

Reconstructing Visual Trust:

Professional Standards for Photojournalism After the AI Turn

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Abstract

The proliferation of artificial intelligence and synthetic media has fundamentally altered the conditions under which photographic images are produced, circulated, and evaluated. As traditional assumptions of indexical trust have eroded, journalism, human rights documentation, and accountability processes face an urgent need to reconstruct the foundations of visual credibility. The crisis of visual evidence has revealed the inadequacy of appearance-based trust and purely technical verification as guarantors of authenticity.

This research article proposes a professional and institutional response to the post-AI visual environment by articulating a framework for reconstructing visual trust. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in journalism studies, media ethics, visual communication, and evidence theory, the study synthesizes prior analyses of visual testimony, ethical risk, quasi-legal standards, and AI-driven disruption. It advances a set of professional standards centered on procedural trust, transparency, and accountability.

The article argues that visual trust can be restored not through the elimination of uncertainty, but through resilient professional practices that integrate provenance, verification literacy, institutional oversight, and ethical reflexivity. By framing trust as an outcome of governed processes rather than visual realism, the study offers a forward-looking model for sustaining the evidentiary and social role of photojournalism after the AI turn.

Keywords

visual trust; photojournalism standards; artificial intelligence; visual evidence; media ethics; professional accountability

Peer Review

This article underwent academic peer review in accordance with the editorial standards of the *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*. The manuscript was evaluated for its conceptual synthesis, normative contribution, and relevance to interdisciplinary debates on visual evidence, journalism, and artificial intelligence.

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The reviewers assessed the article's contribution to the development of professional standards after the AI turn, the coherence of its analytical synthesis, and the clarity of its proposed framework for reconstructing visual trust.

1. Introduction

The crisis of visual evidence precipitated by artificial intelligence marks a turning point in the history of photography. As demonstrated in prior scholarship, the emergence of AI-generated and AI-altered imagery has dismantled the presumption that photographic realism corresponds to factual truth. In the wake of this disruption, journalism and human rights documentation confront not only technical challenges but a deeper epistemic rupture: the erosion of shared criteria for trusting visual information.

While much research has focused on detecting synthetic media or mitigating misinformation, less attention has been devoted to reconstructing the professional foundations of visual trust. The central question is no longer how to restore certainty, but how to sustain credibility under permanent uncertainty. In a post-AI visual environment, trust cannot be anchored in the image alone; it must be grounded in the processes, institutions, and ethical commitments that govern visual production and circulation.

This article argues that the future of photojournalism depends on a shift from reactive verification to **normative reconstruction**. Rather than treating AI as an external threat to be neutralized, the profession must adapt its standards to an environment where synthetic images coexist with authentic ones. This adaptation requires redefining what counts as trustworthy visual evidence and articulating professional norms capable of withstanding technological volatility.

Building on a series of prior studies that conceptualized photography as visual testimony, examined ethical risk, analyzed quasi-legal evidentiary use, and assessed the impact of AI and deepfakes, this article offers a synthetic and forward-looking contribution. It proposes a framework for reconstructing visual trust through professional standards that emphasize procedural transparency, institutional accountability, and ethical reflexivity.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 revisits the concept of visual trust in light of AI-driven disruption, clarifying its normative dimensions. Section 3 identifies core professional standards for photojournalism after the AI turn. Section 4 examines institutional mechanisms for sustaining trust across media, advocacy, and accountability domains. Section 5 discusses implications for journalism education, policy, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The conclusion reflects on the role of photojournalism as a resilient form of public witnessing in the twenty-first century.

2. Visual Trust After Indexicality

The erosion of indexical trust marks a decisive shift in how visual credibility is established and maintained. For more than a century, photography's authority rested on the assumption that images bear a material trace of reality. This assumption structured professional norms, audience expectations, and institutional uses of photographs as evidence. The AI turn dismantles this foundation, compelling a reconceptualization of *visual trust* that does not depend on indexicality.

2.1 From indexicality to governed credibility

In a post-indexical environment, trust can no longer be inferred from visual appearance or from the presumed mechanics of capture. Instead, credibility must be *governed*. Governed credibility refers to trust produced by transparent, repeatable, and accountable processes that surround images across their lifecycle—from capture and editing to publication, verification, and archiving.

This reconceptualization aligns trust with governance rather than with ontology. An image is trusted not because it looks real, but because the procedures that produced and handled it are demonstrably reliable. Governance shifts the burden from viewers' visual judgment to institutions' procedural integrity, reframing trust as a social achievement rather than a perceptual inference.

