

Videography and photography: Critical thinking, ethics and knowledge-based practice in visual media

Storytelling through videography and photography can form the basis for journalism that is both consequential and high impact. Powerful images can shape public opinion and indeed change the world, but with such power comes substantial ethical and intellectual responsibility. The training that prepares journalists to do this work, therefore, must meaningfully integrate deep analytical materials and demand rigorous critical thinking. Students must not only have proficient technical skills but also must know their subject matter deeply and understand the deeper implications of their journalistic choices in selecting materials.

This course gives aspiring visual journalists the opportunity to hone critical-thinking skills and devise strategies for addressing multimedia reporting's ethical concerns on a professional level. It instills values grounded in the best practices of traditional journalism while embracing the latest technologies, all through knowledge-based, hands-on instruction.

Learning objectives

This course introduces the principles of critical thinking and ethical awareness in nonfiction visual storytelling. Students who take this course will:

- Learn the duties and rights of journalists in the digital age.
- Better understand the impact of images and sound on meaning.
- Develop a professional process for handling multimedia reporting's ethical challenges.
- Generate and translate ideas into ethically sound multimedia projects.
- Understand how to combine responsible journalism with entertaining and artistic storytelling.
- Think and act as multimedia journalists, producing accurate and balanced stories — even ones that take a point of view.

Course design

This syllabus is built around the concept of groups of students going through the complete process of producing a multimedia story and writing journal entries about ethical concerns that surface during its development and execution. Each week's lessons are also designed to work independently and can be stitched into another course; in this case, assignments are crafted for individuals rather than groups. The course focuses on video and photography, and does not speak directly to other visual media forms such as interactive graphics or data visualization (although many lessons here apply across all forms of visual storytelling).

This course utilizes the “flipped” classroom model: Outside class, students watch videos, multimedia pieces, documentaries and new media; read articles, book excerpts and studies; listen to podcast segments; and train on equipment and software. During class the instructors discuss topics related to, as well as issues and concerns stemming from, the material reviewed. For example, an instructor may zero in on a scene from a documentary the students watched outside of class and discuss an element that pertains to that week’s topics.

It is recommended that students train on multimedia equipment and software using an online venue such as Lynda.com, which many universities make available at a discount or for free to their students and faculty members. Before taking this course, students should have completed a basic multimedia-skills class or have gained the necessary fundamental skills, including operating a video camera and editing on nonlinear software.

Schedule, assignments, readings and viewings

This syllabus calls for classes to meet twice a week. Each week includes a standalone assignment that tackles critical and/or ethical issues. Some include optional group assignments, intended for when the syllabus is being used as a whole, with students working in small groups to produce a professional-level nonfiction visual story (length: 5 to 12 minutes). Several hands-on assignments lead up to the final submission.

This course offers many suggestions for readings and viewing. Many are too long to be screened in the classroom, but given the flipped classroom model, even the video shorts should be first viewed outside class. Readings are listed in their order of centrality to the course.

Week 1: The multimedia landscape

Nonfiction visual storytelling has increasingly become a vital part of the global media landscape. While many newspapers and magazines have been downsizing their newsrooms, investments in video, in particular, have been growing. For example, in 2014 the *New York Times* doubled the size of its video team and increase the prominence of [Times Video](#) on its website, even as it reduced staffing on the print side. Other publications, from the *Denver Post* to *Bloomberg* to the *New Yorker* have followed suit, and even the venerable *Economist* magazine has created [Economist Films](#) to produce “high-end factual” video shorts.

Class 1: Thinking critically about multimedia (part I)

What ethical challenges can come from infusing traditional storytelling with visual content?
What dilemmas can result from content and form that might push mainstream boundaries?

Class 2: Thinking critically about multimedia (part II)

What temptations are there to take shortcuts or make rushed decisions in the race to keep up with market demands, audience needs and evolving technologies?

Readings

- Kenneth Olmstead, Amy Mitchell, Jesse Holcomb, Nancy Vogt, [“News Video on the Web.”](#) Pew Research Center, 2014.
- Mark Deuze, [“What Is Multimedia Journalism?”](#) *Journalism Studies*, 2004, Vol. 5, No. 2.
- Society of Professional Journalists, [SPJ Code of Ethics](#), 2014.
- Shani O. Hilton, [“The BuzzFeed Editorial Standards and Ethics Guide.”](#) 2015.
- Anna Van Cauwenberge, et al., [“TV No Longer Commands Our Full Attention’: Effects of Second-screen Viewing and Task Relevance on Cognitive Load and Learning from News.”](#) *Computer in Human Behavior*, 2014, Vol. 38.

Viewing

- [“Video Now.”](#) Tow Center for Digital Journalism, 2014.
- Kassie Bracken, Taige Jensen, [“The Nipple Artist.”](#) *New York Times*, June 2, 2014.
- Channon Hodge, Tanzina Vega, Taige Jensen, [“Off Color: Kristina Wong.”](#) *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 2014.
- Jonathan Demme, [“What’s Motivating Hayes.”](#) “Docuseries,” *New Yorker*, 2015.

Assignments

- Edgy multimedia (individual, ethical considerations): Find five multimedia pieces on such venues as [Times Video](#) or the *Denver Post*’s [Media Center](#) that, in your opinion, push the envelope of traditional journalistic storytelling, be it in content, form or other aspects. In 350 to 500 words, discuss at least one ethical consideration they present.

- Give notes (individual, critical thinking): Watch a video story of your choice twice. The first time, think critically, evaluating what parts and aspects work and which need improvement. The second, jot down your thoughts using a time-code. For instance: “04:23: The subject looks directly into the camera for the first time. You may want to cover this with b-roll.” Addressing your notes directly to the video creator(s), open with at least one piece of positive feedback, along with a summary of the work as a whole, then offer about half a dozen suggestions for improvement using a time-code. Some of these can be questions posed to the creator(s).

