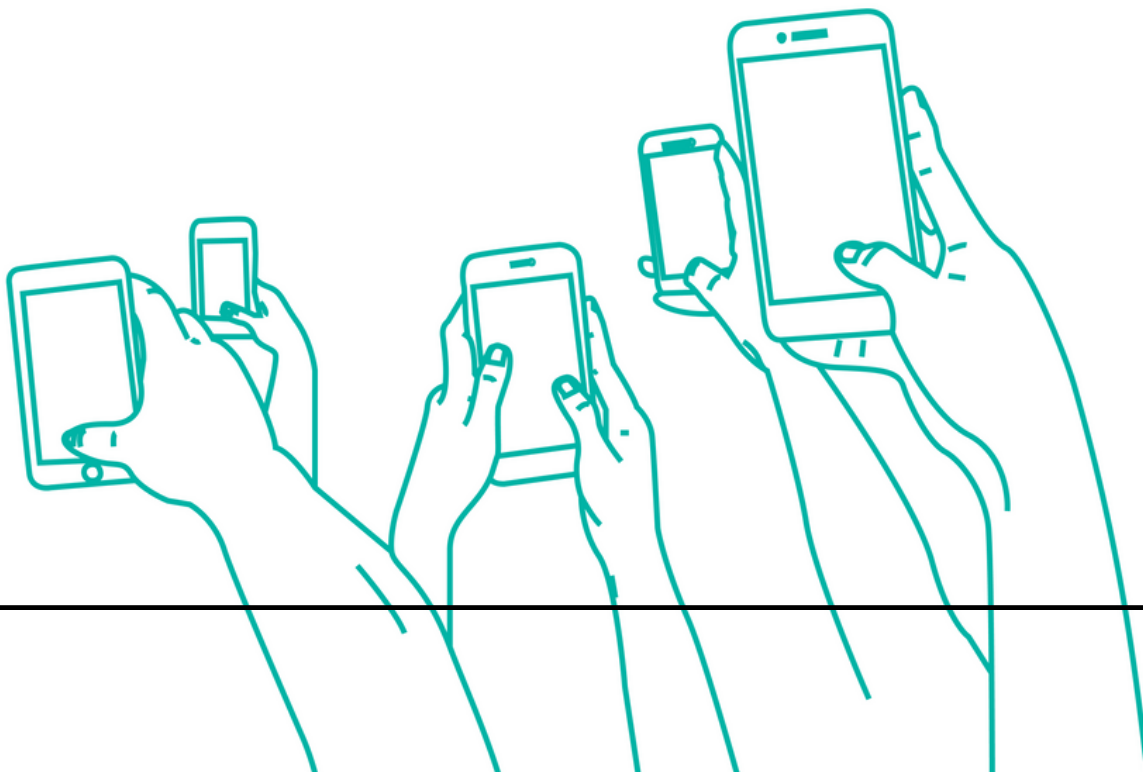


OpenArchive's guide to ethical citizen reporting



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The role of journalism within the digital media landscape is constantly changing. People armed with smartphones play an essential role in challenging the traditional gatekeeping role newsrooms have played for decades.

While there is no foolproof crash course on being an ethical citizen journalist, our guide aims to give you harm-reduction tools to balance truth and accuracy with compassionate reporting.

Due to the decentralized nature of citizen journalism, there isn't exactly a "universal" code of ethics. [The Society of Professional Journalists code of ethics](#) is a fair place to start, but we're highlighting some tips and best practices to ensure that advancing human rights and source safety are at the forefront.





DO THE WORK BEFORE YOU START

Don't be a [parachute journalist](#). Few things alienate a community more than a well-intentioned individual who drops into a situation and proceeds to act like an authority. Consider the following before diving into your reporting:



Question yourself

Why are you entering this work in the first place? Is this just about elevating your platform? Or are you prioritizing cultivating community, documenting unique perspectives, and achieving justice?

Delve into your biases

Bias can be dangerous if you're not aware of it. Consider how your biases could impact your reporting, as they may inadvertently harm the subjects and the cause you are documenting.

But bias isn't always a bad thing

Having lived experience in a particular subject matter can also be a good thing and add richness and authenticity to your reporting.

