Multimedia content gathering

07 September 2023

Key points

- Take photos and short videos to document what you see. A small glimpse of your daily reality can help audiences round the world to care about the people you serve.

- Focus on an individual or a family and share their story. Consider the protection and security of those you interview or film. Respect their dignity and seek their consent. Do not disclose details that might put them at risk. Explain that the image(s) or story could be seen all over the world on internet, television, radio, etc. Discuss whether to change names or other details to ensure their protection.

- Think of the audience. Ask yourself: why will a reader or viewer living far away find this story interesting? Explain unfamiliar details and avoid jargon.

- Use social media to share up-to-the-minute content in real time.

- Share your content with the Multimedia Content Section, which can help edit and distribute it to a wider audience.

1. Overview

The term ‘content' refers to all the editorial material that we publish on our websites, post to social media platforms, or share with external media partners. It includes news and feature articles, tweets, blogs, newsletters, photos, videos, podcasts, infographics and in-depth reports.

Obtaining good content is especially important when major conflicts or natural disasters erupt. Their impact on civilians is often eclipsed by political and military issues, but strong, timely content helps UNHCR to humanize a distant conflict and call attention to the plight of civilians in need of protection and life-saving assistance. Content enables us to raise awareness of the rights and needs of persons of concern, advocate for open borders, humanitarian access and other favourable policies, and mobilize much-needed donor support.
The Global Communications Service often deploys multimedia content producers to capture stories about individuals and families displaced from their homes, but field staff make a vital contribution, especially in the first hours and days of an emergency before the international press corps has arrived, as well as after the press corps has moved on.

2. Main guidance

Underlying policies, principles and/or standards

- When we share up-to-the-minute content, it helps UNHCR to lead the narrative by showing, that we are on the ground, well-informed, and ready to engage with journalists.
- Content about an emergency can help generate empathy in ways that advance UNHCR's advocacy and fundraising objectives.
- Protection is paramount. Never share content that puts someone at risk.

Good practice recommendations

Focus on individuals. Stories and images that focus on an individual are almost always more engaging and memorable than general stories or images of a crowd. Find a sympathetic individual who can articulate his or her experience. Ask what life was like before he or she was displaced. Look for ways in which people exhibit resilience, and ways in which host communities are showing generosity. Look for the unexpected - details or themes that add an element of surprise to the story. When writing, vary the length of your sentences, avoid jargon, and omit unnecessary words. Start at a dramatic moment to hook the reader's interest and fill in context and backstory as you go along. Consider this example from a UNHCR story about desperate journeys on the Mediterranean (please see the first photo below).

Photographs. When taking photos, try to establish eye contact with the subject. Collect detailed captions with names, ages and direct quotes. If possible, take pictures in the early morning or early evening, when the light is often best. Take many photos and choose the best ones later. Take some in portrait format (vertical), which works well for report covers and Instagram stories, but take most in landscape (horizontal) because they fit most of our other online platforms better. Rather than put the subject in the centre of the frame, consider the rule of thirds. (Please see the second photo below.)

Sometimes, nevertheless, images of a crowd can powerfully capture a newsworthy situation - like the below iconic photo of Syrian refugees crossing into Iraq (please see the third photo below).

Video. When shooting video with a smartphone:

- Hold your phone parallel to the landscape (think of a wide movie screen) so that we can distribute your footage to broadcasters – unless you are intentionally shooting clips for
Instagram stories or TikTok.
- Keep it still (try to brace against a stationary object, like a tree or vehicle).
- Try to capture a sequence, three related shots that give continuity or compress time. This could be a wide, medium and close-up shot of the same subject, or the beginning, middle and end of an action (putting a kettle on to boil, pouring hot water over the tea leaves, pouring a cup for a visitor).
- Hold each shot for about 10 seconds.
- Do not pan (move from side to side), do not tilt (move up and down), do not zoom.
- Let the action move through the frame, rather than follow it with your camera.
- If someone is speaking, get as close as possible and try to minimize wind noise. Better still, use a lav mic.

See media sample below – UNHCR's Vivian Tan with newly arrived Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Share photos, videos and written pieces with the Global Communications Service in Geneva. You can send large video files with shotlists to http://www.wetransfer.com and upload photographs directly to Refugees Media, UNHCR's searchable online distribution platform, at: http://media.unhcr.org.

Considerations for practical implementation

- Show what the subjects' lives were like before they were displaced.
- Capture the moment when they realized they had to flee. What went through their minds?
- Describe their flight to safety, their current situation, and their hopes and plans.
- Record interviews. Quote the interviewee directly. Let the reader hear his or her exact words.
- When writing, start at the most dramatic point in the story and add context and backstory as you go along.

Resources and partnerships

- Key staff including communicators working in emergency operations should be issued smartphones, so that they can create content themselves and share it quickly with social networks and the Global Communications Service in Geneva.

Annexes

UNHCR Guidelines on Engagement with the Media
3. Learning and field practices

4. Links

Refugees Media UNHCR Official Website UNHCR on Youtube UNHCR on Twitter UNHCR on Instagram UNHCR on Facebook

5. Main contacts

Contact the Global Communications Service:

- Chris Reardon, Chief of Multimedia Content Section, reardon@unhcr.org.
- Gisella Lomax, Head of Social Media Unit, lomaxg@unhcr.org.
- Suzy Hopper, Head of Photo Unit, hopper@unhcr.org.
- Michelle Hoffman, Head of Video Unit, hoffmanm@unhcr.org.
- Tim Gaynor, Global Web Editor (English), gaynor@unhcr.org.
- Adrian Edwards, Officer in Charge, Global Communications Service, edwards@unhcr.org.