THE DOCUMENTARY FILM IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST INITIATIVE

CONVENING REPORT

DOCUMENTARY IDEAS SYMPOSIUM 2025

DOCUMENTARY AT RISK: STRATEGIES FOR ETHICS, SUSTAINABILITY, AND INNOVATION IN A TIME OF DISRUPTION

HARVARD Kennedy School
SHORENSTEIN CENTER
on Media, Politics and Public Policy

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INTRODUCTION

As director of a research center focused on the health of our public square, I spend much of my time tracking causes for alarm: rising division, rampant disinformation, and the reckless deployment of powerful technologies that concentrate control without accountability.

So it was bracing—and inspiring—to be reminded, during the Shorenstein Center's first *Documentary Ideas Symposium*, that we also live in a golden age of storytelling. The same tools that often feel like weapons against truth, trust, and fairness have also empowered filmmakers to reach global audiences in ways that were unimaginable just a decade ago.

None of this is easy. The upheaval in how we create and consume information touches every surface of public and private life. And the obstacles facing documentary filmmakers—from gutted public funding to the commercial gatekeeping of distributors—can crowd out deeper questions. Several weeks after the symposium took place, the announcement of the impending closure of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting came as yet another seismic shift in the field. For anyone committed to the public interest, the atomization of audiences, the collapse of traditional revenue models, and the rise of extractive platforms demand both vigilance and reinvention.

At the same time, the growing influence of nonfiction storytelling brings new ethical responsibilities. To shape the public imagination is to wield power—and those who tell other people's stories (or their own) must constantly navigate hard questions of voice, authorship, consent, and impact. These are not just editorial choices. They are moral ones.

That's why we convened this symposium: not to reach consensus, but to press one another, learn from one another, and seek greater clarity about the road ahead. Technologies like artificial intelligence will continue to accelerate, hurling new obstacles and opportunities in our path. If the documentary field is to flourish, it will need principled leaders willing to widen the lens—asking tough questions, embracing creative risk, and holding fast to public purpose.

I'm especially grateful to the leaders of our *Documentary Film in the Public Interest* program—Sara Archambault, Rebecca Richman Cohen, Enrique Pedráza-Botero, and Sydney Tanigawa—for bringing passion, insight, and urgency to this work.

And we are all grateful to the supporters who make this research and these conversations possible—at a moment when they've never mattered more.

– Nancy Gibbs, Shorenstein Center Director

Photo by Martha Stewart.

Nancy Gibbs, Shorenstein Center Director.

DFPI PROGRAM DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

FROM PRESSURE TO POSSIBILITY: ETHICAL PRACTICE AND NEW IMAGININGS FOR THE DOCUMENTARY FIELD

Documentary filmmaking, at its core, is driven by an abiding faith that truth-telling matters, that stories can make a difference, and that the act of bearing witness is a sacred responsibility. These films are works of art and can entertain, but for those whose filmmaking is focused on elevating the public good, documentary offers a vital tool and methodology for seeking justice, accountability, and public understanding. With this power comes a host of weighty responsibilities and ethical dilemmas involving risks and uncertainties for filmmakers, for the people whose stories form the bedrock of these projects, and, of course, for audiences. In an era marked by rapid technological change, shifting political tides, and consistent pressures on independent storytelling, the ethical imperatives of documentary filmmaking have never been more complex—or more consequential.

It was out of these tensions that the inaugural Documentary Ideas Symposium was born. The goal for the Shorenstein Center's Documentary Film in the Public Interest (DFPI) initiative was to create a forum rooted in transparency and trust in order to foster the kind of candid dialogue that is harder to have in more public-facing realms like the film festival panel or commissioner's forum.

While the symposium's stated focus was documentary ethics, it quickly became clear that our conversations could not be separated from the wider threats facing our field. The air in the room was charged by acute anxieties: the precarious future of PBS and other public media organizations under threat from proposed government funding cuts, the ongoing erosion of support for documentaries driven by visions of public interest or social justice, and the chilling effects of censorship and self-censorship as commercial platforms increasingly

sideline more serious or provocative storytelling in favor of market-safe content. That the convening took place at Harvard Kennedy School—just days after university leadership affirmed its refusal to capitulate to political pressure from the Trump administration—lent the gathering an added sense of urgency and resolve. For many in the room, it was impossible to talk about ethics in the abstract when the foundational infrastructure of documentary—of independent thought, creative risk, democratic debate—felt so under siege.

This first gathering, which we hope will be annual, brought together a cross-section of many of the documentary field's most thoughtful and committed practitioners: filmmakers (from seasoned award winners to next-edge voices), institutional leaders new and old, executives, scholars, lawyers, radical thinkers, and industry professionals. Our ambition was to seat representatives at every level of power—from the grassroots to the treetops—and every point of view in the same room to see what might spark. The result? Sometimes difficult, always illuminating conversations about the state of the documentary field, its marketplace, its core ethical practices; and how we might build momentum to protect, reform, and innovate this essential field together.

We made the deliberate choice to keep attendance small, confidential (abiding by the Chatham House Rule), and wide open to productive disagreement. That created a unique container—a place for real vulnerability, one that can be rare in these forums, and a sense of possibility, too. We wrestled with questions big and small: What does real participant care look like, especially as stories circulate in an unpredictable world? Where do legal and moral concerns collide—and what happens when one overshadows the other? Is it possible to build a rigorously ethical community of practice, even as commercial pressures, platform changes, and emergent technologies like AI reshape the landscape at breakneck speed? And what does it take to cross the old divides separating "movement" documentary and commercial industry paradigms so we can move forward, not apart?