Week 2: Ideation and idea development

Multimedia production begins with ideation — an unscientific yet often rigorous process of generating practical ideas — and critical thinking, a crucial tool gauging whether your ideas meet journalistic standards of originality, timeliness, relevancy, transparency and integrity. Closely watching out for ethical considerations from the start can help assure fairness and accuracy in story content, context and tone. Such considerations include recognizing and sidelining preconceived notions, avoiding exploiting subjects and being flexible about the essence and structure of the pursued story. It's thus critical for nonfiction visual storytellers to establish a culture of critical analysis from the start.

Class 1: Ideation

Learn how to come up with good ideas. Brainstorm, mine academic studies, and conduct primary and secondary research to generate ideas. Utilize critical thinking to make sure the ideas are original, visual, practical and ethical. Address how to balance obligations to subjects, audiences and colleagues. This is the time to consider what to do if they clash.

Class 2: Idea development

Develop your idea through primary and secondary research while exploring its ethical aspects, such as maintaining flexibility to allow the real story to emerge, constructing a journalistically sound project and approaching subjects in an ethical manner.

Readings

- Chip Scanlan, [“Idea Generators: Creativity Tools for Journalists,”](#) Poynter, 2003.
- John Wihbey, [“Research-based Ideas for College Campus Reporting: Potential Stories,”](#) Journalist’s Resource, Aug. 4, 2014.
- Bryan Alexander, [The New Digital Storytelling: Creating Narratives with New Media,](#) ABC-CLIO, 2011. Ch. 12: “Story Flow: Practical Lessons on Brainstorming, Planning and Development.”
- Richard Paul, Linda Elder, [“Defining Critical Thinking,”](#) *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools*, Foundation for Critical Thinking Press, 2008.
- Bruce Garrison, [“Journalists’ Perceptions of Online Information-Gathering Problems,”](#) *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2000, Vol. 77, No. 3.

Viewing

- QualiaSoup, [“Critical Thinking,”](#) 2009.
- Gilles Deleuze, [“Cinema: What Is the Creative Act?”](#) 1987.
- J.P. Olsen, [“Love Canal: A Legacy of Doubt,”](#) *Retro Report*, 2013.
- Amy Berg, [Deliver Us From Evil,](#) 2006.

Listening

- Chris Riback, [“Retro Report’s J.P. Olsen: ‘Love Canal: A Legacy of Doubt.’ ”](#) *Conversation With Thinkers*, 2013.
- Alex Bloomberg, [“How to Name Your Company: Choosing a Favorite Is Only the Beginning.”](#) *StartUp*, 2015.

Assignments

- Idea mapping (individual or group, critical thinking): In the center of a sheet of paper, jot down a topic that may yield a strong idea for a multimedia piece. Circle it. Draw out from it related, specific story ideas. Under each idea, list at least one ethical concern that could arise. Repeat the exercise at least twice, generating a total of three topics, several ideas and several possible ethical concerns.
- Preproduction workbook (individual or group, ethical considerations): Individually or in a group gearing up to produce a multimedia piece for this class, put together a workbook that includes a summary of your story idea, a plan to conduct primary research, annotated secondary research with basic citations, a list of ethical considerations, visuals such as photos and graphics, contact info for potential subjects and a production outline/timeline.

Week 3: The art of the interview

Despite the somewhat pejorative label of “talking heads,” traditional video interviews remain the backbone of visual reporting. Even when used only as voiceover, interviews drive stories forward. For example, in [*Twenty-Eight Feet: Life on a Little Wooden Boat*](#), director Kevin Fraser doesn’t show the protagonist’s sit-down interview, but uses the audio track to narrate the piece, highlighting the fluidity of the topic and the striking b-roll footage. And when done well, a traditional interview sequence can offer valuable clues into the characters’ motives, point of view and emotions. Errol Morris’ [*The Fog of War*](#) is basically a feature-length “talking head,” yet it won an Oscar and it is widely regarded as a landmark documentary.

Every visual reporter must learn to conduct effective on-camera sit-down interviews as well as other, less-structured interviews. Critical thinking and ethical awareness are essential components of the preproduction, production and post-production for these interviews. Nonfiction storytellers must grasp the on- and off-the-record rules, including the practical meaning of “interviewing for background,” “deep background” and “not for attribution.”

Class 1: Video interviewing

Learn how to draw the best information, stories and insights from your subjects utilizing ethically based best practices. Study the definition and application of on- and off-the-record rules — even public officials can be unclear about these procedures. Is it multimedia reporters’ responsibility to educate subjects, particularly private figures, about their rights?

Class 2: Getting close — but not too close — to subjects

Where is the “sweet spot” in building relationships with subjects? How do you earn their trust yet keep expectations realistic and professional? How do you avoid becoming an advocate when imbedded during the reporting on a story?

Readings

- Christopher B. Daly, Leighton Walter Kille, [“Interviewing a Source: Rules of the Road: Talking with Officials and Experts.”](#) Journalist’s Resource, 2014.
- Beth L. Leech, [“Asking Questions: Techniques for Semistructured Interviews.”](#) *Political Science & Politics*, 2002, No. 4, 665-668.
- Jason Guerrasio, [“Nine Filmmakers Tell Us What Makes the Perfect Documentary Character.”](#) Tribeca Film Institute, 2014.
- Norman Pearlstine, [“Off-the-Record Editorial Guidelines.”](#) 2007.
- Emanuel Berman, Timna Rosenheimer, Michal Aviad, [“Documentary Directors and Their Protagonists: A Transferential /Counter-transferential Relationship?”](#) *The Couch and the Silver Screen: Psychoanalytic Reflections on European Cinema*, Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, 2003.
- Lisa Leeman, [“How Close Is Too Close? A Consideration of the Filmmaker-Subject Relationship.”](#) *Documentary Magazine*, International Documentary Association, 2003.

