

VERIFYING VISUAL CONTENT FOR MAGAZINE MEDIA

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Hotsheets

The last thing anyone wants to do is share something that could risk the trust that their audience has in them. When it comes to online imagery and video it would jeopardize any publisher's credibility if what they shared turns out to be false or – at the very least – misleading. So, how can we recognize, verify, assess and evaluate images, photos, videos, memes, graphs, charts or any new format that might come along next for signs of misrepresentation or manipulation?

The first and only answer to this question is: create a process.

Unless you are a specialist journalist working in OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) and performing highly complex forensic analysis, you will most likely be dealing with single images or videos from an event and you will need to determine the where, what, when, why and how. You might also have to make an assessment under pressure or at considerable speed. Knowing the process that you personally need to take the visual content through will give you peace of mind and the knowledge that you have applied the necessary checks and balances in every instance.

There are some tools which might be useful in certain circumstances, but they should never be solely relied upon. The landscape changes so fast that these tools can become obsolete or core functionality can disappear overnight if a platform changes the way the tool accesses it. Some tools have also been discovered to be unethical in the way that they gain access to your own data, a reason why due diligence and regular reviews of any tools used are essential.

By building your own process that follows the best practice framework below, you will be able to meet the current challenges of this work and be well-positioned to adapt to the challenges of the future.

PHASE ONE: IDENTIFYING AN ORIGINAL

It is easy to get caught up in the moment during a breaking news event. You stumble across some great content and you think you might be first because nobody else has run it yet. It is the first example of the video or photo in your search results and the description gives you a lot of information. Now is the time that you must run your first checks to see if it is an original piece of content or if it has been repurposed.

Action:

- If it is an image or a screenshot, perform a reverse image search to see if you can find the same thing from an earlier event.
- If it is a video, run similar descriptive searches to see if you can find it from another event. Also try YouTube Data Viewer to reverse image search screenshots from the video.
- If you have received the image directly check the EXIF data.
- Check the comments or replies on the platform it appears. Others might have already flagged authenticity issues.

Tools:

- [Google reverse image search](#), [Rev Eye Chrome Extension](#), [TinEye](#)
- [YouTube Data Viewer](#)
- [Jeffrey's EXIF Viewer](#)

PHASE TWO: VERIFY THE SOURCE OF THE CONTENT

Once you have found what you believe is the first instance of a piece of content – essentially the person or group who captured it or owns it – then you should follow a process for confirming it is indeed theirs and what it actually shows. Too often content is accessed quickly without work being done to understand and report the full context.

1. Review the social history of the person or organisation who has shared the content on a platform or with you directly.

Action:

- Determine what more can you find about this person using open source search tools.
- Look at what they have previously posted – this helps work out if they were indeed likely to have been there when the event happened.
- Check if they have posted from the location of the event before e.g. from the same town, region or similar circumstances.
- See if you can place them at the scene during this event by looking at content they have posted on all platforms, not just where you found them.

Tools:

- Platform native searches

Tip:

- People often use a similar username across multiple social networks. Put their username into Google or into the native searches for each platform to see if you can find them there.

2. Contact the person or group that posted this content to further verify the authenticity.

Action:

- Pick up the phone. If you don't know their phone number, see if they list a place of work – business numbers are easier to find.
- Take your conversation off social platforms if possible. Communicating this way can have a very public element and you don't want competitors seeing your questions. You also want to protect the privacy of your source.
- If you can't make contact offline then directly message them – but you'll need to seek extra assurances, they are who they say they are.

3. Ask questions of your source. You need to be certain they are who they say they are. You also need to explore the context of the content and the story.

Action:

- Ask them if it is their content and if they were there.
- If they witnessed the event in question and confirm it is their content, then use this opportunity to ask about their experience.
- Ask them if they have anything extra to share. This will help with validating they were there but also potentially grant you access to unseen content. You should run any new content through the full verification process.

Tip:

- Not everyone wants to talk to journalists, so be sensitive in your approach. We can't always know someone's current circumstances when we are trying to communicate with them. Refer to the [ONA SOCIAL NEWSGATHERING ETHICS CODE](#) for guidance on this.

4. Secure permission to use the content in all the places that you intend to use it.

Action:

- Seek the permissions required for use of this content in all the places you plan to publish or broadcast it.
- Consider the impact on the individual if you embed their content directly.
- Think about international rights for all content, unless you are geo-restricted.

Tip:

- Note that people who are not genuine are often more reluctant to speak to you directly. Requesting permission is a useful part of determining the original source. If people don't have the right to let you use the content, then they might not want to talk to you directly or sign anything official/legal. Trust your intuition over a source's reluctance to engage but always be mindful that there may be other reasons for reluctance.

PHASE THREE: VERIFY THE CONTENT

Even if we now trust that this person or group was in the place at the time that they said they were – and own the content – we need to verify what we are seeing. Eyewitnesses often see events from afar and don't know the finer details. It is up to us to determine the context of this content. To do this, you need to independently confirm as many of the facts as possible.

1. Translate or transcribe text and any audio. This includes any signage or other wording that might determine time or location.

Action:

- Try to use a native speaker where possible or a translation tool as a back-up.
- Don't just check the content in a photo or video, check captions or descriptions as well. If the caption or description contradicts the clues within the content this could indicate a problem with the source or context with which it has been shared.

Tools:

- [Google Translate](#)

2. Assess key elements (including landmarks and weather) in an image or video that will identify or confirm location or time.

Action:

- Identify unique geographical identifiers – both natural or human-made – so that you can place the location on a map.
- Check the direction of the shadows to determine time of day.
- Check the historic weather records for that location at the purported time and date.

Tools:

- [Google Maps](#)
- [SunCalc](#)
- [Wolfram Alpha](#)

3. Consult with independent experts.

Action:

- Speak with others in your organization who may have knowledge of the location or event. You don't often know someone has this knowledge until you ask.
- Ask anyone with knowledge of the location or event to review the piece of content and your verification work as they might pick-up on something you missed or be able to give additional context.

4. Seek separate confirmation of events if possible.

Action:

- Find other eyewitnesses and content creators unconnected to the source of this specific piece you are verifying.
- Find out if you had a reporter or stringer in the nearby area – they might even be reporting on it while you are working on verification.
- Check with third parties who might also be present – is there a webcam? Did the police release a statement?

- See if these separate accounts or pieces of content confirm the same events.

5. Establish the context of the content.

Action:

- Ask how you can use what you have learned through the verification process to establish the bigger picture.
- Find other sources of reporting that you can use to put the visual content into context.

Tip:

- If you can't put the piece in context then ask yourself what value it has to your audience.

If you ever get stuck or are required to take a leap of faith as you work through these three phases it could be an indication that something is wrong with the content or source.

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Fergus Bell is the founder and CEO of Fathm, an independent news lab and consultancy. He is an experienced journalist, editor and leading expert in digital newsgathering, verification, newsroom innovation and collaborative journalism projects. Fergus' experience spans both the business and editorial sides of the news industry. He spent eight years as a journalist and producer at the Associated Press, where he became their first International Social Media and UGC Editor. In 2015 Fergus founded Dig Deeper Media - advising broadcasters, publishers and start-ups on social and digital newsgathering, newsroom transformation and innovation.

In 2017 he co-founded Pop-Up Newsroom, a framework for collaborative journalism projects that has already seen success in the US, UK, India, Sweden and with the multi-award winning "Verificado" - an initiative designed to monitor for misinformation during the Mexican elections. Fergus is a 2019 Reynolds Journalism Institute Fellow and is a faculty member of the European Broadcast Union's Academy.

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