A JOURNALIST'S GUIDE TO WORKING WITH SOCIAL SOURCES

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FIRSTDRAFT

HOW SHOULD I CONTACT EYEWITNESSES WHEN I NEED TO GAIN PERMISSION TO USE THEIR MEDIA?

As discussed above, eyewitnesses are often bombarded with requests during a breaking news event. It is easy to hit reply on Twitter or to leave a comment on an Instagram post, but you are likely to be competing with many other journalists. On a story of global relevance, the number of comments left under a piece of eyewitness media can reach over 200. It is difficult in 140 characters to explain that you want the eyewitness to stay safe, and exactly how you intend to use the footage. It is therefore worth using online research skills to find other ways to contact an eyewitness. Encouraging Twitter users to follow you means you can send them a direct message. This is better than arranging permission requests via public messages, but the scrum on Twitter and Instagram in the aftermath of a breaking news event makes it problematic to rely solely on these avenues.

It is also worth remembering that many users do not understand the public nature of Twitter, including the fact that journalists can find their tweets or Instagram posts via keywords, or via geo-located searches if they have added location information to their posts. They are therefore sometimes shocked when journalists request permission seemingly out of the blue. This can occur, in particular, if a group of friends are conversing together on Twitter. There have been cases of journalists 'jumping into' conversations on Twitter or in a chatroom, which, while technically public, felt private to the participants. Journalists should consider the context in which they contact eyewitnesses. While it is easy to emulate offline techniques, there are often specific cultural norms in online communities.

> *It's important journalists consider the context in which they contact eyewitnesses.*

A simple 'yes' via Twitter or Instagram can sometimes mean a journalist gets permission quickly and easily. However it is only by talking to an eyewitness that a journalist can ask the necessary questions to help with verification, including:

- **Did you capture this footage yourself?**

- **Can you explain exactly why you were there?**

- **What did you see?**

- **What camera were you using?**

- **Can you send the original image or video?**

- **Did you capture any other footage?**

This final question can often result in an eyewitness providing new footage that no one else has seen, particularly useful when every news organisation is chasing the rights to use the same video or image. By building a rapport with you, and therefore building trust, an eyewitness is more likely to offer more information, or offer to give an audio interview.

The issue of crediting eyewitness media is discussed below. Suffice to say that the final reason journalists should endeavour to contact the eyewitness is in order to ask them whether they would like to be credited, and if so, how, for example with their real name or their username.

KEY POINTS

Where possible, use online research techniques to find email addresses or telephone numbers to contact eyewitnesses away from public social media channels.

Whenever possible, try to talk to an eyewitness directly, to ask questions that will help with verification processes, but also to ask whether they have other footage on their phone and are willing to provide an interview about what they saw.

Where possible, ask the eyewitness how they would like to be credited.