

Photo-Journalism Ethics in the Digital Age

The transition from traditional to digital photography has brought new ethical challenges to photo-journalists. The widespread availability of image manipulation technology poses difficult questions for photo-journalists and those who depend on them to document events. Widely publicised photo tampering scandals have dented public confidence in the profession and so a number strategies have been proposed for grappling with the ethical issues surrounding image manipulation. However, the challenges posed by the new technologies are complex, and their analysis, rather than yielding simple solutions, demands a closer examination of society's relationship with the printed image.

Digital photography and traditional film-based photography are very different. When light passes through a camera and falls onto film it has an effect on chemicals on the film. When the film is processed it produces a negative image of the scene that was photographed. When this negative is printed, light passes through the negative onto paper that is sensitive to light. This paper is developed to reproduce the photographed scene. Many copies of the scene can be printed from the same negative. Digital photography is very different. Light passes through the optics of the camera like in a film camera, but instead of falling onto film it falls onto an array of sensors. A charge is built up in each sensor depending on the intensity of the light. To generate an image the charge from each sensor is recorded as a number. The image is stored as a grid of picture elements or *pixels*. These pixels form a mosaic of tiny rectangles that, when viewed from a distance, reproduce the photographed scene. Since the color of each pixel can easily be represented by a number, copying the numbers is all that is required to make a perfect copy of the image. Digital photography differs from film-based photography in two fundamental ways. With digital photography there is no original negative that can be used as a reference. More problematically, the pixels that make up a digital image can be easily changed. Just like the tiles in a mosaic can be removed and replaced with those of a different colour, so too, portions of a digital image can be seamlessly removed or altered.

The ease with which digital images can be changed has caused concern in professions where the accuracy of images is important. Journalism has been particularly troubled by the issue and there have been a number of widely publicized cases where photographs have been manipulated. In June 1994 Time Magazine altered a police mug-shot of O.J. Simpson to make him appear darker and unshaven, before using the image on the magazine's cover. These changes were very obvious when Newsweek used the same image, unaltered, on its cover. The February 1982 issue of National Geographic Magazine used digital imaging techniques to move a pyramid in a landscape shot so that it would fit more neatly into the magazine's distinctive yellow box format. The photographer complained and the magazine was forced to publish an apology. In 1996 the Evening Standard in the UK digitally removed a beer bottle from a photograph of John Prescott and his wife. Another beer bottle was cropped so that only the top was visible. This in itself might have been trivial had the photograph not been accompanied by the caption "Champagne Socialist". Mike Holdeness of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) believes this to be first party-political abuse of photo-manipulation in the UK[1].

On the 31st of March 2003 the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* carried a photograph by Brian Walski of a British soldier at the Azubayr Bridge directing refugees fleeing Basra to take cover from Iraqi gunfire. It was an impressive image. However it is, in fact, a composite of two images that had been taken moments apart. No one at the *L.A. Times* noticed, but an employee of another newspaper observed some duplication in the image and suspected something was amiss. A few days later the *L.A. Times* staff photographer was fired

The ethical problems surround image editing are not just a problem for journalists. Seeing is believing for millions of people in the world and so image editing presents a problem for society in general. Most readers assess the credibility of what they read based on their opinion of the source. This is especially true in countries like France and Italy, for example, where newspapers wear their political allegiances on their sleeves. Even in cultures where newspapers are traditionally objective, most readers still accept that you cannot always believe what you read and that the author may have a particular bias or agenda. However, the most skeptical of readers is inclined to believe her own eyes when shown a photograph of an event. The belief that *the camera never lies* is widely held and readers are more likely to believe a picture than a written account.

