

How to be a Human Rights Filmmaker



“Do your little bit of good where you are, it is all those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu -

1. Conviction and Passion



Having conviction and passion for human rights and filmmaking might seem like an obvious point, but I cannot stress enough how important this combination is. Being a human rights filmmaker can be a very lonely and difficult road. It is surely not a profession that will make you rich. Filled with obstacles and frustrations, what you see on the job can be quite disturbing. That is why it is crucial that as an individual you whole-heartedly believe in

the importance of human rights as a global concept. To start with, I therefore suggest the following:

Develop a theory as to why human rights is important to YOU personally. Why do you want to dedicate your life to it?

If you are not clear on this, the inevitable hardships ahead will be significantly more difficult.

2. Film as a Tool

Making a film should not be the priority. See the medium as a way in which you can make your conviction and passion for a certain human rights issue known to the world.

Your filmmaking should be in the service of human rights - not the other way around. As such, producing a human rights film should not be because you need a juicy story that will get funding, shock audiences and fill cinema seats. It should be because you want to effect change and make a previously ignored issue visible via a powerful platform.

Therefore, regard your film as a TOOL that will assist you in highlighting injustice. Do not see human rights as a way to tell 'good' cinematic stories.



3. Honesty and Integrity

When you approach people and interview subjects always be as honest about what you are interested in and why you are investigating the subject. **As soon as people see the sincerity with which you approach your work, you will be amazed just how accommodating people are.**

A part of the human rights filmmaker's work is often to speak up for the rights of peoples from a different culture than one's own. In such a case, the **integrity and respect with which one treats the stories of others is one of the most important aspects of one's work .**



The reason for this is that internationally the human rights paradigm is often criticised as neo-colonialist. This is in actual fact not the case, since human rights stand for the dignity and equality of all human beings irrespective of race, colour and creed. Yet, some people have used the concept of human rights to promote their own less than ethical objectives. Therefore, if a film speaks up for or criticises another culture/country, the honesty and integrity of the filmmaker must be of the highest order.

In this regard, if you seek to speak up for the rights of minorities and/or indigenous cultures, **make sure that your film reflects *their* views and voices - not your own. Anything less would be disrespectful of the suffering many people have gone through at the hands of other more powerful groups.**

4. Don't make promises you can't keep

Human rights filmmaking often brings one in contact with people who are living in extremely hard and often life threatening environments. Moreover, the focus of our work is to highlight issues that other otherwise ignored by the larger society. So when we go into these environments, it can happen that people attach a great deal of hope to one's presence - perhaps even a way out of their current situation.

One is sometimes told the most heart-wrenching stories that speak directly to one's humanity and therefore also demands action. In some instances, people might even plead desperately for help. Although one feels the strong desire to help, it can do more harm than good to make promises one cannot keep. **Gifting people empty hope, is a cruel thing. Often, the only thing one can truly do as a filmmaker, is shed light on their situation by making the film speak for them.**

5. Work with authorities where possible and necessary



While human rights filmmaking often involves exposing injustices committed by governments and/or exploitative laws implemented by authorities, it helps to give 'the other side' an opportunity to offer their perspective. **If governments do not want to participate or work with you - make that fact explicit in the film.** Such an approach would go a long way to expose injustice, abuse of power and corruption.

Always acquire the necessary permission to film at events and/or specific locations. Of course, there is a lot to say for guerrilla filmmaking during investigative work, but always stay on the right side of the law. It does not help anyone if one is arrested or if the footage one so painstakingly gathered is confiscated. Moreover, many high profile locations require the cooperation of authorities in order to be granted access. So, in the first instance, try and work with the authorities where possible and necessary.



6. Content before Form



The first thing new and young filmmakers generally do when describing what film they want to make is to compare their work to the style of another filmmaker.

This is of course fine, but **focusing on form when developing a human rights film should be secondary to focusing on the content - that is, the views expressed, the facts about the subject as well as the argument you are trying to make in the film.**

It doesn't help to have the best equipment on the market or the most creative visual aesthetic without convincing facts.

If concessions need to be made, make them on the side of the 'look' of the film, not the information communicated to the audience. Filming on your phone in dark conditions is by all means acceptable - given that what you film has purpose and carries meaning. **The quality of your image does therefore in truth matter far less than the quality of the facts and arguments you present.** If your images are crisp and the editing slick, that is wonderful. But if your content is lacking, your skill at the technicalities of filmmaking stands for nothing.

7. Remain Realistic (Focused)

Human rights subjects are extremely complicated, with far-reaching consequences. For example, injustices committed against minorities and/or indigenous people are deeply engrained into the fabric of whole societies. It is therefore impossible to deal with the subject in its entirety.

As a filmmaker one should therefore remain realistic in terms of what one's film will be able to cover. Like in so many other things in life, less is usually more in human rights filmmaking. So, be focused in what you want to cover from the start.

Of course, when making a documentary film, it sometimes happens that the story only reveals itself during the process of filming, yet **one should never go into production without having a sound grasp of the subject, its complexity and what is realistically possible within the budget and scope of the film.**



8. Be Informed - Generally

A human rights filmmaker is only as good as his/her ability to relate a subject to past and contemporary sociopolitical environments. Why is a certain injustice occurring? What are the underlying factors and how does it sit in relation to other unjust occurrences in the world? It is often the case that one injustice happens because of a series of other injustices. The disregard for climate change, for example, results in several human rights violations. Suffering in the global south, is often due to violations committed in the global north. In order to make these connections, **a filmmaker should see him/herself as an eternal student.**

It is therefore important to not only read about the subject you are dealing with. **It is highly beneficial to thoroughly inform yourself about issues important for human rights more generally.** Read articles, newspapers, legal documents and books as broadly as possible.



Read, study and be informed!

9. Think for yourself - argue your point

Human rights filmmaking speaks to the conscience of the world. As such, the human rights filmmaker should be able to act independently from popular beliefs and arguments. **The most important skill a human rights filmmaker can have is therefore to think for him/herself.** Moreover, as a filmmaker you often come in contact with a range of different people - all of whom have their own agenda for talking to you. So, remain conscious that not everything you will be told is true. **Think for yourself - and think critically.**

This is so important because the purpose of a human rights film is to convince the establishment that something needs to change. That we as a society need to change - often drastically - in order to respect the dignity of all. This is not an easy task and there are always those who would rather not have the boat rocked.





Good luck with your filmmaking
and please let us know about
the important work you do!

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10. Do a Hostile Environment Training Course

Making a human rights film can bring you in dangerous situations. The nature of this form of filmmaking requires filmmakers to go to where the story is - which could even be at the frontline of a war zone.

Doing a hostile environment training course is therefore highly beneficial to any serious human rights filmmaker. There are several courses out there, but one that I would recommend is offered by [AKE International](#). The courses do cost and take about a week to complete, but depending on the course one can gain an BTech Level IV diploma for the effort. Funding is also available from organisations such as the [Rory Peck Trust](#).

Completing such a course is not only important for one's own safety, but it is often also a requirement for commissions from human rights organisation or news institutions such as the BBC.

Don't play with your life!

Learn how to act in dangerous and/or life-threatening situations!

