

GUIDELINES FOR SOURCING EQUITABLE VISUALS

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What are equitable visuals?

Equitable visuals are images that represent a diversity of people and communities, include a variety of experiences and backgrounds, and foreground a visual framework of equity. Publishing photos, videos, illustrations, and other forms of imagery that visualize people, places, and events equitably and ethically is necessary because images have far-reaching and long-lasting social impact. It's particularly important for visual news media content to accurately portray all people in order to retain journalistic integrity and public trust.

Gender, race and/or ethnicity is often imagined as the central component of equity and inclusion work. However, it's vital to represent and value ALL diverse experiences including: socioeconomic backgrounds; sexuality; people with disabilities; familial structures beyond the "nuclear family"; different religions; and many other lived experiences that are often misrepresented or ignored in visual media.

Avoiding visual stereotypes, tropes, or misrepresentations of individuals and groups is a key element of solutions journalism practice and ethics. Consider the following ideas when seeking imagery to accompany or illustrate solutions journalism stories.

Prioritize visual storytelling.

→ Visuals shouldn't be an afterthought! Try to commission original art or license photography from photojournalists whenever possible. Working with photographers and illustrators with the story in hand will produce the best visual storytelling and ideal opportunities for equitable and inclusive imagery.

Consider the source.

→ Commission photographers who share your organizational mission of making and publishing equitable imagery. If commissions aren't possible, use stock collections that are invested in inclusive and equitable visual practices and representation. Repeatedly searching the same newswires and stock collections like Getty, Associated Press, Adobe, or Shutterstock may limit your access to equity-focused visual content.

RESOURCES

Strategies for Sourcing Images

Because of the history of inequity and misrepresentation in photography, popular stock agencies, creative commons and open archives may offer limited options for equitable, appropriate imagery. Give yourself enough time to research the best image options. Think creatively and be specific when using search keywords, especially for stock agencies. For example, if you search "woman artist" you may find mostly images of white women but searching "woman of color artist" or searching a specific identity may yield more results.

If the image you're looking for is not available through a stock or wire agency, or creative commons, consider commissioning a photographer or illustrator, or reaching out to an artist to license an image. Sometimes, no image is better than the wrong image.

Image Sources

Creative commons: [Flickr Creative Commons](#), [Wikimedia Commons](#), public domain

Stock agencies: [Stocksy](#), [Shutterstock](#), [Getty Images](#), [Adobe](#)

Wires: [Associated Press](#), [Getty Images](#), [AFP](#), [ZUMA Press](#), [Reuters Pictures](#)

Equity-focused stock collections: [TONL.co](#), [Disabled and Here](#), [Getty Images #ShowUs](#), [Nappy.co](#), [The Gender Spectrum Collection](#)

Represent all people accurately and holistically.

→ **Consider whose bodies and experiences are centered in an image vs. whose experiences are relegated to the margins.** For example, does the image highlight white, Western, or able-bodied people/organizations as the heroes of the visual story? If so, choose imagery that foregrounds the experiences of those featured in the story. Solutions journalism avoids individual hero narratives in favor of community-focused asset framing.

→ **Normalize everyday experiences rather than emphasize harm or victimhood. It's a delicate balance to invoke a problem to explain it while not purely centering the harm.** For example, does the image showcase the strengths and successes of an individual/community/solution or does it primarily highlight weaknesses and lack? Choose imagery that depicts all people (regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or dis/ability) as complex beings experiencing nuanced relationships to both problems and solutions.

→ **Recognize what cultural objects, experiences, and interactions are frequently used as visual clichés for communities. It's important to show these elements when they're relevant but consider the context within a story to determine if certain objects or actions are actually necessary to depict either the specific problem or solution discussed.**

For example, if a story focuses on Indigenous people or communities, avoid using stereotypical symbols like feather headdresses or dreamcatchers to illustrate it. (It's not that these aren't factual aspects of contemporary Indigenous culture, it's that they are overused expressions that leave out many other aspects of Indigenous people's lived experiences.) Instead, look for representations that highlight everyday experiences of interpersonal, environmental, cultural or other relationships among contemporary Indigenous people.

Represent all people accurately and holistically.

→ **Similarly, avoid relying on oversimplified symbolism of complex, nuanced issues.** If a story is about addressing police overuse of force, using a visual symbol like a Black Lives Matter protest sign doesn't accurately illustrate the story because it's only tangentially related to the core problem. Instead, consider using imagery that depicts community conflict resolution response teams or something else rooted in direct relationships to the possible solutions presented.

→ **Learn to recognize and avoid what kind of imagery pulls from centuries of the anthropological or colonial "Western gaze."** These are visuals that cast Black and/or brown bodies as less-than-human, often equating people or communities of color to animals or framing them as uncivilized, child-like, or lacking agency.

Imagery like this often shows up in visual documentary of the global South (i.e. Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia). Carefully consider the historical references of an image's visual style and approach to avoid reproducing these visual rhetorics.

For example, portraits where Black and/or brown people stare unsmiling into the camera are often pulling from centuries of medicalized imagery used to depict bodies in photographic typologies. (An example of this is the infamous *National Geographic* image of Sharbat Gula, referred to as "the Afghan girl.")

This style of portraiture has historically been used to dehumanize non-white people, specifically for the purposes of rationalizing colonization and slavery.

