



إكسبو 2020  
دبي، الإمارات العربية المتحدة  
DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES



# Report on Dignified Storytelling Consultation #4: Addressing Ethical and Practical Dilemmas in Visual Storytelling

Facilitated by Altamont Group<sup>1</sup>  
March 3, 2021  
6-8pm GST / 9-11am EST

## CONSULTATION SUMMARY

### Consultation Participants & Objectives

Over forty people – representing communications managers and specialists, photographers, consultants, and journalists – participated in Dignified Storytelling Consultation #4 on March 3, 2021. As the fourth of a six-part series being hosted by Dignified Storytelling, the Consultation focused on “Addressing Ethical and Practical Dilemmas in Visual Storytelling” with the aim of gathering best practices around dignified storytelling approaches in photography, film, and other visual art forms.



A screenshot of Consultation #4 participants as they head into the breakout room discussions.

The Consultation also provided a platform for a diverse group of artists, communication specialists, and advocates to learn from a panel of content creators and each other’s ideas and experiences across sectors and geographies.

Outcomes from Consultation #4 – along with the other discussions in the series – will help inform the *Dignified Storytelling Guidebook*, which is being developed as part of the wider Dignified Storytelling initiative with support from Dubai Cares, Expo 2020, and the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MOFAIC).

### Discussion Summary

The Consultation opened with a panel discussion, featuring four expert content creators: Munizae Jahangir (Documentary Filmmaker, Broadcast Journalist & Executive Producer), Lisa Kristine (International Humanitarian Photographer & Artist), Waleed Shah (Photographer), and Dr. Rebecca Swift (Global Head of Creative Insights, Getty Images).

Panelists responded to a question about what dignified storytelling means to them – *How do you make sure your art and work honours human dignity?* – before offering advice, based on participant questions, around tackling bias and stereotypes and telling more authentic stories.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Altamont Group is a boutique advisory firm: [www.altamontgroup.ca](http://www.altamontgroup.ca). Special thanks to the Guest Facilitators for the Consultation, Jess Crombie (University of the Arts London) and Tara Todras-Whitehill (TW Visual Storytelling Consulting)

<sup>2</sup> Observations from the Panelists have been incorporated into the key points from the breakout discussion sessions in the table below.



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The full list of questions raised by participants is included in Annex A of this report.



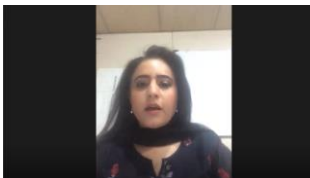
*"I'm coming at dignified storytelling from the angle of ensuring that the many photographers we work with are not doing any harm. That "do no harm" aspect is really what we are trying to move towards both in working with editorial photographers and those in acting or modelling." – Rebecca Swift*



*"For me, dignified storytelling is about intentions. Why am I shooting this photograph? Why am I telling this story? My subject is my client. How do I make this person feel better about themselves, or become more successful, or represent them in a better way?" – Waleed Shah*



*"No matter how dire the circumstances dignified storytelling is about showing the dignity of that person. It's very instinctual. I want to elevate the person I have the honour of being in front of." – Lisa Kristine*



*"For me dignity means basic human rights. We are bringing journalists and lawyers together to address the rights of women and young children. Dignified storytelling means upholding basic rights and freedoms for the most vulnerable citizens of my country, Pakistan." – Munizae Jahangir*

Building on the questions and comments of the Panelists, participants continued the discussions in Breakout Rooms, where they shared examples of commonly faced ethical and practical issues in visual storytelling – and their advice for addressing these challenges. Key themes across both Breakout Rooms included the important role of ongoing dialogue to ensure informed consent, how to acknowledge and respond to implicit bias, and ways to promote authentic representation and contributor agency.

Discussion points from both rooms, as well as the panel discussion, have been summarized in the table below. Many of the points raised interconnect with each other across thematic areas and should be read as parts of the whole dignified storytelling puzzle.<sup>3</sup>

Thematic Area	Guidance for Dignified Storytelling
Bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledge implicit bias. Once recognized, the dynamics of culture, race, and gender (among others) can be further dissected, understood, and responded to.</li> <li>As a continual process, invest in educating ourselves and those we work with around bias.</li> <li>Actively seek to work with creatives on the ground and from the communities or groups involved in the story, rather than bringing in outside agencies who do not understand the context.</li> <li>Affirm that issues related to development and human rights are present in every society – in all our "backyards."</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> Every attempt has been made to represent the points shared with accuracy. Participants are welcome to suggest any changes by email to [HQ@dignifiedstorytelling.com](mailto:HQ@dignifiedstorytelling.com).