Viewing

- Katie Couric, [“How to Conduct a Good Interview.”](#) 2009.
- Errol Morris, [The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara](#), 2003.
- Kevin A. Fraser, [Twenty-Eight Feet: Life on a Little Wooden Boat](#), 2014.
- Michael Gondry, [Is the Man Who Is Tall Happy? An Animated Conversation with Noam Chomsky](#), 2013.
- Charlie Rose, [“Tim Cook on Privacy and Apple Pay.”](#) 2014.

Assignments

- Class exercise (group, critical thinking): In groups of two, interview each other about a turning point in your life. Audio-record the interview. Switch to allow each person to play the role of interviewer and interviewee. As an interviewee, go off the record at least once. Afterward, tell the other person’s story to the class. As the interviewee, rate the interviewer’s accuracy.
- Interview setup (group, ethical considerations): Set up an interview with your protagonist. Write a checklist and go over it with your main characters at least 24 hours in advance of the interview. Review their rights, such as being able to go off the record.

Week 4: Effective, ethical sourcing

Like print journalists, visual storytellers often seek secondary sources for their work. For instance, they can turn to the protagonist's family, friends or foes to paint a multidimensional portrait, and reach out to experts for perspective and context. Even if such interview footage doesn't make the final cut, these additional conversations can help multimedia reporters properly frame and advance their stories.

Securing appropriate sources requires critical thinking, research and the careful weighing of ethical considerations. For example, to gain access — a crucial part of production — reporters must earn their sources' trust. This must be done through honesty, transparency and respect, yet can sometime give rise to intricate notions of power and control.

Class 1: The importance of secondary sources, including experts

Who's an expert and what standards allow you to judge this? What can experts contribute to multimedia stories? How do you find them, and what's the best way to earn and maintain their trust? How can you develop a mutually respectful approach that yields rich yet focused stories?

Class 2: Generating knowledge through multimedia reporting

Sensitive information can often emerge during interviews. What are reporters' responsibilities to their sources before, during and after (sometimes, long after) the filming? How do you avoid exploiting your subjects? What's the line and how do you know when you've crossed it?

Readings

- [“Expert Sources,”](#) Journalist's Toolbox, Society of Professional Journalists, 2012.
- Neil Reisner, [Finding \(Almost\) Anybody](#), Florida International University, 2005.
- [“Research Chat: CUNY's Barbara Gray on Web-based Research,”](#) Journalist's Resource, 2011.
- Kate Nash, [“Exploring Power and Trust in Documentary: A Study of Tom Zubrycki's Molly and Mobarak,”](#) *Studies in Documentary Film*, 2010, Vol. 4, No. 1.
- Ellen Maccarone, [“Ethical Responsibilities to Subjects and Documentary Filmmaking,”](#) *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 2010, Vol. 25, No. 3.
- John Anderson, [“Documentaries and Ties that Bind or Unravel,”](#) *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 2010.

Viewing

- Bonnie Bertram, Erik German, Meral Agish, [“Vaccines: An Unhealthy Skepticism,”](#) *Retro Report*, 2015.
- Lagan Sebert, J.P. Olsen, Matt Spolar, [“Napster: Culture of FREE,”](#) *Retro Report*, 2014.
- Gabe & Kristy, [Getting People to Talk: An Ethnography and Interviewing Primer](#), IIT Institute of Design, 2009.
- Leon Gast, [When We Were Kings](#), 1996.

Assignment

Expert opinion (individual or group, critical thinking, ethical considerations): Set up and conduct an on-camera, sit-down interview with an expert. For instance, for a multimedia piece about sexual assault on campus, you may choose to interview a sociology professor who teaches and/or researches gender issues. Write a journal entry about this shoot's ethical considerations and how you dealt with them before, during or after the interview.

Week 5: Smart practice in the field

If sit-down interviews are the backbone of nonfiction visual storytelling, observational and b-roll footage are its flesh and blood. They tend to be the most interesting filmic aspect of video production, infusing multimedia stories with movement, intensity and aesthetic depth. They also require a great deal of critical thinking and can present complex, unpredictable challenges.

Ethical issues that may come up during production include whether to intervene in a difficult or risky situation and how to protect subjects' privacy. Multimedia reporters must make many decisions — often, in real time — about capturing, framing and even creating scenes. Many of these decisions have ethical dimensions.

Class 1: Ethically sound decision-making during production (part I)

Learning if and when to intervene. This was a dilemma that Susan Froemke, Albert Maysles and Deborah Dickson faced when making *Lalee's Kin*, when they grappled with whether to help feed their subjects, who often went hungry. What would you have done? Why?

Class 2: Ethically sound decision-making during production (part II)

What is the best way to handle questions of privacy? Why is it valuable, and how can visual reporters balance countervailing interests? How can we to avoid hypocrisy?

Readings

- Nancy Kalow, [“The Ethics of Documenting Others.”](#) *Visual Storytelling*, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University, 2011.
- Willemien Sanders, [“The Aggie Will Come First Indeed. A Survey on Documentary Filmmakers Dealing with Participants.”](#) *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 2012, Vol. 10, No. 3.
- Frederick Wiseman, [“Privacy and Documentary Filmmaking.”](#) *Social Research*, 2001, Vol. 68, No. 1.
- Anne Adams, [“Multimedia Information Changes the Whole Privacy Ballgame.”](#) 10th Conference on Computers, Freedom and Privacy, Toronto, Canada, 2000.

