

BRENT RENAUD DISCUSSES ETHICS IN DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

The following is an edited transcript of Brent Renaud's observations about ethics in documentary filmmaking:

Being a documentary film maker, you are constantly wrestling with ethical issues. Just who you are going to focus on, who you're going to film, how you're going to film them, what equipment that you're going to use. Who else are you going to interview that's going to be discussing your subject? How are you going to deal with the situation of minors and releases? How are you going to deal with the issue of people who are mentally ill or addicted to drugs? How are you going to represent other cultures and be sensitive to other cultures? From journalism ethics we have rules, like to do no harm, and to protect the vulnerable, and to always honor the trust of your subjects and your viewers.

But in documentary film, it's a little more complicated and it's a constant interpretation of those things. And in documentary film, I'm often spending up to a year, maybe even two years, with a subject. When I'm making a documentary film, I really feel like I'm making a story with someone. So ultimately it comes down to trust among my subject, myself and the viewer. I'm spending so much time with the subject that it's more of a collaboration. I have built the trust and they've given their trust in me to tell their story. And I see myself as shepherding their story.

My goal is to put myself in positions where I'm listening, where I'm observing, where I'm doing the best to tell a human story behind the headlines. I want to present a real empathetic story about people and then allow the audience to make their own decision. And I see my role as getting myself into positions to tell stories that the viewer doesn't have access to for whatever reasons – because it might be all the way around the world, because it might take a lot of time to get access to that particular story, or because it might be about a certain subculture that people don't have access to.