



## Remote Portraits: Teaching Photojournalism When You Can't 'Get Closer'

Robin Hoecker  
*DePaul University*

### Abstract

Portraits are essential in photojournalism. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has made getting close to subjects risky for both subjects and photographers. This necessary distance has created challenges for both professional photojournalists and students alike. Remote portraits use smartphone technology to get around this problem. In a remote portrait, the photographer and subject work together to set up a shot on the subject's camera phone. Then the photographer remotely controls the shutter by using a third-party app or the camera's timer. This assignment teaches students to take remote portraits of each other. It addresses not only the health risks of in-person portraiture and the geographical distance between subject and photographer, but also the equipment disparities among students and the challenge of getting students to interact online. Although not a substitute for in-person photography, remote portraiture is a useful tool for photojournalists going forward.

### Introduction

Legendary photojournalist Robert Capa famously said, "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough" (Magnum, 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has made "getting close" a dangerous endeavor. With an airborne virus, simply occupying someone else's airspace can put both subject and photographer at risk (Alanez, 2020). Because they spend so much time in close proximity with their subjects, "photographers have been affected by social distancing restrictions perhaps more than other media workers" (Tracy, 2020, para. 5).

Photojournalists have dealt with the pandemic in a variety of ways. Some have continued working by

using personal protective equipment, sanitizing their gear, using telephoto lenses, and photographing outdoors as much as possible (Tracy, 2020). Some still got sick, despite these precautions. Early in the pandemic, a sports photographer for the *New York Post*, Anthony Cuasi, died of COVID-19, though it was not clear how he contracted the virus (Tracy, 2020). For many photojournalists in an industry that increasingly relies on freelance labor, and with economic pressures exacerbated by the pandemic, many photographers' assignments simply dried up (Tracy, 2020). Given this existential crisis, some photojournalists have chosen to adapt by turning to remote portraiture (Tritt, 2020).

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Remote portraits are created by photographers who are not in the same location as their subjects. One way to think of it is as a directed self-portrait, where the off-site photographer instructs the subject on how to set up the shot and how to pose. First, the subject shares the space with the photographer, most easily done on a video chat. The photographer makes suggestions for where to position the camera and how the subject should be positioned. The shutter is released through a self-timer or a third-party app. Then the subject sends the images back to the photographer, who provides further instructions for how to change the shot. This process continues until a satisfactory image is made.

While this was technically possible before smartphones, the process has been dramatically enhanced by mobile phone and communication technology. Video chat allows the photographer to virtually tour a space online and coordinate with the subject in real-time. Not only has smartphone camera quality increased, but the sharing of images between locations has been made much easier. Photos can be shared quickly through text messages, e-mail, or cloud storage. Third party apps are also enhancing this process by allowing photographers to access a subject's camera phone and create a series of timed shots. Although few subjects have their own DSLR camera and lenses, most will have a decent smartphone, making remote portraiture possible in most situations.

This project explains remote photographic portraits in relationship to traditional forms of portraiture. It reviews the step-by-step process of making remote portraits and describes a sample assignment for students in an online photojournalism class. It draws from lessons and advice of professional photojournalists who are experimenting with these techniques in the (*c.f.* Lusina, 2020; "Photographer Jay Clendenin," 2020; Todras-Whitehill, 2021; Tritt, 2020). It describes the readings and instructions given to students. The assignment was completed in Fall 2021 at a private, Catholic, urban university. Examples of student work, and feedback from students are reviewed, with suggestions for this assignment's use in future classes.

### **Photojournalism Education in the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Like journalists, journalism educators have had to adapt quickly during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Journalists usually report *on* crisis, but the COVID-19 pandemic places journalists, like everyone else, *in*

the crisis," wrote a group of journalism educators in the United Kingdom as they faced a surge in virus cases. This resulted in a shift to first-person, "lock-down-diary style" accounts by both professionals and students facing restrictions in their own communities (Fowler-Watt *et al.*, 2020, p. 3). This first-person perspective has created an ethical dilemma, as journalists don't typically cover themselves or their own friends or family for assignments. For example, the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics (2021) says journalists should "avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived" and "disclose unavoidable conflicts." To address this potential conflict, the relationship between the photographer and subject must be made transparent. Using the first person "I" also emphasizes this point. It can be done, as long as the relationship between journalist and subject is made clear to the audience. Despite the intimate nature of these first-person accounts, professionals and students both found newsworthy narratives about how the virus was affecting people's lives (Fowler-Watt *et al.*, 2020). One benefit of this was increased diversity of perspectives, including "voices that may have previously been unheard" (Fowler-Watt *et al.*, 2020, p. 3).