Understand why there's a general distrust of the media

You may have the right intentions, but that doesn't mean people will perceive you that way. Journalistic institutions historically haven't been kind to radical politics. Right-wing grifters and streamers also pose as journalists while doing a lot of [harm to the community](#).

Know your setting

If you are not yet embedded in the community you are working with, try to build a connection with them. Consider collaborating with another reporter who has already done the work.

BUILD TRUST & MAINTAIN TRANSPARENCY WITH COMMUNITIES

Trust is key in any work with sources, especially when interacting with sources from marginalized groups. If you are not already embedded in the communities you work in, consider the following when developing relationships:

Drop the savior complex

Don't view this work as "giving a voice to the voiceless." Everyone has a voice, they're just not always amplified in traditional media.

Humble yourself

Be open to feedback and take vitriol with a grain of salt. Many people in these spaces speak from a place of trauma.

Be transparent about your intentions

Make sure you clearly articulate your goals and purpose for being there with both your sources and your audience.

Allow sources to be part of the reporting process

Consider letting sources read quotes or segments of what you wrote about them to ensure you're portraying them accurately.



Give credit where credit is due

Be sure to credit and recognize the work fixers and locals are doing to help you with your reporting.

Understand that you're sometimes a guest

Remember that you're a guest. Community members taking their time to work with you is a courtesy.

It's OK to mess up. Learn to grow from mistakes

If you publish or post something and you're called out for bad ethics/inaccuracy, let go of your ego and listen to the community. Understand that you're going to make mistakes in your coverage. Be transparent and update stories and posts, or make corrections based on community input and new information.





ELEVATE THOSE WHO DON'T HOLD POWERFUL PLATFORMS

Communities have diverse perspectives, so be wary of allowing one voice or institution to speak for many. Consider the following when framing your coverage:

Know who/how to scrutinize

Don't treat community members the same way you would a politician or police chief. All stories should be scrutinized, but consider power dynamics and who has historically controlled the narrative.

Center the community

When covering social unrest, ensure your reporting/coverage is centering the people's demands and viewpoints accurately.

Rethink what it means to be a "credible" source

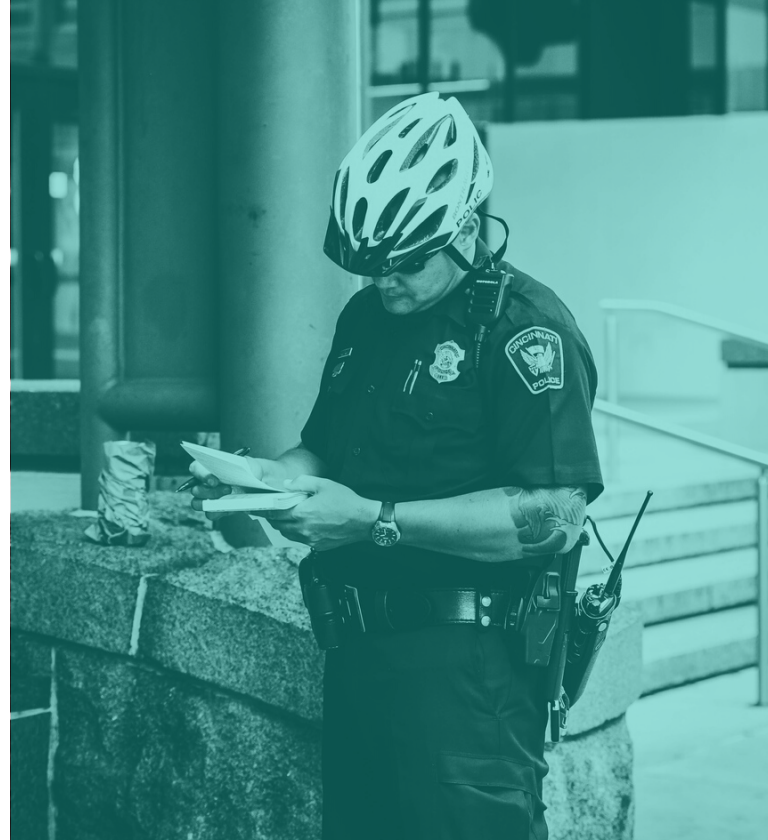
Individuals and groups without resources or a robust communications team behind them aren't any less credible. Credibility doesn't always come from a traditional authoritative source (i.e., nonprofit spokesperson, government official, etc.) Allow the community you're covering to guide you on whom to trust.



