy, Dr. Kameelah Mu'Min Oseguera, Sherry Simpson, Bhawin Suchak, and Hannah Hearn.

### **Documentality:**

**DocuMentality** aims to create dialogue and collaborative change to the key mental health and well being challenges currently facing the documentary community: filmmakers, crew, and participants. They conduct research to explore individual and systemic mental health and well-being challenges, and use that research to help funders and other industry representatives better understand the role they can play in improving field-wide systems. They are in the process of creating new resources and collating existing ones to help the documentary community support themselves and each other. They also speak at public events and film festivals as part of their advocacy work.

## ITVS:

As public media's leading incubator and presenter of independent film, **ITVS** is driven by the conviction that bold storytelling builds a more just society. They are currently leading a large-scale study, *Exploring the Relationship between Documentary Makers and Participants*, to understand more about how filmmakers and participants work together. This study fills in gaps in our collective knowledge and offers a timely and vital opportunity to build from the field's good work and interest in advancing ethical practices.

## Re-Present Media, ART WORKS Projects, and the Video Consortium:

Re-Present Media, ART WORKS Projects, and The Video Consortium work together to gather best practices and train documentary filmmakers and journalists in informed consent, trauma-informed, and community-centered practices for working with film participants based on human rights frameworks. Following an advocacy campaign led by Re-Present Media to bring awareness of unethical practices in the documentary *Sabaya*, they co-presented a series of workshops and created a **report** to educate filmmakers on working respectfully with survivors of sexual violence and abuse. They are currently expanding this work into a field guide and toolkit for filmmakers working with survivors of trauma.

## Working Films:

Working Films positions documentaries to advance social and environmental justice. In 2017, they launched the **StoryShift** initiative to change the way stories are told to ensure accountability to and authentic representation of the people and places featured in documentaries. StoryShift uplifts non-extractive approaches to non-fiction filmmaking through case studies and generative workshops and includes a video series that features filmmakers, participants, and funders. The program is undergirded by a set of **principles** co-created and endorsed by allies within the fields of documentary, narrative shift, and social justice. StoryShift's work now continues through the Documentary Accountability Working Group.

## **Practical Application**

These groups help the documentary industry operationalize participant care by creating resources that focus on the nuts and bolts of implementation and/or by providing hands-on support throughout the filmmaking process.



### **Documentary Participants' Empowerment Alliance (DPEA):**

The Documentary Participants' Empowerment Alliance's mission is to bring vital resources to those who have appeared in or are considering appearing in documentary films. The DPEA was founded by Margie Ratliff, *Subject* producer and *Subject* and *The Staircase* participant. We believe this is the only organization solely focused on providing direct participant support. It is still in its early days, only recently founded and granted its 501(c)3 status.

### **Doc Society:**

Doc Society brings people together to unleash the transformational power of independent documentary film. Their Safe + Secure initiative, developed in partnership with a network of documentary funders, created new tools for both filmmakers and funders to help mitigate risks, be they digital, legal, journalistic, or related to safety and health. These tools—a resource-rich handbook; a checklist to help anticipate and minimize risks, as well as create contingency plans; and a hostile filming protocol for filming in high-risk environments—include sections focused solely on duty of care to participants.

### **Documentary Producers Alliance (DPA):**

The Documentary Producers Alliance sets standards for inclusive, sustainable, and equitable business practices and educates the industry about producers' essential roles. The DPA ethics subcommittee holds peer support meetings for producers to work through questions related to ethics, accountability, and participant care. They are also building a free online ethics resource library, cataloging the multitude of resources that exist around encouraging ethical practices in all phases of documentary filmmaking.

### **Film in Mind:**

Film in Mind advocates for better mental health in the film industry, providing consultation and therapy for the filmmaking community. They are developing a new model of support for filmmakers called documentary supervision, which places the ethical, emotional, and relational process of filmmaking at its core. Film in Mind offers both individual and group supervision sessions, where topics of discussion include ethics in practice; duty of care and protection for filmmaker, crew, participants, and audience; and relationships and power dynamics. They are training qualified mental health practitioners to further develop this position and provide these services directly. Film in Mind also delivers training and workshops, including recently training 15 filmmakers to create, lead, and sustain their own peer support groups.