In addition to health risks and restrictions on movement, students' access to camera equipment has also been restricted due to campus closures (Friesem, 2020; Fowler-Watt *et al.*, 2020). Some students have their own digital single lens reflex (DSLR) cameras and lenses, but others have only their smartphones with varied camera phone quality, creating a large technology disparity. The pandemic has also created geographic distance between students who log in from around the world. Depending on their location, students have faced rolling lockdowns mandated by local governments. Some students, particularly in rural areas, did not have access to high-speed internet needed for video lectures (Hoecker, 2019). Furthermore, in an online asynchronous class, where students log in on their own time, students often struggle to engage with each other in meaningful ways (Schroeder *et al.*, 2016). During the pandemic, students learning online reported a lack of motivation and a host of mental health challenges (Friesem, 2020; Fowler-Watt *et al.*, 2020; Hoecker, 2020). This remote portrait assignment was designed to address some of these obstacles.

### **The Importance of Portraiture in Photojournalism**

A portrait is defined as a "likeness of a person, especially of the face" (Angier, 2020, p. 19). The goal of a

portrait is to capture “as much of the sitter’s individuality as is possible in a flat surface view” (Lawton & Knox, 1978, p. 35). Before photography, this was done through painting, or for those with less money, making silhouettes by tracing the shadows of a person’s face (Knipe, 2002). Early photography mimicked the techniques of portrait painting in terms of positioning, gaze, and the uses of symbolic props and backgrounds (Chapnick, 1994). Over time, and with improvements in technology, portrait photography became less rigid and allowed for more candid moments in natural settings.

Portraits remain an important tool in any photojournalist’s toolkit (Chapnick, 1994; Kobre, 2016). Commonly assigned by editors, portraits “reveal both why the person is in the news and something about the person’s personality” (Kobre, 2016, p. 104). Environmental portraits show subjects situated in their natural surroundings, as opposed to in a studio (Cornfield, 2020). Environmental portraits rely on creative input from the photographer; whereas mug shots are more descriptive, environmental portraits rely on interpretation and creativity on the part of the photographer (Parrish, 2002; Kim & Kelly, 2008). Environmental portraits reveal important information about the subject’s character, life circumstances or occupation. Environmental portraits usually show a subject’s face and include visual clues within the frame, such as objects in the foreground or background, clothing, or props (Kobre, 2016). Environmental portraits are often posed, but they can be candid as well. For posed photographs, subjects often make direct eye contact with the photographer to signal this relationship to the viewer (Kobre, 2016).

### **Remote Portraits as Multi-Mediated Portraiture**

In a remote portrait, the photographer is not on-site with the subject. While some might argue that remote portraits are just “selfies,” or self-portraits taken by the subject, this argument leaves out the creative input of the photographer who is directing the shot. Even traditional, on-site portraits require some level of collaboration between the subject and the photographer (Azoulay, 2016). In the case of remote portraits, this coordination is mediated through a screen using Facetime or video chat. The photographer directs the subject where to go, how to position themselves, and how to frame the shot. One tip offered by Annie Tritt (2020) is to use both a laptop and a smartphone camera at the same time. The video on the laptop is used

to set up the shot, then the camera phone can be positioned leaning up against the laptop screen to take the photo. That way the video chat, and communication between photographer and subject, can be maintained as the photos are being taken, similarly to an on-site photo session.

Previous research has shown that professional photojournalists, as opposed to untrained reporters or citizen journalists, are more likely to create aesthetically pleasing images that convey emotion (Mortensen & Gade, 2018). Although the subject may be physically setting up the camera, the creative vision is still largely in the control of the photographer, even when that person is off-site.

Once the shot is set up, the smartphone camera shutter can be released in a variety of ways. The simplest is to have the subject use the phone camera’s built-in self-timer. However, this involves the subject getting up and moving between shots. Another option is to have the subject download a timer app, such as Remote Timer +. This app allows the subject to set up a series of timed shots, for example every 3 seconds for a total of 10 shots. Using a series of timed shots allows the subject to make adjustments easily between frames and it can capture some more candid expressions. A third option for remote shutter release is to use an app, such as CLOS, that gives the remote photographer temporary control of the subject’s smartphone camera. Once the photos have been made, they can be shared with the photographer through text message, e-mail, cloud storage, or within the third-party app. The photographer can then direct the subject to change the setup or their positioning. The process repeats until a satisfactory portrait is made.

