

STORYCENTER

LISTEN DEEPLY... TELL STORIES

Ethical Practice

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Introduction

At StoryCenter, we recognize that the ethical considerations relevant to any given project are unique. The following principles are intended as an evolving set of recommendations for ethical practice in StoryWork and participatory media approaches. We invite readers to engage in a dialogue with us about how best to ensure the safety and dignity of storytellers and audiences worldwide; please send your questions or comments to info@storycenter.org

The first principle centers on storyteller wellbeing.

Storytellers' physical, emotional, and social wellbeing must be at the center of all phases of a StoryWork project. Facilitators must have expertise in group facilitation and must be committed to an approach that views the process of creating stories as important as the end products (media pieces). Facilitators should be attentive to how culture and power can impact relationships; we recommend working from a stance of cultural humility. [1] Facilitators need to maintain appropriate boundaries at all times while remaining open to processes of listening and understanding.

Strategies to ensure the wellbeing of vulnerable participants are particularly important; personal storytelling is generally not appropriate for individuals currently experiencing strong symptoms of [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder](#). If trauma is a potential topic, a licensed clinician (e.g. social worker, counselor, therapist, etc.) should carefully screen potential participants to assess their readiness to share stories and should be present during the workshop to provide any needed emotional support. Facilitators should support those storytellers who are sharing stories about especially painful life experiences in approaching their narratives from a position of strength rather than from a vantage point that reinforces victimization, and mechanisms for post-workshop debriefing must be in place, where necessary. [Read more about digital storytelling and trauma.](#)

The second principle expands conventional practices for requesting “consent” from storytellers, when there is a desire to publicly share their stories.

Storytellers must have the knowledge and support they need to make informed choices about workshop participation and the content, production, and use of their work. Facilitators must provide storytellers with the information they need to make these choices and must make it clear to storytellers that they have the right to withdraw their stories from public circulation at any time (recognizing the particular constraints of withdrawal from Internet forms of distribution). Facilitators must be equipped to offer guidance in these decision-making processes in a way that protects the dignity and safety of storytellers. Above all, consent must be viewed as a process, not as a one-time activity.

The third principle centers on the multiple connotations of knowledge production and ownership.

Storytellers have the right to freedom of expression in representing themselves, in their stories. Facilitators must provide storytellers with the space and flexibility to describe what they have experienced, within the parameters or thematic concerns of a given project and without being coerced or censored. Facilitators should support each storyteller in sharing stories in the language of their choice, through the involvement of skilled interpreters and translators. Facilitators must be able to assist storytellers in determining whether or not it is safe for them to attach their names to their stories and whether images of themselves or others should be blurred to protect their privacy and maintain their safety. Storytellers and facilitators must agree to maintain confidentiality about information and materials that are revealed in a workshop but do not make it into publicly circulated stories. Where possible, facilitators should engage interested storytellers in outlining context and discussion points for their stories and in determining where, why, and how their stories will be publicly distributed.

The fourth principle emphasizes the need for local relevance.

StoryWork projects must be sensitive and appropriate to local contexts and needs. Facilitators should work with local partners to develop and carry out realistic plans for storyteller recruitment and advance preparation. Facilitators are strongly encouraged to engage the assistance of local teaching assistants to provide culturally appropriate support. Facilitators should conduct workshops in local languages, with assistance where necessary from skilled interpreters and translators who are “cultural insiders.” Facilitators should adapt StoryWork

methods to fit local technological resources and capacities, emphasizing always the importance of first-person voice, group process, and participatory production.

The fifth principle acknowledges that ethical engagement is a continual process.

Ethics must be viewed as a process, rather than as a one-off occasion of “gaining consent.”

Ongoing dialogue between storytellers, staff members, partner organizations, and funders about how best to design and implement an ethically responsible project is key to ethical practice. This includes the development of: project goals and objectives, storyteller recruitment and preparation strategies, privacy guidelines, strategies to ensure emotional support for storytellers during and following workshops, and story distribution strategies.