	<p>Start from a position of recognizing that that we, as humans, are connected and face similar issues.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Language (both through text and visuals) needs to be inclusive and should be examined closely for subtle connotations (including sexism, racism, and other forms of bias).</li> </ul>
Representation & Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Humans are not props. Pursue deeper stories and profiles to better capture whole personhood, particularly in cases of the purposeful inclusion of those from traditionally excluded groups.</li> <li>Bring contributors into decision-making processes, from planning through publication.<sup>4</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This may include dialogue on their preferences on how they would like to be photographed (place, clothing, emotion, and accompanying text) as well as the selection of what images are used.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Embrace the shift from artist to facilitator <i>and</i> artist, seeking to equip people to represent themselves through creation of their own images (still or video) and stories.<sup>5</sup></li> <li>People need agency in their own stories, including to how and where their stories are used (see 'Consent' below). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Honour contributors' wishes on whether names or identifying features are included. With that, seek a balance within publications to make sure that people are depicted individuals and not just types or representatives of a whole group.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Advocate with NGOs, the media, and other partners to build in increased contributor participation at all stages of the storytelling process – through time, dialogue, and project design – towards more authentic, meaningful stories.<sup>6</sup></li> <li>Ensure that information and data is accurate and does not make false claims, over-exaggerate, or over-simplify: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use recordings, interpreters/translators, and research to tell the most accurate and authentic story possible.</li> <li>Check back with contributors to verify all details of the story.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make the choice to highlight new or unexpected aspects of people's lives – moments or stories that are authentic, but that also refute stereotypes.</li> <li>Consider potential negative impacts when making decisions on what story to show. Just because a</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> Learn more about how Fotosynthesis employs participatory processes at:

<https://www.fotosynthesiscommunity.org/our-process/>

<sup>5</sup> Read about lessons learned from GSMA and UNHCR's participatory storytelling project with Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia: <https://medium.com/unhcr-innovation-service/behind-the-mobile-stories-historias-m%C3%B3viles-project-77bc0d01d410>. Other examples of participatory storytelling are very welcome! Please share at: <https://dignifiedstorytelling.com/share-best-practices/>

<sup>6</sup> It is widely acknowledged that best practice in development programming is participatory, with the individuals and communities who are affected by the program consulted at each stage. Why should communications best practices be any different?



	<p>stereotype may have some truth behind it, does not necessarily mean that is the story that needs to be depicted.</p>
<p><b>Consent &amp; Risk Assessments</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fully informed and free consent – with opportunities to revisit and potentially withdraw – is ESSENTIAL to any story-making.</li> <li>Consent is not a one-time conversation, but rather a process centred on ongoing dialogue to ensure all parties understand the potential implications of the story and agree on the sharing parameters.</li> <li>Contributors must fully understand what they are agreeing to – this takes time and a toolbox of strategies to unpack potential risks, outline plans and processes, and discuss/agree upon how the story/image will be used.</li> <li>Consent should be obtained for specific usages. If these usages change in the future, consent should be re-affirmed, with opportunity for withdrawal.</li> <li>Images and stories truly belong to whoever is represented in them. Contributors should sign off on final products and have access to their images/story.</li> <li>The process of assessing risk needs to be ongoing as contexts evolve. Even if consent is present, there may be times when a story should not be shared if it is likely to do harm.</li> <li>While many organizations have their own consent forms, there is a felt need for a streamlined “Consent App” to help facilitate consent processes.<sup>7</sup></li> </ul>
<p><b>Pay or compensation for contributors</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remuneration or compensation may be acceptable in some scenarios, but problematic in others (for example, photojournalism).</li> <li>Remunerating contributors runs the risk of affecting the authenticity of stories (and the ‘free’ component of consent).</li> <li>Questions to consider may include examining what people are being paid for (time? opportunity costs?), the impact on the veracity or authenticity of the story, and precedent for future story-making.</li> <li>Content creators should reflect on ways that they can give back to the people in the stories, particularly if a commission or award is won thanks to those people.</li> </ul>

Dignified Storytelling Consultation #5 will be held on April 14, 2021 and will continue the topical exploration of different aspects of dignified storytelling with a focus on “Displacement, Migration, and Dignified Storytelling.”

<sup>7</sup> See Easy Release and Global Press (<https://globalpress.co/>) for related resources.





## Annex A: Consultation #4 Participant Questions

Due to time constraints, many – but not all – of the questions below were touched on during the Consultation. The list is included here in full for ongoing consideration of the ethical and practical dilemmas often faced when telling stories through visual media.

