



# Holding Ourselves Accountable

A Consent Calendar Resource

# Table of Contents

<b>03</b>	Overview
<b>04</b>	Director's Note
<b>07</b>	Consent Calendar FAQ
<b>13</b>	Participant's Note
<b>15</b>	Credits

# Overview

When filmmaker Jennifer Tiexiera directed the documentary series *Unveiled: Surviving La Luz del Mundo*, she used a consent calendar: a system she designed to ensure the series' participants could make decisions around their participation at every stage of the process. With this system, consent became an ongoing, active dialogue. It was born out of a non-extractive filmmaking approach, a way to hold filmmakers and distributors accountable and keep them communicative, as well as minimize potential damage that could be done to participants throughout the filmmaking process.

In this resource, we examine how Jennifer structured this consent calendar, why it was effective and meaningful, and how other filmmakers, distributors, and industry might use this model for their projects too.

Using a consent calendar is not a one-size-fits-all solution for the challenges facing all filmmakers and film protagonists, as every project comes with a unique set of circumstances that require nuanced care. But Jennifer has created a valuable model that can provide guidance to both filmmakers and participants attempting to shift power dynamics away from extractive practices and toward equity and accountability.

# Director's Note

In 2021, I co-directed a documentary feature film called *Subject* about what it means to participate in a documentary film. The film has prompted global conversations about how we can change the way we make films to become more equitable to the story holders. At a time when the streamers now dominate the documentary field, profits have taken priority over care for the people at the heart of our stories. The ramifications of this run deep for documentary film audiences, translating into a subconscious lack of regard for real people whose experiences we are consuming. This in itself can transpire into a broader erosion of empathy in a more heightened and aggressive social era. We are exploring the concept of “conscious consumption” amongst documentary audiences and how that can be applied to documentary filmmaking.

Not long after co-directing *Subject*, I was hired to direct a documentary series called *Unveiled: Surviving La Luz del Mundo* about survivors of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse at the La Luz del Mundo church. It was clear from the very beginning of the process that there would need to be an extra layer of transparency, communication, and accountability in order to protect the survivors at the center of this story.

Our team wanted to open lines of communication right away, so the first thing we did was establish a north star to present to potential participants: We aimed to expose the abuse that the church had subjected its parishioners to for decades. But La Luz del Mundo notoriously harrasses and threatens those who speak out against the church.

So how could we make this series without jeopardizing participants' physical safety, mental health, and impending court cases?

We used this question as the starting point for all participant conversations, and the answer looked different for each contributor. For example, one participant was uncertain about whether or not they wanted to appear in the film anonymously. Rather than pressuring them to commit at a time convenient for our production, we instead shot their interview in two ways, simultaneously— with their face on camera and anonymously. We then amended our appearance release so that it only gave us permission to use the anonymous version of the footage, unless we had clear, written permission from the participant indicating that they wanted us to use the on camera version. We knew we would need to decide which version to use in the series by a certain date, so we put that date in the calendar, and the consent calendar was born and expanded from there.

Unfortunately, there is no magic checklist in our practice. Was it perfect? No. Did we still make mistakes? Of course. But as filmmaker Michèle Stephenson said, "It's about being deliberate at every step of the process." Because we started from a place of deliberate transparency, we eventually built relationships based on trust, realized our north star, and created a successful, Emmy-nominated network project that delivered on time and on budget.

And this change isn't only necessary for altruistic reasons—it's also good business. If your participants speak out against the film, that would jeopardize the integrity of the film, the filmmakers, and the distributor. Audiences are savvier than ever, and in the same way they care about organic food or sustainable fashion, they care about ethically-made programming.

People often claim that we can't change industry practices because that's not the way it's always been done. But many times "the way it's always been done" is harmful not only to participants but also to filmmakers. That answer just can't be acceptable anymore.

There are so many allies in the industry who are pushing forward equitable filmmaking, and it's up to all of us to band together, keep the conversation going, asking questions, and ultimately change "the way it's always been done."

I hope this resource will help other filmmakers, participants, distributors, funders, and everyone who plays a role in the documentary industry consider the deep importance of consent, care, and safety, and provide ideas on how to make these big-picture ideas possible and practical in your daily filmmaking practice.

