

STORY MANIFESTO





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INTRODUCTION

Surefire is a specialist communications team working for non-profit and community based organisations. A lot of Surefire's work centres around story-telling. These 'stories' can take different forms (photo essays, written articles, documentary films) and can be posted on different platforms. Stories are powerful tools for the civil society and non-profit sector. They bring a human face to their work - showcasing their qualitative impact on people and social ecosystems.

We have written this manifesto to guide us in story-writing. It sets our standards for our written and visual stories, ensuring genuine and sensitive story-telling with the story participant's dignity and agency at the centre.

We have been inspired by other organisations who are working to 'shift the power' by defining - and practising - ethical story-telling. One such organisation is [On Our Radar](#), an organisation which works "through partnerships to establish community reporter networks." On Our Radar published a [Manifesto](#), which we are often guided by.

We also draw from several reports published by international organisations that explore ethical communications. One such [report](#) is by Save The Children who travelled to four countries to listen and learn from the 'People in the Pictures.' The interviewed people who featured in Save The Children's photos on their motivations, their feelings around the process and their feelings on their portrayals. This report aims to support image making that is responsible, accountable and that respects the rights and priorities of the contributors.

As part of our process in developing this Story Manifesto, we interviewed (and wrote stories about) each other as a team. This helped us to better imagine what it is like to be a participant in a story

ETHICAL STORY-TELLING

Ethical storytelling is the practice of telling stories in a way that respects the dignity and rights of individuals - especially those involved in the story itself. This is especially important for the civil society and non-profit sector as they often work with people who are marginalised. Sometimes, story participants are (or have been) 'beneficiaries' of an organisation's services - and so the dynamic is skewed in such a way that the participant of a story is often a 'receiver.' Participants might feel obliged, in some way, to participate in stories, or pressurised to say certain things. They might think (as found in the Save The Children report) that their case, or assistance with the organisation will be impacted if they participate. Awareness around this dynamic is critical.

There are a number of principles that guide ethical storytelling such as:

- **Informed consent**

The people whose stories are being told should give their informed consent before the story-writing process begins. This means that they should be fully aware of : (a) the process around story-telling, (b) how their stories will be gathered and told, (c) their ability to remain anonymous should they want to (d) how they will be able to give feedback in the process (e) how their stories will be used in the future (f) how to opt out of the process and (g) who could potentially access their stories in the future.

- **Transparency**

Organisations should be transparent about their intentions in telling stories. They should be clear about why they are telling the stories and what they hope to achieve. This includes transparency around information and the avoidance of "sugar-coating" the impact of the organisation in participants' lives.