2.2 Trust as a relational and institutional construct

Visual trust has always been relational, even when indexicality appeared sufficient. Audiences trusted images because they trusted photographers, editors, and organizations. The AI turn exposes this relational core by removing the shortcut of visual realism. Trust now depends more explicitly on who produced the image, under what standards, and with what accountability.

This shift privileges institutional reputation, professional consistency, and disclosure practices. It also reveals disparities: images produced within robust institutional frameworks are more likely to retain credibility than those circulating without provenance. Consequently, rebuilding trust requires strengthening institutional scaffolding and clarifying roles and responsibilities across the visual information ecosystem.

2.3 Procedural transparency and the ethics of disclosure

Procedural transparency is central to post-indexical trust. Transparency does not imply total openness—especially where safety is at stake—but it requires clear disclosure of methods, limits, and uncertainties. Ethical disclosure aligns claims with evidence and prevents overinterpretation.

Key elements of procedural transparency include: documenting capture conditions; preserving originals; disclosing permissible edits; explaining verification steps; and stating uncertainty where it exists. These practices transform trust from an implicit assumption into an explicit, reviewable claim. Importantly, transparency also supports contestation: when images are challenged, transparent processes enable reasoned defense rather than appeals to authority.

2.4 Functional trust under permanent uncertainty

The post-AI environment is characterized by permanent uncertainty. Attempts to restore certainty through detection alone are neither feasible nor desirable. Instead, the goal is *functional trust*: sufficient confidence to support informed judgment, timely response, and accountability, even when absolute proof is unattainable.

Functional trust accepts probabilistic verification and emphasizes resilience over certainty. It is sustained by corroboration across sources, institutional endorsement, and adaptive standards that evolve with technology. This orientation preserves the social utility of images without denying their limits.

2.5 Reframing skepticism: from corrosive doubt to disciplined inquiry

Unchecked skepticism can be as damaging as credulity. In AI-saturated environments, generalized doubt risks paralyzing action and enabling strategic denial. Reconstructing visual trust requires reframing skepticism as *disciplined inquiry*: a methodical evaluation guided by standards and evidence rather than blanket dismissal.

Disciplined inquiry leverages verification literacy, contextual analysis, and transparent communication. It resists both the liar's dividend and naïve acceptance by grounding judgment in process. For photojournalism, this reframing protects authentic work from being undermined by the mere possibility of fabrication.

2.6 Implications for professional identity

Rebuilding visual trust after indexicality reshapes professional identity. Photojournalists are no longer validated primarily by the presumed truthfulness of images but by the integrity of their

practices. This elevates method, documentation, and ethical reflexivity as defining professional competencies.

Such a shift does not diminish creativity or witness; it deepens them. By embedding trust in governed processes, photojournalism can continue to function as accountable visual testimony—credible not by default, but by design.

3. Professional Standards in the Post-AI Environment

Reconstructing visual trust after the AI turn requires translating conceptual shifts into **actionable professional standards**. These standards do not aim to eliminate uncertainty; rather, they institutionalize practices that make uncertainty manageable, transparent, and accountable. In a post-indexical environment, standards function as shared commitments that align individual practice with collective credibility.

3.1 Provenance as a professional obligation

Provenance becomes a primary standard once indexicality can no longer be presumed. Professional practice should ensure that the origins and handling of images are reconstructable, even when not fully disclosed publicly for safety reasons. Provenance encompasses authorship, capture conditions, editorial history, and publication pathways.

Key practices include preserving original files; maintaining secure archives; documenting capture circumstances; and ensuring consistent attribution across platforms. When provenance is robust, challenges to authenticity can be addressed through process rather than assertion. Provenance thus operates as a professional obligation, not merely a technical feature.

3.2 Verification literacy as core competence

In the post-AI environment, verification literacy is a foundational skill for photojournalists. This literacy entails understanding the capabilities and limits of detection tools, metadata analysis, and contextual verification, as well as the probabilistic nature of their outputs. Verification literacy does not require technical specialization but demands informed judgment.

Professionals equipped with verification literacy can collaborate effectively with editors, technologists, and investigators, contributing field knowledge that enhances corroboration. This competence also improves communication with audiences by aligning claims with evidence and uncertainty.

3.3 Transparency and disclosure standards

Transparency standards govern how methods and limitations are communicated. In a post-AI environment, transparency is not optional; it is essential to credibility. Disclosure should clarify

permissible edits, verification steps taken, and known uncertainties, without compromising safety.