*Module description:* This lesson was developed for an online, asynchronous class, meaning students can access the materials and complete the work on their own time throughout the week. Prior to this lesson, students should be familiar with basic concepts of composition, such as the rule of thirds, and be able to identify the direction and quality of light. All assignments were submitted on Slack to promote class discussion. Students were placed in pairs for this assignment, which were assigned at the beginning of the week. Students were directed to take remote portraits of each other so they could experience it as both a photographer and subject. Once students were confident with the technique, they were encouraged to use remote portraits for their final reporting projects.

**Readings:** First, students read about what makes a strong portrait. This reading included a textbook chapter on portraits (Kobre, 2016), as well as a supplemental video lecture with local, student examples. The lecture also included self-portraits and remote portraits to show how subjects can position the camera in different ways, such as using a ceiling fan to shoot from above. Students read an article about remote portraits (Tritt, 2020) and watched several video clips by professionals (Clendenin, 2020; Tritt, 2020; Dunk, 2020).

**Mid-week assignment:** Mid-week assignments help distribute online work throughout the week. They also assess whether or not students understand the concepts before producing their own remote portrait. This helps students achieve different levels of learning, as defined by Bloom (1956). This module required two mid-week assessments. First, students had to identify and analyze an example of an environmental portrait produced by a professional photojournalist. Second, they had to connect with their student partner, interview them, and generate three ideas for a potential remote portrait. Having partners connect mid-week avoids the last-minute “I couldn’t reach my classmate” problem. If a partner is unresponsive by mid-week, assign the student to a different partner or group.

**End-of week assignment:** For the final assignment, students had to create remote portraits of their classmates. Students were asked to create images that revealed something important about their classmates by using the techniques discussed in the readings. They were also asked to demonstrate techniques of light and composition from previous lessons. Students had to submit 3-5 images, each with a full caption, as well as a 2-3 paragraph reflection on the assignment (see full assignment description in Appendix A).

### Outcomes: Samples of Student Work

Overall, the remote portrait assignment was successful, both in the images produced by students (see Figures 1 and 2), as well as in students’ reflections. Students produced a number of publishable images. They reflected that they enjoyed getting to know their classmates, especially during the isolation of the pandemic. “All of us are battling remote work, whether it’s school or work related ... This assignment was a chance to get to know your classmate more and see their life,” wrote one student. Another commented, “All of us are students, however many of us have different home life and responsibilities ... This assign-



**Figure 1.** *Kofi Brooks poses for a portrait in her Chicago apartment. Brooks plays music and practices aromatherapy to relieve stress during the pandemic. Remote portrait by Audrey Champelli.*



**Figure 2.** *To deal with the pandemic isolation, DePaul student Audrey Champelli embraces creativity through crafts, reading, and writing. Remote portrait by Kofi Brooks.*

ment was exciting and gave us the opportunity to get know each other.” They also came to realize that getting to know their subject first was critical to making a good portrait. “Once we got to know each other, and I became more familiar with her personality, choosing what shots to get was easy. The same process applied to me having my portrait taken ... Once she got to know my interests, the experience became very easy and flowed naturally.” Another reflected, “The technique is important, but it’s secondary to the story.”

Having the subjects be their classmates reduced some of the pressure of figuring out new technology with a stranger. Students remarked that the process was very different from taking a selfie or a regular on-site portrait. “The process was definitely strange because you experience less control as the photographer. I would say if anything It allowed for more

trust between us because I had to trust that she was going to capture the vision I had in mind,” wrote one student in their reflection. Another commented, “Having a photographer directing the shot made it feel more natural than if I’d had to take a photo of myself to send into some news source without much guidance.” Some students reported that they felt shy being in front of the camera, even with a remote photographer. “Having my own portrait taken was pretty nerve-wracking which is as much a reflection on my own camera-shyness as it is on this assignment, but I was struck by how similar it ended up feeling to times I’ve had my picture taken in person.” Another appreciated the remote aspect of the assignment. “I overall liked this assignment because it showed me how to direct something without physically being there.” One student concluded, “It gave me a greater appreciation for the work of photojournalists working in such unconventional conditions.”

In the discussions, students talked about which shots they liked best and why. A common question for the subject was, “Which photo do you think reflects you best?” Then the subjects would answer, giving their reasons for preferring some images over others. Students also commented on things like the lighting and composition. In some cases, they remarked on the camera placement. But mostly, they asked questions about each other’s lives as depicted in the photographs, such as “How do you do cheerleading practice at home?” or “What do you like to paint?” This showed that students were also getting to know each other and saw the portraits as communicating something about their lives. Furthermore, as evidence of success, one student went on to use remote portraits for other assignments later in the quarter (see Figure 3).