Traversing through these "big questions" together, it was impossible not to feel the pressures and uncertainties of the world lurking beyond the forum doors. We debated strategies for defending documentary media focused on the public interest, for resisting pressures to appease markets or censors, and for collectively imagining new possibilities to sustain, protect, and reenergize our field.

> …WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU OVERCOME FEAR? EVERYTHING. EVERYTHING HAPPENS WHEN YOU OVERCOME FEAR. YOU GET STORIES, YOU GET FILMS, YOU GET SUCCESS, AND YOU GET FAILURE. INCREDIBLE THINGS HAPPEN WHEN YOU WORK THROUGH FEAR. THROUGHOUT CIVILIZATION'S HISTORY, WE BUILT BETTER SYSTEMS OF JUSTICE BECAUSE WE OVERCAME FEAR.
>
> — Vinay Shukla, accepting the Grand Prize for his film *While We Watched*.

Through these debates, we also searched for inspiration and hope. During the symposium proceedings, the Shorenstein Center hosted the first Henry Awards for Public Interest Documentary. In accepting the Grand Prize for his film *While We Watched*, filmmaker Vinay Shukla reminded us:

"…What happens when you overcome fear? Everything. Everything happens when you overcome fear. You get stories, you get films, you get success, and you get failure. Incredible things happen when you work through fear. Throughout civilization's history, we built better systems of justice because we overcame fear."

This sentiment penetrated the shared worries and permeated the conversations over the two-day gathering. If the challenges ahead are daunting, the determination in that room—to confront them head-on, together—remains my greatest source of hope.

In the end, nobody left with all the answers or a neat checklist—but there was clarity, if not consensus, on some essential truths: there's no one-size-fits-all container for ethical documentary practice, but there is a wealth of collective knowledge, hard-won wisdom, and a growing hunger for radical collaboration. Several priorities came into focus: the need for deeper, ongoing dialogue across power structures and borders, a long-term strategy to build stronger public policy and media literacy muscle, new ideas for harnessing distribution platforms in service of the public good, the need to center the audience in whatever we imagine next, and ensuring that bold, necessary storytelling never comes at the expense of a commitment to care.

This report is meant to serve as an artifact of the conversations that took place, but also as an invitation—a call to keep pushing together, across our differences and in pursuit of a healthier, stronger, and more principled field. As we look ahead, the work is clear: keep building trust, keep platforming often-overlooked voices, and designing spaces—like this one—where we can reckon honestly with what's at stake. My hope is that the reflections and recommendations shared here can ripple outward, emboldening all of us to imagine a vital future for documentary film rooted in collective imagination, a willingness to confront what isn't working, and the enduring spirit to build what is next, together.

— Sara Archambault, Project Director

Photo by Martha Stewart.

DFPI team (Sydney Tanigawa, Sara Archambault, and Enrique Pedráza-Botero) with Henry Award-winning filmmaker Vinay Shukla (second from right).

CHATHAM HOUSE RULE

We chose to work within the protections of the Chatham House Rule to allow people to share freely about difficult challenges, decisions, provocations, and even failures. Additionally, there were several people in the room worried about political repercussions for their speech.

The Chatham House Rule is designed to facilitate open and honest discussion by protecting the confidentiality of participants' identities and affiliations—though not of the ideas themselves. Under this rule, participants are free to use the information shared during a meeting, but the identity and institutional affiliation of speakers or other attendees may not be disclosed.

In keeping with the Chatham House Rule, attendees will not be listed, and comments will not be attributed. Any attributed quotes appearing in these documents were included with the express permission of the speaker. All photographs have also been used with the express permission of the participants.

ETHICS, POWER, AND THE PUBLIC

ANALYSES AND PROPOSALS FROM THE 2025 DOCUMENTARY IDEAS SYMPOSIUM

This essay distills key ideas, concerns, and proposals that surfaced across the *Documentary Ideas Symposium* over the course of two days in April 2025 at Harvard Kennedy School. Drawing together more than 90 filmmakers, funders, scholars, lawyers, and institutional leaders, the convening grappled with mounting ethical and structural pressures shaping the future of documentary practice. The proposals outlined here arose through discussion and reflection by the experts in attendance, and reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives that they brought to the convening. Effort has been made to reflect the significant points of disagreement, but also where avenues for progress emerged.

— Pooja Rangan and Rebecca Richman Cohen

CHALLENGES

Across every conversation, one reality was unmistakable: democracy is eroding, and the documentary field is grappling with both external political pressures and internal systemic crises. Forces such as authoritarianism, censorship, platform consolidation, chronic underfunding, exploitative labor conditions, and algorithmic gatekeeping are rapidly dismantling the conditions for free expression, accurate information, and public accountability. Filmmakers are not merely witnesses to these changes; they are embedded in the struggles themselves.

One of the most insidious forces identified was the narrowing of the documentary landscape. Public broadcasters are under attack. Commercial streaming platforms, now central to distribution, increasingly prioritize "The Three C's" (Celebrities, Cults, and Crime) at the expense of other kinds of documentaries. Those left behind often offer rigorous reporting, the investigation of systemic issues, or the amplification of underrepresented voices—work that serves the public interest by fostering accountability, promoting informed civic discourse, and encouraging a more equitable society. This is compounded by a disturbing power imbalance in celebrity-driven projects, where subjects wield unprecedented control, reducing documentaries to PR vehicles rather than independent inquiries. Legal tools such as NDAs enforce silence, marking a new frontier of censorship—not by governments, but by estates, corporations, and legacy wealth.

