DEUTSCHER FOTORAT

AI-generated images in the media: What to do now.

Generative AI systems can produce photorealistic images that cannot be distinguished from actual photos, either by human viewers or by technical methods.

In social networks and parts of the internet, synthetic images are now already in the majority in some areas. They are already demonstrably distorting the perception of reality, and their influence will continue to grow in the coming months and years.

The motivation for disseminating generated images is manifold, ranging from the creative playfulness of individuals to highly organised disinformation campaigns. Most of the legal aspects are still unclear, from copyright issues to labelling requirements, which are already provided for in the European AI Regulation, but whose concrete implementation is not even remotely apparent.

In this situation, the media have a special responsibility. On the one hand, there is a strong incentive to use AI tools in production to save costs and streamline workflows. On the other hand, AI-generated images undermine the credibility of all publications.

Media outlets that are dedicated to providing reliable information and reporting are particularly at risk of damaging their reputation as serious sources of reliable information through the non-transparent use of AI-generated material.

The German Photgraphic Council calls for a joint effort by German publishing and media companies to formulate principles for dealing with generated image material. This includes guidelines for working with photos and other image material in editorial offices, as well as uniform standards for labelling AI-generated images and transparent communication with readers.

Generative AI poses fundamental challenges for media outlets working in journalism and documentary filmmaking:

- Erosion of trust:

Journalism thrives on the authenticity of its reporting. AI-generated images undermine trust when readers and viewers can no longer be sure whether the images shown are real photographs or artificially generated. The knowledge that images can be perfectly faked feeds a general scepticism towards all kinds of images. Even authentic photos lose their evidential value if it can be assumed that they are synthetically generated or manipulated images.

To ensure trust in images, clear editorial guidelines are needed to regulate the context in which AI images can be used, the areas in which their use is taboo, and how photos and AI images are labelled.

- Risk of manipulation:

Images that have been deliberately created for manipulation are appearing with increasing frequency. Similarly, photos are being edited using AI tools with the aim of making them stand out more impressively in the flood of images. If such images are not detected and are treated as authentic photos in the editorial office, the media unwittingly spread manipulative narratives.

AI models are based on training data that contains biases or stereotypes. This repeatedly leads to a distorted representation of people and events.

The increasing amount of AI-generated or AI-manipulated images requires additional resources for photo verification and clear criteria for the standards that are applied before an image is published.

These must also be adhered to when there is high competitive pressure to distribute a supposedly relevant image, even though there are doubts about its authenticity.

▸ Devaluation and displacement of authentic photographs

AI-generated images call into question the value of photojournalists' work. While photojournalists often go to great lengths, even putting their lives at risk, to take photographs that are as close and immediate as possible, it can be more attractive for editorial offices to create images on a computer. Since virtually every medium now has an online presence and is constantly competing for users' attention, there is considerable pressure to prefer AI-generated or optimised images over comparatively unspectacular real photographs.

The rapid development of generative AI urgently requires joint efforts in these areas:

▸ Trustworthy sources, metadata and workflow in editorial systems

Editorial organisations should only use image sources that guarantee authentic photographs and label their works accordingly. Anyone who creates photographs or images should label them truthfully according to the type of creation or digital source and document this through a voluntary commitment.

Metadata according to the IPTC* or PLUS* standard is an effective and simple way to document the origin of an image. In addition to traditional data on authorship and content keywords, the standards also include fields that document in detail the origin of an image. It is possible to label generated images and photos differently and to document steps such as the digitisation of analogue material or the modification of photos. The use of AI tools can also be marked in detail in the metadata.

However, there is currently no general agreement on the methodology to be used for the various options, and no clear rules on the minimum standards that image suppliers are required to use for the relevant metadata.

Editorial software systems must also be designed to ensure that this information is retained throughout all stages of processing, from image delivery to publication. For copyright-relevant data, this is already required by law (UrhG § 95c). This is the only way to ensure that synthetic images are not accidentally published as authentic photos. In addition, intact metadata is a prerequisite for offering users additional and background information on the images in appropriate channels.

▸ technical methods for authenticating photographs

Methods for authenticating photos at the time of capture have been available for some time and should be used more widely in the future, especially in journalistic reporting.

By using C2PA* or the ISCC* standard, the origin of every image and photograph can be traced. Each image is given a unique, unchangeable ID and all information about its origin and processing is documented. This technology offers a high degree of transparency, but still requires broader acceptance and integration – including on the part of photographers and agencies.

In the medium term, only photographs that can prove their complete origin or whose origin is known to the editorial team should be accepted. This information should also be made available to users. In this way, reputable media outlets can counter the narrative of allegedly politically motivated image manipulation and alternative facts.

Resources for verifying photos

AI-generated images are now appearing in all genres, from landscape and travel photography to fashion photography and political reporting. Verifying photos is therefore becoming increasingly important for reputable media outlets. Technical methods for detecting AI-generated images or image manipulation are not yet reliable. This means that human expertise is particularly important. In some cases, detecting image fakes requires extensive research, such as searching for comparative material, background information on the image source or analysing geodata from the presumed location where the image was taken.

Common standards should be developed to define the criteria that are sufficient to classify an image as an authentic photo. Media companies must provide the necessary resources to carry out a qualified review. This will require additional investment.

