Photographic Ethics: Module 6

Ethics of Image Captions

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Goals: Image Captions

Captions
• To emphasize information gathering with the subject
• To understand what to include and not to include in an ethical caption
  • Including the who, what, where, when, why

Publications
• Understand if the image is too sensitive or specific for a given publication
• When an image can be ethically generalized
• When not to publish images
Ethical Captions

• Captions provide critical information about an image and help to shape the meaning, decode the visual narrative, and connect the image-content to the program or agency associated.

• Usually 1-2 short sentences that convey critical, basic knowledge about the content and narrative of the image

• Necessary information:
  • Who?
  • What?
  • Where?
  • When?
  • Why / How?

“Patrick, age 26, and his younger sister cook fofou and cabbage for dinner outside their home in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo in December of 2013. Patrick is a photographer who uses his income to sustain his family and support his various small business plans.”
Who?

- Be sure to gather the individual’s name, age, and occupation if possible.
- If they choose to remain anonymous, be sure to not include the name in the caption.
- Names, however, humanize. Giselle is not just “a woman in Congo.” Her identity begins with her name – and by naming we maintain the humanity of the subjects in their images.
What

- A short description of the action taking place in the image will help keep the specificities as well as make the image understandable. Is it a measles vaccine or polio? An eradication campaign, or communicable disease risk reduction?
- A well-fleshed out description of what was happening will help keep the image accurate and understandable.
- How was the situation carried out? This section allows description of the scene, players, and their actions.
Where

Location: town, province, country, home, organization, etc.

- The ‘where’ is important as many places will look similar and often can be confused when publishing the image. Trying to connect the image with the location is important as it keeps photographic accuracy intact.

- Conversely, if there exists stigma or political conflict, it is worth being careful about naming the location of the population or individual in question. Being vague may enable you to both publish the image, show the situation, and reduce the risk to the photographic subject(s).
When

• The date / time of day is necessary to place not only the social, medical, political context.
• The date / time allows viewers to connect the image with other events happening at the same time, and distinguish them from events happening at earlier or later periods.
Usually part of the second sentence of the caption

• Why does this image matter? (Particularly for FETP)

• Why is it important – to you? To the organization? To the population?

• Why is it representative of the situation, actions, culture, region, etc?
Example of a bad caption

Congolese girl looks at cans in a store.

Young African woman in a Western grocery store.

Confusion is a significant confounding factor within the first couple years of immigration.
In March, 2013, Maria, 19, walks through a local grocery store in an effort to find the soup packets her mother needs to cook their family version Congolese stew that evening. Maria’s family immigrated from the DRC in 2009 and has since been making a life and living in Clarkston, GA, one of the most refugee-dense and diverse cities in the USA.
When to be Specific / General

- Providing specific caption data enables accurate generalization.
- To generalize: A photograph must be applicable or representative of larger community-wide, national, regional, global issues.
  - Common in: photo contests, websites, newsletters, and on social media, photographs
- For instance:
  - The picture shows: Jean Claude in Yaoundé Cameroon receiving a measles vaccine...
  - Jean Claude of Yaoundé Cameroon is representative of the ever-heightening need for MMR vaccines around the globe.
    - To reiterate some examples of when one can generalize include:
      - When there is a medical similarity
      - regional situation
      - cross-community / national / international work.
When NOT to publish

• The image is too revealing /sensitive
  • The photograph shows cultural insensitivity (reveals ethically questionable body parts, gender, religious considerations)
  • Politically sensitive images that show individual affiliations in tense political situations
• Context of the publication is not accurate to the original intent of the photograph
  • E.G. using a photograph of women whose children received a polio vaccine to discuss the outcomes of sexual violence
  • When the image feels inconsiderate to the individuals featured
    • Ask yourself: would you want this photograph of yourself published?
Summary

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Questions about the aforementioned material should be directed to Tina Rezvani, TEPHINET Communications Manager, at trezvani@tephinet.org