

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH

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“You have access to all of it.”
**Assessing documentary participation through
an ethics of care**

Erika Theissen Walukiewicz

Abstract

Different media genres generate distinct ethical challenges. While the professional journalistic ideal includes a distance from one’s sources, the intimacy and longevity of the storyteller-subject encounter in extensive factual formats challenge such a distance. In an attempt to acknowledge such diversity, this chapter looks beyond professional ethical frameworks to allow for a receptive and context-sensitive reflection on media ethics. In the context of the television documentary, I propose care ethics as a way of honouring subjects’ interests without compromising storytellers’ autonomy. Based on the assumption that media ethics would benefit from increased attention to the subject experience, the focus of this chapter is on the documentary subject. Following care ethical assumptions, I suggest that paying attention to subjects’ interests makes for increasingly informed ethical considerations on the part of the practitioner within long-form factual storytelling, such as documentary filmmaking and narrative journalism. Based on in-depth interviews with documentary subjects, this chapter traces concerns relating to participation in Swedish television documentaries. I present an array of subject interests ranging from the transmission of a message to the relationship with the filmmaker, and the protection of a third party. Besides adding empirical knowledge about the experience of participation, this chapter highlights the potential of care ethics within a media context.

Keywords: care ethics, documentary, television, subject-filmmaker relationship, long-form

1. Introduction

While Swedish media, public broadcasting in particular, enjoy high credibility among Swedish citizens (Carlsson and Weibull, 2017; Ipsos, 2016) there is one area where the public express significant discontent. Respondents in a recent study believe that Swedish media are failing to show due respect for the private lives of individuals (Carlsson and Weibull, 2017: 7). Do such responses mirror the experiences of individuals represented by the media? Despite increasing interest among media scholars in ethics within extensive factual formats, e.g. long-form journalism and documentary film, we know remarkably little about subjects' own experiences of participating in such mediated representations. This chapter adopts a care ethical perspective in order to expand the premises on which ethics in factual storytelling can be approached. Care ethics promotes relationships as moral paradigms and considers moral duties as context-specific (Collins, 2015). Such points of departure make for new insights into the subject experience, spurring ethical practice within factual storytelling. The present chapter suggests how this approach can begin to be operationalized.

At a time when media credibility and conduct are coming under ever closer scrutiny, concurrent with market demands for speed and the quest for audience ratings that affect both commercial media and the public service (Lindén, 2011), media ethics has seldom been more important. A central, yet under-researched, issue concerns the preservation of subjects' interests without compromising storytellers' autonomy. Within journalism as well as documentary research, there is a clear lack of scholarly focus on the subject. When approached within journalism studies, it has generally been via quantitative methodologies. Focus has tended to be put either on elite sources or subjects unhappy with participation (Palmer, 2016). Such points of departure are:

[...] poorly suited to helping us understand to what degree being wronged by the news media is actually the norm, or how news subjects feel about the news production process more generally. (Palmer, 2016: 6)

Palmer's argument can be extended beyond the context of news production to long-form factual storytelling.

It has been argued that documentary is neither fiction nor journalism, and that application of journalistic ethics to documentary is not straightforward (Winston, 2005: 181). There are, however, journalistic genres where the "application of journalistic ethics" in its dominant form is far from straightforward. Scholars highlight

the particular concerns generated by extensive factual formats (Kramer, 1995), such as long-form journalism and observational documentary, where audience and storyteller tend to come exceptionally close to the subject (Nash, 2009). Examining the documentary filmmaker-subject relationship, Aufderheide et al. note that filmmakers: "[...] usually treated this relationship as less than friendship and more than a professional relationship" (2009: 6-7). Subjects of documentary as well as journalism have been found to describe their relationship to the filmmaker/ journalist in terms of friendship (Nash, 2009; Palmer, 2016; Sanders, 2012). While potentially resulting in more ethical practice, these relationships generate ethical challenges of their own. Extensive trust engenders vulnerability. A documentary subject, interviewed for the present study, put it like this: "The more we got to know each other it was like ... film what the heck you want, you have access to all of it" (Subject S).

Among the first to pay empirical attention to the documentary subject, Nash claims that a different approach to documentary ethics is necessary: "[...] in focusing on the needs of documentary as a profession, documentary ethics has failed to see that one of the most unique features of documentary practice is the documentary relationship [...]" (Nash, 2009: 33). She suggests sensitive engagement instead of an ethical framework as the way towards ethical documentary practice. Identifying the meaning of participation, for both subject and filmmaker, is a cornerstone of sensitive engagement. Despite filmmakers' attention to ethics, Nash found this conversation to be lacking.

