

# *Tagged*

a case study in documentary  
ethics

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## CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The production of the documentary film that forms the creative component of this thesis owes much to the contribution of the four young participants whose lives are featured in this story. Paul, Sara, Rhonda and Tony generously contributed their ideas, attitudes and activities which form the basis of the documentary. Their warmth and exuberance infuse the film.

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## Abstract

The growing concern about the role of ethics in western society has also touched documentary film-making. Yet, since the emergence in the late 1980s of the first journal articles discussing documentary ethics, the theoretical exploration of the key arguments in this field has been fitful. Debates amongst filmmakers about ethics are often immersed in topical discussions of production issues or issues relating to a few controversial films. With the exception of a few insightful works, there is little new analysis or examination devoted to exploring ethics in this discipline. This dissertation adds to the available body of work by examining in depth the ethics encountered in the production of a documentary film, *Tagged*, with young people, especially the ethics encoded in the aesthetic and discursive elements of the film. Theoretical discussions about ethics range from the analytical focus on the ethics of representation, through the use of subjective modes of expressivity and filmic techniques to epistemological analyses of specific issues such as privacy and the nature of consent that draw on legal and medical models. A study of relevant documentary films reveals the variety of approaches to the moral values reflected in their discourses and visual representations, and a range of authorial voices, heavily influenced by the relationship between filmmakers and subjects and by the production circumstances of each film. In Australia, broadcasters, funding bodies and production companies dominate the documentary film-making environment and their codes, editorial policies and protocols influence the whole sector of documentary filmmaking. By categorizing documentary within the broad scope of factual programming, they reflect an institutional gaze that fails to acknowledge those individuals including children and youth, who participate in its production. Through my examination of ethics in both the theory and practice, I address the relevant question of whether there should be a code of practice for documentary film-making. In focussing on my own ethical position and its translation into practice through the making of *Tagged*, I explore the ways in which the ethical stance that I established is pivotal to the documentary and represented both in the text and in the pragmatic choices of production. This led me to conclude that the development of an ethical position specific to a current project is an effective focus on the potential ethical conflicts in a production. From this I argue that while a broad code of conduct can provide valuable guidelines, it cannot replace the filmmakers' investigation of their ethical practice and their establishment of an ethical statement and stance for their films thus creating a platform from which ethical conflicts can be understood and either avoided or resolved.