Viewing

- Susan Froemke, Albert Maysles, Deborah Dickson, *Lalee's Kin*, 2000.
- Chris Hegedus, D.A. Pennebaker, *The War Room*, 1993.
- Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, Albert Maysles, D.A. Pennebaker, *Primary*, 1960.
- Cullen Hoback, *Terms and Conditions May Apply*, 2013.

Assignment

Observational shoot (individual or group, critical thinking, ethical considerations). Using a “fly on the wall” approach, film your subject in action. She/he could be interacting with others, giving a lecture or working in a lab. The activity must be organic (i.e., “real”), not staged. Simply capture it. Write a journal entry about this shoot’s ethical considerations.

Week 6: The philosophies of visual media

Using visual media to tell nonfiction stories is universal, and dates back at least 40,000 years, to the cave paintings in Spain and France. Writers and philosophers from Plato to Susan Sontag have written passionately about the ethical dimensions of nonfiction visual storytelling. Gaining insight into their arguments offers an opportunity to sharpen your points of view and build on a long tradition of deep critical thought.

Class 1: An overview of nonfiction visual storytelling

Why and how is nonfiction visual storytelling ingrained in the human experience? What makes it so important — and so full of ethical challenges? What is the philosophy that underlies the critical thinking about its impact on society and individuals?

Class 2: How to think and act like a nonfiction visual storyteller

By observing the techniques and practices of leading practitioners, students can build upon the hard-won insights and experiences of others. The truly great photographers and filmmakers develop habits of mind and a philosophical worldview that helps guide their work.

Readings

- S. Marc Cohen, [“The Allegory of the Cave from Plato’s Republic,”](#) 2006.
- Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, [“In Plato’s Cave,”](#) 1977.
- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972.
- Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, “The Monomyth,” 1949, pages 3-46.
- Yu Liua, Kay L. O’Halloran, [“Intersemiotic Texture: Analyzing Cohesive Devices between Language and Images,”](#) *Social Semiotics*, 2009, Vol. 19, No. 4.

Viewing

- Nigel Spivey, Robin Dashwood, Mark Hedgecoe, [The Origin of Cave Images and Paintings](#), BBC, 2014.
- Nancy Kates, *Regarding Susan Sontag*, 2014.
- Pepita Ferrari, [Capturing Reality](#), 2008. Ch. 2, “Exploring the Genre: The Social Role of Documentary.”
- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, BBC, Episodes [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), 1972.

Assignment

Philosophical point (individual, critical thinking): Zero in on a theoretical take on the power of nonfiction visual storytelling made by one of the writers who have tackled this subject over the years. In 250 to 300 words, explain how you agree, disagree, or both, with the points they make.

Week 7: Narrative techniques in visual storytelling

Narrative techniques can infuse nonfiction stories with internal and external conflicts, highlight an arc for protagonists, and build tension to a climax. The use of narrative structures vary widely, but they often share basic elements such as a proactive protagonist and supporting characters who help and/or hinder the protagonist's trajectory. The classic "hero's journey" described in Joseph Campbell's [*Hero with a Thousand Faces*](#) has pervaded storytelling for thousands of years, and appears in fiction films as varied as *Star Wars* and *Finding Nemo*.

For nonfiction stories, viewers might expect the 100% "truth," but this can often be elusive, even for straight-news reporters, and many multimedia journalists argue narrative elements help them deliver the best version of the "truth" that is also well researched and documented.

Class 1: Narrative techniques in nonfiction visual storytelling

What are the benefits of using narrative techniques in nonfiction visual storytelling? What are the potential pitfalls and how can they be avoided? Can these tools bend the facts to the point of twisting them? Discuss multimedia pieces and documentaries that utilize narrative tools, such as [*The Off-Season*](#).

Class 2: The pursuit of the elusive truth

What is the "truth"? What measures can multimedia reporters take to capture and deliver it? Continue the discussion about multimedia pieces and documentaries that utilize narrative tools, such as Albert and David Maysles's classic documentary [*Salesman*](#).

Readings

- Joseph Campbell, [*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*](#), "The Adventure of the Hero," 1949, pages 49-95.
- Hanna Schenkel, ["A Lie that Tells the Truth: How Fictional Techniques Enhance Documentary Storytelling."](#) *Screen Education*, 2014, No. 74.
- Robert McKee, [*Story: Style, Structure, Substance and the Principles of Screenwriting*](#), 1997. Ch. 5, "Structure and Character"; Ch. 8, "The Inciting Incident"; Ch. 13, "Crisis, Climax and Resolution."
- Bill Nichols, ["History, Myth and Narrative in Documentary."](#) 1987, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1.

Viewing

- Albert Maysles, David Maysles, [*Salesman*](#), 1969.
- Lance Oppenheim, [*The Off-Season*](#), Short of the Week, 2012.
- SilverDocs, ["Martin Scorsese: Documentary vs. Narrative,"](#) American Film Institute, Discovery Channel, 2010.
- Desson Thomson, ["Werner Herzog on Deeper Truth,"](#) American Film Institute, Discovery Channel, 2009.

Assignments

- Narrative element (individual, critical thinking): Watch a documentary or a multimedia piece of your choice. Identify a narrative element such as an active protagonist. In 300 to 500 words, describe it and analyze whether it helped or hindered the storyteller's process of capturing and delivering the "truth."
- Narrative notion (group, critical thinking): Pick a narrative tool such as creating a character arc and apply it (at this stage, simply as an exercise) to the multimedia piece you are producing for this class. Write a journal entry addressing such questions as: Do you feel you are tampering with reality? Or does this tool actually help you better capture and deliver your perception of reality?