The combination of streamer dominance and persistent industry-wide underfunding has made conditions for independent documentary especially bleak. Consolidation among platforms might offer larger audiences, but it squeezes out politically charged work. Independent filmmakers must increasingly measure success against entertainment metrics, while funding for investigative projects shrinks. Underpayment and exploitation are commonplace for producers, directors, freelance journalists, editors, camera crews, and researchers, many of whom are asked to work on "passion projects" with little or no compensation, with the promise of exposure instead of fair pay. While it's true that under-resourcing has long plagued both documentary and journalistic fields, there is a new normalization at play: platforms with substantial resources increasingly expect independent creators to absorb financial and legal

risks, while algorithms and awards set the terms for success.

Ethical filmmaking today is therefore not merely about accurate portrayal; it is about participant protection, filmmaker safety, expanded timelines of responsibility, and community accountability. It also demands tactical innovation in the face of authoritarian regimes, the criminal legal system, and corporate impunity. Some participants initially saw platforms like YouTube as promising alternatives to traditional media, but the reality is more complex. In India, for instance, rising digital censorship threatens YouTube as much as broadcast TV, tempering optimism about such platforms as future models. In a landscape where spectacle sells, funders and distributors who back high-risk projects without built-in safeguards leave filmmakers and, more gravely, participants to shoulder disproportionate danger. Filmmakers themselves are not equal in risk or resources; depending on political threats, legal protections, and institutional support, some face far greater exposure than others. New threats—like AI-driven facial deblurring and disinformation campaigns—are outpacing current protections, demanding an urgent reassessment of duty of care.

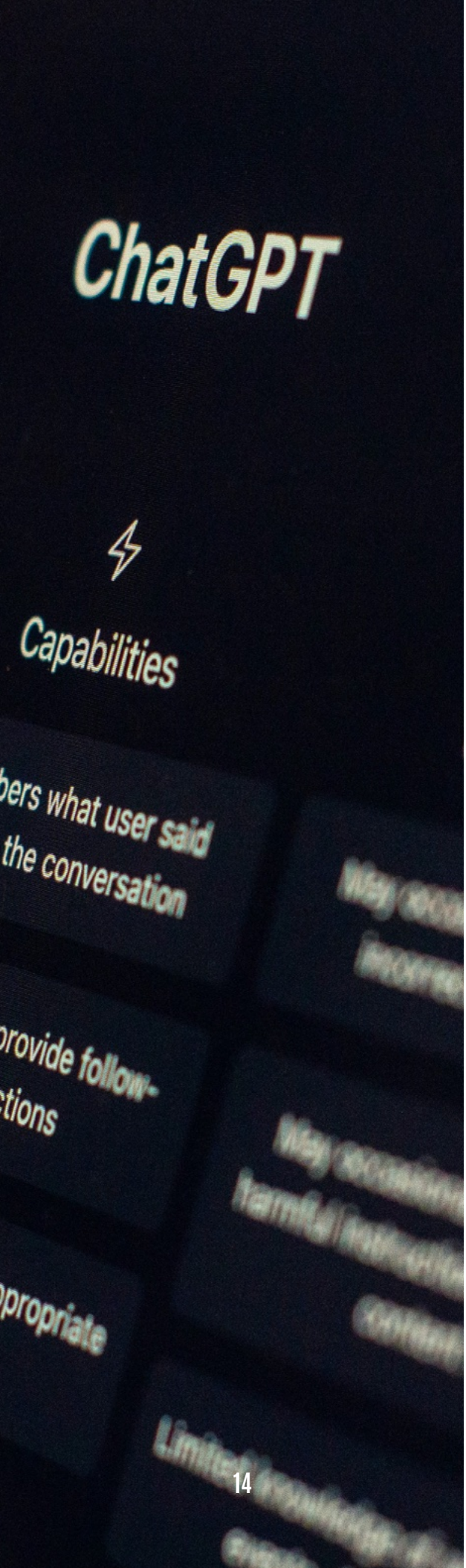
Filmmaker-participant boundaries are also being redefined in challenging and contentious ways. Close relationships among filmmakers and participants do not inherently compromise rigor, but require transparent, conscious management of information and power dynamics. Norms around participant compensation are also evolving, with growing (but by no means universal) support for payment framed as an ethical gesture of recognition, care, and shared

labor rather than the cost of access. While many filmmakers embrace these shifts, some—particularly those rooted in more journalistic practice—worry that payment may complicate audience trust. In that view, compensating participants may raise questions about authenticity, influence, and the perceived independence of storytelling.

Consent, once treated as a single moment (a signature on a release form), is now understood as an evolving relationship, an idea that demands a complete rethinking of traditional production models and industry standards. But even this more expansive framework runs up against hard limits: in contexts of incarceration, surveillance, or coercion, meaningful consent may be structurally impossible. Here, filmmakers, funders, and distributors may need to assume a greater share of responsibility for participant care and fair compensation, and to reckon more fully with the material and institutional conditions of access.

Participatory models of production are on the rise, but do not fit all filmmaking approaches. Even as participant empowerment receives more attention—especially for structurally marginalized participants—it sometimes stands in irreconcilable tension with another core value of documentary filmmaking: allegiance to rigorous investigation, verifiable facts (which may not always correspond with those the participant would like to have amplified), and public trust. Power-sharing also varies by participant power. While all participants deserve to be treated fairly, in practice, those with greater resources or visibility are often more successful in shaping how they are represented on screen, raising questions about equity, accountability, and whose perspectives are most likely to be elevated.

