San Francisco Chronicle

Visual Ethics Guidelines: Standards and Practices

Photo integrity

Our images should be truthful depictions of events. In general, recreating events for news photos or videos is not allowed. Photographers should note posed portraits in original captions. If the image is not an obvious portrait, the published caption should explicitly state that it is a posed situation. Emerging technologies should be used responsibly and follow relevant laws, including the right to privacy. Visual elements should not be used if it could encourage or glorify illegal or unsafe behavior. As with all types of reportage, it is important to consider the state of the subject and the public value of the photography.

Photo Processing

Minor adjustments to photos are acceptable. These should be limited to those minimally necessary for clear and accurate reproduction and that do not obscure the authentic nature of the photograph. These edits include cropping, dodging and burning, conversion into grayscale, elimination of dust on camera sensors and scratches on scanned negatives or scanned prints and normal toning and color adjustments. Backgrounds should not be digitally blurred or eliminated by burning down or by aggressive toning. In general, photo manipulation such as adding or removing items in an images is not allowed unless it is purposefully done to create a photo illustration and labeled as such.

Video and Audio Editing

The San Francisco Chronicle permits the use of subtle, standard methods of improving technical quality, such as adjusting video and audio levels, color correcting due to white balance, eliminating buzzing, hums, clicks, pops, or overly long pauses or other technical faults, and equalization of audio to make the sound clearer provided the use of these methods does not conceal, obscure, remove or otherwise alter the content of the image. Video can be produced with titles and logos, the images toned and the audio quality improved.

Sound can also be added to video if it is obvious to the casual observer that it is not natural background sound present at the time the visuals were shot. The emotional impact of added sound must also be taken into consideration when selected.

When editing audio within a video, in general the specific audio associated with each video shot must be used without alteration. However in cases where music is the principal ambient sound — e.g. when the video portrays a marching band or an orchestra playing audio may be laid unbroken and video images edited over the top, provided the video was shot contemporaneously and the meaning of the scene is not altered.

Photo illustrations

Photo illustrations must be labeled as such. They must not misrepresent and must not result in an image that looks like an unaltered photograph — it must clearly be of a compiled and illustrative nature. Any work to alter a photograph or video — including blurring of offensive words or faces — must be discussed with the Director of Photography prior to publication. Altered photos, regardless of how they were altered and by whom, should include caption information that explains the nature and purpose of the alteration.

Obscuring identities

When identity obscurement is deemed necessary we should photograph or video the subject in silhouette or use other techniques (such as using the person's shadow naturally cast on a wall or ground) to achieve the desired effect. Exceptions may be granted by the Director of Photography and/or Editor in Chief. Images may be treated so that end-users of our content cannot adjust the levels to bring a shadowed face into view. The voices of silhouetted persons being interviewed may be digitally distorted with a manager's permission strictly for purposes of hiding identity. However any such alteration will be noted and disclosed in the accompanying script or shot list. It is important to recognize that any representations to subjects should be limited to the precise steps you will take to obscure their identities, as we cannot guarantee their anonymity. If a source has expressed concern about how she is depicted, the best course is to review with the source exactly how you plan to depict her, and to show her if possible. This will ensure there is no misunderstanding in the event she is later recognized by someone despite our best efforts to obscure her identity.

When approved by a manager, The Chronicle may allow the use of material from third parties, such as government authorities, in which faces are digitally obscured. In such cases, it must be stated in the shot-list, or caption and special instructions, who is responsible for the obscuring of a face. Similarly, the caption or shot-list must clearly disclose any other manipulation of imagery by a source that otherwise would not be allowed under Chronicle guidelines.

Mature Content

Publishing photos of physical violence, violent crime and other disturbing imagery is occasionally necessary to cover a story. Such imagery must be appropriate and newsworthy, not gratuitous. Extreme caution must be taken with images that could be offensive to specific

religions, nationalities or ethnic groups. Violent images and videos need the approval of the Editor in Chief.

Special warnings to viewers about disturbing images may be needed for online content. In the rare case that an obscene image is necessary to tell the story, we may blur the portion of the image considered offensive but this must be approved by the Director of Photography and/or Editor in Chief.

Historical material

Archival photos should be clearly labeled as file with the date established in the credit when available.

Captions

All photo and video captions should adhere to Chronicle style and accurately describe the situation depicted. When the photo desk is alerted to errors in the caption fodder by the copy desk or other verified source the desk will ensure caption information in fixed at all points of the content management system and live web articles.

Handout Images

When obtaining visuals from external sources such as subjects, government entities, non-profits etc. we must be certain the content is accurate, un-manipulated, shows what it is said to show and that we have the right to use it. All externally produced content must not be published without proper attribution to the copyright holder, creator or both. When uploading images make sure to input captions with credits and list any use restrictions, like "one time use." Be careful when selecting archival handouts and old wire images for republication — make sure we still have the rights to use them. When in doubt check with the photo desk.

Photo Kills

When the Associated Press, Getty or another news wire service issues a photo kill notice, the photo desk will immediately seek to eliminate the imagery from all points in the content management system. Special care will be taken that older wire imagery in the content management system has not had a photo kill placed on it before re-publication.

Copyrights

The rights for images and videos taken by staff while on assignment (including reporters) belong to the Chronicle. If contacted to share any Chronicle content, please direct inquiries to licensing@sfchronicle.com.

Parts of the San Francisco Chronicle Visual Ethics Guidelines were taken verbatim from the Associated Press Visuals Ethics Policy and the Ethics Policy of the National Press Photographers Association with additional policy relevant to The San Francisco Chronicle.

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