### **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. They lead care-driven documentary film impact campaigns and create filmmaker learning spaces through their Collective Lens impact workshops. Recently, they created resources, including this report, to help the documentary industry prioritize participant care, and plan to continue collaborating with partners on this work in the future.

### **REIMAGINE: A Legal Framework for Community-Accountable Mediamakers:**

REIMAGINE addresses the law's limitations and contradictions and offers ways to use existing legal structures to support a transparent and intentional collective decision-making process. Through the LEVELSET process, mediamakers and community members work to align their values and principles which the collaborators then use to guide their legal agreements. The REIMAGINE framework includes project support as well as workshops on creating more equitable legal entities, legal agreements, and media project rights.

## **Production and Distribution**

These production companies and distributors center care in an intentional, formalized way—including, in one instance, in the content of the film itself. (An early example is Kartemquin Films' decision to share profits with *Hoop Dreams* participants, as well as pay a participant's electric bill.) These are selected examples and not an exhaustive list.

### **American Documentary:**

A national nonprofit media arts organization, American Documentary (AmDoc) strives to make essential documentaries accessible as a catalyst for public discourse. Their program FurtherMore, which launched a successful pilot in Philadelphia in 2022, is an initiative that aims to redistribute power within the storytelling ecosystem, forge connections between emerging and seasoned filmmakers, and ultimately strengthen the documentary field. During an 18 month-long residency, FurtherMore provides a non-competitive, training environment for justice-impacted citizens who have previously had the camera turned towards them as participants. The selected residents are actively involved in the full filmmaking process, from initial development of the story, to production, editing, and a post-screening evaluation.

## Multitude Films:

**Multitude Films** is a queer- and women-led independent production company dedicated to telling nonfiction stories by and about historically excluded and underrepresented communities. Multitude has always prioritized participant care in their filmmaking practice, and in 2023, the team formalized this commitment by bringing on Dr. Kameelah Mu'Min Oseguera (Dr. Kam) as their Head of Care. Dr. Kam is a leading expert in trauma-informed considerations and practices in documentary filmmaking, a member of the Documentary Accountability Working Group (DAWG), and the Founder and Executive Director of Muslim Wellness Foundation. The position was created to systematize care practices and make expansive accountability a normal part of documentary production and aims to serve as a model for the industry.

## Subject:

The documentary film **Subject** explores the life-altering experience of sharing one's life on screen through key participants of acclaimed documentaries, *The Staircase*, *Hoop Dreams*, *The Wolfpack*, *Capturing the Friedmans*, and *The Square*. The release of *Subject*, the lively discussions at the film screenings (including joint events with DAWG), and the acceleration of press about participant care was an inflection point for the field. Dialogues about the film created new space for the documentary community to engage with questions around the responsibility everyone in the industry holds to film participants. The film, co-directed by Jennifer Tiexiera and Camilla Hall, produced by Margie Ratliff, and executive produced by Dr. Kameelah Mu'Min Oseguera, is now streaming and available for screenings.

## The Unquiet Collective:

The Unquiet Collective is a group of storytellers and impact producers who are committed to making transformative change. Their work is grounded in a series of **principles**, including interconnectivity, cultural safety, and transparency, that actively challenge the history of exploitation and misappropriation in media. Unquiet works in deep collaboration with those represented in their films from production to release and ensures an ongoing deep process of mutual benefit and power distribution.

# The Issues

This report doesn't aim to fully unpack the complexity of documentary participant care in one short document. Instead, we will provide an overview of some of the issues practitioners are grappling with and posit questions for further consideration.