Editorial statutes with guidelines on the use of AI images, active communication

Media outlets should explain to their readers, in the form of a voluntary commitment, in which areas or under what conditions they use AI-generated images. For reputable media outlets, it should be a self-evident principle to refrain from using AI-generated images or manipulated photographs. However, internal guidelines are not sufficient. The standards must also be communicated transparently and bindingly to media users.

Media companies should develop specific editorial guidelines governing the use of AI-generated images. These guidelines should set out clear rules on when and how such images can be used without compromising journalistic and documentary ethics. For example, it should be specified that AI images may only be used in certain areas (such as illustration, conceptual representation or historical reconstructions) and then clearly distinguishable from photographs, while they are generally prohibited in other areas (such as reporting on current events).

Clear labelling and visual language

The ability to distinguish between authentic photos and generated or edited images is particularly important. As with manipulated photographs, there are no established standards for labelling AI-generated images, which will lead to misinterpretation and deception. Although the European AI Act provides for labelling to meet transparency requirements, it will likely take many years before concrete standards are established and legal issues are clarified. There is also a risk that legal regulations will either be impractical and bureaucratic or so general that they will have no tangible benefit in strengthening trust in media products.

Media companies are called upon to take the initiative and develop meaningful standards. The German Press Council, for example, already requires clarification and identification of symbolic images in its press code (guideline 2.2). A similar methodology could also be applied to AI-generated images.

In view of the blurred boundaries between photographs, symbolic images, illustrations and AI images, editorial offices should define and use clear visual language. If photorealistic visual language is reserved exclusively for authentic photos and images from other sources are recognisably illustrative in nature, there is no risk of confusion.

AI images should never be referred to as photos. However, this is often still preset in layout templates for image captions, causing additional confusion in connection with explanatory texts. Terms such as ‘AI photo’ are incorrect and should not be used.

There are currently no established methods for labelling AI-generated or AI-edited images. Each editorial office is working on and experimenting with its own approaches. These methods, such as logos in the image, notes in captions or explanations in the body text, change frequently, use different terminology and are not always applied consistently even within publications.

Labels using symbols in the image must be self-explanatory and remain recognisable even in different display channels where image formats or colours may change. Markings in subheadings or body text are only effective to a limited extent, as images usually appear in different contexts through automated processes, for example in compressed overviews or social media feeds. It must also be ensured that the marking is retained when images are accessed via search engines or other links.

Labels should be standardised across media to enable readers to interpret them consistently. Publishers' associations, media outlets and the Press Council should develop uniform regulations and guidelines for editorial statutes.

Additional positive labelling of authentic photographs can also be useful and should be standardised.

Acting instead of waiting

It is in all our interests to maintain the credibility of photography and thus also of the media. We all therefore need to play our part. This means that we must engage intensively with the challenges and possible measures and act accordingly. Waiting for legal requirements is not an option. The more time we allow to pass, the further we move into a world where the value of content is measured primarily by its entertainment value and where reality becomes irrelevant because it can no longer be assessed, either in fact or in perception.

In the middle of 2026, the European Union's AI Office will publish a ‘Code of Practice’ that regulates how the labelling requirements for AI content will be implemented, which will come into force as part of the AI Regulation at the beginning of August 2026. The consultation process, in which the German Photgraphic Council is also participating, has already begun. Whether the resulting rules will actually be helpful and practicable cannot be predicted at this stage.

The German Photgraphic Council is therefore calling for cross-industry dialogue and the creation of appropriate committees and discussion formats in order to find joint responses to the new challenges.

contact: Dr. Jürgen Scriba • juergen.scriba@deutscher-fotorat.de • +49 171 5421850

IPTC

The standard was defined in 1991 by the International Press Telecommunications Council (IPTC) in collaboration with the Newspaper Association of America (NAA) and has been continuously developed since then. It is suitable for all types of media, i.e. text, photos, graphics, audio or video.

The standard defines two aspects of metadata: a list of copyright and recording data and a technical format for storing this data. The standard allows copyright notices, the name of the creator, an image description or keywords to be specified and stored directly in the image file.
https://iptc.org, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/IPTC-IIM-Standard#Weblinks

PLUS-Coalition

The PLUS Coalition is an international non-profit initiative that aims to simplify and facilitate the communication and management of image rights. It is supported by associations, leading companies, standardisation bodies, scientists and industry experts, and serves all groups involved in the creation, distribution, use and preservation of images.

PLUS fulfils this mission by developing a globally networked registry for visual works, a standardised language and a machine-readable format for transmitting information about visual works.
https://www.useplus.com

C2PA

The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA, founded in 2019) is developing an open technical standard to ensure the authenticity of digital content. Major companies such as Microsoft, Adobe and Google support this standard and are part of an association of the same name.

C2PA uses cryptographic signatures to verify the origin of digital content and document any manipulation. The C2PA standard is based on metadata. The system embeds this information in the file, both when recording with suitable cameras and during subsequent processing steps.
https://c2pa.org, https://contentauthenticity.org

ISCC International Standard Content Code

The ISCC is a universal identifier for all types of digital content (text, image, audio, video). It is a code that can be used across all sectors (journalism, books, music, film, etc.). ISCC has been standardised since mid-2024 (ISO 24138 – ISCC) and can be used under an open source licence.

The ISCC CODE is a unique, hierarchically structured, composite identifier. It is generated from the content and metadata of a media file using a mathematical hashing function. This code remains intact as a kind of fingerprint even when the files are further processed, allowing, for example, the identification of similar images. IPTC metadata and C2PA protocols can be integrated into the code.
https://iscc.codes