Standardized disclosure practices—such as methodological notes or verification statements—help normalize honesty about limits. They also reduce incentives for overclaiming, aligning ethical communication with epistemic reality.

3.4 Ethical restraint and claim discipline

Ethical restraint complements transparency by regulating what claims images are used to support. Claim discipline requires that photographs not be positioned as proof of causation, intent, or identity beyond what visual evidence can substantiate. In AI-saturated contexts, overclaiming accelerates skepticism and invites strategic denial.

Professional standards should emphasize alignment between visual evidence and analytic claims, reinforcing credibility through precision rather than rhetorical force. This discipline protects both subjects and institutions from downstream harm.

3.5 Institutional alignment and peer accountability

Standards gain force when embedded institutionally. Newsrooms, journals, and documentation organizations must align editorial policies with post-AI standards, providing oversight and peer accountability. Peer review, editorial verification, and ethical review processes distribute responsibility and reinforce consistency.

Institutional alignment also signals credibility externally. When organizations articulate and adhere to standards, trust is anchored in governance rather than individual reputation alone.

3.6 Continuous adaptation and standards evolution

Finally, standards must be adaptive. AI technologies evolve rapidly, and static rules risk obsolescence. Professional standards should incorporate mechanisms for review and revision, informed by interdisciplinary expertise and field experience.

Adaptation preserves relevance while maintaining continuity of principles. The goal is not rigidity but resilience—standards that endure by evolving.

4. Institutional Governance and Accountability

Professional standards achieve practical force only when they are embedded within institutional governance structures. In the post-AI environment, institutions—not individual images—are the primary guarantors of visual trust. Governance translates standards into enforceable routines, allocates responsibility, and creates accountability mechanisms capable of withstanding contested claims and strategic denial.

4.1 Editorial governance and decision traceability

Editorial governance is the first institutional layer through which visual trust is operationalized. In AI-saturated environments, editorial decisions must be *traceable*: institutions should be able to explain how and why an image was selected, edited, verified, and published. Traceability does not require public disclosure of sensitive details, but it does require internal documentation sufficient to reconstruct decision pathways.

Decision traceability supports accountability in two ways. Internally, it disciplines practice by aligning actions with standards. Externally, it enables reasoned defense when images are challenged. Institutions that can articulate their processes credibly are better positioned to counter generalized skepticism and the liar’s dividend.

4.2 Verification governance across workflows

Verification governance coordinates technical checks, contextual analysis, and editorial judgment into coherent workflows. Rather than treating verification as a single gate, institutions should adopt layered verification models that distribute evidentiary weight across sources and stages.

Effective governance clarifies roles—who conducts technical checks, who assesses context, who approves claims—and establishes escalation paths when uncertainty remains. This coordination prevents overreliance on any one tool or individual and reduces single-point failure. Importantly, governance frameworks should normalize uncertainty management, allowing publication with disclosed limits rather than defaulting to suppression.

4.3 Accountability mechanisms and peer review

Accountability in the post-AI environment extends beyond corrections. It includes peer review, post-publication review, and mechanisms for contestation that are transparent and fair. When images are disputed, institutions should provide structured avenues for challenge and response, grounded in evidence and process.

Peer accountability—within and across institutions—raises the baseline for credible practice. Shared standards, cross-institutional review, and collaborative verification initiatives create collective resilience. Accountability thus becomes a networked property rather than a siloed obligation.

4.4 Governance under safety and ethical constraints

Institutional governance must balance transparency with safety. In conflict and human rights contexts, full disclosure of provenance may expose subjects or photographers to harm. Governance frameworks should therefore define *graduated disclosure*: what is documented internally, what is shared with partners, and what is made public.

Ethical review bodies play a critical role in adjudicating these trade-offs. By integrating safety assessments into governance, institutions avoid false binaries between transparency and protection, reinforcing trust without increasing risk.

4.5 Interoperability across domains

Visual evidence increasingly circulates across journalism, advocacy, and accountability domains. Governance frameworks should therefore prioritize interoperability—shared vocabularies, compatible documentation practices, and aligned disclosure norms. Interoperability reduces friction as images migrate and prevents credibility loss due to mismatched expectations.

Institutions that invest in interoperable governance contribute to ecosystem-wide trust. This collective alignment is especially important in AI-era environments, where isolated standards are easily undermined by cross-platform circulation.

