

**The dark grey zone:
ethics and power in documentary
consent processes**

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Certificate of original authorship

I, Rebecca Barry, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctorate of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney. This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution. This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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Content

| | |
|---|-----------|
| CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP | II |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | III |
| CONTENT | V |
| ABSTRACT..... | 1 |
| CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF THE DOCUMENTARY GENRE.. | 3 |
| The dilemma | 4 |
| Research background | 6 |
| Background and context: the creative work | 12 |
| Synopsis of the practical work: the film <i>I am a Girl</i> | 14 |
| Methodology | 16 |
| Conclusion | 17 |
| CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW..... | 20 |
| Power and victimhood..... | 22 |
| Informed consent | 29 |
| Industry standards..... | 33 |
| Artistic integrity | 41 |
| Feminist approaches..... | 47 |
| Conclusion | 51 |
| CHAPTER 3 ETHICAL DILEMMAS, PROCESSES AND PROTOCOLS | 53 |
| ‘Old school’ ways..... | 54 |
| The release form..... | 60 |
| Indigenous protocols..... | 63 |
| Documentary ethical governance..... | 68 |
| Ethical dilemmas..... | 70 |
| Conclusion | 76 |
| CHAPTER 4 FILMING <i>I AM A GIRL</i>: ETHICAL DECISIONS AND PROCESSES..... | 78 |
| Aziza, Afghanistan | 86 |
| Kimsey, Cambodia..... | 93 |
| Manu, Papua New Guinea | 99 |
| Habiba, Cameroon..... | 103 |
| Breani, United States of America..... | 107 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| Katie, Australia..... | 108 |
| Jaya, India..... | 112 |
| Conclusion | 115 |
| CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS | 122 |
| Recommendation 1: Ethical strategy and framework | 124 |
| Recommendations 2, 3 and 4: Informed consent processes..... | 125 |
| Recommendation 5: Ethics advisory group | 126 |
| Recommendation 6: Ethics advice services..... | 127 |
| Recommendation 7: Personal ethical framework | 127 |
| Recommendation 8: Professional discussion of ethics | 129 |
| Conclusion | 130 |
| APPENDICES..... | 133 |
| Appendix A: The MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics | 133 |
| Appendix B: Screen Australia’s <i>Pathways and Protocols</i> summary checklist ... | 135 |
| Appendix C: Ethics position questionnaire | 139 |
| Forsyth’s taxonomy of ethical ideologies..... | 141 |
| REFERENCES..... | 142 |

Abstract

In much contemporary documentary practice, ethical issues—particularly that of informed consent—fall into a dark grey zone. While some filmmakers have publicly reflected on their ethical decisions and academic research has explored the subject, filmmakers are often left to their own devices to navigate through challenging ethical dilemmas in an ad hoc way. Unlike other professional fields, documentary filmmakers often lack a process and insight into how best to solve ethical dilemmas. This is surprising given the often-high-stake situations and the very real risks to many documentary participants.

This dissertation set out to answer the question: ‘What ethical processes can filmmakers implement to ensure they obtain the informed consent of documentary film participants, especially when there is a power disparity between filmmakers and participants?’

The thesis describes how I drew on practice-led research in the creation of the documentary film *I am a Girl* to develop an ethical process appropriate to the diverse and dynamic ethical challenges encountered during filming.

The thesis argues that by engaging with academic literature, industry protocols and philosophical schools of thought, filmmakers can establish the framework for a personal ethical process, which can provide a path to ensuring informed consent and resolving ethical dilemmas as they arise during filming and in post-production.

The exegesis offers recommendations aimed at supporting filmmakers to self-educate and reflect on their ethical practice. Recommendations also suggest that filmmakers establish an ethics brains trust to provide advice to resolve ethical dilemmas encountered during filming. Finally, while not recommending the development of an industry code of ethics, the thesis urges the profession to establish and participate in ethics discussion forums online and at conferences. I argue that by improving the consent and decision-making processes we follow, we will move closer to creating work that earns the trust of our participants and audiences, paving the way for a healthier sector and stronger stories. ❖