### Challenges

One immediate challenge with this activity was the incompatibility of some smartphones with the various apps. At the time of this assignment, the *CLOS* app only worked when both subject and photographer both had iPhones. That prevented most pairs of students from using it. Instead, they turned to the *Photo Timer+* or *Shutter* apps to set up a series of timed shots on the subject’s phone.

Another issue that arose is that some students tried to cut out the photography part by simply taking screenshots from the video chat. Although they may have looked acceptable on a phone, when enlarged on a regular screen, these images were too blurry to



**Figure 3.** *Tiffany Lyday works from her in-laws’ backyard, where she conducts counseling meetings on Zoom with students from nine different charter schools in Houston, Texas. She has to do her work remotely because she works with so many schools in her district that she is a risk to student health if she were to go between schools. Remote portrait by Alayne Trinko in Illinois. This image is an example of how one student used her remote portraits skills as part of her final project for the class.*

be used for publication. There are many reasons for this, from camera phone quality to the speed of one’s internet connection (Todras-Whitehill, 2021). In the future, this issue must be made explicitly clear to students: that images extracted from video are generally not high enough quality for the assignment. They must use the smartphone camera or a camera app. Students should also be reminded to try both horizontal and vertical shots when using a smartphone.

Privacy and security could potentially be an issue going forward. Giving an app access to your smartphone camera requires a good deal of trust. Many popular apps, including some mentioned in this article, were created in Russia and China. These apps should be monitored to make sure that privacy and data are safeguarded.

### Conclusion

By requiring students to use their phones, this assignment bypassed the disparities in camera equipment caused by COVID-related campus closures. It also gave students an opportunity to get to know each other by interviewing each other and going through the process of taking portraits. Most importantly, it allowed the students to produce meaningful storytelling visuals without putting themselves or their subjects at risk of catching or spreading a dead-

ly virus. Instead of focusing on first-person stories during lockdown, remote portraiture opens the door to continue covering communities in a safe manner. There are additional reasons to use remote portraiture aside from the pandemic. They allow the photographer and subject to connect regardless of schedule or geographical distance. There may also be times where the subject's location needs to remain unknown, such as for security reasons (Todras-Whitehill, 2021). Although it can't and shouldn't replace in-person portraiture, remote portraits will remain a useful tool for photojournalists going forward.

### Appendix A:

#### Remote Portrait Assignment Instructions

For this assignment you will submit 3-5 environmental portraits of a classmate that you will direct remotely. First, spend some time to get to your classmate and figure out what story you want to tell. Think about what you want to show about that person. Then, using Facetime or video chat, have your subject give you a tour of their living space, inside or outside. Look for things that might give clues about their personality or story. Use everything you learned about light and composition. Look for leading lines, ways to frame a subject, or places to shoot from below or above. Think about backgrounds and foregrounds. Look for art on the walls, bookshelves, musical instruments, or other props or clothing that you might use. Pay attention to lighting, either natural or artificial. You may want to use your laptop to help set up the shot, and then have the person take the photo with their phones from the same angle as the computer, as Annie Tritt described.

Think about creative ways to prop up your phone. Use whatever is available. To release the shutter, you may have the subject use the camera phone timer. You may also set up a series of timed shots using the PhotoTimer+ app. Another option is to use the CLOS app, which will allow you to control your subjects' camera phone, though you will both need an iPhone to do this. When the photos have been taken, have the subject share the images with you via text, e-mail or the cloud. If you need to make corrections, have them change the shot so it matches your vision. Continue this process until you are satisfied with the image. Try several different setups.

To submit your assignment (on Slack):

- Submit the 3-5 images of your classmate.

- Write a full caption for each image. (Remember the rules for caption-writing!)
- Then, in a paragraph or two, write your reflection on the assignment. What were you trying to do? Did it work? What was the process like to take someone's portrait remotely? What was it like to have your portrait taken? What might you do differently next time? Overall, what did you learn?
- Make sure to review the work of your classmates. Give constructive feedback and ask questions.

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*Robin Hoecker is an Assistant Professor of Journalism at DePaul University where she teaches mostly photojournalism-related courses. She earned a Ph.D. in Communication from Northwestern University and an M.A. in photojournalism from the University of Missouri-Columbia. Before entering academia, Hoecker worked as a multimedia editor at the Stars and Stripes military newspaper in Darmstadt, Germany, and Washington, D.C.*

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