The sixth principle addresses ethical story distribution.

Story distribution strategies must be rooted first and foremost in the needs of, and designed to benefit, storytellers and their local communities, rather than primarily serving the agendas of distant viewers or funders. Storytellers must be provided with copies of their finished stories in a media format they can access, *before those stories are distributed or displayed in any setting*. Viewing audiences should be advised in advance when stories contain deeply sensitive material and should be provided with opportunities to talk about what they have seen and heard. Stories about sensitive / stigmatized topics should be shown only in carefully facilitated venues and with the involvement of a licensed clinician or an individual knowledgeable about the issues portrayed, who can debrief audiences and provide referrals to support services, if necessary. If sensitive stories are being shared online, appropriate viewer advisories and background context should accompany their presentation.

Conditions for Ethical Practice

- Facilitators and partners must have clarity about StoryWork project goals, methods, and story distribution intentions.
- Facilitators and partners must be transparent with storytellers, about workshop and story distribution goals and methods. This transparency must be woven through the life of a project, from storyteller recruitment, to workshop implementation and eventual story distribution.
- Facilitators must have the skills needed to lead workshops with a high level of competency (for leading group processes; supporting writing, story recording, and image gathering activities; teaching technology skills; addressing emotionally difficult subject matter; and engaging with groups from a position of cultural humility).

- Facilitators must be committed to assisting storytellers in making decisions that will ensure their safety, and, where needed or desired, protect their privacy.
- Project partners must maintain ongoing communication with storytellers, to address any concerns that may arise for them following a workshop.

Image Ethics

At StoryCenter, we support those we work with in creating compelling and meaningful narratives. This means we offer guidance to storytellers not only on their spoken stories, but also on their choices for visually representation. We stress an ethical approach to gathering and working with images -- especially when people can be recognized in them.

We offer here some of our views as an organization, about the ethics of working with visual images.

Visual images are not neutral ... especially those of people.

Above all, we believe it's important to recognize that visual images (photos or video clips) of people are *not neutral*. SOME kind of relationship always exists, between the photographer or videographer, and the subject – usually one that is power-based (meaning, the person with the camera is relatively empowered, and the photo “subjects” are relatively disempowered).

Here's a simple example: why is that when photos in which people can be identified are published, we often see the name of the photographer, or the name of the organization that the photographer works for, but we almost never see the name of the people depicted in the photo? What does this say about the dimension of power, when it comes to visual representation?

StoryCenter's commitment to human dignity and social justice means that we take seriously the nuances of these inherent power dynamics and do our best to address them as they emerge in connection to a particular story or workshop context. This may mean suggesting that certain images are not effective, or it may mean suggesting ways to represent people without showing identifiable faces, when doing so could put people at risk of harm.

What do laws and professional standards say?

When it comes to capturing or publishing photos taken of people in public settings, [laws vary from country to country](#). This means that we need to be mindful about the legalities of working in a particular setting and have an obligation to convey correct information to storytellers.

In the United States, it IS legal to take photos of people *IN PUBLIC*, and to publish them, even for commercial purposes. At StoryCenter, however, we believe that just because a person “can” do something doesn’t mean they *should* do it.

We suggest that some of the [ethics standards offered by the National Press Photographer’s Association](#) (NPA) offer a useful starting point on this topic. For us, because the storytellers we work with are taking and presenting photos and video clips together with voiceover narration, text, and sound (music or sound effects), we stress the importance of the NPA standard that reads:

“Do not manipulate images or add or alter sound in any way that might mislead viewers or mis-represent subjects.”

The sense that doing this is unethical is why *we ask storytellers in our workshops to refrain from using a visual image (photo or video clip) of one person to “represent” a different person, in relation to what is being said in the story voiceover.*

In some cases, particularly when a story is focusing on a divisive, stigmatized, or highly sensitive topic like violence, we go beyond the above guidance to suggest that storytellers avoid using *any* visuals of people they don’t know, at any point in their stories.

