



A Practical Guide to Ethical Imagery

As media makers and content creators for change and sustainability, it is essential that the processes we use to create content do not perpetuate harm and are done with the same integrity we want to see reflected in the world. This guide will serve as a resource for media makers who are committed to making a difference.

Created by the Water Hub at Climate Nexus
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General Principles

When working to shed light on an issue, we often end up needing to recount the lived experiences of other people and picture them in our advocacy communication. It's important at every stage of the work for the people we collaborate with to feel:

Trusted – From client to media maker to collaborators on camera, relationships with a foundation of trust are essential for authentic powerful storytelling.

Connected – Each project is an opportunity to connect everyone more deeply to each other and to the issues.

Benefited – Ensuring that everyone feels emboldened, engaged, and excited about the project.

Represented – That the story is being properly translated to an audience.

Compensated – That the time and energy that has been put into the project is supported.

Once these basic collaborative needs are met, you can think more about how these principles will apply more specifically.

Terminology

We believe terminology should reflect the sharing of power. These terms move away from a top-down approach that objectifies people telling their stories on camera:

- People behind the cameras or computers: media makers, content creators, crew

- People in front of the cameras: participants
- People paying for the work: convening organizations

Planning visual projects

Gut check

Before starting a visual storytelling project, it's important to ask the question, "Am I the right person to tell the story? Can I use this project as an opportunity to empower a storyteller closer to the issue?"

Narrative goals, audience and impact

Imagery can help to create or counter myths. When creating a visual story designed to advance equity, we need to be thinking: How does this story challenge the status quo? How does this story portray people in their dignity? How does this story center the solution and the way forward? Does it inspire?

Consider your audience. For content aimed at the impacted community, you may want to focus less on the problem, so as to not re-traumatize people, and more on solutions, including your theory of change. For audiences who are not the impacted community, you may want to focus more on the problem, solutions, and lived experiences of those at the center of this story.

Make a commitment to heal. How can we frame participants as experts, as visionaries, as people who hold solutions and are deserving of the audience's support?

Avoid

Tropes of trauma porn. Showcases a group's pain and trauma in excessive amounts for the sake of entertainment.

Victim fetishization or romanticization. Focusing on the person's suffering results in objectifications and ultimately shifts the focus away from the issue.

Reinforcing stereotypes.

Building a team

Anti-supremacy approach. As media makers and content creators, we have a responsibility to undo the harm that has been caused by extractive storytelling. Look to hire people in/of the community central to the story. Don't just hire for diversity stats. Empower folks who know the issues, have the trust of the community, have the skills needed, and are reliable.

Honor expertise by paying a living wage, respecting time and boundaries, and treating media makers as experts in their field.

Honor perspectives. Consider the perspectives each team member brings into our work. Check assumptions and make space for people to share their own context.

HIRING CHECKLIST

-  Can you hire someone from the community? **IF NOT**
-  Can you hire someone that shares a common language? **IF NOT**
-  Can you hire someone with trusted relationships and experience working in the community? **IF NOT**
-  Prioritize working with BIPOC, women, trans, and gender non-binary media makers who will be able to establish trusting relationships with media participants.

Reminder: Pay a fair living wage.

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Telling the story

Our relationships with people featured in stories must be:

Connected: Spend time building relationships with the participants. Share examples of your work and your approach.

Consensual: Listen to the community you are hoping to feature. What narratives will best support their needs?

Conscious: Put your agenda second.

Choose images that portray people in their dignity. When working with participants who have been disenfranchised, it is important to think about whether imagery is portraying this person or community as victims or as heroes in their story.

- Are we perpetuating harmful narratives? For example, identifying people of color as low-income people systematically.
- What kind of imagery can show the reality without victimizing or stereotyping this participant?



Sourcing and licensing images

Where to look - what to look for:

- As best as you can, source images from the local community itself. Find local photographers/filmmakers to support.
- Pay and credit the original photographer or videographers.
- If sourcing images from a local partner organization, be sure to ask for the consent of the people pictured ([sample release form](#)).
- Donate to folks in the image when possible.

