

REPORT #2



SOURCE : ©2026 / AFP PHOTO

Covering Displacement:

Between the Imperative
of Documentation and
Respect for Privacy and
Human Dignity

Introduction

“The greatest challenge facing journalists is balancing journalistic curiosity with the displaced person’s right to refuse being filmed.”

“

With these words, Lara El Hachem, a correspondent for LBCI, summarized the main challenges journalists face when covering the displacement crisis in Lebanon. As waves of displacement from the South, the Bekaa, and Beirut’s southern suburbs increase toward other regions, images of displaced men and women have become a central element of media coverage. However, this intensive use raises serious ethical and professional challenges related to privacy, human dignity, and prior consent.

Amid the race to capture the most impactful image, journalists constantly find themselves tested on the limits of their profession and its ethics. The reality of war also imposes heightened pressures that sometimes push toward prioritizing visual impact over humanitarian considerations, raising critical questions about how to achieve a real balance between documentation and respect for individuals’ rights.

Lara El Hachem explains that the challenges range from security and logistical to humanitarian. Obtaining permission to film inside displacement centers is not easy. In addition, journalists must respect the wishes of displaced individuals, many of whom refuse to appear on camera, placing journalists before the ultimate challenge of balancing journalistic curiosity with the displaced person’s right to refuse being filmed.

In her statement to Maharat, El Hachem emphasizes that the primary criterion for selecting images suitable for publication is to avoid infringing on human dignity, while also taking into account the social and cultural norms of displaced communities, particularly regarding women and children in shelters.

Lara El Hachem

”



“In live coverage, we always ask displaced individuals whether they wish to appear. If they refuse, we capture images in a way that preserves their privacy, such as not showing their faces or altering their voices. I have personally done this with one displaced person to record an interview without revealing their identity.”

Meanwhile, Darine El Helwe, a correspondent for Sky News Arabia in Lebanon, highlights the significant psychological and emotional impact on journalists. Dealing with individuals in difficult psychological conditions is an extremely complex experience, especially when some displaced people believe that the coverage serves the journalist or the media outlet, which can generate anger or rejection. She adds:

Darine El Helwe

”



“In other cases, the displaced person opens up and shares their story, and the accounts of suffering and pain they recount leave a lasting impact, accompanying the journalist in their daily life and thoughts.”

El Helwe notes in her statement to Maharat that the political positioning of media institutions may influence how displaced individuals respond, particularly when these positions conflict with their own beliefs. At times, a displaced person’s refusal can escalate into verbal tension or even physical threats against the journalist. She emphasizes that respecting ethical and humanitarian standards requires obtaining the consent of displaced individuals before any filming, and avoiding the filming of children or people in situations that could compromise their dignity. She adds: “Even if a displaced person makes statements that align with a particular political stance, they cannot be published if they could expose them to harm later.”

In the same context, this approach aligns with what Sarah Matar, editor and correspondent for Al-Araby Al-Jadeed in Beirut, highlights. She also sheds light on a range of professional and humanitarian challenges imposed by field coverage of displacement. Foremost among these is obtaining prior consent for filming inside shelters, whether from supervising authorities or from the displaced individuals themselves, given that images are directly tied to their dignity and privacy, especially as many do not wish to appear in such circumstances.

Matar affirms in her remarks to Maharat her commitment to avoiding intrusion, leaving displaced individuals the freedom to accept or refuse without any pressure, as the goal is not to achieve a journalistic scoop but to convey their suffering—if they choose to share it. She is careful to avoid filming children as much as possible, given the potential long-term psychological impact such images may have on them. When filming is necessary, angles are used that do not clearly reveal faces. She also highlights the importance of obtaining consent before using individuals' full names, with the option of using only a first name or a pseudonym if they refuse, although she prefers using real names to maintain credibility.

In this context, Matar stresses that images must preserve human dignity, criticizing the excessive focus on scenes of crying or pain, even when the intention is to portray suffering. She also explains that she does not face pressure within her organization to publish images that violate privacy, and that image selection follows clear professional standards.

Although her work does not involve live broadcasting, she applies the same ethical standards to published videos as to still images, avoiding graphic or violent scenes and ensuring that the privacy of displaced individuals is not violated, even in cases that require more detailed coverage.

According to Matar, humanity remains the foundation of journalistic work. She recalls field situations in which she went beyond her professional role to assist displaced individuals, considering this human dimension no less important than the coverage itself. She also notes that her relationship with some displaced people has developed into ongoing communication, where she sometimes helps connect them with organizations providing assistance, reflecting the journalist's role as a humanitarian link, not merely a conveyor of news.

She also highlights the importance of avoiding discrimination in coverage and ensuring representation of different affected groups, including women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and migrant workers. She further emphasizes that she avoids relaying political or sectarian statements that may be made by displaced individuals under emotional stress, in line with journalism's role in conveying suffering rather than fueling divisions. Matar concludes that:

Sarah Matar



“The essence of journalistic work does not lie in scoops or the number of followers, but in the ability to convey people’s voices with dignity and respect, and to treat their suffering as a human issue that transcends all political or media considerations.

Absence of Institutional Policies

Alongside these field challenges, another equally important issue emerges: the absence of clear policies in most media institutions to regulate sensitive coverage of displacement and to ensure the protection of both journalists and affected individuals.

In this regard, Wafaa Abou Chakra, professor at the Faculty of Information at the Lebanese University and head of its research center, explains that Lebanese media institutions lack clear policies for sensitive coverage of displacement. This includes the absence of specialized training programs for the physical and psychological protection of journalists and war correspondents, the lack of protocols for dealing with children or vulnerable groups, and the failure to establish ethical guidelines for covering humanitarian issues during displacement and war. Abou Chakra emphasizes that:

Wafaa Abou Chakra



“Media coverage represents a real test of journalistic ethics, as journalists must document and reveal facts without causing any harm to displaced people.”