DON'T BE A COP

As government agencies and big tech institutions (e.g., Google, Facebook, Amazon, etc.) continue to use biometric and photographic data to surveil civilians, citizen journalists need to focus on documenting injustice without endangering or incriminating their peers.

When drawing attention to social injustice, you must first examine the unintended consequences of irresponsible reporting:



Avoid filming/photographing people without consent

Don't assume that someone existing in a public space automatically means it is appropriate for you to film/photograph them without permission.

Don't post photos/videos until identifying features are covered

Sometimes capturing people's faces/other identifiable characteristics is unavoidable. If you cannot get consent before sharing, blur or cover identifying features before publishing. (This is especially crucial for minors, abuse victims, and other at-risk groups.)

Protect your sources

Take the privacy/safety concerns of the communities you interact with seriously. [The Committee to Protect Journalists has some great tips](#) on protecting confidential sources.

Don't be a mouthpiece for police/government agencies

Official press releases from corporations and government agencies should always be contextualized and reported on with scrutiny. News stories are more substantial when there are multiple sources from different backgrounds and perspectives. A rewritten police report is not a sufficient news story.

If you're a citizen journalist based in the U.S., check out [OpenArchive's U.S. Protest Survival Guide](#) for more harm-reduction tips on ethically documenting protests and actions.



CONSIDER FRAMING & LANGUAGE

Remember that real people have to live with the consequences of the narrative you purport. Bad framing can cause long-term repercussions on communities that can't be undone.

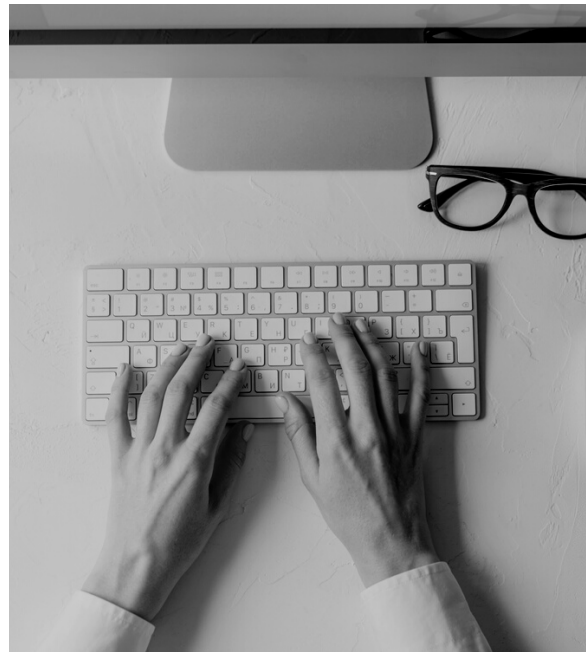
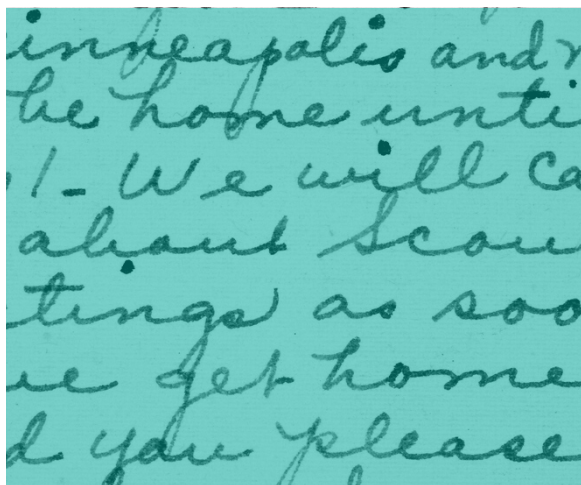
Before publishing or posting about a region or community, consider the following:

Objectivity isn't attainable

No matter how hard you try, bias and perspectives will inevitably leak into your reporting. Try your best to be fair and amplify voices not typically centered in the narrative.

Events don't exist within a vacuum

Make sure you understand and share the deeper context and subtext of a situation while framing your coverage.



