

“Permission To Engage” Documentary Analysis

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Introduction

Shuchen Tan’s documentary *Permission to Engage* examines the people and decisions behind the Apache helicopter footage released by WikiLeaks under the title “Collateral Murder.” The footage recorded a July 2007 U.S. military engagement in Baghdad in which civilians, including Reuters employees, were killed. Tan’s film follows former soldier Ethan McCord and Iraqi relatives affected by the attack, moving beyond the aerial image to reconstruct consequences on the ground. The Netherlands Film Festival describes it as a documentary about the facts underlying the footage and the deaths of at least seventeen civilians. (“Nederlands Film Festival”, n.d.)

The original response correctly recognizes the film as an exercise in investigative journalism, but it assumes that U.S. government “protocols” should censor media that conflicts with military interests. In a democratic society, journalism is not ethically required to protect a government from justified criticism. The relevant questions concern verification, national-security harm, privacy, trauma, informed participation, context, and fairness—not whether a documentary supports official policy. (“Society of Professional Journalists”, n.d.)

The Documentary’s Central Intervention

The leaked video was already a powerful document, but military optics and radio traffic create distance. Viewers see figures from above and hear operational language. Tan’s documentary restores names, families, memory, and moral consequence. It asks what happens when a person labeled as a target is later encountered through relatives and witnesses.

This shift is essential to the film’s ethics. War reporting often privileges the perspective of institutions that possess cameras, briefings, and communications systems. Interviewing Iraqi families contests that imbalance and treats them as sources of knowledge rather than background victims.

Freedom of the Press

Freedom of the press protects the ability to investigate and publish matters of public concern, including military conduct. It is not unlimited: journalists may face laws concerning classified information, privacy, defamation, and direct threats to safety. Yet criticism of a military operation is

not itself unethical or disloyal.

The original essay says the documentary failed to follow censorship principles because it opposed national interests. That reverses the journalistic role. Reporters should independently evaluate claims of national interest, ask whether secrecy is necessary, and consider the public's need to know. Government preference cannot be the final ethical test of publication.

Public Interest

The public has a strong interest in understanding how lethal force is authorized, how civilians are distinguished from combatants, how errors are investigated, and how official accounts compare with evidence. The video also raises questions about rules of engagement, visual interpretation, organizational culture, and accountability.

Public interest differs from public curiosity. Graphic material should be used when it contributes to understanding, not merely because it attracts attention. The documentary's value lies in linking evidence with testimony and consequences.

Verification

Leaked material can be authentic and still require contextual verification. Journalists should establish date, location, source, sequence, edits, units involved, and related records. Interviews should be cross-checked where possible, and uncertainty should be stated.

Tan's decision to locate participants and families strengthens the work because it does not rely on the clip alone. However, testimony is also situated and partial. A rigorous documentary distinguishes what the footage shows directly, what witnesses remember, what military records claim, and what the filmmaker infers.

Framing and Editing

Documentaries create arguments through selection, sequence, music, narration, and juxtaposition. There is no neutral way to compress hours of material into a film. Ethical editing should preserve the meaning of statements, avoid deceptive chronology, and provide enough context for viewers to understand disputes.

A film may take a moral position and remain truthful. Balance does not require giving every claim equal weight. It requires fair representation of relevant evidence and serious counterarguments. Official explanations should be examined, not inserted ritualistically.

Graphic Images

Images of death can reveal realities hidden by sanitized language. They can also violate dignity, traumatize relatives, and become spectacle. Editors should consider necessity, duration, warning, cropping, repetition, and whether identity is exposed.

The people shown are not merely evidence. Their bodies and deaths concern families and communities. A documentary should consult relatives where feasible and avoid turning suffering into a branding device.

Interviewing Survivors and Families

Trauma-informed interviewing gives participants control over pace, location, and topics. Consent should be ongoing because a person may agree initially and later become distressed or reconsider exposure. Translators should be competent and bound by confidentiality.

Journalists should explain where the film may appear and that online distribution can be permanent. Payment for ordinary testimony can create concerns, while reimbursement for costs may be appropriate. The power difference between an international production and a bereaved family should be acknowledged. ("International Committee of the", n.d.)

Ethan McCord and Source Protection

The original essay assumes that identifying the former U.S. soldier necessarily placed him in danger and that the director should have concealed him. That conclusion depends on his informed choice, legal circumstances, and risk assessment. A source who wishes to speak publicly may have reasons to use a name and face: accountability, credibility, moral responsibility, or advocacy.

The filmmaker should discuss foreseeable consequences, provide time to decide, and avoid promises of protection that cannot be guaranteed. If a source requests confidentiality, secure communication and careful production practices are required. Source autonomy does not remove the journalist's duty to minimize avoidable harm.