Complicating all of this is the rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which now generate imagery, sound, and text by drawing on vast troves of existing media, often without creators' consent. AI's ability to seamlessly blend source materials obscures attribution and amplifies unseen biases, while legal frameworks struggle to keep pace with questions of fair use and creative ownership. Moreover, AI can convincingly mimic human voices and images, making deception easier than ever, and its enormous resource demands deepen environmental harms and inequities. As audiences are increasingly offered personalized, algorithm-driven media, there is growing concern that AI will reinforce filter bubbles, simplify aesthetics, and sideline the kind of challenging, public-interest storytelling the field urgently needs.



The conversation risks devolving into one of depoliticized individual "choices" while real harms—mass data theft, creative labor expropriation, and ecological devastation—accelerate. At the same time, some participants asked whether documentary's engagement with AI might bend the curve toward verified and validated knowledge, or be repurposed as a tool for participant protection. With adequate guardrails—including disclosures—AI in the hands of documentarians might be a pro-creative force. But even those optimistic about potential benefits of AI for documentary recognize that structural interventions such as labor organizing, legal reform, and platform accountability may be necessary to ensure creators and consumers are knowledgeable about risks and rewards and maximize the likelihood that all actors in the creative ecosystem behave ethically.

Finally, the documentary sector faces not only a long-term crisis of sustainability, but also of reach and relevance. While the U.S. philanthropic sector is the largest and most developed in the world, its predominance reflects a public sector that has been steadily decimated. Private giving, though generous, remains inherently fragmented, shaped by the priorities and whims of individuals or family foundations; it cannot match the scale or systemic reach of robust public investment. The myth of discovery—that good work will naturally find an audience—is being decisively dismantled. Without robust, alternative infrastructures for funding, distribution, and discovery, many urgent stories will remain invisible and disconnected from the communities they aim to serve.

Amid these challenges, the field holds real

power. Public trust in documentary remains high, far outpacing trust in news media. But that trust is fragile. The field remains fractured across companies, practices, and generations, and key voices—especially those most affected by surveillance and censorship—were missing from the symposium conversations. Still, a shared urgency was clear: we need to break out of our siloes; define, debate, and defend our core values; and build collective power to protect the work that lies ahead.

Photo by Martha Stewart.

Filmmaker/author Astra Taylor.

NEXT STEPS AND TOOLS

The proposals outlined here emerged directly from participants and reflect the insights, concerns, and priorities of those working in the field. Taken together, they offered a grounded response to the challenges that surfaced throughout the convening, and help explain why, despite the grim diagnosis, there was palpable energy for the hard work of organizing. As Astra Taylor reminded the group in her keynote address, **solidarity is not spontaneous; it must be built**. In order to defend the work of documenting injustice, expanding civic imagination, and telling public, verifiable truths, then the field must build the social and material infrastructure to sustain public-interest documentary. This work requires public investment, corporate regulation, political courage, and a shared willingness to collaborate and take risks.

1. FUND THE FUTURE: BUILD STRUCTURAL SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC-INTEREST FILM

Traditional U.S. philanthropy cannot sustain public-interest filmmaking at the necessary scale, and filmmakers working in the public interest cannot rely solely on corporations whose mission is profit-driven. Impact capital and hybrid investment models may be part of the equation, but new models must be developed and resourced, including:

PUBLIC FUNDING AT EVERY LEVEL

Federal support matters, but state programs and tax credits (such as Illinois's tax credit of up to 45%) also offer excellent models.

SLATE FINANCING

Widely used across Europe, this approach supports the ongoing work of a production company by providing funding for multiple projects at once, thereby distributing risk and increasing sustainability. It can take different forms, but the core mechanism is to strengthen companies rather than individual films.

LOBBYING POWER

Documentary needs organized advocacy. Participants were eager to support organizations like Future Film Coalition, that promote a more equitable and sustainable film industry, and use lobbying power to influence public policy in support of independent filmmaking. Independent music venues secured $16B in federal COVID relief through coordinated lobbying. The room agreed that documentary needs that kind of political power.

GRASSROOTS FUNDING

Direct support from impacted communities (e.g., tribal councils backing *Free Leonard Peltier*) can offer not just financial resources, but also deepen community engagement.

TAX THE TENTPOLES

Participants advocated for revenue-sharing mechanisms from mega-deals (e.g., Netflix blockbusters), a "solidarity tax" on major commercial deals or a small percentage of each monthly streaming subscriber fee to sustainably fund non-commercial, public-interest films. This approach would mirror proposed reforms like Germany's Film Funding Act.

2. RETHINK DISCOVERY, DISTRIBUTION, AND REACH

Funding films is not enough; they must be found. Streamers are neither saviors nor villains. Attendees recommended that filmmakers continue to use mainstream platforms when it serves their goals, but the field must also invest in resilient, autonomous infrastructures that don't rely solely on corporate approval.

BUILD NEW PLATFORMS AND LEVERAGE EXISTING ONES

Discovery strategies and accessible platforms don't have to exist outside corporate structures. Both/and (rather than either/or) thinking is key: attendees urged the field to pursue collectivist approaches to entrepreneurialism both within *and* beyond existing systems. Proposals included new digital platforms like jolt.film and more intentional use of existing platforms like YouTube to circulate censored or under-distributed films as well as to cultivate long-term audiences for the genre.