## What is Participant Care?

“*Care is our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow the vast majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive—along with the planet itself.*”

—The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence

Building upon *The Care Manifesto*, participant care can be seen as the ability to provide the conditions that allow people who share their lives' stories in documentary films to thrive.

While emphasizing care for a small number of people featured in documentaries might seem like an individual pursuit, its impact is felt across the communities to which they belong. Each participant brings with them all of the spaces they inhabit, and in an interconnected and interdependent world, their health affects the health of their families, friends, and communities. If they are at risk, so are the people they love.

There are also practical concerns: The inclusion of certain footage in a documentary could lead to a participant's surveillance, arrest, deportation, or death, all of which would have a harmful ripple effect across multiple communities. In addition, when a person or community who has experienced trauma is in a film that fully reflects their dignity and agency, it may help them heal. But if it advances reductive and harmful stereotypes, it may further traumatize them. These narratives can also influence documentary audiences, which number in the millions, and shape public perception and behavior.

Participant care doesn't exist in a vacuum. It's part of a long history of both extraction and collaboration within the documentary field, and it's also situated in current social, economic, and political contexts. To talk about participant care is to talk about the systems that govern our lives, as well as how we build and sustain relationships within them.



## **We observe two primary places where participant care shows up in documentary filmmaking:**

- 1.** When a filmmaker enters a participant's life, the filmmaker may wrestle with ethical dilemmas around how their presence intersects with the larger issues the participant is facing. Trying to practice care in this context can look like trying to address systemic problems like racism, ableism, transphobia, or poverty. Many filmmakers, especially when producing films in a marketplace that is not advantageous to ethical creation, struggle with how they as individuals can meaningfully support participants within larger oppressive systems like capitalism and white supremacy—systems that, in many cases, also oppress the filmmakers.
- 2.** Filmmaker and participant relationships are like any other in the filmmaker's life, and as such, filmmakers intentionally consider how to show up with integrity for someone they care about. They consistently operate with sensitivity for the participant's well-being and respect for their autonomy. They may set boundaries to keep the relationship centered around working together on the film, or in other cases, they may grow close personally as well.

Every filmmaker practices participant care differently, and some don't prioritize it at all. In general, we observe a spectrum where, on one side, filmmakers are fully committed to accountable mediamaking and embrace collaboration and horizontal decision-making, and on the other, there are filmmakers who reject participant care measures during and after the filmmaking process. Many filmmakers fall somewhere in the middle, where their practices might not deviate from the norm in radical ways, but they operate with a sense of ethics and genuine care, and are interested in learning and adopting new ways of caring for participants.

## **Code of Ethics**

The question comes up often, in conversations, on panels, at events: Does there need to be a code of ethics, widely adopted across the industry, centered around duty of care to film participants?

Other fields that impact people's lives in similar ways, including journalism, medicine, and anthropology, all have agreed-upon ethical principles, though they may diverge in some specificities. These principles have evolved over time and continue to be debated within each field, but are nonetheless core components of the work.



However, within the documentary industry, while there are many ongoing efforts to further accountability, there has also been a vocal resistance to the idea that documentary filmmakers should abide by ethical standards. There have been claims that the true victims are filmmakers who have been subject to “cancel culture” and “woke” Twitter mobs advocating for documentary participants. There is also concern that a code of ethics could become a list of rules that would impede the documentary creative process.

An argument for adopting a duty of care code of ethics is that without one, the field is reliant on people voluntarily opting in, with no structural mechanism to prevent harm, just individual choices. Many filmmakers prioritize care and actively seek out opportunities to do right by their participants. But when filmmakers put participants at risk, they often operate without accountability. Some funders and distributors already require certain safety measures or legal clearances to release a film but integrating shared principles into multiple points of checks and balances might better ensure that a film would not jeopardize participants’ lives.