Military Information and Operational Harm

Publishing current troop locations, tactics, or identities can create direct danger. The documentary concerns a past incident, so the harm analysis differs from live operational reporting. Editors should still consult knowledgeable experts and consider whether details expose unrelated people or methods.

Consulting the military can improve accuracy, but it should not give officials a veto. The organization should receive a fair opportunity to respond to allegations, and its response should be evaluated against the evidence.

Language of “Collateral Damage”

Military terminology can clarify legal and operational categories, but it can also distance audiences from human consequences. “Collateral damage” describes unintended harm to civilians or civilian objects in relation to a military objective; it does not resolve whether the attack was lawful, proportionate, negligent, or based on misidentification.

The leaked footage’s title, “Collateral Murder,” is also an argumentative label. Journalists should distinguish the source’s title from a legal conclusion. The documentary can critique euphemism while explaining the relevant standards and uncertainty.

International Humanitarian Law

Analysis of an attack should consider distinction, proportionality, precautions, and the information reasonably available to decision-makers at the time. The presence of civilians does not automatically make every attack unlawful, and a claim of combatants does not automatically make it lawful.

A documentary is not a court, but it can show evidence that may support investigation. Legal experts should be identified, and legal conclusions should not be implied solely through emotional editing.

Institutional Accountability

Accountability involves more than finding one morally defective soldier. Training, rules, intelligence, command decisions, target identification, recording systems, after-action review, and institutional incentives all matter. The radio language in the footage may reveal normalization of distance or aggression, but interpretation should consider operational context.

Focusing only on individual blame can allow systems to escape examination. Conversely, invoking the system should not erase personal responsibility. The film’s strongest contribution is creating space to examine both.

WikiLeaks as a Source

Journalists using leaked material should verify independently and avoid becoming a passive distribution channel. The interests of the leaker, the platform, and the journalist may differ.

Authenticity does not answer every ethical question.

News organizations can add value through redaction, context, interviews, and verification. They should also explain what is missing from the record. Transparency about methods helps audiences evaluate the result.

National Interest and Democratic Accountability

Governments often argue that disclosure damages national interest. Sometimes the claim is valid; sometimes it protects embarrassment or wrongdoing. Journalists must evaluate specificity and likelihood of harm, not accept an abstract label.

Accountability can strengthen legitimate institutions. Concealing evidence of civilian harm may damage trust, strategic goals, and service members who report wrongdoing. The interests of the nation are not identical to the short-term interests of officials.

Bob Steele's Ethical Questions

The original essay appropriately invokes questions associated with journalistic ethical decision-making: What are the short- and long-term consequences? What alternatives maximize truth while minimizing harm? These questions should be applied to all affected groups.

Alternatives include redaction, delayed publication, warnings, pseudonyms, partial obscuring, additional verification, and contextual explanation. Minimizing harm does not mean eliminating every negative consequence; important reporting frequently causes discomfort or institutional cost.

Audience Responsibility

The film asks viewers to resist passive consumption. Watching violence can create outrage without understanding. Audiences should examine sources, distinguish evidence from inference, and avoid circulating graphic clips stripped of context.

Educators using the documentary should prepare students, offer alternatives for those affected by graphic content, and frame discussion around evidence, law, media ethics, and Iraqi perspectives rather than spectacle.

Strengths of the Documentary

The film's major strength is humanization. It connects a globally circulated image with people who lived through its consequences. It also places a former soldier's testimony beside Iraqi family

accounts, complicating a simple division between national enemies.

Its investigative work demonstrates why documentary journalism can matter after breaking news has passed. Time permits tracing people, reconstructing events, and examining the moral afterlife of an image.

Possible Limitations

Any film centered on selected participants risks narrowing the event to the most available narratives. Translation, memory, editing, and access affect the record. Viewers should ask whose voices remain absent and whether the film explains disputed details fully.

These limitations do not invalidate the work. They are reasons to read it as a documented argument rather than a transparent window onto the past.

Conclusion

Permission to Engage exercises press freedom by investigating a lethal military action of clear public concern. It is not ethically obligated to follow censorship merely because the findings conflict with government or military interests. Its obligations are to truth, verification, context, fairness, source autonomy, and the reduction of unnecessary harm.

The film's ethical achievement is its movement from aerial abstraction to human consequence. Its use of graphic evidence and vulnerable participants requires care, but silence would also carry moral costs. Responsible journalism should neither glorify disclosure nor defer automatically to secrecy. It should ask what citizens need to know, what harm publication may cause, how that harm can be reduced, and whether the evidence is strong enough to justify the decision.

References

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