



## Empathy for the Stakeholder in Documentary Filmmaking

As a documentary filmmaker I'm often asked how I decide what to make a film about. I think people are expecting a description of an elaborate process of research and investigation, but the answer is so much simpler than that. I make films about stories that intrigue me. Don't get me wrong, I do tons of research once I decide to make a film, but the reality is that personal stories are what interest me.

I don't make "issue" films – ones that feel like investigative journalism, rather, I look for the personal stories that reflect the broader issue and, hopefully help the audience connect with my subjects on a deeper, personal level. I think this

builds empathy, and in doing so, has a far greater impact on the viewer. It's also why I shudder when I'm asked to speak as if I'm an expert on a subject just because I made a film about it. I'm the storyteller. The experts are the people in front of my cameras. My goal is to tell their stories by turning the narrative over to them. I want my presence to be invisible. It's their story and I want the audience to develop a relationship with them, not me. I'm not interested in presenting an "objective" story. Objectivity is overrated, and quite honestly, impossible to achieve. Subjectivity is so much more fun to work with, and it reflects reality.

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We don't experience the world objectively; we live it subjectively, so why not tell our stories in the same way? It's a much harder way of creating a film, but it's worth it when you can elevate a person's story who the mainstream

media ignores, and you get the audience talking about the issues because they connected, in some way, with the people in your film. That's how I build empathy for the stakeholders in film: I get out of the way so my main characters can tell their stories to an audience, and connect with strangers in a way they never imagined.

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**Learn more about Mike's films at [www.whalenfilms.com](http://www.whalenfilms.com)**