Week 8: Editing and ethics

Many multimedia reporters and documentary filmmakers say they craft their stories in the editing suite. It takes critical thinking to carefully select moving images and decide how to present them, including whether (and to what degree) to manipulate them. Other issues include how to use music, respond when subjects demand to review a rough cut — and even handle a possible triple-murder confession.

In making the HBO documentary [The Jinx](#), Andrew Jarecki and Marc Smerling noticed well into post-production — two years after the interview — that their protagonist may have admitted to murder. In an article about this development, the *New York Times*' Jonathan Mahler asked, “What are the responsibilities of filmmakers — or, for that matter, journalists — who come into the possession of potentially incriminating or exculpatory evidence during an investigation?”

Class 1: Making tough decisions during post-production

Almost every aspect of the editing process requires critical thinking beyond making creative and aesthetic decisions. Multimedia reporters must take the time to figure out their positions. They could be dealing with life and death decisions. Just ask Jarecki and Smerling.

Class 2: Taking responsibility for your version of the truth

In the editing suite, what measures are required to deliver the story you have uncovered? How do you choose what to leave on the cutting-room floor? What is the practical and ethical considerations of transcribing videotaped interviews?

Readings

- Jay Ruby, [“The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film.”](#) *Journal of the University Film Association*, 1977, Vol. 29, No. 4.
- Regina McCombs, [“Music in Multimedia: Add Sparingly, Not as a Crutch.”](#) Poynter, 2009.
- Jonathan Mahler, [“Irresistible TV, but Durst Film Tests Ethics, Too.”](#) *New York Times*, March 16, 2015.
- Bruce Fretts, [“‘The Jinx’ Director Andrew Jarecki on Robert Durst and That Ending.”](#) *New York Times*, March 16, 2015.

Viewing

- Andrew Jarecki, Marc Smerling, [The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst](#), HBO, Ch. 6: “The Second Interview,” 2015.
- Zackary Canepari, Drea Cooper, [Superman](#), 2013.
- Jonathan Caouette, [Tarnation](#), 2003.
- Nanette Burstein, Brett Morgen, [The Kid Stays in the Picture](#), 2002.

Assignment

Ethical editing (group, critical thinking): Edit a rough cut of your video story. In the process, address ethical concerns that arise, such as deciding when to show it to your protagonist. Write a journal entry about these concerns. Describe how you have dealt or plan to deal with them.

Week 9: Still photography's lasting power

Despite all the advances in technology, the photograph has maintained its distinctive draw — and can still pack unmatched emotional punch. Multimedia reporters must establish a process for effectively and ethically selecting the “right” images. Stills come with their own set of ethical considerations, most notably the classic problem of tampering, which started soon after the birth of photography in the 19th century. Tools such as Photoshop have made “improving” the content of photos easier than ever, muddling an already murky area.

Class 1: Appreciating the lasting power of the still image

What are the characteristics that keep photography at the forefront of nonfiction visual storytelling? Comparing the iconic [“Raising of the Flag in Iwo Jima”](#) photo to the [Iwo Jima flag-raising video](#) shows the distinct appeal of the image itself.

Class 2: Developing a critically and ethically sound photo-selection process

What does it take to choose compelling still images and incorporate them into multimedia stories? Should a photo-selection process include, perhaps first and foremost, a way to determine when to leave out certain images, such as the [9/11 falling man photo](#)?

Readings

- Maria Aspan, [“Ease of Alteration Creates Woes for Picture Editors.”](#) *New York Times*, Aug. 14, 2006.
- Tom Wheeler, Tim Gleason, [“Photography or Photofiction: An Ethical Protocol for the Digital Age.”](#) *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 1995, Vol. 2, No. 1.
- Errol Morris, [“Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire.”](#) *New York Times*, July 10, 2007.
- Errol Morris, [Believing Is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography](#), 2011.

Listening

- Jad Abumrad, Robert Krulwich, [“Sight Unseen.”](#) *RadioLab*, WNYC, April 28, 2015.

Viewing

- Kelsey Monty, [Photo Journalistic Ethics: Photo Manipulation](#), 2012.
- PhotoWings, [“Photographer Paula Bronstein: Visual Ethics.”](#) Foundry Photojournalism Workshop, 2013.
- Joe Rosenthal, [“Raising of the Flag in Iwo Jima.”](#) Associated Press, 1945.
- Lou Reda Productions, [Iwo Jima flag-raising video](#), 1945.
- [O.J. Simpson Time magazine cover](#). June 27, 1994.

Assignment

Multimedia stills: Take some quick and informal photos of one of your subjects (what might be considered “b-roll” shots in videography). Edit the raw files, selecting at least one image to incorporate into your multimedia piece. Use Photoshop to do the following: (1) Improve the image through basic measures such as color and level correction, being careful to maintain its content and editorial tone. (2) Alter the same photo in a significant and therefore potentially unethical manner. Use the first version in your project and write a journal entry about the second.

Week 10: Spotting best practices through great works

As they work, leading journalists conduct a great deal of research and think critically during all stages of a project. It's both essential and can sometimes lead to unexpected results. For example, in 2013 *Frontline* and ESPN were collaborating on a joint documentary about concussions in the National Football League. Each partner applied critical thinking to the same research and set of interviews, yet walked away with [different conclusions](#) — and both versions of the story won a 2015 Peabody Award.

Examples of strong multimedia reporting are everywhere, but some projects stand out. John Branch's "[Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek](#)" set a new standard in multimedia when it published by the *New York Times* in 2012. The following year, the *Guardian* aimed to outdo its American counterpart by posting "[Firestorm.](#)"

Class 1: Recognizing quality in nonfiction visual storytelling

What makes the *Guardian*'s "[Firestorm](#)" groundbreaking? How to view multimedia reporting through professional, analytical eyes?