LOOK TO ENDURING MODELS

Filmmakers and commissioners alike must innovate, but also remember what has long worked. Some filmmakers or media platforms acquire regional rights and make films freely available within those regions, expanding access and maximizing impact among audiences for whom the content is most relevant. Other proven models, such as the Southern Circuit, use regional touring and in-person events to foster deep audience engagement. Longstanding educational distribution strategies including placements in classrooms, libraries, and universities, also continue to play important roles for reaching audiences and promoting civic dialogue.

USE STRATEGIC FRAMING

Distribution strategy is part of the creative process and shouldn't be the province of distributors alone. Filmmakers must understand the intricacies of their distribution environment. For example, emphasizing a film's classification as journalism (when it genuinely qualifies) to reach Washington policymakers or framing it as art to gain entry into restrictive contexts like Russia. Strategic framing needn't be seen as manipulation; it's about aligning a film's goals with the pathways that make its impact possible.

3. CARE FOR PARTICIPANTS

There are deeply held, often divergent, perspectives on the best approaches to participant care in the documentary field. Power dynamics among participants and filmmakers are contentious, shifting, and context-specific. However, new baselines for sharing power with structurally disempowered participants are being developed by organizations such as the Documentary Accountability Working Group (DAWG). Filmmakers are approaching these principles in a spectrum of ways aligned with their own ethical frameworks and filmmaking contexts.

Rather than proposing singular recommendations, the assembled body recognized the need for continued dialogue and exploration. To that end, our report highlights some of the places and practices where these approaches are actively being interrogated and developed.

RELATIONAL CONSENT MODELS

Resources like Peace is Loud's *Consent Calendar* (produced with Jennifer Tiexiera) and Jordan Lord's reimagined appearance releases offer guidance.

PARTICIPANT ADVOCACY

Margie Ratliff's organization, Documentary Participants Empowerment Alliance (DPEA), works to bring resources including legal, mental health, mediation, and mentorship opportunities to those who participate in front of the camera.

COMPENSATION ETHICS

Some filmmakers compensate participants, not as inducement, but as recognition of labor and risk.

PREEMPTIVE LEGAL TOOLS

Lawyers like Sekou Campbell working with groups like REIMAGINE are developing legal arrangements with participants to support shared decision-making, obviate conflict, and reallocate risk.

HARD CONVERSATIONS, BOTH PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

The field—filmmakers, distributors, commissioners, studios, and documentary leaders—need to have ongoing, honest reflection and dialogue around moments when core values collide. Core values of committed documentary work are holding power to account and exposing uncomfortable facts. At the same time, filmmakers must navigate the tension between their responsibility to tell accurate and relevant stories for audiences and the ethical imperative to care for participants, who may similarly want a different story told than the one filmmakers uncover, find more timely, or deem to be more commercially viable.

4. BUDGET FOR SAFETY, REDISTRIBUTE RISK

Risky productions require transparency and care for filmmakers and participants alike. This means ensuring that everyone in the project understands the risks involved; assessing whether the risk is acceptable to all (and if it is not, then stepping away from the project), and mitigating the risk wherever possible (money, resources, protection). Safety cannot be an afterthought or entrusted entirely to platforms or distributors whose primary incentive is profit, or to access-granting entities like the state, the military, or private corporations, especially those when lacking independent oversight or accountability mechanisms. Access without accountability is exploitation. Attendees recommended, therefore, that safety be planned and funded from the outset:

BUDGET FOR SAFETY PROTOCOLS

Such as mental health support, long-term safety planning, and participant advocates as necessities and not luxuries. Acknowledge that responsibility to participants doesn't end when a film wraps and care may need to extend indefinitely.

DEPLOY DIGITAL PROTECTION TOOLS

Such as AI-assisted face replacements for at-risk subjects, with the awareness that even the best current safeguards may soon be obsolete. When using these tools, filmmakers should be transparent with audiences about what has been altered and why.

IMPLEMENT SECURITY PROTOCOLS

Like those developed by Doc Society, which offer free consultations for filmmakers.

EXPLORE PROTECTION TACTICS

Such as offshore ownership or shell companies for dissident filmmakers and vulnerable participants facing domestic retaliation.

EXTEND RESPONSIBILITY BEYOND FILMMAKERS AND PARTICIPANTS

How can risk and responsibility be more equitably shared? Currently, the burden falls disproportionately on participants and filmmakers. It is important to continue the conversation about what responsibility funders, distributors, and executives should have in supporting safety and care. While there isn't yet consensus on how to achieve this, it is critical that the field moves toward better practices to redistribute risk.

5. ENGAGE WITH AI'S STRUCTURAL IMPACTS

AI's harms are ecological, labor-based, and social. Addressing them requires collective action and, as was clear in the discussions, a far deeper well of field-wide understanding. Many at the symposium recognized just how quickly the AI landscape is evolving—and how much uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety remains regarding its impact on the field. Participants voiced an urgent need for learning spaces: more convenings, teach-ins, shared best practices, and accessible white papers to move the conversation beyond surface-level headlines toward meaningful, actionable guidance for documentarians.

Policy recommendations remain particularly complex; few participants felt fully prepared to chart a legislative or legal path forward. Education and dialogue, therefore, are immediate priorities, both to help the field stay ahead of the curve, and to ensure that emerging standards reflect its values.

While grappling with these unknowns, several immediate steps are clear:

DRAW INSPIRATION FROM RECENT LABOR ORGANIZING EFFORTS

Such as the Hollywood writers' strike—which, even if not always as successful as hoped, exemplify the ongoing fight to address AI's impact on creative work and workers' rights.