2. Care ethics and the media

Ethical standards and their realization in codes of ethics is a well-established focus of media ethics. Although potentially instructive, such rules may prove counterproductive, particularly when replacing moral reflection (Boeyink and Borden, 2010: 9). There is an abundant body of scholarly work critically assessing codes of ethics (Yngvesson, 2006; Zelizer, 2013), and neither documentary filmmakers nor journalists strictly abide by guidelines if alternatives are considered more ethical (Sanders, 2012; Wilkins and Coleman, 2005). Approaching the foundations of media ethics, Couldry argues that the focus needs to be elevated above a reflection on codes:

[...] the prevalent institutional models of media regulation do not encourage any link to broader questions of ethics, quite the contrary. It is significant that an authoritative international review of media ethics glosses the word ethics as "deontology" [...] (2006: 106)

In line with such arguments, this chapter considers media practice against an ethical framework that allows for problematization in alternative theoretical terms, at the same time as evaluating the relevance of this perspective in relation to mediated practice. A starting point for the study is that ethical challenges and possibilities vary with genre. This does not entail a specific framework for every genre. Rather, I am pointing to the need for an ethical perspective not only suited for news journalism but able to acknowledge and address ethical challenges within different forms of factual storytelling.

Media ethics has traditionally been assessed through the language of rules or duties. The last decade has seen an expansion of the discourse, with words of virtue, but also of care, entering the field. Examining journalists' moral development, Wilkins and Coleman found care ethical thinking, characterized as attendance to relations, in their ethical reasoning. Emerging from the study was an ethics of strong care informed by duty (Wilkins and Coleman, 2005). A concern for scholars considering care ethics in a media context is what they perceive as a too narrow focus on the private sphere and intimate relations (e.g. Steiner and Okrusch, 2006). Inability to care for a large number of people is a relevant concern that makes some versions of care ethics unsuitable within a media context. Scholars have, however, elaborated the theory to be applicable outside of the private sphere (Tronto, 2006).

3. Dependency relationships generate responsibilities

Many records of care ethics start with Carol Gilligan and her questioning of ethical thinking primarily based on rights, justice and moral autonomy (1982). Bringing relationships to the fore as a basis for moral reasoning, Gilligan laid the ground for an ethics of care. Building on Gilligan and more recent theorists, Stephanie Collins proposes four care ethical claims highlighting such issues as: the importance of ethical theory to consider concrete particulars; that relationships ought to be treated as moral paradigms and acknowledged as giving rise to weighty duties; that care ethics sometimes calls for agents to have caring attitudes, and perform actions, directed at a moral person's interests (2015: 10-11). The claims are unified and justified by the dependency principle: "Dependency relationships generate responsibilities" (Collins, 2015: 2). The responsibilities Collins places on a moral agent are duties to fulfil important interests. Consistent with Wilkins and Coleman's arguments for care informed by duty, Collins regards duties as context-specific. This strengthens the relevance of care ethics to media practitioners by allowing for the consideration of practitioners' costs in moral reasoning, diminishing the self-sacrificing nature sometimes attributed to care ethics.

Placing interests on a scale from trivial to important: the closer to important, the more valuable that the interest is fulfilled. Care ethicists tend to see basic needs¹ as highly important. According to Collins, these are not the only interests that deserve to be fulfilled (2015: 103-107). An addition to what might be classified as an important interest and how it should be formulated is that dependency duties are duties to take measures to *fulfil* interests (Collins, 2015: 106). Thus, Collins' proposition does not limit moral responsibility to character but extends it to action.

A limitation of Collins' principle in the present context is that the only costs considered are those to the agent and the recipient (2015: 110). This is where the relevance of "defeaters" comes in, factors that lie outside of the dependency principle but which might affect or outweigh dependency duties. Examples of such defeaters are: when someone else has promised to fulfil the interest or when the dependent is wholly responsible for the interest being unfulfilled (2015: 101, 122). This resonates with the fact that documentary filmmakers tend to abandon their protective attitude if subjects' actions are considered ethically repugnant (Aufderheide et al., 2009: 9). To open up for competing duties is to allow for consideration of a third party, such as audience and/or funders, in moral reasoning.