## **Participant/Filmmaker Relationships**

The term “documentary” is applied broadly across a genre that encompasses everything from true crime to investigative filmmaking to personal storytelling. Filmmaker and participant relationships might range from respectful to loving to adversarial. Given this range, many in the field grapple with the question: Does a filmmaker’s responsibility to uphold a level of care for their participants change depending on who the participant is? For instance, does a filmmaker documenting climate justice organizers have the same ethical obligations as a filmmaker exposing a white supremacist leader? There may be common principles of care that could apply to all participants, but different degrees or methods of implementation depending on the circumstance.

For some filmmakers, prioritizing participant care may include setting boundaries to ensure the relationship is healthy for both the filmmaker and the participant. For instance, does the filmmaker aim to provide care for the totality of the participant’s life and circumstances, or just for the parts the film has impacted them? (Film in Mind’s supervision model and Multitude Films’ Head of Care aren’t replacements for personal therapy, but rather contained to the project itself.) In other words, what type of care is the filmmaker providing, and how can they ensure that care is sustainable, within their abilities, and doesn’t create additional harm?

Similarly, filmmakers and participants may be in daily communication while in production on a film, but after its release, this may slow to infrequent check-ins or they may lose touch entirely. Participants are often unprepared for how the relationship shifts over time and may experience this as a painful loss or rejection, if not prepared for this change in advance.

## **Consent and Agency**

The most crucial way for participants to exercise agency is the ability to provide informed consent—to freely agree to being in a film with a continually updated understanding of its benefits and risks. Especially since independent documentaries often take years to complete, it is the responsibility of the filmmaking crew to be transparent about the expected time commitment from the people who are sharing their lives in front of the camera.

Some filmmakers' practices have shifted from asking participants to sign a release form at the beginning of production to initiating an ongoing conversation about consent throughout the entirety of the filmmaking process.

In addition, many people grapple with the nuances of consent, which have no easy answers. For instance, what does the consent process look like for minors? Should they be able to withdraw their consent when they become adults? What if participants consent to certain aspects of the process, like appearing in the film, but not others, like the film's festival run or distribution platform?

And how does one do this while keeping the integrity and agency of both parties intact? Many in the field believe that true care measures avoid paternalism and instead uphold participant agency in meaningful ways.

## **Operationalization**

While filmmakers increasingly embrace participant care in theory, many have questions about how to put it into practice. Participants also often express the need for direct support and guidance. While there are helpful resources and workshops that support aspects of this work, direct support on how to fund and implement participant care is not currently offered at scale across the field.

Part of the challenge is that there is no one-size-fits-all model for participant care. Good intentions can still lead to harm, and filmmakers should be mindful of working across communities, cultures, material conditions, and circumstances. For instance, embracing difficult conversations may create trust in one team, but in another cultural context, it could be considered rude or coercive. Giving participants access to footage might be respectful in one instance, but in another, footage might need to be deleted to avoid being subpoenaed or putting a participant in legal jeopardy. Therapeutic support might be welcomed by some participants, while healing might look different in other contexts and communities. If a film interrogates a powerful or controversial public figure, allowing them the opportunity to review cuts could undermine its impact, while in other circumstances, providing editorial feedback is central to participant agency.

Ultimately, each film and participant should be uniquely considered because there is no magic formula to follow. Care work isn't perfect; there is no perfect relationship. We often learn by doing, and part of doing is making mistakes. Ideally, with a solid foundation of trust, transparency, and respect, missteps could be corrected and repaired.

## **Industry Support**

In a moment where filmmakers are struggling to fund their films, budgeting and fundraising for new measures of participant support can feel like an impossible endeavor, or like a luxury as opposed to a necessity. Even just slowing production to a healthier pace can be expensive. The ability to operationalize components of this work often requires explicit support from funders.

There are a few different models of care intermediaries—people who work directly with filmmakers and/or participants to support measures of care—including work led by Film in Mind, Multitude Films and Dr. Kameelah Mu'Min Oseguera, Peace is Loud, and REIMAGINE, as well as work the DPEA aims to do in the future. However, none of these models are offered at scale (though Film in Mind is actively working on training new supervisors), but rather are reliant on a few individuals. It will require time, money, and deliberate investment into expanding the possibilities for this role before there are enough practitioners to support films that are interested in receiving this support, as well as commitments from funders to fund this new line item.



