

Study finds mainstream news outlets do not have a monopoly on credibility in the eyes of the public

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Images of newsworthy events that appear on news websites and on social media have the same level of credibility in the public's view, regardless of whether they were captured by a professional photojournalist or an amateur photographer, according to new research led by the University

of Massachusetts Amherst.

Brian McDermott, senior journalism lecturer at UMass Amherst, found that photos gathered by established mainstream news outlets do not have any special monopoly on credibility in the eyes of the public. The study appears in the journal [*Social Media + Society*](#).

McDermott and co-authors Tara Marie Mortensen and Robert A. Wertz of the University of South Carolina documented that professionally authored images and images by amateur photographers were assessed in a survey with nearly identical levels of credibility, both on news websites and on Instagram. This was true even though respondents rated professional images higher in terms of authority and visual composition.

"People notice when a picture is professional, but they don't seem to care," McDermott, a former photojournalist, says. "News consumers assign the same level of credibility to an amateur image used by a news organization as they do to a professional image captured by a journalist."

McDermott and his co-authors tested the credibility perceptions of photographs using an online survey of nearly 4,500 adults across the United States. Participants were shown pairs of images of three high-profile news events—one set taken by photojournalists and the other by amateurs—displayed on both a professional [news website](#) and in an Instagram feed.

The three news events represented were a protest over the death of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and the California "Dixie" wildfire in 2021. While respondents judged the photos captured by journalists as more professional, all six images were viewed as equally credible. Whether the images were presented on a news website or on social media made no discernible difference.

The results show that [news consumers](#) have no issue with news outlets incorporating visuals gathered by "citizen journalists" into their reporting.

"News organizations would be smart to embrace more amateur imagery, with the vitally important caveat that the images are verified and vetted using the traditional principles of newsgathering," McDermott says.

Where does that leave professional photojournalists with many [media outlets](#) looking to cut editorial staff to reduce costs?

McDermott argues an increased reliance on amateur photography makes the role of professional visual journalists even more important, particularly as [artificial intelligence](#) becomes better at generating images. "Who else is actually trying to show the world as it is? Nobody else has that mission. AI only has the mission the user gives it," he says.

As academics continue to study the ways mis- and disinformation enter conversations on social media, Ethan Zuckerman suggested in a 2021 paper that they step back and observe the issue as part of a complete media "ecosystem"—one which includes the relationships between both user-generated [social media](#) and professionally-created news media.

More information: Brian McDermott et al, Measuring the Effect of Presentational Context and Image Authorship on the Credibility Perceptions of Newsworthy Images, *Social Media + Society* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/20563051241229656](https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241229656)

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