The problems with image manipulation in photo-journalism are even more complex when we consider photographs as historical records. The Vietnam war was perhaps photo-journalism's finest hour. Americans saw daily, in still and moving images, that the war was not being conducted as the government said it was. The extent and nature of the civilian losses were well documented by photo-journalists who were largely free to report the war as they saw it. On the 4th of May 1970, as students protested the expansion of the war into Cambodia, the Ohio National Guard shot dead four students at Kent State University. The killings marked a turning point in US history and a photograph taken by John Filo of Mary Vecchio as she knelt over the bleeding body of Jeffrey Miller ultimately became one of the most important photographs of the era. In May 1995 Life magazine reprinted image and someone noticed that it had been altered so that a distracting post appearing above the head of Mary Vecchio was removed. There was a flurry of speculation on the internet that Life magazine had altered the image to improve the composition and in response the Director of Photography at Life magazine investigated the matter. He later explained to the Nation Press Photographer's Association mailing list (June 2nd) that "LIFE did not and does not manipulate news photos". He explained the photograph had been taken from the Time-Life Picture Collection and had been modified by someone, now anonymous, in the early 1970s. He also pointed out that the altered image was reprinted in many publications in the intervening years, including Time (1972, 1980) and People (1977, 1990).

The manipulation of Filo's Kent State raises several important issues. If an image of such historical importance could be so easily altered, then there is clearly no protocol in place that protects the integrity of images taken by photo-journalists. Secondly, the altered image, once introduced to the image library, was accepted as authoritative and reproduced again and again without to reference to the original. While it is certainly the

case that the absence or presence of a wooden post on that day in no way altered the course of history nor harms our understanding today of that history, it does illustrate how just how vulnerable our historical records are. If a decision made by one anonymous darkroom technician can potentially alter the historical record of an event, then the value of photo-journalism to history can be in doubt. Had the same darkroom technician added a rifle to the ground near the body of the dying student, he could have changed history. Fortunately the original image captured on negative that day was available and so this possibility was precluded. However this is not the case with digital photography. Although digital technology makes it possible to take an original image and make perfect copies, it offers little to distinguish the original from any imperfect copies. In the digital world there is no original. This makes the consequences of image alteration all the more serious.

Concerns about ethical standards in photojournalism, albeit primarily in the U.S; have led to a great deal of discussion about what kinds of image manipulation are acceptable in journalism and how far is too far. Codes of practice had been devised and a number of solutions proposed. These ethical standards vary in the extent to which they allow journalists to make judgement calls. One pragmatic suggestion is that it is acceptable to alter images provided that readers are told about it. Many codes of practice suggest the label of “photo-illustration”. Some commentators have proposed elaborate systems of icons that should accompany altered images. In 1996 the NUJ launched an unsuccessful campaign to require that every digitally manipulated photograph used in a newspaper or magazine, be marked by a symbol within the image. While captioning is helpful, however, it is really just a way of avoiding the ethical issues altogether. In many cases a fake image may have already biased a reader’s interpretation of the facts. Pointing out underneath a photograph of a knife-wielding maniac, that the photo is not real, may be as helpful as a tiny page 12 retraction of a front page headline lie.

The American Society of Media Photographers’ code of practice requires members to “photograph as honestly as possible, provide accurate captions, and never intentionally distort the truth in news photography. Never alter the content or meaning of a news photograph and prohibit subsequent alteration.” This and similar codes, however, do not provide any objective measures of what is acceptable. The editor of National Geographic argued in his defense that the effect of the change was the same as if the photographer moved over a few feet. The question of what is honest or acceptable is debatable. Neither the altered Kent State image nor the Azubayr Bridge photographs distorted truth. Nor did they change the meaning of the original photographs in any way. Codes of practice that identify the ethical issues, but do not provide specifics, leave journalists unclear as to what is acceptable practice, and provide them with little protection when they are deemed to have crossed the line.

Some manipulation of images is necessary. Images photographed in color may need to be printed in black and white. In applying the transformation from color to monochrome, the brightness and contrast might be altered. The lighting conditions at the time the

photograph was taken may not have been ideal and so darker areas of the image may require *dodging* to reveal detail. Excessively bright areas may need to be *burned in*. Images may need to be cropped to fit narrow newspaper columns. Areas of distracting background may need to be de-emphasized.