4.6 Measuring trust outcomes

Finally, governance should include mechanisms for evaluating trust outcomes. Metrics may include correction rates, contestation resolution time, audience understanding of uncertainty, and institutional reputation over time. While trust cannot be reduced to numbers, reflective assessment supports continuous improvement and standards evolution.

By embedding professional standards within robust governance and accountability structures, institutions can sustain visual trust at scale. The next section considers the implications of this reconstruction for journalism education, public policy, and interdisciplinary collaboration, extending the framework beyond professional practice into systemic change.

5. Implications for Journalism, Human Rights, and Policy

Reconstructing visual trust after the AI turn has implications that extend beyond professional practice and institutional governance. It reshapes how journalism is taught, how human rights documentation is organized, and how public policy engages with visual evidence. This section examines these broader implications, emphasizing the need for alignment across education, practice, and regulation.

5.1 Journalism education and professional formation

Journalism education has traditionally emphasized storytelling, ethics, and technical proficiency in image-making. In the post-AI environment, these competencies remain essential but are no longer sufficient. Education must integrate **verification literacy**, **procedural transparency**, and **epistemic humility** as core elements of professional formation.

Students of photojournalism should be trained to understand how images acquire credibility across different contexts, including newsrooms, advocacy reports, and accountability processes.

This includes familiarity with verification workflows, documentation practices, and the communication of uncertainty. Embedding these competencies early normalizes responsible practice and prepares future professionals to operate under conditions of contested trust.

Importantly, education should frame AI not only as a technical challenge but as a structural transformation of visual culture. By situating synthetic media within broader discussions of power, misinformation, and institutional trust, journalism programs can cultivate critical awareness alongside practical skill.

5.2 Human rights documentation and interdisciplinary practice

For human rights organizations, the post-AI environment underscores the necessity of interdisciplinary collaboration. Visual evidence can no longer be evaluated in isolation; it must be integrated with legal analysis, open-source intelligence, and ethical risk assessment. This integration benefits from shared standards and mutual understanding between photojournalists and human rights researchers.

Reconstructed visual trust supports more resilient documentation practices. When photographs are embedded within transparent verification frameworks and governed by shared norms, they are less vulnerable to dismissal and more capable of supporting advocacy and accountability. Interdisciplinary training and joint protocols can further strengthen this resilience.

5.3 Policy, regulation, and standards-setting

Public policy responses to AI-generated media often focus on prohibition, labeling, or detection mandates. While these measures may have value, they cannot substitute for professional standards and institutional governance. Effective policy should therefore support **process-oriented trust** rather than imposing rigid technological solutions.

Standards-setting bodies, professional associations, and regulators can facilitate interoperability by endorsing disclosure norms, provenance documentation, and accountability mechanisms that respect safety constraints. Policies that incentivize transparency and verification capacity—rather than penalizing uncertainty—align better with the realities of visual evidence in the AI era.

5.4 Public understanding and democratic resilience

Finally, reconstructing visual trust has implications for public understanding. Democracies rely on shared factual baselines to deliberate and act. When visual evidence becomes universally suspect, public discourse fragments and accountability weakens. Rebuilding trust through transparent processes and disciplined communication helps sustain democratic resilience without reverting to naïve realism.

Educating audiences about how trust is produced—through method and governance rather than appearance—supports informed skepticism. This form of skepticism is constructive: it questions claims while remaining open to evidence grounded in credible process.

5.5 Synthesis: from crisis response to systemic renewal

The implications outlined above suggest that the post-AI crisis of visual evidence is also an opportunity for systemic renewal. By aligning education, practice, and policy around governed credibility, institutions can transform disruption into resilience. Visual trust becomes a shared responsibility, distributed across professional communities and supported by transparent standards.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the future of visual credibility after the AI turn depends on reconstructing trust as a governed, procedural achievement rather than an indexical assumption. The erosion of visual certainty does not negate the evidentiary value of photography; it redefines the conditions under which such value can be sustained.

By articulating post-indexical trust, professional standards, institutional governance, and cross-domain implications, the study offers a forward-looking framework for photojournalism and visual evidence. Trust is rebuilt through provenance-by-design, verification literacy, ethical restraint, and accountable governance—practices that accept uncertainty while preserving the capacity to inform judgment and support accountability.

In an era of synthetic media, photography remains a vital form of public witnessing not because it appears real, but because it is produced, verified, and governed with integrity. Reconstructing visual trust is therefore not a defensive retreat from technology, but a normative commitment to responsible knowledge production in a transformed visual landscape.

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