Class 2: Investigative journalism on a (small) screen near you

What ethical considerations do multimedia reporters face when digging into serious topics such as torture? Does the video format present unique challenges?

Readings

- Martin Belam, "[Telling the Story of 'Firestorm.'](#)" 2013.
- John Branch, "[Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek.](#)" *New York Times*, 2012.
- Wes Unruh, "[Peabody Award-Winning Documentaries of Frontline.](#)" Peabody Awards, 2015.
- David Fanning, Raney Aronson, "[A Note from Frontline: ESPN and 'League of Denial.'](#)" PBS *Frontline*, 2013.
- WGBH, "[Frontline Journalistic Guidelines.](#)" 2015

Viewing

- Jon Henley, Laurence Topham, "[Firestorm.](#)" *Guardian*, May 23, 2013.
- Thomas Jennings, "[American Terrorist.](#)" *Frontline*, 2015,
- Peter Klein, "[Anatomy of an Interrogation.](#)" *Retro Report*, 2015.
- Scott Calonico, *The Silly Bastard Next to the Bed*, 2015.

Assignments

- Qualifying quality (individual, critical thinking): Watch one of the above visual stories. In 500 words, describe its strengths and weaknesses and assess whether it meets journalistic standards of quality.
- Preliminary rough cut (group, critical thinking): Submit the preliminary rough cut of your multimedia story with a report on what you still need to do to achieve excellence.

Week 11: Advocacy and nonfiction storytelling

In recent decades, documentaries have deepened the discussion about such polarizing issues as global warming ([An Inconvenient Truth](#)), animal mistreatment ([Blackfish](#)), fast food ([Super Size Me](#)) and the Great Recession ([Inside Job](#)), among others.

Engaging in mission-orientated visual storytelling presents a whole new set of ethical considerations and can also make reporters vulnerable. “Nonfiction filmmakers who tell truth to power often face aggressive attacks from powerful individuals, governmental bodies, businesses and associations,” Patricia Aufderheide and Angelica Das state in [“Dangerous Documentaries: Reducing Risk When Telling Truth to Power.”](#) Safety for multimedia reporters and their subjects before, during and after all stages of production is a real, practical ethical issue. It takes critical thinking to map out potential problems and strategize on the best ways to deal with them.

Class 1: Advocacy in documentary filmmaking

What are the ethical implications of using your skills to promote an agenda? What role do you want to play? Do you see yourself as an advocate, a detached observer or something else?

Class 2: Risks for nonfiction storytellers and their subjects

In “Dangerous Documentaries,” Aufderheide and Das argue that society should better protect nonfiction storytellers: “What are the risks, and can they be mitigated to encourage more and better expression on the important issues of the day?” Similarly, subjects of multimedia reporting can also run risks, from powerful interests or because of the behavior of the nonfiction storytellers. What are some of the ethical issues that can arise, and how can they be addressed?

Readings

- Vincent Stehle, [“How Documentaries Have Become Stronger Advocacy Tools.”](#) *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 2011.
- Bryce J. Renninger, [“SeaWorld Unleashes 8 Assertions About ‘Blackfish’ and Filmmakers Respond.”](#) *Indiewire*, July 15, 2013.
- Tom Isler, [“Errol Morris Sued by His Documentary Subject — Again.”](#) *Docs and the Law Blog*, University of Pennsylvania Law School, Jan. 18, 2014.
- Patricia Aufderheide, Angelica Das, [“Dangerous Documentaries: Reducing Risk when Telling Truth to Power.”](#) Center for Media & Social Impact, School of Communication, American University, 2015.

Viewing

- Gabriela Cowperthwaite, *Blackfish*, 2013: [Trailer](#), [review](#), [interview](#), [ethics charges](#) by SeaWorld, [impact](#).
- Charles Ferguson, *Inside Job*, 2010.
- Davis Guggenheim, *An Inconvenient Truth*, 2006.
- Morgan Spurlock, *Super Size Me*, 2004.
- Errol Morris, *The Thin Blue Line*, 1988.

Assignments

- Advocacy approach (individual, critical thinking): Pick an issue that matters to you and write a synopsis of a mission-driven documentary you might like to make. How would you weave in your advocacy? Overtly? Subtly? What kind of tone would you employ? Would you create a campaign around the documentary to stimulate discussion among key audiences about its issue?
- Rough cut (group, critical thinking): Submit the rough cut of your multimedia story. Write 250 words about whether it contains elements that can be viewed as advocacy. If so, what are they? If not, did you purposely stay away from such elements?

Week 12: Practices on the edge and ethical pitfalls

On the surface, deception may seem like a clear-cut issue in nonfiction visual storytelling. After all, why would any professional in pursuit of the truth turn to dishonest measures? What if you determined that the only way to report a story that could have grave consequences for public safety was to use hidden cameras?

Such techniques can help tell powerful stories, including [“The Secret Swami,”](#) Tanya Datta investigative portrait of the late Indian spiritual leader Sathya Sai Baba. At the same time, hidden cameras or taking deceptive steps to gain entrance to story locations can get multimedia reporters in serious trouble. Just ask ABC News *PrimeTime Live*, which lost a key part of its appeal to overturn a judgment against it in the landmark 1996 Food Lion case. Other issues — including the proliferation of found footage such as the [“Ray Rice”](#) cell-phone video and doctored/bogus videos — have strengthened the need for constructing a process to think through ethical considerations in multimedia reporting.

Class 1: Lying to get the truth?