Reframe the gaze.

→ **The Western Gaze often shows up in how images are physically composed by the visual journalist. Consider what and/or who is emphasized or de-emphasized within the frame.**

Camera angles, or the way a visual journalist is positioning the camera, can convey particular ideas about people and environments. Consider how the viewer or audience is positioned in relation to those pictured within the frame.

For example, is the image composed in a way that has the viewer either looking down on the people in the frame or looking up at them? Low angle imagery that looks up at people in a frame tends to heroicize the people pictured whereas high angle imagery that looks down on the people tends to cast them as less-than or diminished. Take time to consider how this positioning might alter or inflect the way the visual representation aligns with the overall solutions story.

→ **How color is used within an image can also convey certain ideas about people, places, and events.** Has a yellow tint been applied to imagery of an Asian nation or other representations of Black or brown people? Has Black or brown skin been darkened or lightened in an image? Contemporary colorization or toning practices like these rely on and reinforce inaccurate or stereotypical ideas about people and places.

Provide necessary context.

→ **Be clear about the story you're seeking to illustrate.** Read/watch/listen thoroughly before embarking on any image searches. Pull keywords from the story and let those inform the image search.

→ **Understand the difference between cultural appropriation and appreciation.** When imagery highlights cultural objects, elements, or practices mainly outside the context of that specific culture, this is typically leaning into appropriation. Appreciating cultures requires accurate recognition of where knowledge, objects, and practices originate and it necessitates valuing the people of a culture equally to how their cultural elements are valued.

An example of cultural appropriation might be images of non-Asian people wearing bindis, which is a South Asian religious/cultural symbol. Another example: if an image is conveying the benefits of “Eastern medicine” or restorative practices of yoga, but the main people depicted in the imagery are white or Westerners (rather than Asian people and nations), the culture responsible for creating this knowledge isn't being accurately centered or appropriately recognized.

→ **Always include clear, thorough captions, text, or audio information that provide further context for imagery.** While it's not possible to account for all interpretations, consider how images might be decontextualized if they are circulated or published without accompanying text. Select images that can tell nuanced stories on their own, even without further context to situate the visual story.

Use thoughtful language.

→ Rethink the terminology we use to talk about individuals, communities, and practices in visual contexts. This is an important step toward achieving an equity framework and language is constantly in flux, so it's also a key part of attaining journalistic accuracy. Make space for conversations about the most accurate terminology and how certain words can have social impact.

For example, if an image depicts a person who identifies as transgender or nonbinary, captions should use accurate pronouns aligned with their gender. As another example, when discussing the act of photography, consider how common terminology like “shooting” a “subject” relies on violent and colonial rhetoric. Use more neutral terms to convey those ideas.

Give credit where it's due.

→ Recognize the labor of image makers by properly crediting visual journalists. Make sure you know and follow the attribution required based on the licensing and copyright permissions of the images you're using.

RESOURCES

Language

[A Copy Editor's Education in Indigenous Style](#)

[Beyond the Bill: Language — Photo Bill of Rights](#)

[“Disability Language Style Guide” by NCDJ](#)

[Diversify Photo's Guide to Nonviolent Language for Lens Based Work](#)

[Queer Black Editing](#)

[Race Reporting Guide by Race Forward](#)

[Radical Copyeditor](#)

[“Reporting and Indigenous Terminology Guide” by NAJA](#)

[Trans Journalists Association Style Guide](#)

Talent Databases

[Authority Collective](#)

[African Photojournalism Database](#)

[Black Women Photographers](#)

[Brown Girls Doc Mafia](#)

[Color Positive](#)

[Diversify Photo](#)

[Indigenous Photograph](#)

[Majority World](#)

[Native Agency.](#)

[The Everyday Projects](#)

[Women Photograph](#)

[Women Who Draw](#)

Crediting Photographers and Artists

Develop a **style guide** that covers proper crediting for imagery used across your platforms. Publications may have different crediting styles for different image sources.

Below are examples of possible credit styles:

- Commissioned: “[Firstname Lastname] for Solutions Journalism Network”
- Licensed: “[Firstname Lastname] for [Publication]”
- Wire, stock, public domain or creative commons: “[Firstname Lastname]/Associated Press” or “[Firstname Lastname or creator handle]/[Stock Agency]”

Carefully read through the licensing and copyright permissions of all images you use. When in doubt, consult the image source, photographer, or a lawyer.

Conclusion

These guidelines are not a substitute for deep and ongoing personal education on equity frameworks for images. Our knowledge and understanding of social impact and cultural contexts are constantly expanding. So too must our individual research continue in perpetuity to stay informed as ideas develop over time.

Stay informed on developing perspectives around visual ethics and the social impact of media representation.

Stay mindful of visual stereotypes and keep diversity in representation at the forefront of your sourcing process. Rather than thinking of certain identities as checkboxes to tick off, adopt a holistic view of representation that includes an understanding of which identities are underrepresented and how power dynamics may manifest as visual trends.

Don't be afraid to ask questions! Consider consulting colleagues and engaging discussion around images you're uncertain about. Engage in communication around these ideas by connecting with the communities you visually represent and listening to feedback from the people represented in imagery.

Learn from mistakes and missteps. Equity work is ongoing education and dedicated action produced in solidarity with affected communities.

The work is never "done" but it is always necessary and always worth it.