It may be difficult to know where to draw the line. Suppose Séan Óg Ó hAlpín were to send a sliotar moving so fast that a photographer was unable to capture the athlete and ball in the same image. Would it be wrong for the unfortunate photographer to fake a single image that included them both? Clearly such an image would present no threat to democracy, historical accuracy, journalistic integrity, nor to society in general. But suppose the photographer, while covering an event, was not quick enough to capture a petrol bomb as it left the hand of a rioter. Would it be ethical to add the weapon to the image later? Such an alteration is, in many respects, the same. Yet somehow it is not so simple. Would it be acceptable to add a petrol bomb thrown by one protester to the photograph of different rioter who was doing likewise? None of these would change images would distort the truth nor change the meaning of the news. Would it be acceptable to make a petrol bomb appear to fly from the hand of a more photogenic rioter whom the photographer didn't actually see throwing one? What if the photographer witnessed only stones being thrown and later learned from the state controlled news agency that petrol bombs were involved? Would it be ethical to alter an image to reflect the unwitnessed 'truth' of the events? Some argue that once the Pandora's box of image editing is opened it is difficult to know when to stop.

In an attempt to keep a lid on the problem some prescriptive codes of practice attempt to guide journalists by limiting the kinds of transformations photographers can make to images. The hope is that by providing practitioners with a limited palette of ethically sound modifications, problems can be avoided. Some have proposed that editing in digital darkrooms be restricted to only those processes that were possible in the past in the wet darkroom. So technical modifications required by the production process should be allowed, but nothing else. Conversion from color to black & white would be acceptable. Cropping, improving contrast for print, and darkroom techniques such as burning-in and dodging would be allowed. On 26 February 1998 the NUJ altered its code of conduct and added that "No journalist shall knowingly cause or allow the publication or broadcast of a photograph that has been manipulated unless that photograph is clearly labeled as such. Manipulation does not include normal dodging, burning, colour balancing, spotting, contrast adjustment, cropping and obvious masking for legal or safety reasons." The U.S. Department of Defense issued very clear guidelines "to guard against the potentially dangerous effects such manipulation can have on military leaders who use digital images to make decisions". These guidelines provided a list of manipulations that were acceptable. These included "dodging, burning, color balancing, spotting and contrast adjustment to achieve accurate recording of an event or object. Cropping, editing or enlarging to isolate, link or display part of a photograph." [2] Practical proposals like these, that specify acceptable changes, are useful because they do not rely on any ideological, moral, nor subjective judgments. But such schemes are rooted in the notion

that anything that had been done hitherto in a conventional darkroom was ethically sound and it is the new technology that presents the problem. This is somewhat simplistic.

The most extreme solution to the problem put forward is that all news photographers be equipped with a standard issue camera and film, and their photographs printed in full without editing. But this proposal is as naïve as it is extreme.

The main problem with codes of conduct for photographers, both subjective or prescriptive, is that they depend on and perpetuate two great myths.

The first is the myth of objectivity. When photography replaced illustration in newspapers as the primary means of visually representing the news, the public was startled by the accuracy and clarity of what it saw. Because machinery was involved, photographs were believed to be objective and impartial. No human hand was visible in the production process and so photographs became paragons of truth. At the turn of the 19th Century King Leopold of Belgium was able to dismiss reports of mistreatment by troops of the native population in the Congo. During this period, however, cameras became widely available and he could not argue with the many photographs that came out of the region. Photography was widely credited with bringing an end to the abuses. Mark Twain said in a 1905 interview "Thank God for the camera, for the testimony of the light itself, which no mere man can contradict. The light has been let in upon the Congo, and not all the outcries of Leopold can counteract its record of the truth" [3]. The value of photographs as proof is still appreciated a century later. In 2005 the peace process in Northern Ireland was stalled for a time over the issue of photographic evidence of IRA disarmament.