Would you use deceptive measures to report a story? Would you use them only in “important” stories? As a last resort? Did *PrimeTime Live* reporters go too far when they lied on job applications and utilized hidden cameras to expose allegedly public safety issues at Food Lyon? Would you use material that was leaked by a whistleblower or obtained illegally?

Class 2: Fake videos, real trouble

Doctored and bogus videos and images are anything but new, but 21st-century technology has greatly simplified their production and wide dissemination. It’s also easier than ever to recycle footage from one period and place to another — but technology can also help [detect fakes](#).

Readings

- Bob Steele, [“ABC and Food Lion: The Ethics Questions,”](#) Poynter, 2002.
- [“Food Lyin’?”](#) PBS Newshour, Jan. 15, 1997.
- Roy Peter Clark, [“Ray Rice Video Sparks Ethics Questions,”](#) Poynter, Nov. 25, 2014.
- Tracy Shelton, [“The Most Disturbing Fake Videos Making the Rounds in Syria,”](#) *GlobalPost*, Nov. 12, 2012.
- Astrid Gynnild, [“Surveillance Videos and Visual Transparency in Journalism,”](#) *Journalism Studies*, 2014, Vol. 15, No. 4.
- Josh Stearns and Leighton Walter Kille, [“Tools for Verifying and Assessing the Validity of Social Media and User-generated Content,”](#) *Journalist’s Resource and VerificationJunkie*, April 2, 2015.

Viewing

- Laura Poitras, [Citizenfour](#), 2014.
- TMZ, [“Ray Rice — Elevator Knockout ... Fiancée Takes Crushing Punch,”](#) 2014.
- Zachary Maxwell, [Yuck: A 4th Grader’s Documentary About School Lunch](#), 2012.
- Judith Ehrlich, Rick Goldsmith, [The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers](#), 2009.

Assignments

- Hidden truth (individual, ethical considerations): From a journalistic and ethical point of view (separate from the legal issue), did the *PrimeTime Live* reporters do the right or wrong thing — or something in between or altogether different — by lying about their qualifications and using hidden cameras to produce [“Food Lyin’?”](#)
- Fine cut (group, critical thinking): Submit the fine cut of your multimedia story and write 250 words about whether you and your team used or considered using any measures that might be viewed as potentially deceptive. If so, what were they and how did you handle them? If not, could you have used such measures in your piece? If you had, what would they have contributed and/or taken away from your work?

Week 13: Insights on ethics and stereotypes

For multimedia reporters, ethical concerns are a practical matter, but academic studies can provide insight. Scholars have long been researching nonfiction visual storytelling, and their work has revealed the advantages and disadvantages of visual media, as well as their effect on audiences. For example, in a [2012 “field report,”](#) Patricia Aufderheide studied 45 documentarians’ “common ethical challenges” and the ways they “address those challenges in the absence of a formally articulated code of ethics or shared institutional regulations.”

Class 1: Scholarly and empirical insights on the ethics of the visual

Scholars who study filmmaking raise profound issues for practitioners, and their insights can provide guidance.

Class 2: Issues of identity on screen, and grappling with stereotypes

There is a long history of representing race, gender and other identity categories in a less-than-responsible and objective way through imagery. A painful history of bias and prejudice haunts this aspect of visual media. How can contemporary practitioners usefully grapple with this history and think resourcefully about how to overcome stereotypes?

Readings

- Patricia Aufderheide, [“Perceived Ethical Conflicts in U.S. Documentary Filmmaking,”](#) *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 2012, Vol. 10, No. 3.
- Willemien Sanders, [“Documentary Filmmaking and Ethics: Concepts, Responsibilities, and the Need for Empirical Research,”](#) *Mass Communication and Society*, 2010, Vol. 13, No. 5.
- Garnet C. Butchart, [“Camera as Sign: On the Ethics of Unconcealment in Documentary Film and Video,”](#) *Social Semiotics*, 2013, Vol. 23, No. 5.
- Maria Elizabeth Grabe, [“Emotion-Provoking Personalization of News: Informing Citizens and Closing the Knowledge Gap?”](#) *Communication Research*, 2013.
- Sarah Eschholz, Jana Bufkin and Jenny Long, [“Symbolic Reality Bites: Women and Racial/ethnic Minorities in Modern Film,”](#) *Sociological Spectrum: Mid-South Sociological Association*, 2002, Vol. 22, Issue 3.
- Travis L. Dixon, [“Good Guys Are Still Always in White? Positive Change and Continued Misrepresentation of Race and Crime on Local Television News,”](#) *Communication Research*, 2015.
- Franklin D. Gilliam Jr., Nicholas A. Valentino and Matthew N. Beckmann, [“Where You Live and What You Watch: The Impact of Racial Proximity and Local Television News on Attitudes about Race and Crime,”](#) *Political Research Quarterly*, December 2002.
- Robert M. Entman, [“Modern Racism and the Images of Blacks in Local Television News,”](#) *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1990, Vol. 7, No. 4.

Assignment

Identify an example of a television news segment, a documentary film and a photograph that contain problematic portrayals of women, racial minorities or others. These can be historical in nature. Based on some of the concepts and analytical approaches introduced in the academic literature, write a blog post of 800 to 1,000 words evaluating these problematic works.

Week 14: Practical matters, social media

Ethical issues often cross into the legal realm, and the fine details of fair use, copyright and story rights are essential to understand. Although many filmmakers are understandably cautious or confused about the limits of fair use, some have used what seems like a limitation as a springboard for creativity. For example, director Penny Lane and producer Brian L. Frye constructed the feature-length documentary *Our Nixon* relying almost entirely on found footage.