Capturing photos and videos

Check for consent:

- **It is important to know when to turn your camera off.** Have you been invited to film the Indigenous ceremony? Do the residents of a curbside community know you are filming them? If you don't have a relationship with the people featured, turn your camera off and start building one.
- **Normalize asking participants to identify times, locations, and events that are OK to photograph or film.** If an event is of a sensitive nature, make sure you seek permission ahead of time. If a participant gets emotional or shares something vulnerable, ask them afterwards how they feel about that footage or photos, and any considerations around editing and usage.
- **If someone asks you to stop filming, STOP filming.**



Storing and sharing imagery

Metadata: Ask photographers to include embedded metadata in each of their files ahead of time. Standard metadata may include, *Title, Caption, Keywords, Photographer, Copyright, Credit, Rights Usage Terms, City, State, Country, Contact email address.*

Naming convention: When building your own library make sure you have a naming system to help you organize and find your content easily. Your file names may include *Location, Date, Event, Participant names, Author.*

Checking for consent before sharing, even with allied groups

Make sure to caption your images accurately. Captions tell the story of the image and give necessary context:

- Who? If there are notable people, your caption should include who is in the picture and why they are significant. Identify people left to right.
- What is in the picture? The text should including a story, not just a literal description of what's in the photograph.
- When? Include the date the image was taken.
- Where? Be specific. Include city and country.
- Why? Explain the circumstances and why the photo is relevant.



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Follow-up with your participants

Stay connected after the cameras are off:

- Include the participants in the review process. A pattern in extractive storytelling is for production teams, outlets, writers, filmmakers, and even larger convening organizations to go into a community, extract footage, and not include the film participants in the process. From the time of pre-interviews, share the timeline of the project with the film participants and ask if they would like to be a part of any review.
- Share the finished product, and include participants in your outreach on the issue, including events or press opportunities.
- Keep people updated on the impact of the project.

Accessibility considerations

People with disabilities are the biggest minority in this country. Think about how you can make your content accessible to as many people as possible. Consider the following.

Image descriptions for image readers. A lot of people use readers to navigate the internet and all social media platforms. Adding an image description makes images available to many people with disabilities.

Closed captioning versus open subtitles. As more and more video platforms use AI for automatic captioning, burning subtitles directly in the video can become problematic. Instead of open subtitles, consider exporting the captions as a separate file. Close captions are responsive, can be translated automatically, can be read by reading devices and can be resized as needed. Open subtitles cannot.

Text-on-screen readability.

- Provide the right amount of space (and time) between lines of text.
- Use clean typography.
- Avoid using all caps.
- Don't underline text. Reserve underlining for identifying links.
- Use left-aligned text.
- Size matters.
- Make hashtags accessible by capitalizing the first letter of each word so readers can read them. #ThisHashtagIsAccessible

APPENDIX

Technical tips for better portraits

Don't use compositions that reveal the identity of the people who do not wish to be identified or whose safety could be jeopardized by the exposure.

Take into consideration the skin color of the people you are filming. Use lighter backgrounds for darker skin and adjust your lighting appropriately — use more diffusion and move the source closer.

When filming children, short people, or wheelchair users, always lower the camera to their eye level to avoid infantilizing shots.

Always check in with your participants and make sure they feel comfortable with the way your shot looks.

Ask if they want to fix their clothing/hair if you notice misplacement. If the issue persists, do not assume it's OK to touch people to fix anything. Ask permission or get consent.

Tips for better collaboration

It's important to have clarity on who decides what but this doesn't have to be a top-down approach — the stakeholders involved can share power.

Everyone has different work styles. When putting together a new team, kick things off with a pre-production meeting so that everyone can learn and share preferred communication styles, work styles, how people like to receive feedback or critique?

During pre-production meetings learn how a team member relates to the issue/story being told.

Make space for people to share their own context. When working with marginalized communities it's crucial that we make less assumptions and more space for people to share what cultural sensitivities or protocols to be aware of. Add these types of

guidelines into production materials and call sheets when appropriate.