But photography is not objective. It is the selective rendering of a single instant in time of a subset of the photographer's experience. The viewer is not informed what took place before or after that instant, nor what took place elsewhere at that time. As John Filo said in a CNN chat-room "A photo is never objective. ... It is the nature of freezing a moment. Simple example: you hit me, no one takes a picture. I hit you and someone takes a picture. Who is the villain in the picture? If you look at most photography ... they are not objective at all. ... the moment someone decides to release the shutter, it is an editorial statement." [4] The photographer chooses what to photograph, and the angle of the shot. She chooses the camera, the film, and frames the shot to include or exclude various elements. Long before a photograph leaves the camera it is a construct, imbued with all of the intent, bias, culture, and subjectivity of the photographer.

Another myth about image manipulation is that it is new. The possibilities afforded by digital technologies have only compounded the problems surrounding image manipulation, but these problems have existed for some time. The Kent State image was, after all, modified in a conventional darkroom long before the advent of digital techniques. There are many examples of photographs from the Soviet Union that were painstakingly altered in the darkroom. In Stalin's time many people, Trotsky in particular, were quite literally airbrushed from history.

The recent widespread deployment of digital imaging technology does not spell the end of objective credible news reporting. It does, however, alter the landscape and the context in which consumers of news will view images has changed. As consumers learn to quickly edit and modify their own photographs, they will grow less confident in the veracity of those presented to them by others. In a world where seeing is no longer believing news organizations will have to actively defend their reputations. This is why the *L.A. Times*' rebuke of Walski was so swift and so severe. If a news organization appears to abuse the public's trust it will become less credible.

In the final analysis the issues facing photo-journalists and picture editors are no different than those that other journalists and editors have grappled with for years. Credibility is the main asset of any news organization. Once compromised this can be difficult to maintain, and once lost it is impossible to restore. It may already be too late. There is already a large and growing community that refuses to believe that the moon landings actually took place. As the public becomes more aware of the possibilities for photographic fraud Mark Twain's 'testimony of the light itself' may not be enough.

Fortunately the technological changes that challenge image integrity also provide opportunities. In King Leopold's Congo at the turn of the 20th Century, it was not major news organisations that gathered evidence of his conduct, but ordinary people. Missionaries and traders took photographs with common run-of-the-mill cameras. Of course newspapers were needed to publish them. Recent advances in internet technologies make it possible at the turn of the 21st Century for ordinary people with common run-of-the-mill cameras to publish their own photographs, and these cameras are everywhere.

The London bombings of 2005 were probably the first news story for which first-hand eye-witness accounts posted directly to the internet competed with coverage from large news organisations. The high market penetration of camera phones and digital cameras in the developed world means that hours or even minutes after an event there may be hundreds of images circulating on the internet. The BBC received 50 pictures from 'citizen journalists' within an hour of the first explosion. Two mobile phone sequences were used on the Ten-O'clock news. The most engaging footage was video shot on a camera phone as passengers evacuated a train in smoke filled tunnel. Many commentators believe these events marked a shift in the way news is gathered.

In the age of widespread image manipulation technology the trustworthiness of no one image can be guaranteed. This has consequences for photo-journalism and, indeed, for society. However the widespread deployment of camera phones and digital cameras means that for some events there may be thousands of images from hundreds of sources. In such an environment, the scope for distorting the truth is limited and the truth will out, eventually. While the supplanting of respected media sources, like the BBC, by subjective anonymous sources may be troubling, there is some safety in numbers. Society may have to settle for quantity over quality, and in the absence any authoritative voice, it

may have to settle for a thousand dubious voices. Perhaps it is only from the chorus of all those voices that we can distill the, ever illusive, truth.

[1] Mike Holderness, <http://media.gn.apc.org/9605mani.html>

[2] Patrick A Swan, *Military Review*, November - December 1995, p81

[3] Mark Twain, *What I Am Thankful For*, *New York World Sunday Magazine* Nov. 26, 1905

[4] John Filo, CNN chat room, 4 may 2000
<http://www.cnn.com/COMMUNITY/transcripts/2000/5/4/filo/>