In addition to support from funders, participant care requires a commitment from everyone in the ecosystem of a film, including distributors, publicists, programmers, press, and even audiences. Often conflicts arise when participant care goals aren't shared by some of these players—for instance, when a distributor plans a marketing campaign that uses language or imagery that is harmful to participants or doesn't take measures to make a film available to audiences who have accessibility needs.

## **Compensation**

The topic of compensation came up in nearly every conversation about participant care, as people are grappling with philosophical and practical questions around paying participants, yet the field is without norms or resources about how to navigate this topic. This appears to be one of the areas of greatest need in the field—guidance on how to determine whether or not to pay participants, how much to pay them, in what form, and whether paying them would create any risks to the participant or the project. Many filmmakers are also struggling to fund their films and go unpaid themselves, and the suggestion that participants might be compensated when the filmmakers are not can be a point of tension. That said, it's widely accepted that film crews need to be paid, so the tension around paying participants may change over time. With adequate support and funding, it might be a matter of course for filmmakers to explore in earnest.

**Given the sheer amount of debate around this topic, we thought it might be helpful to share some of the many questions coming up for filmmakers:**

### **Ethics**

- ◆ Should all participants be paid? What about participants whose actions or beliefs contradict your values?
- ◆ Does the introduction of money make the relationship business-oriented and transactional?
- ◆ Does the introduction of money make the relationship coercive, setting an obligation to continue participating, or exacerbate uneven power dynamics?
- ◆ What happens if a participant becomes financially dependent on a filmmaker?
- ◆ If you observe the participant using the money for something harmful to themselves or others, are you responsible for financially enabling those actions (or any more responsible than an employer would be)?
- ◆ If the film makes a substantial amount of money, is it ethical for you to profit if the participant whose story made the film possible doesn't get anything?
- ◆ Do high-profile or celebrity participants get paid more commonly than “regular” people?



## Journalistic Integrity

- ◆ Does paying someone change the story (or change it any more than anyone else's contribution to a film changes a story)? If so, is this inherently a bad thing?
- ◆ If you pay participants, will you be restricted from working with certain funders or distributors?

## Risk

- ◆ Does receiving an influx of money put any participants or their communities in danger of being targeted, robbed, or kidnapped?
- ◆ Would paying a participant cause them to lose journalistic source protection and put them in potential legal jeopardy?
- ◆ Will the participant lose government benefits (eg, Medicaid, Social Security Disability Insurance) as a result of receiving a large sum of money?
- ◆ Will you provide any type of financial counseling or guidance?

## Filming Movements/Communities:

- ◆ If making a film about a movement or a community, how do you choose which individuals get paid, and by extension, which don't?
- ◆ If you pay the people with the most screen time, are you arbitrarily rewarding them for having a compelling on-camera presence?
- ◆ Will that money create new power dynamics within the movement/community?
- ◆ What is the impact if you introduce money into a community that doesn't have a formal economy?

## Practicalities

- ◆ How will you pay your participants, in literal terms? For instance, what form makes the most sense—cash, check, bank transfers? What currency do they use?
- ◆ How much will you pay them? How will you calculate this? Who decides?
- ◆ Are there opportunities to pay participants for additional contributions to the film (eg, location fees, archival licensing, impact campaign participation)?

## Alternative Compensation

- ◆ Instead of paying individuals, how might you provide compensation that betters or benefits a community in a holistic way?
- ◆ Are there other types of opportunities you could offer, including skillshares or trainings?
- ◆ While many films don't make a profit, is profit-sharing an option?

# The Possibilities

The documentary field is in a moment of reckoning with participant care, but this moment of crisis also brings the opportunity to transform industry practices.

How do we, as an industry, prevent participants from being harmed, or even killed, as a result of participating in a film, and instead ensure the experience of telling their story is healing and empowering?