*—Jennifer Tiexiera*

# Consent Calendar FAQ

## What is a consent calendar?

A consent calendar is a schedule of milestones where documentary participants have the opportunity to provide continued consent to participate in a project. The schedule includes key dates when power shifts—for instance, when the director “loses” their power to further edit the film before distribution, or when marketing materials need to be approved. The filmmaker shares this calendar with participants and discusses the implications of each date, to ensure that the participant has all existing information to decide if and how they will participate in the film.

## What dates were included in the consent calendar?

During the production of *Unveiled*, director Jennifer Tiexiera created individual consent calendars for the series’ participants. Each calendar contained different milestones based on that person’s unique needs and concerns.

## Example milestones include when:

- People in the participants’ lives confirm they fully understood the project
- People in the participants’ lives decide whether they wanted to be part of the project
- Participants confirm whether or not they wanted to be in the series
- Participants decide whether they would be anonymous or on camera
- Participants’ lawyers receive an interview transcript
- Participants’ lawyers provide feedback
- Participants screen rough cut and provide feedback (over a series of weeks)
- Participants screen marketing materials and provide feedback
- Participants are informed of important marketing roll out dates and premiere dates

**Who chose the dates?**

These dates were determined by production and delivery schedules, including when editing began and when Jennifer would lose her power as director after delivering to the network.

**When did she begin the consent calendar process?**

Right away, in pre-production. It went hand in hand with discussing people's potential participation and the series' north star.

**What methodology did she use to create the calendar?**

Jennifer created her own internal Google Calendar, but since not everyone uses a digital calendar, she let the participants decide how they wanted to receive this information. She ultimately shared a Google doc listing all of the dates, then made phone call reminders to each person in advance of each date. They figured out how much lead time to give with each call depending on the nature of the event or milestone.

**Who was responsible for sharing and updating the calendar?**

Director Jennifer Tiexiera, producer John Jordan, and showrunner Alex Lowry communicated the consent calendar and its milestone dates to the participants, the production company, and the distributor. While the calendar management was shared by three people, it required the support of production and distribution executives to be successful. It was crucial that Jennifer and her team continually kept all parties on the same page—to agree to the north star, the concerns incited by the north star, and ultimately the commitments made to the participants.

**How did the team identify the unique milestones on each calendar?**

Each participant shared their own questions and concerns about their safety, physical and mental health, legal needs, finances, time and availability, and families and relationships. Jennifer shared information about available resources, budget limitations, and the production schedule / delivery dates. Together, they identified each person's individual priorities and considerations, and Jennifer translated that into the calendar.

**What control did the participants have over the editing process?**

Each participant had “meaningful consultation,” which the film team took very seriously. Participants and their lawyers had the power to redact statements from their interview transcripts to ensure the series didn't put their court cases at risk. The film team also agreed to make changes to the cut if it endangered participants' mental well-being or put them or a family member at risk. Ultimately, they made the decision for two participants to stay anonymous and to remove one from episodes altogether.

### Did this affect the budget?

Creating the consent calendar itself didn't cost anything, but Jennifer's commitment to participants was reflected throughout the series' budget. It included mental health line items for trauma workshops and therapy for the crew, as well as therapy for participants from production through release. Jennifer also added a line item for participant contingency, like a phone bill or childcare costs. In addition, she budgeted for three cameras on each interview (instead of two) to ensure they had coverage if the participant decided to be on camera anonymously, and added extra money for legal fees in case they needed to amend releases. She also budgeted for more weeks with the editor to allow participants to view the series and marketing materials, and provide feedback before release. Finally, the budget included a robust impact campaign based on the needs of the participants.

**When did Jennifer discuss the consent calendar with the network? How did they respond?**

Jennifer included the consent calendar in her negotiations before signing onto the project. Both the production company and network supported the ideas but couldn't make any promises because so many of the requests were unprecedented. However, because they all recognized the importance of consent and care, everything was a conversation.

