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Panel Recap: Every Cut is a Lie: Editing the Truth

by VOX STAFF on MARCH 3, 2013 7:42 PM · NO COMMENTS

There are many ethical conflicts in documentary films, but there is one that is overlooked by most: editing video footage to make the film. The panel Every Cut is a Lie: Editing the Truth, was moderated by [David France](#), journalist and director of [How to Survive a Plague](#), an Academy Award-nominated film from True/False 2012.



Photo: americasparkinglot.com

The panel included insights from Robin Schwartz, editor of [America's Parking Lot](#); Bill Ross, editor and director of [Tchoupitoulas](#); and Nels Bangerter, editor of [Buzkashi Boys](#) and [War Child](#).

The panel started with clips from films by Schwartz, Ross and Bangerter. All three clips had diverse topics, and it was interesting

to be able to go behind the scenes and understand the thought process for editing each.

After viewing the clips, France started with a quote from director [Jean-Luc Godard](#), "Cinema is truth 24 times a second, and every cut is a lie."

The panel members delve into the idea of truth, the ethics of journalism and how to put their own interpretation of these in documentary films.

Bangerter says that in pieces of journalism, the journalist has to include everything. In documentary, the editor has his or her own discretion. Bangerter says, for example, when there is an antagonist in a documentary that avoids answering questions, the editor can take it out of the film. He says documentary editors have more freedom to move things around and delete clips that are not as relevant.

Ross says when he and his brother filmed [Tchoupitoulas](#) they made the adventures of three boys in New Orleans appear as one night. It was actually filmed in nine months. Ross says if it were filmed in one night there wouldn't have been as much good footage. Since he took more time for filming, he said the audience is now "seeing that city through those eyes."

The panel members discussed the issue of rotating quotes and action shots to get the message across versus being accurate. As Bangerter says, "You have to be an

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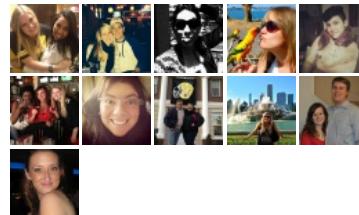
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entertainer from reality."

Schwartz says the editor has an ethical responsibility to the characters and a social responsibility to portraying them honestly. She says that one has to edit in a way that encompasses the subject's human qualities and to be able to still identify with the character's personality despite edits. She says, "to show a multi-dimensional person."

Overall, the panel members discussed that each documentary editor has his or her own judgment. It is his or her job to decide to make the characters more compelling by moving things around or keeping a more accurate depiction.

This is summed up by what France says toward the end of the panel, "You are creating a slice of their lives."

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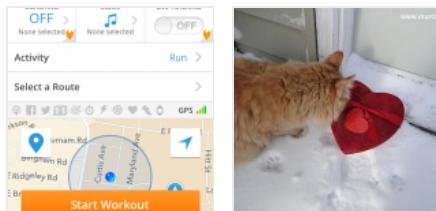
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