PREPARE FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

Many participants admitted feeling unprepared to grapple with AI's technical, social, and policy implications. Without shared knowledge, discussions risk stalling at the level of hype or fear. Building AI literacy means creating accessible white papers, hosting teach-ins, sharing best practices, and sustaining open conversations across the field. These collective learning spaces help documentarians move beyond headlines toward a grounded understanding of AI's risks and possibilities.

With that foundation, the field can build the consensus needed to determine whether and how to pursue consent laws, stronger fair-use standards, and expanded labor protections.

ASSESS USE CASES INDIVIDUALLY

AI is not a monolith. Some applications may align with documentary values—for example, protecting participant identities in high-risk situations (facial obfuscation, voice masking), aiding in large-scale research, streamlining tedious aspects of post-production, or even infusing new forms of creativity into the field. Others, particularly when deployed as cost-cutting measures, are already exacerbating labor precarity, undercutting creative integrity, and eroding the pipeline that trains and sustains new workers. Careful, case-by-case assessment is therefore essential to distinguish between uses that strengthen the field and those that threaten its long-term health.

6. EXPAND THE LANE—AND AUDIENCE HORIZONS

Public interest filmmaking can't survive if the conditions of its making remain hidden, or if its circulation is structurally sidelined. Audiences can handle complexity; the challenge lies in the *systems* that determine what gets made, funded, and seen. Moreover, conversations about nonfiction often center creators and gatekeepers rather than the audiences films hope to reach. Cultivating and empowering audiences is key.

BROADEN THE LANE FOR PUBLIC INTEREST WORK

Entertainment has its place, and charismatic individuals will continue to anchor compelling stories. But when billionaires and celebrities become the default filter through which executives greenlight and platform nonfiction, the public interest suffers. The problem isn't popular content. It is the shrinking space for everything else. Political films, structural critiques, and works grounded in collective action deserve room to circulate and shape audience desires.

EVERY GENRE IS AN OPPORTUNITY

Even in a marketplace dominated by the so-called "3Cs" (celebrities, cults, and crime), filmmakers can embed complex, strategic storytelling within familiar, commissionable formats. The series *O.J. Made in America* drew audiences in with the promise of sensational true crime but delivered eight hours of searing commentary on racism and inequity.

CENTER AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT AS A PUBLIC-INTEREST PRIORITY

Public-interest filmmaking is meaningless without a public. The field needs renewed investment in audience research, grassroots outreach, culturally specific curation, and long-term community partnerships.

BUILD TRANSPARENCY AND REGULATORY ACCOUNTABILITY

Attendees discussed pushing distributors and commissioners to publish standards and practices (as PBS, BBC, and Frontline have done), disclosing funding sources and editorial control, and clearly labeling celebrity-controlled films for what they are: autobiographies, or memoirs, or promotional media, not biopics. Transparency is essential for policymakers committed to supporting public media.

COMPLICATE THE METRICS OF SUCCESS

Some participants called for moving beyond the awards economy, arguing that overemphasis on prizes distorts priorities and marginalizes impact-driven work. Others noted that awards remain central to funding and visibility. The field must wrestle with these tensions and expand its understanding of success beyond accolades to include audience engagement, cultural relevance, and long-term sustainability.

EQUIP AUDIENCES WITH TOOLS TO EVALUATE NONFICTION

Media literacy is at its core about public accountability. Provide viewers with the context and vocabulary to understand how power, funding, and access shape what they are watching.

7. LEARN FROM GLOBAL RESISTANCE

The U.S. documentary field may be in crisis, but it is not alone, and it is not the first to face authoritarianism, censorship, and corporate capture. As more than one participant wisely reminded the room, the "global majority" has long built resilient systems, not through scale, but with care, clarity, and cultural grounding. Their experiences offer essential lessons.

ORGANIZE ACROSS DIFFERENCES TO BUILD COMMUNITY-ROOTED INFRASTRUCTURE

The field must resist replicating extractive systems. Instead, it must invest in collective tools and networks, embrace transparency, and redefine authorship and access in ways that center participants and protect filmmakers. The goal is to have many local models rooted in solidarity.

REAFFIRM ACCOUNTABILITY AS A RELATIONAL PRACTICE

In documentary, ethical responsibility cannot be codified solely through rules. Unlike fields with formal oversight bodies (e.g., IRBs for social sciences, or state Bar Associations for law), accountability in the documentary field is primarily social. How filmmakers are known by their peers, how they are trusted by those they film, and how they respond when they fall short becomes the true measure of ethical practice. While institutional standards and practices are essential, relationships will remain documentary's strongest safeguard.

COMMIT TO A CULTURE OF REFLECTION AND MUTUAL AID

Ongoing dialogue is how ethical norms are shaped and reshaped. By committing to transparency, collective responsibility, and honest conversations when things get hard, the documentary film sector can build relationships of trust. This is why it's so essential to keep having these conversations—as a living, ongoing commitment to a documentary practice that is ethical, expansive, resilient, and anchored in the public interest.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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SYMPOSIUM REFLECTIONS

Photo by Lincoln Else.

Filmmaker Jon Else.

Jon Else is one of the most revered and quietly influential figures in documentary film. Known for his deep wisdom, generosity of spirit, and fierce commitment to ethical storytelling, Jon has shaped generations of filmmakers through both his acclaimed work and his decades of teaching at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. He was series producer and cinematographer for the landmark PBS series *Eyes on the Prize*, directed the Emmy- and Peabody-winning *The Day After Trinity*, and has contributed to some of the most important nonfiction films of the last half-century. Whether behind the camera or in the classroom, Jon brings a rare blend of artistic rigor, moral clarity, and open-hearted mentorship that continues to ripple across the field.

