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Did she do it? The ethics of the Schapelle Corby telemovie

AUTHOR
Michelle Smith
Research Fellow at Deakin University

Schapelle Corby remains behind bars – but Channel 9 is spruiking its telemovie about her time in jail in Indonesia. AAP Image/Mick Tsikas

However 4.2 kilograms of marijuana made its way into Indonesia in a body board bag in 2004, the story of Schapelle Corby’s arrest, conviction and subsequent jailing for drug smuggling is known by every Australian. The barbeque discussions about whether Corby was guilty were perhaps only rivalled by those drawn-out speculations by Australians a few decades ago about whether a mother would fabricate a tale about her baby being taken by a dingo.

With Corby reportedly awaiting the results of a parole hearing, Channel 9 has begun promoting its upcoming telemovie, Schapelle, which screens on February 10. It promises to tell us “the whole story”.

Delivered in a dramatic voiceover, the preview asks us, “Did she do it?”
Trailer for Channel 9's Schapelle.

**TV drama that challenges the courts**

Corby sits inside Kerobokan prison in Bali today because she was found guilty of importing drugs by the Denpasar District Court. Yet the new telemovie invites controversy by throwing the Indonesian verdict into question.

The version of the truth included in the movie has been derived in part from the controversial book *Sins of the Father*, written by journalist Eamonn Duff and published in 2011. The book’s core allegation was that Schapelle’s father, Michael, now deceased, was involved in a drug syndicate and that he was the source of the drugs in his daughter’s bag.


While the stories told in these books and documentaries are not in agreement, they have some basis in interviews and statements provided by people close to the events.

A biographical film, however, is necessarily based on the fictions required of screenwriting and acting.

Is it ethical for this telemovie to purport to reveal Corby’s “true story” at a time in which she is still serving a prison sentence and in which intricate negotiations are taking place to secure her release on parole?

**Learning from Lindy Chamberlain**

There is a similar precedent in the form of John Bryson’s 1985 book *Evil Angels*, which also issued a challenge to the Supreme Court verdict that held that Lindy Chamberlain had murdered her daughter Azaria in 1980.

Chamberlain continued to serve her sentence until new evidence saw her released in 1986. All charges were acquitted just two months before the film version of *Evil Angels*, starring Meryl Streep, had its cinema release in 1988.

In 1983, while Chamberlain was imprisoned, a lower budget production, *Who Killed Baby Azaria?*, screened on Channel 10. It combined dramatised re-enactments of testimony, along with writer Frank Moorhouse’s addresses to the camera. Like most Australians at the
time, the film largely went along with the consensus that Chamberlain was responsible for killing her daughter.

Various polls taken in recent years show that the court of public opinion believes Corby is guilty too. This is a turnaround from initial widespread presumption of her innocence.

Even given the public perception of her guilt, the prospect of Corby’s first interview on release from prison is attracting intense media discussion, especially regarding the large fee expected to be paid to secure the interview. The Schapelle telemovie aims to capitalise on the public interest in the story regardless of which network she agrees to speak with.

Who is in the media spotlight?

Corby’s life, and that of her immediate family, has been a media spectacle for a decade. The nature of the Kerobokan prison has meant that photographs of Corby and her cell have been easy to obtain and publish.

In contrast, the lives of the “Bali Nine” – a group of Australians convicted for drug smuggling in 2005 – have been comparatively invisible.

Ball’s Kerobokan prison, where Schapelle Corby and members of the Bali Nine are held. AAP Image/Johannes Christo

Their stories, and their physical appearances, have not had the same market value as that of a former beauty school student. Myuran Sukumaran and Andrew Chan are also housed in Kerobokan, but unlike Corby, they will never leave the prison and will be subject to execution by firing squad.

Similarly, far less commercial media attention was devoted to Van Tuong Nguyen who was
hanged in Singapore in 2005 for trafficking heroin. In 2013, his story was developed into a mini-series for SBS called Better Man.

While the dramatisation was produced against the wishes of his family, the purpose of a fictional version of Nguyen’s life, which was cut short at just 25 years old, differs from the dramatisation of Corby’s arrest and imprisonment.

Better Man can be seen as an attempt to throw into question the practice of capital punishment. Indeed, producers of the 2006 documentary about Nguyen, Just Punishment, believe that their film played some part in the groundswell of pressure that encouraged Singapore to remove mandatory death sentences for some forms of drug trafficking in 2012.

The Schapelle telemovie is not premised on a need to tell a story about an injustice (though that might be possible). Instead, it aims to capitalise on the elevation of a convicted drug trafficker to celebrity status.

How the film will contribute to long-term opinion about a woman who may soon have to attempt to rebuild her life after almost a decade in an overcrowded prison is unclear.

What it says about our thirst for true crime stories delivered to us as if they are titillating reality TV content is much more evident.

**Schapelle screens on Channel 9 on February 10.**