LESSON
Permission Pledge: A Media Ethics Lesson

OVERVIEW
How many of your students are seemingly attached to their smartphones? How many use their phone cameras to take photos and video that they share online via social media? And how many think of themselves as media makers or journalists, governed by the ethics and standards of those professions? If you’re like most educators, you answered the first two questions with something like “lots” or “all of them,” and you answered the third question with “none.”

The fast pace of changing technology has placed a tool in students’ hands that allows them to record and share images with billions of people in mere seconds. Yet very few receive any type of guidance to help them reflect on the implications of their choices. This lesson begins to fill that gap.

Using clips from veteran cinematographer Kirsten Johnson’s memoir, Cameraperson, as prompts, students will discuss the complex issues of whether and why those who take pictures (or video) of others need to obtain the consent of their subjects. They’ll use what they learn from that discussion to develop a “pledge” to govern their own use of cameras.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our Community Network.

OBJECTIVES
In this lesson, students will:
- Consider ethical issues involved in recording and sharing pictures of other people, with a special emphasis on when and why a subject’s permission is required
- Formulate their own code of personal conduct for obtaining consent when taking and sharing pictures/footage of others

GRADE LEVELS: 9-16

SUBJECT AREAS
English/Language Arts
Ethics
Media Literacy
Media Production

MATERIALS
film clips and a way to share or project them

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
2 class periods plus homework
FILM CLIPS
Video clips provided with this lesson are from *Cameraperson*.

Clip 1: “It’s in Public” (1:55 min.)
The clip begins at 8:00 and ends at 9:55.
  Cinematographer Kirsten Johnson is shooting b-roll footage of Sarajevo, Bosnia, including the backs of two young men looking out over the city (we never see their faces) and footage of a group of people walking by a cemetery. This clip includes the following off-camera exchange:
  
  WOMAN: Something I was going to ask about when we saw these people: If you’re just getting the backs of heads, I can see why you wouldn’t need permission, but what if their face comes into it? Do you need that?
  JOHNSON: Well, anything that’s in public is public domain, it’s open. But you also… I always try to have some kind of relationship with people, like I’ll look them in the eye like, ‘You see me shooting you, don’t you?’

Clip 2: “Ask the Family” (2:00 min.)
The clip begins at 14:50 and ends at 16:50.
  District attorney Guy James Gray describes evidence he prepared in the James Byrd case. Byrd, a black man in Jasper, Texas, was chained to a pickup truck and dragged to death by two white men. To avoid showing graphic photos in open court, Gray’s team prepared a book of photos for the jury. In the clip, Gray describes some of the book’s content. In a clip later in the film (which students will not see), the filmmaker asks Gray if the crew can record pictures from the book. Gray says he might share one photo, but he’ll have to check with Byrd’s family first.

Clip 3: “Government Control” (3:00 min.)
The clip begins at 17:00 and ends at 20:00.
  Johnson’s driver informs her that journalists need permits to shoot video of the prison—and they don’t have a permit. So, they plan to say they are making a movie for entertainment, which doesn’t require a permit. But their subterfuge raises the suspicion of soldiers, and we’re left to wonder whether the driver is arrested.

Clip 4: “Competence Required?” (1:40 min.)
The clip begins at 21:00 and ends at 22:40.
  Johnson is shooting footage of her mother, who is identified as being in the early stages of Alzheimer’s. When Johnson asks her mother if it’s okay to film, her mother seems lost in another reality and never actually gives an answer. If this were a courtroom, her mother would likely be judged not competent to stand trial.

Clip 5: “Preserving Dignity” (1:48 min.)
The clip begins at 58:20 and ends at 1:00:08.
Syrian dissident Charif Kiwan speaks to a university audience about the ethics of showing the violated, dead bodies of the victims of war or atrocities. When he asserts that showing graphic images is just about making money, a student challenges him with an example of an incident in which a powerful image of a dead child turned the tide of public sentiment. Kiwan answers, "When you focus on death, you say, 'It’s done. It’s finished.' No… There’s nothing to do except voyeurism, except watch and ‘wow.’ So here is the main problem for us: We have to find a way to represent horror, to represent the death, respecting the golden rule—dignity."

ACTIVITY

Step 1: Introduction
Briefly pose this series of questions to students about their experience with taking and sharing pictures or video, or with having pictures or video taken of them:

- Did you ask permission to take pictures or video? Do you think you should have?
- When you were the subject, did you wish you had been asked for your consent?
- What sorts of rules do you think should govern this common practice?

As students are beginning to think about these questions, segue to the larger discussion by letting them know that, since long before it was routine for people to have phones with cameras and Internet connections in their pockets (or backpacks), journalists and filmmakers have been asking these questions.

Tell them they’re going to look at the ways the questions come up for a professional documentary cinematographer, Kirsten Johnson. Johnson has worked on dozens of films in 86 countries over the course of a 25-year career. She’s assembled a memoir, of sorts, by editing together some of her footage that ended up on the proverbial cutting room floor (an antiquated reference in its own right in the digital world). The name of the film is Cameraperson, and today they’ll be viewing several clips from it.