Attendance to subjects' needs and motives for participation are considered crucial within ethical documentary practice (Nash, 2009; Sanders, 2012). Collins' version of care ethics draws attention to the weight of interests in moral reasoning. She further suggests that the nature of a relationship might affect the level of responsibility an agent holds, opening up the possibility that relationship characteristics affect the value of the fulfilment of interests, and thereby the experience of participation.

4. The documentaries

The following analysis is based on in-depth interviews with seven subjects in six documentary films broadcast by Swedish public service company SVT (Sveriges Television) 2012-2013. These primarily observational documentaries are thought to demonstrate a more straightforward relation to the historical world than, for instance, the poetic documentary (Nichols, 1991). In keeping with a journalistic view, responsibilities towards subjects are believed to vary. The study is therefore restricted to subjects not considered elite sources. The documentaries focus on individuals or personal experience and cover controversial or emotionally intimate topics such as: love across national borders; being diagnosed with a fatal cancer; working within a highly contested industry.

1 Here classified as an interest categorized as a human right (acc. to the European Convention of Human Rights).

Swedish public service broadcasting is authorized and regulated by the Swedish government. The present charter, valid from 2014, guarantees SVT's independence from the state and political interests. It further obliges SVT to pay attention to the privacy of individuals (The Swedish Press and Broadcasting Authority, 2013). Unlike many countries and broadcasting companies, SVT does not require formal consent through release forms signed by documentary subjects. Filmmakers are, however, recommended to establish contracts in cases considered ethically complex. SVT further recommends that filmmakers show the documentary to the main subjects, preferably before the final cut.² This does not amount to giving subjects the right to a final cut (I. Persson, 2017, pers. Comm.).

5. "It's not pretty, but that's what it looks like"

A central aspect of the care ethical frame applied in the present chapter is attendance to interests, here categorized as: concerns of great importance to a subject that are related to documentary participation. A further characteristic of care ethics is its reciprocal nature. To be a successful carer, it is not enough to "[...] act on one's concern for the care recipient: to be fully successful, the care must actually fulfil the right interests. In many cases, these are the interests the recipient endorses" (Collins, 2015: 75). A first step towards applying care ethics and determining its relevance in the present context is to identify subject interests related to the documentary experience. A second step, which is beyond the scope of the present chapter, is to examine filmmakers' actions and attitudes in relation to subjects' interests.

Listening to the informants' accounts, several interests emerge in relation to participation. Subjects' concerns are closely connected to their motives for participation, but not exclusively. In the following, I divide concerns into categories related to particular interests.

The message

In assessing subjects' motives for participation, the wish to convey a message emerges as an important interest. Among the messages that informants in this study wanted to communicate were: Presenting a more nuanced view of a controversial industry or a stigmatized movement, and drawing attention to particularly vulnerable groups in society. Few subjects, however, sought to actively intervene in the documentary process in order to ensure that their message got through. For a majority of the subjects, viewing the documentary before the final cut was the

2 Recommendations differ between different types of documentaries.

most obvious measure for wielding influence, although objections at this stage were remarkably few. Input in the post-production process has been identified as an important factor for subject satisfaction (Hibberd et al., 2000), the subject in this study who was the least content with the documentary message was the one who did not see the documentary prior to transmission. Other informants appear to be satisfied with the message; objections concerning the final result were generally directed at other aspects of the documentary.

Since dependency duties are duties to take measures to *fulfil* interests, important interests are best phrased as interests that can be fulfilled (Collins, 2015: 106). In general terms, the present interest is therefore formulated as: increasing the possibility of communicating a particular message. This implies that even if a filmmaker is not capable of transmitting the specific message, he/she might still have a dependency duty to take measures to increase this possibility. The exact phrasing of an interest should be adjusted to each documentary subject.

Authenticity

A major concern for the interviewed subjects is that the film should constitute what they consider to be an authentic representation of reality. The notion that the film is being true to reality often seems to outweigh the exposure of possibly controversial behaviour or opinions. When acknowledging feelings of discomfort connected to scenes in the documentary, several subjects, however, motivated the scenes' presence with reference to truth or reality. The documentary *The Mink Farmers* starts off with the sound of gas pouring into a box where farmers throw animals to be gassed, followed by a scene where a farmer is seen skinning minks. Subject N did not have any objections to such a potentially controversial scene but refers to its authenticity: "We skin the animals, that's what it looks like. It's not pretty, but that's what it looks like. Period. The same is true when he films in the gas box when they are dead, that's what it looks like" (subject N).

