



# THE JOURNALIST SURVIVAL GUIDE

AN ANIMATED VIDEO GUIDE



## Lesson 3

### How to Permanently Delete Sensitive Information

Over the last few years there has been an enormous growth in the quantity and quality of video and photos on the internet- and much of it is now routinely used by news organizations all over the world.

But if you use third party material in your stories, you run a risk of passing on misleading or false information, which could in turn cause serious damage to your credibility as a journalist.

The most valuable reporting you can offer, whatever medium you are working in, is what you record in your own camera, notebook, or audio recorder.

The farther away you get from what you personally know to be true, the greater the risk of getting it wrong, so you should always start with your own original reporting.

If you cannot take the pictures or shoot the video yourself, you should try to form relationships with trusted colleagues. Ideally these are people who you can speak with directly to discuss the circumstances around the images they have taken.

You should note down all the important facts, including the time and place the material was shot, and any relevant circumstances that may have affected the way it was captured.

For example video shot under conditions where the camera operator felt themselves to be in danger can reflect that anxiety- it can be shaky and dramatic. The same scene, shot by a steadier hand, will give a very different impression of what actually transpired.

Even if video or pictures come from a trusted source, you must realize that pictures often do NOT tell the whole story.

Remember the recent controversy over images depicting the death of a four year old Palestinian boy in a Gaza hospital? Wire services published photos of the child with information suggested he died in an Israeli airstrike. But further reporting indicated he died as a result of a rocket launched within Gaza. Pictures or videos are a moment in time, not the full story.

What's more, the angle you use or the video you choose to shoot can distort reality. For example, if you attend a rally and take close up shots of protestors all huddled together it may look like the rally was well attended.

A wider angle may show it was in fact poorly attended.

Let's say you choose to only photograph a small group of women in a larger crowd of male protestors. Are you really providing an accurate portrayal of the crowd?

Avoid drawing conclusions based on images that you did not directly witness.

If you and people you trust are at the top of the list of credible sources of video, the internet is all the way at the bottom.

Look at these images:

The powerful hurricane known as Superstorm Sandy looming over the Statue of Liberty in New York.  
The children of the Republican candidate for US president

And one of the most shared photos of the year,  
As the BBC's technology division pointed out in this article- all of them are fake- and yet they had a powerful impact on how people think about the real life events they depict.  
With so many ways to capture video or still images from the web, journalists must take extra care to verify that the images are truthful before using them.  
Start by looking closely at the image and asking yourself some basic questions:  
Does it look like other images taken by credible news sources of the same incident?  
Does the video or photo you're thinking about using tell a different story than other reporters are telling?  
For example, are there bodies shown where no-one else is reporting casualties?  
Does the weather match the weather for that time and place?  
Check Google Earth to see if the satellite images matches the physical layout in the video or photo. If it feels wrong, don't use it.

Sometimes there is information embedded in the file that contains the image- familiarize yourself with the ways digital markers are attached to media. If the embedded date precedes the event it's supposedly showing, you know there's a problem.

Those are some basic things every responsible journalist should do, but if you plan on making frequent use of third party images, you should familiarize yourself with the more sophisticated ways of establishing authenticity.

Many photographers and videographers will do some basic processing of their raw material before sending it on, often simply to make it look or sound better.

While this kind of basic manipulation can be acceptable, other techniques such as cropping of photographs and selective editing of video are more problematic.

A more advanced way to tell if an image has been manipulated is to look at the information contained inside the media files.

Commercially available image verification software looks at the digital 'signature' stamped on data files by the cameras that took the image. these signatures often change once a photo is altered.

Sometimes, no matter how hard we try, we publish inaccurate information.

One of the best ways to protect yourself and your reputation against fraudulent or misleading images is to never take credit for something you did not produce.

It's worth repeating:

If you did not take the picture or shoot the video yourself, you must never take credit for it. This is both to protect the rights of the person who took and owns the image, and for your own protection. If you tell your viewers and readers where the information came from, you can help to protect your own reputation even if the material turns out to be false or misleading.

If you are dealing with written information- news reports, surveys, research studies and the like- make sure you check out where it came from.

Some organizations have very official sounding names, but are made up of nothing more than two young bloggers.

Others mask political or social biases behind websites that appear to be neutral non-profits, but are in fact run by corporations, interest groups, or governments.

Try to establish the sources of an organization's funding if you are unclear about what that entity is, and remember, just because an organization publishes something doesn't mean it is factual or unbiased.

And always remember, the best source of information, and most valuable thing you have to offer as a journalist, is your own reporting.

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