**The conversations led to concrete successes, including:**

- The lawyers of both entities worked overtime to adjust releases
- The producers found the money in the budget for therapy sessions for participants and crew throughout filming and release
- HBO connected them to the Dart Center for training on trauma and journalism
- The post supervisors built extra edit time for participants review into the schedule
- HBO agreed to let all the participants view the marketing materials before their release
- HBO honored safety and mental health practices during the impact campaign

While this wasn't part of her contract because no one really knew how to define it yet, Jennifer would ask for an acknowledgment of the consent calendar in future deal memos.

**What else is required to make a consent calendar successful?**

Time. Time to communicate what they were doing and why it was important, then time to figure out how to populate each participant's calendar. Jennifer revisited each of the milestones, sometimes more than once, with everyone involved, and also set aside time for discussion with a participant advocate or therapist in case there were any challenges along the way.

**What effect did the consent calendar have?**

The filmmakers built partnerships based in trust with the participants and were able to honor their requests while staying on schedule and under budget. The participants shared their stories with the care and support of the film team, and the series itself became stronger as a result. The process also made the film team's relationship with the network stronger, more transparent and honest. And because participants were kept in the loop and invited to calls, they met network executives directly and built relationships throughout the course of the project, which doesn't often happen.

**If a filmmaker wants to use a consent calendar, when should they discuss it with a network or distributor?**

As early as the pitch. Jennifer includes considerations for participant care in her pitch decks, and is specific as possible since every project looks different. The process will only work if it's agreed upon in the very beginning.

# Participant's Note

As a survivor of extreme abuse of power in a destructive cult, I get triggered by people in positions of authority. But on the set of the series *Unveiled: Surviving La Luz del Mundo*, director Jennifer Tiexiera organized a space where I didn't feel subjected; I felt like a participant.

Prior to participating in *Unveiled*, I had a very unethical and re-victimizing experience with a team who worked for a prestigious streaming network. I suffer from a disability known as complex post-traumatic stress disorder. I lack the ability to communicate due to my nervous system's inability to function in certain conditions or settings. In this prior project, my trauma was triggered by interview questions, and my family and I were continuously in vulnerable, sometimes dangerous situations. On more than one occasion, we were put in situations where our lives were at risk. My story was told out of context and ultimately re-victimized my family and me.

Because of my previous experience with the documentary industry, trusting the team who produced and directed *Unveiled* was difficult in its early stages. However, Jennifer's direct communication, transparency, and integrity built a foundation of trust with my family and me. During and after the filming process, we felt seen and heard as opposed to examined and studied.

*"...we felt seen and heard as opposed to examined and studied."*

On the first day we met Jennifer, she asked us what we wanted to highlight in the series. We mentioned political corruption, segregation of families, abuse of power within the organization, and sexual assault culture, and we requested Spanish subtitles. At times, we didn't quite know how to communicate our requests efficiently because we weren't used to being asked what we wanted, but Jennifer was so in tune with us that she respected our requests. She artistically explained the problem without sexualizing me, and kept my story in context.

Jennifer prioritized building relationships with the participants to help us communicate effectively. On one occasion, she emailed me the series trailer before its release, and my husband and I noticed he did not appear in it. This triggered his memories of authority figures telling us we were unimportant, and he felt unworthy of being included. However, because of the trust Jennifer built with us, I felt at ease knowing that a simple text message regarding our concerns and feelings would fix the problem. Jennifer immediately answered and changed the trailer to include my husband, making us feel heard and respected.

All production teams should educate participants on their rights and legal terms like Jennifer did. Most people are not familiar with exclusivity or non-disclosure agreements, and being bound in any sense is extremely triggering for some people. Selling or giving the rights to a story should be done under fully given knowledgeable and informed agreement. All participants should have the right to freely ask questions and concerns during the making of the project.

—*Sochil Martin*  
Survivor of La Luz del Mundo

# Credits

Co-Creator: Jennifer Tiexiera

Co-Creator: Stephanie Palumbo

Contributor: Sochil Martin

Reviewer: Julian Catherly, John Jordan

Special Thanks: Jigsaw Productions, HBO Documentary Films, and Camilla Hall Graphic

Designer: Lani Rodriguez

*This resource was produced by Peace is Loud and supported through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.*



**Lady & Bird Films** is focused on cinematic documentaries that showcase unique perspectives through powerful, ethical storytelling.

<https://www.ladyandbirdfilms.com/>

<https://jentiexiera.com/>



**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.