- What are steps that can be taken to eliminate stereotypes against women, or cultural bias in stories?
- We all go into every situation with our conscious and unconscious biases and understanding of the world. How can we consider our biases in our practise?
- How can we tell more authentic stories? What do NGOs need to do to allow more nuanced stories to flow more easily?
- How important is it that those you're photographing have a say in their story? How can this be incorporated into the process, including the contexts of how the photos are finally shown?
- When you photograph someone, do you already know where the picture will be used, in which context, and with what text? Do you inform the subject each time you publish the images?
- Do contributors get a copy of the images? Do you send them links of publications so they can decide if they want to remove anything at any time? How does that work in practice?
- In the UK, charities working with child-beneficiaries within the UK can't use real beneficiaries in their external marketing images due to UK/EU child-protection legislation. However, UK charities working in international contexts do not need to adhere to such legislation. What are your own personal thoughts over showing real contributors in light of such differing approaches regarding safeguarding concerns?
- If you earn a lot of money from a story either through a commission or an award, how do you remunerate or give back to the person in your pictures? As they are the main subject, they should receive a part of the money earned. Without them, there is no salary or awards.
- When an institution (like a university) has diversity goals, how can a photographer or visual storyteller ensure that representation for minority groups is there without tokenizing? (Especially when you may not authentically interact or have connection with a specific identity).
- NGOs are often tempted to only talk about their successes. What are tips for how we can we talk about the bad as well as the good more to be more truly authentic?
- Does the validity of consent expire? What are the implications of removing a picture when there is a contract?
- How can we include more people with first-hand experience of issues into the image making process, not just as subjects? (For examples, as the image makers, or as consultants, directors, or guides to the process and how they would like to see a story portrayed).



## Annex B: Dignified Storytelling Consultation #4 Participant List

Many thanks to the Consultation #4 Panelists for their generosity in sharing from their insights and experience:

- Munizae Jahangir, Documentary Filmmaker, Broadcast Journalist & Executive Producer
- Lisa Kristine, International Humanitarian Photographer & Artist
- Waleed Shah, Photographer
- Dr. Rebecca Swift, Global Head of Creative Insights, Getty Images

And to the following participants for their excellent questions and enthusiastic discussion:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Aulia Adila, ASEAN Secretariat                            | 22. Robert Katende, Smile Africa  |
| 2. Suhael Al Owis, Interesting Engineering                   | Children's Home and School  |
| 3. Khalifa Al Suwaidi, Dubai Cares                           | 23. Shelia Kibuthu, Sanergy   |
| 4. Lisa Atkinson, Fizzy Compass                              | 24. Katherine Lester, UN Resident Coordinator's Officer, UAE                  |
| 5. Keeya-Lee Ayre, GSMA                                      | 25. Judith Madigan, BRANDOUTLOUD  |
| 6. Rodrigo Barraza, Global Fund for Children                 | 26. Aleenah Masud, United Arab Emirates University (UAEU)                     |
| 7. Chiara Beneventi, The Baobab Home                         | 27. James McCauley, Photographer  |
| 8. Susannah Birkwood, World Wildlife Fund (WWF)              | 28. Michael McKinnon, University of Toronto                                   |
| 9. Sandra Boone, University of Minnesota                     | 29. Shermin Mheidly, Dubai Cares  |
| 10. Tom Bradley, Photographer                                | 30. Michael Pfister, Zeit Online  |
| 11. Mara Chan, The Luminos Fund                              | 31. Katelin Raw, VVOB – Education for Development                             |
| 12. Luciana Ciccocioppo, University of Toronto               | 32. Hannah Ridley, Resurgo  |
| 13. Karen Cirillo, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) | 33. Ragy Saro, Expo 2020 Dubai  |
| 14. Savannah Dodd, Photography Ethics Centre                 | 34. Madeline Taylor, University of Toronto                                    |
| 15. Delice Fatiro, Resonate                                  | 35. Diane Uyisenga, Sustainable Growers Rwanda                                |
| 16. Nina Ford, Global Fund for Children                      | 36. Quintina Valero, Quintina Valero Photography                              |
| 17. David Girling, University of East Anglia                 | 37. Emmanuel Walusimbi, E Pictures Media Ltd                                  |
| 18. Sabrina Giasova, UN Expo 2020                            | 38. Kusuma Pandu Wijaya, ASEAN Secretariat                                    |
| 19. Ingrid Guyon, Fotosynthesis                              | 39. Jayashri Wyatt, United Nations Department of Global Communication (UNDGC) |
| 20. Mustika Hapsoro, ASEAN Secretariat                       |   |
| 21. Noha Hefny, People of Impact                             |   |

Consultation #4 was facilitated by Sajida H. Shroff and Jamie Vinson of Altamont Group with special thanks to Jess Crombie (University of the Arts London) and Tara Todras-Whitehill (TW Visual Storytelling Consulting) for their support as Group Leaders.



All queries about [Dignified Storytelling](https://www.dignifiedstorytelling.com) can be sent to [HQ@dignifiedstorytelling.com](mailto:HQ@dignifiedstorytelling.com)

To learn more about the initiative and sign up for future events, please visit the [Dignified Storytelling](https://www.dignifiedstorytelling.com) website at: [www.dignifiedstorytelling.com](https://www.dignifiedstorytelling.com)