The DFPI invited Jon to offer his reflections on the symposium essay, the convening itself, and the ethical principles that have guided his career. We asked for a response grounded in his lived experience in the field—one that would bring the full force of his long view and field-shaping insight into documentary ethics.

OVERVIEW

It was a serious and thoughtful block party, the best of a Flaherty Seminar or Sundance workshop, only better and far more substantive. I came away invigorated by contradiction between our present predicaments, so awash in bad news, and the solidarity of high spirits and resolve among brothers and sisters in the room.

Bravo for the Chatham House Rule and keeping the group small.

I was most taken by the opening nightmare of conflicting visions of a documentary about another famous celebrity in which all the wires crossed—commerce, art, profit, truth, falsehood, private ownership, public good, greed, and good will—in a tragic saga worthy of Melville. The ship went down, and the whale swam away. And later that day came the tiny detail that for decades we have seldom if ever given a participant a copy of the legally binding multipage release they just signed. How could I be so blind and self-serving all this time not to notice the power dynamic baked into that extractive transaction—a box to be checked as quickly as possible. This convening was also my first real introduction to the baffling landscapes of AI, which I'm still trying to digest. Thanks for all of these.

And thanks to Pooja and Rebecca for their superb distillation of what we were up to. There is little I can add, but here are some thoughts going forward.

ART & JOURNALISM

I see no contradiction between being an artist and being a journalist. They inform each other. I took the job at the Graduate School of Journalism Berkeley precisely because it was the documentary home of both Marlon Riggs *and* the West Coast office of Frontline, both of whom I worked with. Neither I nor my students had any trouble trying to make films as artful as Marlon or Lourdes Portillo (or not) while staying within the ethical norms of our colleagues down the hall training for the New York Times or ABC News. Journalistically defensible documentaries need not be prissy, dry, or suffocating, quite the opposite, as in the Oscar-winning *Twenty Days in Mariupol*. Art and nonfiction can embrace on matters of

ethics and factuality; it just takes a *lot* of hard work around the practice of transparency. What we bring to the joint enterprise with our narrative skill is the ability to draw enormous audiences who might not otherwise stumble across the bare reality of our stories into media spaces.

GUIDELINES, EVIDENCE, TRUTH

Making a documentary I feel that I'm under oath, that God is watching, and that we are journalists whether we like it or not. Is that enough? Though it was not on the formal agenda, there were side conversations about whether the documentary community/industry needs a declared set of ethical standards.

For as long as I can remember the Academy has tried and failed to generate practical guidelines for documentary ethics, always bailing for fear of stifling artistic expression or market potential. To their credit many funders, studios, networks, and some streamers have now adopted and published strong Standards and Practices narrowly appropriate to the work they commission. I tend to agree with the notion put forward, "There's no one-size-fits-all container for ethical documentary practice," but there is a fact-based foundational contract with our audience that I hope unites us all. Should we have a crack at articulating it with simple community standards? Are they necessary in an often standardless landscape? If so, where would be a realistic institutional home? I vote for a joint venture between NATAS, AMPAS and the Shorenstein Center with input from all the organizations listed in the convening materials.

I'll throw out for discussion a homemade rule that has served me well over fifty years of production and that we employed at Blackside on five extended nonfiction series: "When the lights come on, we are responsible for ensuring that what the audience believes to be true is true and what the audience believes to be real is real." Try applying it to your own work and you'll discover that everything hinges on transparency, and the rule allows an astonishing range of style and narrative practice. Perhaps this is naïve in the world of AI which presents unique transparency problems. We'll see.

PEOPLE / PARTICIPANTS

The homemade one-sentence rule takes into account our implicit truth-telling contract with the audience, but not a contract with our participants. Should we devise a similar plain-spoken principle for that power dynamic and participant protection? Could it function for both participants we honor (the powerless, marginalized, the victims of oppression, our heroes) *and* those we perceive to be in a different moral universe (the powerful, the rich, the oppressors, our villains). Do we protect all equally from harm regardless of their status? The recent ITVS study was striking—not because participants always felt informed—but because 89% would participate in a documentary again, even as they acknowledged they didn't fully understand what participation would entail. I've been thinking about this ever since doing camerawork on a film inside a poor white American Nazi group decades ago, doing a lot of shooting with prisoners and guards, and being asked by a director to shoot an interview with Edward Teller, the father of the H-bomb "so he looks like Dracula." Documentaries have freed wrongly convicted persons from prison, but the people we or our colleagues have filmed have also suffered shame, shunning, and in a few extreme cases have been disappeared or taken their own lives.

This discussion must be ongoing for us and I'm glad to see that the long history of protecting sources in journalism is spilling over into our work, where it's much trickier because we put "sources" (who are actually people) on camera and inevitably on the Internet. We've done workshops before on the power differentials between the participant, the filmmaker and the institutional power, but I've not before heard thorough consideration of what consent really means. This was the first convening in which participants participated. Something as simple as exchanging words, "subject" for "participant" changes the norm.

I have on occasion shown rough cuts to participant individuals or institutions and always come away troubled by the question of why an audience should trust a film for which the participants had the right of review.

