

Factsheet: Photojournalism

What is photojournalism?

Photojournalism is defined by [Merriam-Webster](#) dictionary as “journalism in which written copy is subordinate to pictorial usually photographic presentation of news stories or in which a high proportion of pictorial presentation is used.” Photojournalism is a crucial aspect of modern reporting, and is becoming even more so in societies in which photography tools are ubiquitous — most people carry mobile phones on their person at all times — and social media encourages the rapid sharing of images. Photojournalism can be used to tell stories that words simply can’t, and to convey realness and intimacy to the audience.

How does international law define ‘a journalist’?

Photojournalism is becoming an increasingly complicated field, as citizen and mobile journalists enable the generation and publication of media content at a much faster rate than in the past. International law generally protects these media creators under a wider interpretation of ‘journalist.’ The United Nations Human Rights Committee’s [General Comment No. 34](#) expressly defines journalism as a function shared by a wide range of actors, from professional full-time reporters and analysts to bloggers and others who engage in forms of self-publication in print and on the internet. According to international law therefore, journalistic protections should be construed broadly to apply to both professional and citizen journalists who are disseminating information in the public interest, so as not to unduly constrain freedom of expression.

Unfortunately, not all countries agree with or abide by that conceptualisation of the industry, and photojournalists should be careful to understand the regulatory and legal issues that affect their work in their context.

Of course, in a world in which almost anyone can take a photograph, how do photojournalists distinguish themselves and their content? Besides having the ability to evaluate the ethical considerations of a certain situation or photograph, and how to present a newsworthy event in an accurate and nuanced way, photojournalists should also understand how to make a photograph visually stimulating and interesting, and only the very best photojournalists are reliably able to do these things simultaneously. There are various resources providing relevant tips online, such as [this guide](#) from North Dakota State University professor Ross Collins.

Ethical considerations

In 2019, the New York Times (NYT) [came under attack](#) for its decision to publish graphic photographs of deceased victims of the January 2019 terrorist attacks in Nairobi, Kenya. While the editors argued the photographs were [newsworthy](#), many readers felt the NYT had applied a different standard to reporting about victims in African than they would, or did, in shootings in the United States or Europe.

This is just one example of the myriad of ethical questions photojournalists and their editors must grapple with on a daily basis. As the saying goes, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” and photojournalists must therefore think carefully about the sensitivities and implications of photographs they take and publish. The International Centre for Photojournalism provides an [ethical charter](#) for practitioners, which includes the following expectations for photojournalists:

1. Respect truth, whatever the consequences for himself/herself.

2. Verify sources.
3. Only publish information that can be traced back to its origin.
4. Abstain from using underhand means to secure photographs.
5. Never pay sources or subjects.
6. Treat subjects with respect and dignity and abstain from intruding on private moments of grief unless there is a justifiable and pressing reason for their public disclosure.
7. Never interfere with an event or attempt to change its course.
8. Never set up or re-enact a situation.
9. Always write truthful captions.
10. Share with the editor all information he/she has, in order to avoid misinterpretations or wrongful use.
11. Choose publications with care to avoid any editorial misuse.

It likewise provides specific guidelines on allowable editing or manipulation of photographs. Other organisations provide similar guidelines which vary on strictness, such as the National Press Photographers Association's [Code of Ethics](#) for their members, or the Associated Press [Code of Ethics for Photojournalists](#).

Photojournalists also need to be aware of local laws relating to their work, for example photographing children or sensitive national sites. In most countries, photographers or photojournalists are allowed to take photographs in any public place, of any person in that public place. However, it is considered best practice to always seek consent from your subjects, at a minimum after you have taken their photograph.

Another important factor that varies by jurisdiction is copyright law. In some countries, freelancers may have no rights to their work, ownership instead falling on the commissioner of the photographs. The length of a copyright, as well as how copyright can be transferred, varies by jurisdiction. Different countries and courts have also dealt differently with the issue of photographs taken of the private lives of public figures, such as politicians or celebrities, and often these cases depend on the nuances and circumstances of the particular case, as well as the privacy law in force. Photojournalists should therefore be aware of relevant jurisprudence in their country, and the general guidelines surrounding what is viewed as fair use.

The strict ethical considerations that apply to photojournalists are one of the key factors distinguishing them from other closely related types of photography, such as documentary photography or street photography.

Safety and Security

Photojournalists often need to be at the frontline of events. Therefore, physical and digital security are of utmost importance to their work, both for the personal safety of the individual and the integrity of the story they are reporting.

One characteristic of photojournalists is that they tend always to stand out in a situation because of the equipment usually required for the job. This may be an advantage or a disadvantage, depending on the circumstances. The International Journalists' Network recommends taking [the following steps](#) to ensure one's safety:

- Do regular back-ups, either onto the cloud or a storage system, and always make multiple copies.

- Be aware of where you are, and take into account local customs or laws regarding photography. Always have an exit strategy, and make sure someone knows where you are and is checking in with you regularly.
- Protect your equipment and yourself, as it may make you a target for criminals. Avoid carrying equipment in a way that makes its nature obvious.
- Carry a “dummy” storage device or card which can be given away, if unlawfully demanded.

Likewise, [digital security practices](#) are crucial for photojournalists:

- Set strong passwords, and use two-factor authentication when possible.
- Use a password manager to create and store unique passwords for each account.
- Resist the temptation to use open Wi-Fi networks.
- Consider setting up a Virtual Private Network for additional security online.
- Understand and be able to identify potential phishing attacks.
- Review your social media accounts to make intentional decisions regarding the data that you make publicly available.
- Be aware of the metadata that is shared along with your photographs, such as location or time stamps.
- Use encrypted communication channels wherever possible, such as Signal.

For more detailed guidance and resources, see Reporters Without Borders' [Safety Guide for Journalists](#).