Critical verdicts about the documentary also tend to be related to the present interest. When a poster depicting the leader of the right-wing party The Sweden Democrats is cut in during a political discussion at the farm, Subject N is critical. He bases his criticism on the notion that the clip gives a distorted picture of reality and falsely connects him to the party. Other subjects also voice objections when parts of the documentary are seen to depart from their notion of reality. Phrasing this interest in relation to care ethical standards, it can be formulated as an interest in: increasing the likelihood to perceive the depiction as authentic.

Interests related to a third party

Exceptions to subjects' interest in "perceiving the depiction as authentic" emerge when it comes to the protection of a third party. When other people's inter-

ests are at stake – especially those closely related to the interviewee – subjects appear to be prepared to withhold information or limit access. Subject S had distinct concerns in this respect regarding how her mother might be represented:

I guess she thought that she would be depicted as a bad mother. And I was quite clear with him [the filmmaker] that: It doesn't matter if she has been a bad mother, it shouldn't show. It's not kind. You don't expose people like that. And he was on board (Subject S).

Subjects' interests related to a third party do not only concern the representation of that party. Besides considerations regarding his immediate family, subject N, for instance, expressed concerns related to his colleagues and the farmer community, which had to do with their potential response to the film. These concerns turned out to be justified as several colleagues expressed their discontent with the documentary.

The wish to help others by sharing personal experience has been identified as one reason for wishing to participate in a documentary (Hibberd, 2000). This was also observed in the present study and is categorized as an interest related to a third party.

Personal interests related to participation

Talking about their motives for participation, personal motives emerge alongside the wish to convey a message. This interest takes on different forms, including a desire to be seen and heard, also recognized in previous research (Donovan, 2012). Subject G's interest in visibility was primarily based on a wish to make it within the entertainment industry. While subject Sv shared this wish to some extent, she also saw the documentary as an opportunity for self-realization and increased status in her new country, having recently moved from Russia to Sweden. Both subjects were prepared to compromise with some of their other interests in order for the result to become a "good" documentary. For subject M, on the other hand, important personal concerns were those of recognition and vindication related to her professional standing:

It was about some kind of redress. My way of working. I can't say that all colleagues have mocked me, that's so harsh, but when they have seen me [...] so many people have shaken their head, thinking: Oh well, now she's dancing, now she's singing, now she brings in the drums, and now they have their morning assembly with that tiny little lamp. I have felt that no one has given me cred. So I felt that this is my chance (subject M).

Preserving integrity

The desire to preserve one's integrity intertwines with an interest in authenticity. Concerns regarding integrity seem to be partly connected to whether subjects perceive the representation to be accurate or not. One aspect of this interest is thus related to how the subject is actually depicted in the documentary. Subject N's negative reaction to the clip including the poster image of the Sweden Democrats has to do with the fact that it establishes a false sense of his political affiliation and thus challenges his integrity. Based on previous experience of mediated representation, subject M was deeply concerned that she shouldn't be regarded as some kind of "crazy teacher".

Preservation of integrity is, however, not restricted to accuracy of representation, it can also involve withholding information. Although subject S was concerned that the documentary should accurately represent her situation, she asked the filmmaker to exclude aspects perceived as intimate, which were not believed to add to the documentary message. While not objecting to a scene where she was crying for her life, she refused to allow the filmmaker to film her teenage room.

Matters of integrity are not confined to the finished film but extend to the documentary process. Several subjects demonstrated a wish sometimes to shield their private sphere in the sense that they wanted to be left alone.

Concerns related to the subject-filmmaker relationship

In addition to the concerns mentioned above, subjects also voice interests related to their relationship with the filmmaker. Subjects appear to put significant trust in the filmmaker: access is extensive and the amount of control exerted is limited. Several subjects express high levels of accommodation, sometimes at the cost of their own comfort. This is thought to reflect both a desire to create a good documentary, but also a wish to please the filmmaker. Subject Sv, who was friends with the filmmaker prior to the documentary process, described her participation as a way of helping a friend. Such a statement points to the possibility that: the closer you get to someone, the more inclined you are to help him/her, possibly to the detriment of your own interests. An important condition for such attitude/behaviour to work out well is for both parties to perceive the relationship in similar ways (Ahrne, 2014).