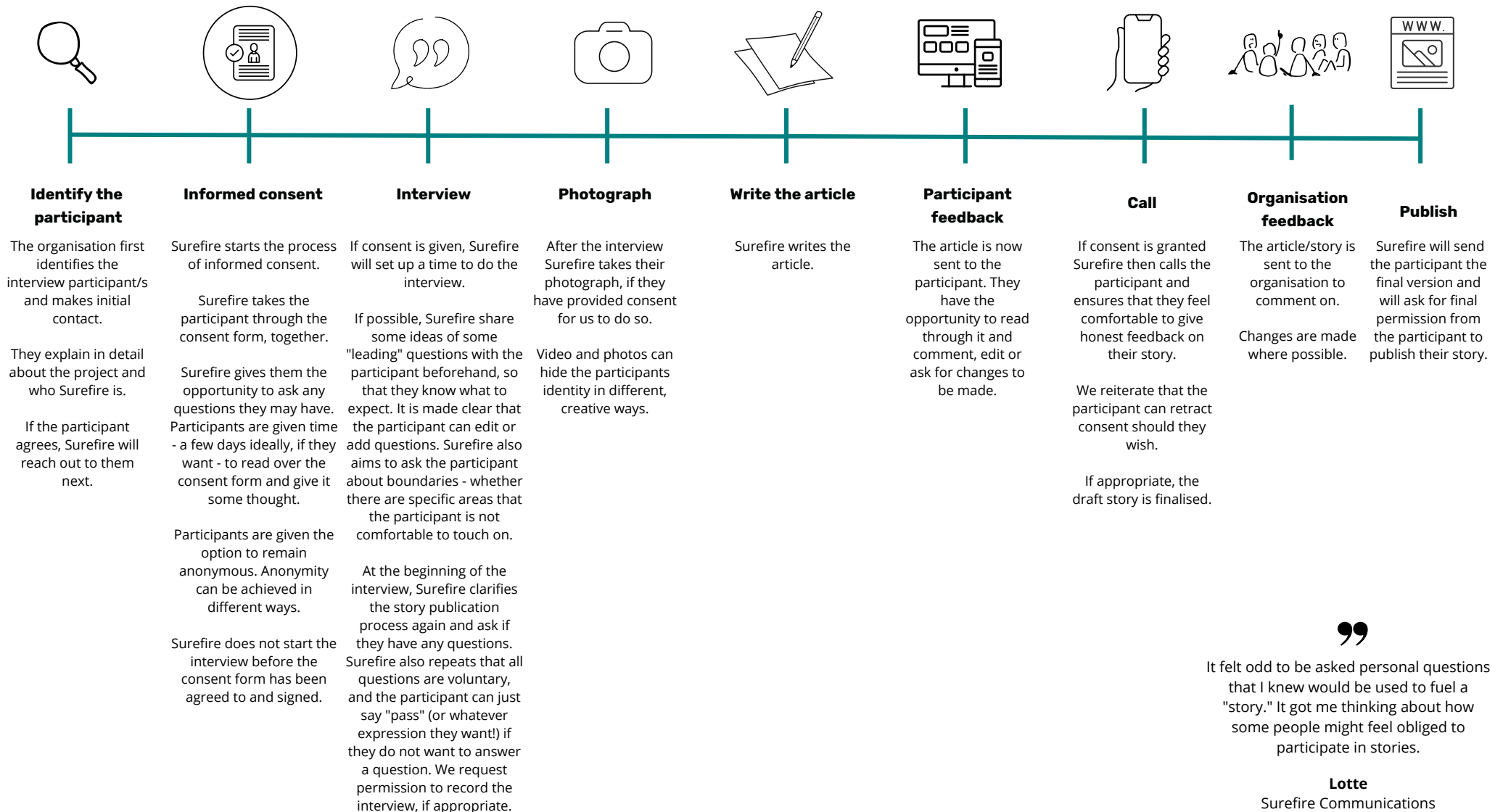
- **Ownership**

The people whose stories are being told should have ownership over their stories. This means that they should have the right to decide how their stories are told and the ability to give meaningful feedback before publication. They also should have the right to withdraw from the process at any stage.

We aim to be sensitive to the potential impact of our storytelling. We want to tell stories that echo genuine nuanced realities, and that are a true reflection of the facts.

OUR PROCESS

Below is a bit more about our process, from contacting the participant, to the publishing the final article/video online. (This process can adapt, depending on the context at hand, but it is the process that we aim to adhere to.)



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It felt odd to be asked personal questions that I knew would be used to fuel a "story." It got me thinking about how some people might feel obliged to participate in stories.

Lotte

Surefire Communications

CONSENT FORM

We are able to provide our clients with a template consent form if they do not already have one. Informed consent is important before writing an article on someone because it ensures that the person is aware of how their story will be used and who will see it/could see it - the participant must understand the potential impact of their story being shared. This is so important.

Participants should be explained the consent form (in as much detail as is possible). They should be encouraged to ask questions and provide feedback. Participants that want to remain anonymous can decide how they want their identity to be obscured (different names, different identifying details, etc.). They must understand that they can retract their consent, but once the story is published, we may not be able to remove it completely.

We have found that many consent forms use difficult to understand, legalistic English. Some participants - especially if English is not their first language - do not understand the form fully. We have changed our consent form, using language that is a bit more accessible.

EXAMPLE

Example consent form

Surefire is a specialist communications team working for non-profit and community based organisations. As we have already discussed with you, we gather peoples' stories. This is a form to ask for your permission to be involved in the story process. Your involvement is voluntary.

Please read this carefully. Please ask Surefire any questions about this form before signing. If you are ready, please tick the boxes and sign where indicated. If you are not comfortable with this, please do not sign this document. Please get back in touch with the person who gave you this form to inform them that you do not want to proceed.

Why  We [name of organisation] use pictures and stories to highlight our work and the impact that it can have. We are asking if you would like to be part of this story process because your story could help us raise awareness, build empathy, inspire action, promote our work or connect us to donors and funders.

We would like to collect your story through words, photos or film. You do not have to tell us any information that you feel is sensitive or private. We can keep your identity hidden, if you want to. This could include changing your name, or taking photos that do not show your face. Please indicate this to us, below, and we can talk more about this option.

Where  Your story might be published online (website, social media platforms, or used in the organisations publications). It will therefore be publicly available, and therefore it could be shared from these platforms to many different countries. It could be seen by many different people.

My Identity  If you want to, we can keep your identity hidden (for example, we can change your name, age, location) if you want to hide your identity, please tell Surefire. Together you can agree on how you want your identity to be hidden, and describe that here.

We understand that you might change your mind in the future about participation in this story. You can contact us at any time. If you do not want us to tell your story or do not like how your story is being used. To do this, contact: surefirecommunications@gmail.co.uk. If you let us know that you have changed your mind, we will not use your story again, but we might not be able to withdraw your story if it has already been published. You have the right to request access to and update your story.

I understand that the interview will be recorded. I also understand that the story may be published in whole or in part, and that it may be edited for length and clarity.

I agree to the interview and to the use of the recording and the story. I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any questions, and that I can withdraw my consent at any time. I have read this consent form and I understand its contents. I am signing this form voluntarily.

Signed by _____ Date _____



This consent form can be edited to include the client's logo and details if needed

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It was interesting to note how I felt when reading a personal story about myself. I felt quite uncomfortable with it being published online. It really highlighted the importance of story participants being able to read the final copy and being able to change their minds.

Olivia
Surefire Communications