By contrast, in other cases, visual images of people taken in public can add great value to a story. When this is true -- and in parts of the world where public photography / videography and the use of such visuals is legal -- we request that storytellers follow this NPA standard:

“Treat subjects with respect and dignity, strive to be unobtrusive and humble, when dealing with subjects.”

Implicit in the above are the need to ask for verbal consent BEFORE taking photos / video clips; the need to explain the purpose of taking photos / video clips (for example, “I’m creating a short video narrative exploring this topic, and I may wish to use images such as X, Y, or Z ...”); and the offer to share the finished story with subjects, where possible (for example, by taking down the subjects’ email addresses and offering to send them a link to the completed story online).

And finally, the enduring question: “what about copyright?”

Most people know by now that it’s not legal to simply grab and re-use images found online. [Here’s a helpful overview to the topic.](#) In our work at StoryCenter, we tend to focus less on the legalities of using online images and more on aesthetic choices. We want storytellers to feel connected to their own narratives, and we want story *viewers* to SEE that connection – to recognize a spark of uniqueness in each story. This means emphasizing the power of original

visual images, whether they're family photos or experimental video clips shot on location during production. We believe that when a storyteller uses a "stock" image that can readily be identified as such, they are undermining the precious individuality of their story, so we advise against the use of online images, on artistic grounds. We suggest instead that storytellers use the workshop opportunity as a chance to challenge themselves creatively, in both the realm of image, by taking their own photos.

(Note: we model this perspective on visual image ethics in our own use of images on our web site and social media channels, all of which we have explicit permission to publish.)

Storyteller's Bill of Rights

In relation to a StoryWork workshop, you have ...

- The right to know from the outset why a workshop is being carried out.
- The right to assistance in deciding whether you are ready to share a story.
- The right to understand what is involved in the process of producing a story.
- The right to know who might view your finished story, after the workshop.
- The right to decide for yourself whether or not to participate in a workshop.
- The right to ask questions at any stage of the workshop, before, during, or after.
- The right to ask for teaching instructions to be repeated or clarified.
- The right to skilled emotional support, if your experience of making a story is emotionally challenging.
- The right to tell your story in the way you want, within the limits of the workshop.
- The right to decide whether or not to reveal private or personal information to fellow participants and instructors, at the workshop.
- The right to competent advice about whether revealing your identity or other personal details about your life, in your story, may place you at risk of harm.
- The right to leave information and/or photographs that identify you or others, out of your final story.
- The right to reject story feedback (about words and images) if it is not useful or offered in a spirit of respect and support.
- The right to decide what language to use in telling and creating your story.

- The right to be respected and supported by capable workshop facilitators.
- The right to a written consent form, if your story will be shared publicly, including a signed copy for your records.
- The right to know what contact and support you can expect after the workshop

In relation to sharing your story after a workshop, you have ...

- The right to decide collaboratively with project partners how your story will be shared.
- The right to view and retain a copy of your story before it is shared publicly in any way.
- The right to know who is likely to screen your story and for what purposes.
- The right to know who is likely to watch or read your story and when (e.g. rough timeframe).
- The right to counsel on the potential sensitivities of sharing your story in public.
- The right to emotional support if you are present when your story is shown in public.
- The right to demand that no one should be able to sell your story for profit.
- The right to know if any funds will be generated as a result of your story being shared (e.g. to support similar projects with other storytellers).
- The right to withdraw your consent for the use of your story at any time.
- The right to information about the limits of withdrawing consent for your story to be shared, if it has already been circulated online or in other digital formats.

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[1] Cultural humility is a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique. The starting point for such an approach is not an examination of someone else's belief system, but rather a process of giving careful consideration to one's own assumptions and beliefs, which are embedded in one's own understandings and life experiences.