While there are no one-size-fits-all answers, and filmmakers may not be able to find individual solutions to structural problems, there are still many intervention points where prioritizing participant care could transform outcomes.

Caring for film participants requires individual, structural, and cultural interventions, each reinforcing the other, and is the responsibility of the entire industry.

## Some of the elements needed for change include:

- ✦ **Individual:** Filmmakers embrace and implement participant care-centered practices.
- ✦ **Structural:** Funders, distributors, programmers, and other powerful industry players require participant safety before supporting a film.
- ✦ **Cultural:** Public narratives, including in the press, uplift models of care and hold accountable instances of harm, contributing to a new norm of prioritized participant care.

On an individual level, there is a need for direct filmmaker support to better implement care. Many filmmakers express a hunger for education and guidance on how to operationalize and fund participant care. Other filmmakers are open to the dialogue even if it has not been a priority. There is space here for the creation of new resources and case studies, further distribution of existing resources, and hands-on support, whether via peers or care intermediaries or learning spaces like workshops.

But there are filmmakers who actively disregard participant safety. How can all players in the industry, particularly those in positions of power, incorporate participant care into their practices to ensure responsibility does not begin and end with filmmakers? And how can a culture of accountability become embedded into the documentary field?

If the industry did adopt a participant care code of ethics, then funders, distributors, and programmers could require filmmakers to abide by this code to have their work funded, distributed, or screened.

We recognize that this is a complex and fraught conversation in the field with no easy answers, and are not suggesting prescriptive rules for filmmakers to follow. However, we believe it's worth further exploration to identify core principles or values. Some have suggested that DAWG's six core values of nonfiction filmmaking, which have already been endorsed by filmmakers, funders, festivals, and professors, could be a clear starting place for this conversation. Re-Present Media approaches this work using an existing international human rights framework, and even the four principles of bioethics (beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for autonomy, and justice) could be considered.

Other structural changes are needed. As one of the first entities to interact with a film, funders can make explicit that they fund measures of participant care and look through proposed budgets for line items that show evidence of care in practice. (These line items might include childcare, reimbursement for missed wages, mental health support, and/or compensation.)

Funders could also support the further development of the models of care intermediary roles in different cultural contexts, research on whether or how these roles could be scalable, training in these positions, and the creation of a directory of these care advocates—as well as the funding of these positions themselves.

In addition, all of the organizations listed in this report will need continued resources to build, sustain, advance, and update their work. There could be great benefit to convening some or all of these groups to share learnings and collaborate when possible, since this work requires collective efforts.

Finally, a cultural shift not only in how documentaries are made, but also how they are consumed and understood, would help hold accountable all of these practices. What might the field look like if audiences came to expect ethical practices and were more likely to watch films that embodied care? If industry awards rewarded transformative models? If press spotlighted values-led contributions to the field?

This paradigm shift would be no small feat, and not happen overnight. But truly prioritizing participant care would allow film participants, their families, and their communities to thrive as a result of being featured in a film, leading to healthier environments for all.

# Credits

Writer

**Stephanie Palumbo**

Editor

**Bedatri Choudury**

Reviewers

**Natalie Bullock Brown**

**Florencia Varela**

Interviewed:

**Sekou Campbell**

**Jennifer Chien**

**Sonya Childress**

**Rebecca Day**

**Jess Devaney**

**Camilla Hall**

**Rahi Hasan**

**Set Hernandez**

**Jennifer Huang**

**Penny Lane**

**Asad Muhammad**

**Molly Murphy**

**Marianna Olinger**

**Dr. Kameelah Mu'Min Oseguera**

**laurie (pea) prendergast**

**Alex Pritz**

**Margie Ratliff**

**Gini Reticker**

**Malikkah Rollins**

**Denae Peters**

**Bhawin Suchak**

**Sherry Simpson**

**Stephanie Sunata**

**Jennifer Tiexiera**

**Sarah Wainio**

**ill Weaver**

**Robert Winn**

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