When approached from the perspective of the participant, the subject-filmmaker relationship shows traits of a professional relationship, but the characteristics indicating a more intimate relation such as friendship are perhaps even stronger. The closer to an intimate relationship, the greater the risk related to issues of trust and vulnerability, as demonstrated in the aforementioned quote by subject

S: “The more we got to know each other it was like ... film what the heck you want, you have access to all of it.” The more you share, the bigger the risk that the other party passes on sensitive information. This risk accompanying the knowledge-sharing characteristics of intimate relations (Zelizer, 2005) is particularly relevant in the documentary filmmaking context due to scope and documentation. Besides spending months or years with a subject, most likely sharing times of both joy and despair, emotions and information are caught on tape. An obvious element within the present concern is thus that of the preservation of trust, also recognized in previous studies (Nash, 2009). This aspect affects several other interests, such as the preservation of integrity and concerns related to a third party, interests that are dependent on trust being cherished.

Aside from relationship interests attached to the documentary, subjects also appear to have an interest in the relationship as such. Interviewees valued the establishment of a reciprocal relationship with the filmmaker that went beyond the actual making of the film. A telling example is subject S’s comment about her relationship with the filmmaker: “[...] it wasn’t just that he should know everything about me during my most vulnerable moments, but I knew who he was, I knew who his children were, met them, talked a little to them and all that.” Several subjects, even when voicing criticism, make a point of expressing their appreciation of the filmmaker and confirm their satisfaction with the relationship.

Interests in a care ethical sense can be indexed in different ways including to the agent who fulfils them (Collins, 2015: 106). Concerns connected to the subject-filmmaker relationship are categorized as two related interests: establishing and maintaining a good relationship with the documentary filmmaker, and trust being cherished.

6. Conclusion

Research into documentary ethics has indicated that subjects have a series of concerns and interests related to participation (Donovan, 2012; Nash, 2009; Sanders, 2012). Care ethics encourages us to scrutinize those interests as possible grounds for moral duties on behalf of the filmmaker. In this chapter, I have followed a care ethical lead and examined the interests of documentary subjects.

Dependency relationships generate responsibilities; that is the core of the dependency principle. The concern of care ethics is not dependence as such but the possibility of responding to dependence. It follows that focus is placed on “dependence as a relation between a dependent and an entity *on which* they depend. To de-

pend on someone or something is to need them or be vulnerable to them" (Collins, 2015: 102). The second claim of care ethics attends to relationship importance. Within the claim it is stated that, to the extent that they have value to individuals in the relationship, relationships ought to be acknowledged as giving rise to weighty duties (Collins, 2015: 146).

Subjects' dependence on the filmmaker materializes in several ways. Among the subject interests presented in this chapter are the transmission of a particular message; the protection or support of a third party; and subject's personal aims related to participation. Fulfilment of those interests is to a great extent dependent on the filmmaker who is responsible for the process as well as the final result and, arguably, its potential aftermath. The extensive access provided by subjects, and related interests such as the preservation of integrity, imply vulnerability on behalf of the subject towards the filmmaker, which increases subject dependence. The value that most subjects attach to the relationship with the filmmaker enhances dependence by suggesting that at least one of the interests is connected to the filmmaker as a person, not as a filmmaker.

The dependency principle suggests that all relationships (personal or non-personal) that are able to fulfil important interests are treated as moral paradigms (Collins, 2015: 148). Following the interests identified in the present chapter, filmmakers have moral obligations to subjects in discharging relationship duties. Obligations derive from the value the relationship has to the subjects in the sense that filmmakers are likely to be able to fulfil, or go some way to fulfil, subjects' interests related to documentary participation. The subject-filmmaker relationship can thus be categorized as a dependency relationship. The value that subjects place on the relationship as such potentially generates even stronger duties on behalf of the filmmaker (Collins, 2015).

In this chapter I have taken a first step towards determining the potential of care ethics in the context of long-form factual storytelling. There are additional conditions for the dependency principle and the strength of dependency duties, which are mainly connected to the entity on which the dependent depends (Collins, 2015: 102), in this case: the documentary filmmaker. To fully access the relevance of care ethics and problematize the detached ideal of the practitioner-subject relationship within factual storytelling, the subject experience ought to be examined in relation to filmmakers' actions and attitudes. Filmmakers' interests and possible competing duties will also need to be taken into account. This will be the subject of a subsequent piece of research

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Biography

Erika is a PhD candidate in journalism at the Department of Media Studies, Stockholm University in Sweden. Her dissertation explores ethics in long-form factual storytelling from a care ethical perspective, with particular focus on the subject experience and the subject-storyteller relationship. Erika is also involved in a research project about the Norwegian TV-series *Skam*. Prior to enrolling in the PhD program, Erika worked as a journalist.

Email: erika.walukiewicz@ims.su.se