

# The Tiger King<sup>1</sup>

A popular Netflix documentary series released earlier this year tells the story of a collection of eccentric collectors of big cats, and the community that they form together. A key relationship in the series is depicted between a man called Joe Exotic, “[a] self-described ‘gay, gun-carrying redneck with a mullet’ who amasses one of the country’s largest collections of wild cats,” and his competitor Carol Baskin, the founder of Big Cat Rescue in Florida and an animal rights activist.<sup>2</sup> The series enjoyed widespread success. Yet it is troubling that it depicts Joe Exotic as a sympathetic character in the conflict, while demonizing Carole Baskin. The series exposes the viewer not only to the abuse of the animals at the center of the story, but also to the abuse of his employees, not to mention Joe Exotic’s attempt to arrange for Mrs. Baskin’s assassination. It portrays Mr. Exotic’s zoo as an equivalent to organizations like Big Cat Rescue, and thus casts aspersions across the entire industry of big cat conservation.

*Tiger King* became a source of popular fascination online, fueling numerous memes and even petitions to #FreeJoeExotic. The real-life consequences of the series have affected the lives of its characters. Furthermore, several accusations of poor ethical conduct have been leveled against the show and its producers.

Kathleen Walsh, a reporter at *The Independent*, notes the repeated misogyny at work within the series, and specifically the toxicity Mr. Exotic leveled against Carol Baskin. Of particular note is the insinuation made by the series that Baskin played a role in the disappearance of her ex-husband in 1997, and its failure to note Baskin’s history of dedicated conservation efforts. Walsh writes, “It is worth noting that Baskin’s park, Big Cat Rescue, has the approval of accredited animal rights groups like the Humane Society, which has praised the organization’s “highly effective and tireless work to end abuses,” noting, “Big Cat Rescue has taken in dozens of abused tigers, lions and other wild animals over the years and is accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries.”<sup>3</sup>

The ethical waters of documentary filmmaking are notoriously murky. Unlike fictional filmmaking, the manner in which a story is presented, how its characters are portrayed, and the limits of nuance that can be conveyed within the medium, can have lasting consequences for anyone involved with producing a documentary. And yet, the popularity of extreme depictions of larger than life, ethically dubious characters is undeniable.

These challenges are exacerbated by the lack of a governing authority over the industry. The New York Film Academy writes, “There are three main ethical challenges that arise for documentary filmmakers; their subjects, viewers, and their envisioned artistic presentation. As of now, there isn’t a specific documentary code of conduct for ethical standards, simply a floating version that most, but certainly not all, abide. Some of these ethical codes that are universally adopted include doing no harm, protecting the vulnerable, and honoring the viewer’s trust.” For a series like *Tiger King*, which leads the viewer into normative judgments about the ethical performance of its characters, *how* the story is told may be just as important as the story itself.<sup>4</sup>

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How should documentaries portray ethically dubious characters?
2. To what extent is moral and ethical editorializing an inevitable part of telling a story through documentaries?
3. To what extent should accuracy and fidelity to the truth take precedent over effective storytelling?
4. How can filmmakers ensure that problematic assumptions and norms do not infect their stories?

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this case appears in the APPE Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl’s 2020 Regional Case Set. It is reproduced here with permission. For more information about APPE IEB, visit <https://www.appe-ethics.org/about-ethics-bowl>.

<sup>2</sup> Slate, “Tiger King review: Netflix’s documentary series is ethically questionable and spectacular”

<sup>3</sup> *The Independent*, “Nobody is talking about the misogyny of Tiger King so I will”

<sup>4</sup> NY Film Academy, “How To Deal With Ethical Challenges In Documentary Filmmaking”