How do we deal with the practical reality that, "in contexts of incarceration, surveillance, or coercion, meaningful consent may be structurally impossible" (to which I would add police and military settings)? What are

the ethical limits of collaboration? If “filmmakers, funders, and distributors may need to assume a greater share of responsibility, and to reckon more fully with the power and risks embedded in the act of asking for consent,” that responsibility shows up in budget lines. Who pays for it? Can we put a price on ethics? Having had the principal participant withdraw from a film on which I had already spent funder’s money, I’m skeptical but would welcome a candid discussion on how funders, producers, and commissions would deal with a consent calendar and participant review. Whose film is it? It is a blunt fact that beyond basic human decency every ethically driven act — fact checking, participant or institutional review, rolling consent, evacuation insurance, therapy, participant payment, workman’s comp — costs money that independents seldom have. And streamers are running bottom line businesses.

The issue of participant payment came up repeatedly. To me it’s an ethical no-brainer that participants in front and behind the camera should share in back-end profit, an exercise which does little to undermine other ethical practices. I’d routinely do it. On the front end I remain conflicted on payment, having been involved in more than one television series in which the high-roller production entity has paid for exclusive rights to individuals, thereby shutting out all other filmmakers. This was always an ongoing debate at Blackside, and we should keep at it.

BANDWIDTH

I agreed with most of what was said and proposed, which may be a sign that the bandwidth was too narrow. It was an astonishing assembly of people, but going forward I would love to see more representation from the major streamers who set default standards by their dominance in the industry. We could learn a great deal from them, and they from us. They are for better or worse the commercial/industrial engines driving much of documentary these days (National Geographic swept the Emmys this year) often bringing our work to millions. We need to interact with them if for no other reason than they keep hundreds of our below-the-line colleagues employed on projects that are sometimes ethically grounded and sometimes ethically sketchy.

EMERGENCY WORK / POLITICS

We talked a good deal about that sturdy Quaker commandment that we must speak truth to power. There was a time spanning many presidential administrations when power valued truth, when men and women of good will in Washington watched our films, took them seriously, and considered our evidence and arguments in forming policy. I seldom knew it at the time, but federal agencies and congressional committees screened and purchased many of my films or paid attention to them on TV, and I'm certain they watched many of yours as well. Documentary made a difference.

Those days are gone. Today the unrestrained power of the Trump administration doesn't give a damn about truth. Truth is their enemy. Attacking nonfiction media is one of their blood sports, and they are winning. Now that their axe has fallen on public media infrastructure we have painstakingly built over six decades, CPB, NEH, NEA, NPR, ITVS may shrivel and die without a big change in Washington. Our colleague from India warned us "We know a lot about dictatorship...you have to prepare for loss." And a foundation executive said, "We need to do emergency work right now."

For sure. So, what is the work we must do?

First, difficult as it is, we need to keep plugging, drawing strength from our community, making powerful, diverse, and ethical documentaries even though the commercial monster calls the shots, the right hates us even more than usual, and the guy with the biggest server gets the money. God loves a plugger. Elvis Presley said, “Truth is like the sun. It goes away but it always comes back.” Someone has to keep documentary truth telling alive until it comes back; that would be us. At worst, we will stockpile ethical stories for better times to come and at best, by treating our audience more as fellow citizens than as consumers, our movies will hold their own in the national conversation.

After fifty years watching ethics evolve in the business, I have absolute faith we can keep our own house in order. But that is not emergency work. There is an arsonist in the neighborhood. In the short time since we met in Cambridge it’s become clear that our house is on fire. With our country enduring such bewilderment and agony, what if public interest documentary as we’ve known it may not survive the political forces of the moment? Solidarity can be a power and an inspiration, but it will only get us so far. The solutions within the community will only do so much. It is time to fully engage outside our bubble with what’s left of our functioning democracy to fight bad politics with good politics. Elections with existential consequences for us leave little choice but to step out of our sphere and into the external political fight of our lives to elect representatives who value truth and support what we do. I would welcome an open-ended discussion on how to do this to greatest effect; the sooner the better.

– Jon Else

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ABOUT THE SHORENSTEIN CENTER

At this moment of division and distrust, our broken news environment poses a threat to the public good. Every pressing public policy concern is affected by the flows and flaws in information. The Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy is a Harvard Kennedy School research center dedicated to addressing this challenge at its root by examining how essential information is created, conveyed, and consumed. We believe that improving the quality of public information and expanding access to it will bring about healthier, stronger, more peaceful societies.

The center was founded in 1986 to allow journalists to engage with public policy students and faculty at Harvard Kennedy School. In the past two decades it has expanded its mission to advance research across multiple disciplines into the forces and factors that shape our broader media environment.

Today, the Shorenstein Center pursues its core mission through original research, convening leaders in practice and scholarship, providing trainings and educational opportunities for students and media practitioners, and highlighting best practices across the fields of media and content production.

Harvard Kennedy School Campus.

ABOUT THE DOCUMENTARY FILM IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST INITIATIVE

Documentary films play a vital role in our civic culture by investigating injustices, unearthing forgotten histories, connecting to new perspectives, and speaking truth to power. Its technologies, methods, creative approaches, institutional infrastructures, and ethical practices have greatly evolved over time. However, within the last several years, both the rate and kinds of change have been radical and destabilizing.

The goal of the Shorenstein Center's Documentary Film in the Public Interest (DFPI) initiative is to inspire new research, analysis, innovation, and provocation around core issues facing the documentary field.

The initiative's activities are designed to cross bridges between thinking and acting. We bring practitioners and researchers, journalists and documentary filmmakers, together in a shared project to build a stronger, more resilient field.

Harvard Kennedy School professor Marshall Ganz moderates a DFPI-organized panel at the John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum. Pictured: Acting U.S. Secretary of Labor Julie Su, union co-directors Steven Maing and Brett Story, and President of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO, Sara Nelson.

THE DOCUMENTARY FILM IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST INITIATIVE

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