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Using Metadata as a Weapon Against AI Fakes

How a routine step in image editing can protect your work and identify slop

6 min read · 5 days ago

👤 Jeff Hayward 🛡   Follow

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Image created using Midjourney AI

When it comes to identifying AI images, there are still some tells. For example, generated images sometimes contain words that make no sense when you look closely. However, while signs of AI can easily be missed, there's another simple way to ensure your photograph or artwork isn't mistaken for artificial.

And perhaps, more importantly, so you can identify whether the picture you're seeing on social media is real or not.

It's not a new fancy tool that you have to learn. This step in identifying pictures and writing was around long before digital editing tools such as Photoshop. However, many people skip this step.

Meta can make a mega difference

It's *metadata*.

You have likely heard of it, but have written it off as unnecessary or tedious. However, when it comes to proving your photo/art is real — and protecting your copyright, which doesn't apply to pictures made with AI — you'll want to pay attention.

Metadata is basically information about data. You won't necessarily see this information unless you're looking for it, but it isn't difficult to find. For example, on a Mac, you can right-click any image and see the metadata details in "Get Info." The same can be done with "properties" on a Windows computer. Editing software can see it all.

Photographers can automatically add ownership information to images as they are taken using in-camera tools. Many models allow you to input copyright info that will be embedded into each click. I can do this with my Canon 6D, which was introduced to the market in 2012. The point is, you don't need a top-of-the-line model.

While you're at it, make sure the date is set properly in your camera. This information is easily viewable via the computer's operating system (or editing tools), and can help determine when a photo was taken, or when the file was created. This could be handy when writing a memoir or making an insurance claim.

Even if your camera doesn't allow you to enter copyright metadata, you can quite easily add it during editing with Photoshop and other editing tools. Here's a photo of

one of my favourite pizza joints that was recently demolished to make way for a transit station:

You can see that the description of the image is blank. That's because I used a film camera to shoot this building, and as expected, analog cameras cannot add digital info to a file. Type in your details, and re-save the file.

The same can be done with Adobe Lightroom, which can batch-add metadata to photos when you select multiple images. In Lightroom Classic, you can edit the metadata by opening the tab in the bottom-right corner of the screen, adding the info, and saving the changes. The same can be done to tag your imported/scanned artworks.

Here's a more detailed guide to editing metadata in LR.

What's yours should remain yours

But what about when you upload your photos to social media? Many people treat uploaded images as public domain, re-posting without credit.

It's commonly believed that Facebook, a big source of generated images, scrubs photo metadata upon posting. I decided to do a quick test to see if this is true. For

this, I used an unedited image scanned from film, exported as a JPEG from Lightroom with basic metadata.

After posting the photo on my Facebook timeline, I immediately downloaded a copy to my desktop from the social media platform. When I plug my uploaded photo from social media into Photoshop, I can see the basic details inputted are intact. (I can't say the same for LinkedIn, which scrubbed my name from the data.)

If my photo is being shared on Facebook, at least there's still some evidence that it's mine in the copyright fields.

However, the EXIF data including the type of camera, shutter speed, aperture (f-stop value), and other technical details in the original image from a digital camera appear to be removed from the Facebook version.

In other words, if I hadn't added (or automatically embedded) copyright info in my photo, it would be more difficult to prove my image is mine — and was created by a human using a camera, and not a keyboard.

There's typically no metadata in a generated image, at least when using Midjourney. However, MJ adds the prompt used to generate the image to the filename, although that filename will change when uploading to social media.

Descriptive text as another layer of security

On top of adding any copyright data, usage rights, and other relevant notes to metadata, pay attention to alt text. This is different from copyright/EXIF data in that it describes an image rather than listing technical details.

Alt text helps people find images online by typing a brief description of what they're looking for into a search engine. For example, you could label the following photo like this:

Photo from Canada Day in 1907. Author found photo in antique dresser.

"Sepia-toned photo of two horses pulling a wagon with a group of people in vintage clothing posing beside it. There is an early version of the Red Ensign Union Jack flag in foreground and background" or something like that.

You may have the option to add alt text to images on certain writing platforms or website builders. LinkedIn provides a tutorial on how to create alt text for images, which can be legally required under regional accessibility rules.

The search engine will use this data to pull up your photo and others in search results, which can drive more traffic to your blog posts/website connected to the image.

You can also add all of this information to AI-generated images to help people identify it correctly. That includes disclosing if the image is AI-generated, and by which platform. Doing so will help mitigate the mess online, where millions of fake images are added each day.

Here's a sample of what I mean, which you can enter in the metadata description and the alt text fields:

A small weapon against an infinite army

Metadata (including descriptive alt text) will not solve the problem of stopping AI slop from flooding the web. But it can help to protect your own work, while identifying the source of other images.

While some people may get fooled by fake pictures, you can view their metadata to combat misinformation — one of the biggest threats that we're all facing today.

Make sure you're adding copyright data and descriptive text wherever you can. It's a small thing, but we're going to need all the help we can get to sort out what's real.

AI   Tutorials   Copyright   Generated   Metadata

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Written by Jeff Hayward

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Bgerby

What are your thoughts?

A.M. Pierson
4 days ago

> If my photo is being shared on Facebook, at least there's still some evidence that it's mine in the copyright fields.

Facebook wouldn't allow any of my photos that had digital watermarks or personal ID metadata to post.

👏 36   💬 2 replies   Reply

A. J. Wyzinski
5 days ago

Nice tips. Filling out metadata is always great idea. You can help your work get properly automatically classified / indexed as well using your method.

I just assume everything on social media is fake or misleading (or both). Metadata won't stop... more

👏 28   Reply

John Green
4 days ago

With all this information being added after the fact, we need to be aware of nefarious use when images are being generated to discredit people/things. Yes, what you suggest can help us discern fake from real. Yet we need to be on the alert against... more

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