UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | EMERGENCY HANDBOOK

Multimedia content gathering

05 March 2025

Key points

- Take photos and short videos to document what you see. A small glimpse of your daily reality can help audiences around the world to care about the people you serve
- If you don't have time or capacity to write a full web story, gather a selection of strong quotes from one or more characters together with background information (name, age, country/city of origin, family composition) and descriptive detail such as people's appearance or manner, what you can see or hear around you. The GCS Multimedia content section can help write up the story
- 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 the internet, television, radio, etc. Discuss whether to change names or other details to ensure their protection
- Under the Ethical Communications Guidelines, images without consent cannot be used, in particular for fundraising purposes
- The GCS Multimedia content section will provide support, clarification and tools
- 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

Content gathering, including video, photo and human-interest stories, is key to ensuring media

coverage and financial support.

As such, any communication staff’s TOR identified at the onset of an emergency should include content gathering as part of the assignment.

Content, including photo and video of the affected areas and population as well as quotes from affected individuals, should be gathered within the first 48h and delivered to the GCS Multimedia content section for global distribution.

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, sister agencies, and potential and existing donors.

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 the people we serve, advocate for open borders, humanitarian access and other favourable policies, and mobilize much-needed donor support.

GCS Multimedia content section colleagues will provide guidance and support, including content briefs, scripts for pieces to camera (PTC) and help drafting or editing web stories.

The Global Communications Service often deploys multimedia content staff 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 when access may be challenging and media corps are not on the ground, ensuring that resource mobilization efforts can be launched and media interest engaged.

2. Main guidance

Underlying policies, principles and/or standards

- Please read and adhere to UNHCR's Ethical Communications Guidelines. Please see UNHCR internal link here.
- 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. Transcribe spoken quotes word-for-word (record them on your phone if possible) - do not embellish or change them. When writing stories, 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 these examples from UNHCR stories

https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/ukrainian-family-confronts-new-reality-life-refugees

https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/south-sudanese-battle-record-floods-amid-rapidly-changing-climate

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 social media, 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. If possible, additionally shoot clips in vertical for social media.
- 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 samples below –
Share photos, videos and written quotes or stories with the Global Communications Service. You can send large video files with shortlists to http://www.wetransfer.com and upload photographs directly to Refugees Media, UNHCR's searchable online distribution platform, at:

http://media.unhcr.org .

As water began to fill the boat, Thamer and Thayer, two brothers from Syria, sat and prayed to be rescued. If help did not come soon, they knew they would be swallowed into the depths of the Mediterranean Sea.

The one-way voyage had cost them US$ 2,000 each. Over 200 others had paid the same and squeezed on board. Nobody guaranteed they would make it to Europe alive.

Now, off the coast of Italy's Lampedusa island, the journey turned into a nightmare – the second of two shipwrecks last October in which hundreds of people drowned within sight of the shore.

Back in Syria, before the violence and bloodshed, the brothers lived in a small, tight-knit community they describe as "serene." Life was simple, and the streets were safe and clean. Then war broke out, uprooting innocent civilians from their homes.

[image: in-medias-res.png]

[image: rule-of-two-thirds.png]

[image: iraq-bridge-gubaeva.jpg]

Considerations for practical implementation

- Capture the moment when they realized they had to flee. What went through their minds?
- Describe their flight to safety, their current situation and needs, and their hopes and plans.
- Ask what the subjects' lives were like before they were displaced.
- 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 on social media and with the Global Communications Service.

3. Learning and field practices

Filmed in camera

Filmed on Iphone

4. Links

Refugees Media UNHCR Official Website UNHCR on Youtube UNHCR on X UNHCR on Facebook UNHCR on Instagram UNHCR on Threads UNHCR on LinkedIn UNHCR on TikTok

5. Main contacts

The Social Media Section in the Global Communications Service at Headquarters: socialmedia@unhcr.org

The Multimedia Content Section in the Global Communications Service at Headquarters
Carlotta Sami, Chief of Section, sami@unhcr.org