Balance truth with harm reduction

Reconcile with the fact that what you think is telling a "true and complete" story is often in direct conflict with minimizing harm, especially when navigating through stories sparked by traumatic events, social unrest, and racial injustice.

Don't reinforce harmful narratives

Think about how your language might perpetuate racist or bigoted narratives and stereotypes. Use an active voice in your reporting and be clear and concise about events. [Color of Change](#) has a great guide on discerning language bias in coverage.



FROM ETHICAL JOURNALISM TO ARCHIVING FORWARD



At OpenArchive, we believe journalists and archivists are natural allies, both dedicated to contextualizing day-to-day events and preserving history's most crucial moments.


Download our [Save](#) app to share, archive, verify, and encrypt your data.

Check out OpenArchive's [Preserving Truth to Power Guide](#) to learn how to ethically and safely store sensitive mobile media using our Save app.



LEARN MORE

Anyone with a phone can expose global injustice.

 open-archive.org

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GUIDES & ADDITIONAL READING MATERIALS



Ethics for Citizen Journalists
[Independent Media Association](#)



Reporting Tips and Tools
[Global Investigative Journalism Network](#)



Tips for Livestreaming Protests in the United States
[WITNESS](#)



OPINION: How “giving a voice the voiceless” ignores nuance
[The Student Life](#)



SPJ Code of Ethics
[Society of Professional Journalists](#)



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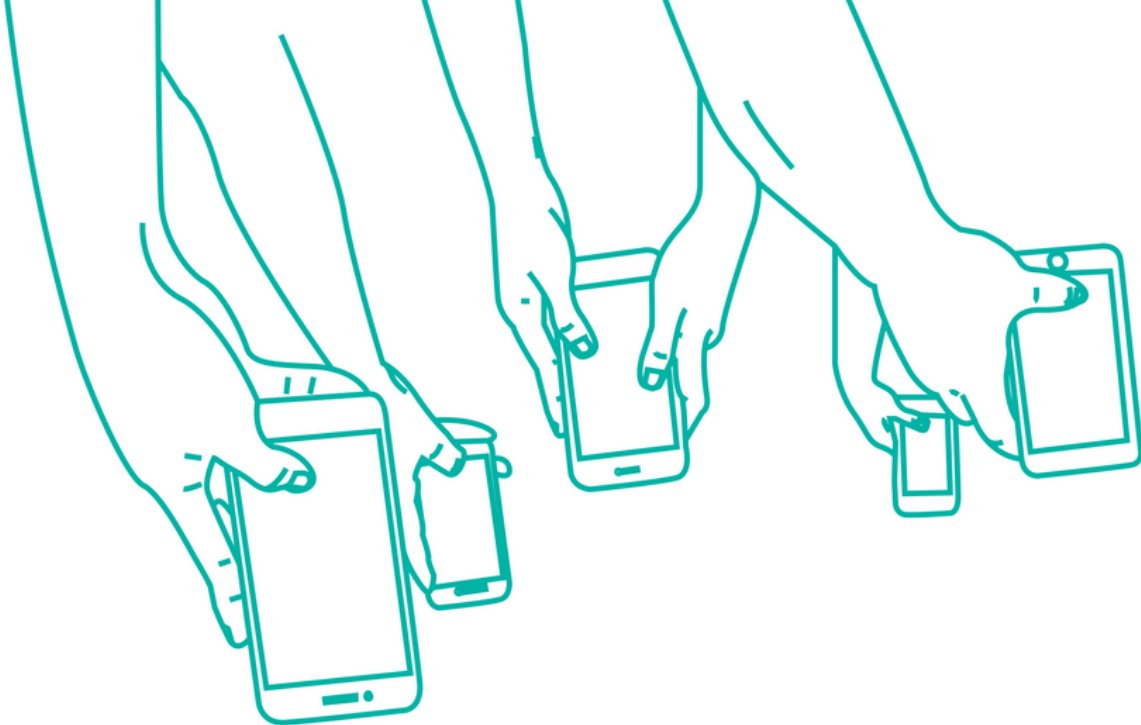
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Narrative Matters: A Guide to Covering Protests
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Digital and Physical Safety: Protecting Confidential Sources
[Committee to Protect Journalists](#)



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