In her remarks to Maharat, Abou Chakra explains that responsible coverage is based on three fundamental principles. The first is the protection of displaced individuals, prioritizing their safety and rights over the pursuit of a journalistic scoop. The second is respect for their dignity and privacy, avoiding any practices that could expose them to social stigma, and not portraying them solely as helpless victims, but rather highlighting their resilience and active participation in their communities. The third principle is to provide a balanced and accurate narrative of displacement, free from media exploitation or the reinforcement of stereotypes, by shedding light on the causes of displacement, the context of the war and its consequences, and by involving displaced individuals themselves, giving them space to express and share their experiences.

Abou Chakra adds that balancing the documentation of suffering with respect for privacy requires clearly explaining the purpose of filming and the nature of the interview, avoiding questions that may reveal identities or revive psychological trauma experienced by displaced individuals, especially those related to the loss of family members or harsh displacement experiences, and focusing on the issue of displacement itself rather than collecting personal information.

She also emphasizes the importance of adhering to international standards, particularly in protecting children and avoiding any practices that could put them at risk, refraining from using images for the sake of journalistic scoops, and ensuring that the locations of displaced individuals are not directly disclosed except in coordination with the relevant authorities.



Professional and Ethical Remarks

While the absence of institutional policies reveals regulatory gaps, field practices also highlight a set of professional and ethical observations that must be addressed to ensure responsible journalistic coverage that respects the dignity of displaced individuals.

According to Dr. Georges Sadaka, former Dean of the Faculty of Information at the Lebanese University, monitoring media coverage of displacement issues reveals a number of professional and ethical concerns that warrant careful consideration.

First

the politicization of coverage, as some media outlets tend to frame displacement narratives in line with their political orientations, whether by criticizing certain actors or highlighting supportive positions toward others, thereby turning a humanitarian issue into a political tool.

Second

The pursuit of sensationalism by some channels through focusing on the reactions of displaced individuals or broadcasting emotionally charged footage, at the expense of the human and professional values that should guide media coverage.

Third

Lack of respect for human dignity, particularly when filming degrading scenes or recording individuals without their consent, including children, which may later expose them to social stigma.

Fourth

Limited awareness among displaced individuals of the risks associated with publishing their images or statements, especially when they are under shock or in an unstable psychological state. It is therefore the responsibility of journalists to inform them of potential consequences.

Fifth

The presence of hate speech in some coverage, whether driven by political actors or through discrimination among displaced groups themselves, causing moral harm to targeted communities.

Sixth

The overwhelming flow of images and footage related to displacement may lead to a counterproductive effect on audiences, as viewers gradually become desensitized to the social tragedy.

In his statement to Maharat, Sadaka stresses the need to humanize media coverage by adopting diverse editorial approaches, including documenting the lives of displaced individuals before displacement and highlighting their daily needs, while adhering to the ethical principles of the profession. This includes verifying information before publication and obtaining individuals' consent before filming them, in order to ensure responsible media coverage that objectively reflects reality and preserves human dignity.

He concludes that ethical codes of media practice prioritize human right values above any political considerations, especially when covering displacement issues. These are fundamentally humanitarian issues affecting people who are suffering, and journalists must convey this suffering with objectivity and respect for human dignity, while ensuring individuals' consent before filming and explaining the risks associated with publishing their statements or images, in order to prevent any potential harm and guarantee responsible media coverage.

Towards Responsible Media Coverage

Based on the professional and ethical challenges highlighted by journalists and experts, a set of recommendations emerges for journalists and media institutions aimed at ensuring responsible media coverage that respects the dignity and rights of displaced individuals, while maintaining professionalism and adherence to ethical standards:

- 1 • **Obtaining prior consent:** Always ensure the consent of displaced individuals before any filming or recording, and respect their refusal without any pressure.
- 2 • **Protecting privacy and human dignity:** Avoid filming children or individuals in situations that may compromise their dignity, and use angles that do not clearly reveal faces when necessary.
- 3 • **Adhering to ethical standards:** Avoid excessive focus on scenes of pain or crying, and refrain from politicizing or exploiting the humanitarian crisis for political or media purposes.
- 4 • **Avoiding discrimination:** Provide space for all affected groups among the displaced, including women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and migrant workers.
- 5 • **Balancing documentation and humanity:** Maintain a balance between reporting reality and avoiding intrusion or the re-traumatization of displaced individuals.

Towards Responsible Media Coverage

- 6 • **Verification and fact-checking:** Ensure the accuracy of information before publication, and clearly explain the purpose and nature of filming to displaced individuals.
- 7 • **Protecting children and vulnerable groups:** Follow international standards for child protection, avoid using their images for journalistic scoops, and refrain from any practices that could put them at risk.
- 8 • **Responsible editorial practices:** Adopt diverse editorial approaches, including documenting the lives of displaced individuals before displacement and highlighting their daily needs to present a balanced and accurate narrative.
- 9 • **Prioritizing human right values over political considerations:** Place human right values above any political considerations, and address the suffering of displaced individuals with objectivity and full respect for human dignity.
- 10 • **Framing coverage within institutional policies:** Establish clear policies within media institutions for responsible coverage of displacement, including training on the physical and psychological protection of journalists and ethical reporting guidelines.

Maharat Foundation

Address:
Jdeideh, Metn
Beirut, Lebanon

Contact Information:
Website: maharatfoundation.org
Email: info@maharatfoundation.org