Step 2: Screening the Clips
You may use as many or as few of the clips as you choose and as time allows. Pause for discussion after each clip. For each clip, students will want to consider these major questions:

Is Permission Required?
- Does audience matter (e.g., for public versus private dissemination; what venues or methods of sharing qualify as “public”)?
- Does it matter whether the person taking the picture or video is a professional or not?
- Does the purpose matter (e.g., to make a profit; for news purposes; for education; for fun)?

You may want to post these questions or create a handout that students can reference. Additional clip-specific questions are included below. And, of course, encourage students to generate and discuss their own questions.

Clip 1: “It’s in Public”
• Do you need consent even if you can’t see someone’s face?
• Does being in public mean that you are automatically consenting to being filmed?

Clip 2: “Ask the Family”
Prior to screening the clip, give a bit of background on the case and explain that the man on screen is a district attorney. Immediately following the clip and before the discussion, tell students that later in the film (in a clip they won’t have time to screen), the filmmaker asks the attorney if there are any pictures in the book that he would show the camera. He answers, “I would need to talk to the Byrd family, but if they’ll permit me, I’ll introduce… I’ll release something on the ankles.”

• When should a photographer or publisher be required to get permission from family members? (Aside from dealing with footage that is upsetting, does the age of the subject matter? Should a videographer be required to ask your parents for permission to film you?)
• When is it permissible to show a dead or violated body, even if doing so dehumanizes a subject?

Clip 3: “Government Control”
• Under what circumstances should a government (or any other authority, including owners of private property like malls or stadiums) be allowed to deny permission to film?
• Under what circumstances is it okay to break the law in order to record or share your images?
• When is it acceptable to put people in danger in order to film?

Clip 4: “Competence Required?”
• Do the rules about consent change if you’re filming your own family?
• What if you want to record someone who isn’t competent to give consent?

Clip 5: “Preserving Dignity”
• Do you agree with Charif Kiwan that showing dead or deceased bodies is “voyeurism” and takes away people’s dignity?
• In history, whose desecrated bodies have been exhibited and whose have been kept private?
• Do you agree with Kiwan that mainstream media shows violence and its impact in order to make money?
• Do you agree with the student who suggests that sometimes images of death can stir people to action?

Optional: You may want to end with a brief free-write to help students synthesize what they learned. Invite them to focus on writing about an issue they had never thought about prior to the day’s discussion.

Step 3: Homework
Students may never work as professional journalists or filmmakers, but if they own smartphones with cameras, they will likely be camerapeople at some point in their lives. Their homework assignment is write their own set of rules governing when they will ask for permission to film/photograph and share images of people. The rules should be written in the form of a pledge.

This assignment will also serve as the assessment for the lesson.
Optional: Expand the assignment to look at issues beyond obtaining consent. Have students craft a personal mini code of ethics. Encourage them to look at examples of the codes that professional journalists use (see Resources).

**Step 4: Sharing Student Pledges**

Invite students to share their pledges by reading them aloud to the class. Encourage students to notice what the pledges have in common and what those commonalities say about their priorities and values.

**EXTENSIONS/ADAPTATIONS**

Introduce students to media literacy questions for reflection from Project Look Sharp, designed to help students think more deeply about the media they create:

https://www.projectlooksharp.org/Resources%202/keyquestions.pdf

Watch the POV Behind the Lens interview with director Kirsten Johnson and discuss the issues she raises: http://www.pbs.org/pov/cameraperson/

Use the film as a spark for video production. Divide the class into five groups. Assign each member of Group #1 to shoot (either with a video camera or with a phone) a close-up, each member of Group #2 a medium shot, each member of Group #3 a wide or establishing shot, each member of Group #4 a pan and each member of Group #5 a zoom. Subject matter can be anything the students choose (though you may want to establish limits about violent or overtly sexual content). Have each student upload their footage to a single site accessible to all. Then have each student assemble a video story using shots from the collection. Hold a screening for their finished videos during which they share observations about shot selection, editing choices, what they notice about how things like lighting or sound make it hard or easy to “marry” clips and how the same shot(s) can be used to tell very different stories. Afterward, have students do a 10-minute free-write in which they reflect on the ways that shot selection, framing and editing influence interpretation.

**RESOURCES**

POV: **Cameraperson**  
Pbs.org/pov/cameraperson - The site includes a general discussion guide with additional activity ideas.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films  
http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php  
This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

Committee to Protect Journalists: “Would-Be Repressors Brandish ‘Ethics’ as Justification”  
https://cpj.org/2014/02/attacks-on-the-press-ethics.php - This is a post about government use of media ethics rules to restrict or suppress journalism,

Poynter: “Ethics"
Poynter offers a range of resources on journalism ethics.

https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp - This trade organization offers general ethical guidelines.

VideoMaker “Why Do You Need Release Forms?”

Video University: “Releases for Use in Film and Video”
https://www.videouniversity.com/articles/releases-for-use-in-film-and-video/ - This page provides sample video release forms and a brief explanation of why such forms are necessary.
STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects
(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.11-12.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.

SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.

SL.11-12.6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

W.9-10.4, 11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

Content Knowledge: (https://www2.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.
Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.
Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of The Teacher’s Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World (Corwin 2012) and past president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 250 independent films.