Learning how to navigate social media is also crucial for multimedia reporters. Documentary filmmakers such as Gabriela Cowperthwaite (*Blackfish*) and Invisible Children (*Kony 2012*) have created extremely successful campaigns through such venues as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. But there are substantial risks as well, including the possibility of losing control of how your work is perceived.

Class 1: The legal language multimedia reporters must learn

What is fair use? Copyright? Personal and property releases? Life-story rights? How do these concepts inform and affect the practice of nonfiction visual storytellers? What are the most helpful online resources?

Class 2: Multimedia journalism and social media

Although some nonfiction visual storytellers have found success promoting their projects online, there are plenty of drawbacks. What are best practices multimedia reporters can adopt?

Readings

- [“Documentary Filmmakers’ Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use,” “Examples of Successful Fair Use in Documentary Film,”](#) Center for Media & Social Impact, School of Communication, American University, 2015.
- Tom Isler, [“Whose Story Is It, Anyway? Obtaining a Subject’s Life-Story Rights,”](#) International Documentary Association, 2014.
- Brandon Harris, [“All the King’s Men: Penny Lane on *Our Nixon*,”](#) *Filmmaker Magazine*, Aug. 31, 2013.
- Stephen Marche, [“The Epidemic of Facelessness,”](#) *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 2015.
- Anthony Wing Kosner, [“12 Lessons from ‘Kony 2012’ from Social Media Power Users,”](#) *Forbes*, March 9, 2012.
- Matthew James Kushin, Masahiro Yamamoto, [“Did Social Media Really Matter? College Students’ Use of Online Media and Political Decision Making in the 2008 Election,”](#) *Mass Communication and Society*, 2010, Vol. 13, No. 5.
- Kelly Fincham, [“Seven Ways Journalists Can Make Better Ethical Decisions When Using Facebook,”](#) Poynter, June 11, 2012.

Viewing

- Gordon Firemark, "[A Brief Explanation of 'Fair Use.'](#)" June 26, 2013.
- Penny Lane, Brian L. Frye, *Our Nixon*, 2013.
- Invisible Children, *Kony 2012*, 2012.

Assignments

- Being social (group, critical thinking): Create a social-media campaign to promote the multimedia piece you are producing for this class.
- Final cut (group, legal considerations): Submit the final cut of your multimedia story. Write a report about the legal considerations you have addressed or still need to address, including obtaining signed release forms from your subjects. Make a list and summarize what you have done or plan to do about each item.

Week 15: New outlets, new formats and the ethics of entertainment

The rise of digital technology has led to an explosion of innovation in nonfiction storytelling — participatory video montages, open-source templates, animated documentaries, crowd-sourced projects and more. These developments raise ethical challenges, such as maintaining credibility when producing a participatory video montage. For example, the need to fully and creatively represent the reality of a diverse group of persons played a role in director Katerina Cizek’s decision to abandon her original plan of making a traditional documentary on highrises and instead create the interactive, Web-based [One Millionth Tower](#).

This spirit of innovation has taken some traditional news organizations to places no one would have ever imagined just a few years ago. For instance, *Newsweek*, Condé Nast Publications and CNN, among others, have ventured into Hollywood-inspired filmmaking. They aim for theatrical release of documentaries and feature films that are “inspired by true events” in coming years. Feature films such as [Selma](#) and [Argo](#) that claim to be “based on a true story,” but often diverge significantly from what actually happened. What are the risks?

Class 1: Case study: The innovations of Vice

The news outlet [Vice](#) has grown over the years into a provocative and powerful outlet for storytelling and investigative work. But not every video is without controversy. Reviewing recent work from Vice can help surface and frame a variety of contemporary issues in videography, documentary work and journalism.

Class 2: Separating fact and fiction

What are the ethical consequences of traditional news organizations stepping into Hollywood’s realm? What are the risks and potential benefits of lightly or heavily fictionalizing a real-life story? Where’s the line between “lying to get to the truth” and pure fiction?

Readings

- Michael Cieply, [“News Companies See Movies as Opportunity for Growth,”](#) *New York Times*, March 29, 2015.
- Rob Tornoe, [“Digital Publishing: Visual Storytelling Does More Than Entertain,”](#) *Editor & Publisher*, Feb. 12, 2013.
- Alessandra Bajec, [“18 Days in Egypt: Storytelling Platform Documents Egypt’s Revolution,”](#) *EMAJ Magazine*, Euro-Mediterranean Academy for Young Journalists, April 11, 2012.
- Alex Woodson, [“Ethics on Film: Discussion of ‘Argo,’ ”](#) Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, 2013.
- A.O. Scott, [“‘True Story,’ ‘The Jinx’ and Serving Up Truth With the Imagination,”](#) *New York Times*, April 22, 2015.

Viewing

- Jaya Balendra, [Cronulla Riots: The Day that Shocked the Nation](#), Northern Pictures, SBS Online, Screen Australia, 2014.
- Katerina Cizek, [One Millionth Tower](#), 2011.
- Jigar Mehta, Yasmin Elayat, [18 Days in Egypt](#), 2012.
- Paul Shoebridge, Michael Simons, [Welcome to Pine Point](#), 2011.
- Manohla Dargis, [“Movie Review: ‘The Missing Picture,’ ”](#) *New York Times*, March 21, 2014.
- Rithy Panh, [The Missing Picture](#), 2013.
- Ava DuVernay, [Selma](#), 2014.
- Ben Affleck, [Argo](#), 2012.

Assignments

- *Argo* analysis (individual, ethical considerations): Read [“Ethics on Film: Discussion of ‘Argo’ ”](#) and answer the first five questions at the bottom.
- Attend screening (individual and group, critical thinking): Attend the screening of the final cuts of the group project for this class. Critically assess your work as well as your colleagues’. Most important: Note how much you have learned about nonfiction visual storytelling.

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