

photojournalism, technology and ethics

WHAT'S RIGHT AND WRONG TODAY?

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Black Star

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1

“OUR PICTURES MUST ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH”

There’s an old saying that there are no atheists in foxholes. When threatened or under fire, people inevitably cling to something certain to guide them through uncertain times. In life and death situations, this something is often a Bible.

Today, the profession of photojournalism as we know it is threatened by technological transformation, by the rise of video, by fragmentation of the media. It’s under fire from a suspicious public—watchdog bloggers, cable and radio pundits, and other critics who question the profession’s credibility and authority to bring us an accurate picture of the world.

For photojournalists, it would be a great time to have a Bible—in the form of a uniform, enforceable code of ethics—handy.

Unfortunately, photojournalists have no such thing. There is no established set of rules to see news photographers through this storm.

While ethical decisions have long played a central role in the business of newsgathering, journalists have never been governed by formal ethical standards. This is a key reason that journalism, by definition, is actually not a profession. You can't be disbarred or lose your license as a journalist.

However, as with the incremental emergence of the English common law, journalists have gravitated over time to a handful of general ethical principles that are widely recognized. In the United States, these principles are designed to enhance journalism's authority by ensuring that reporting is accurate, comprehensive and independent.

For print photojournalists, these principles can be summarized in two basic axioms that have guided their work for decades:

While ethical decisions have long played a central role in the business of newsgathering, journalists have never been governed by formal ethical standards. This is a key reason that journalism, by definition, is actually not a profession. You can't be disbarred or lose your license as a journalist.

1 Altering photographs is unethical. Ethical photojournalists do not alter photographs beyond what is necessary to optimize the technical quality of the image. As the Associated Press states in its photo editing policy,

Electronic imaging raises new questions . . . but the answers all come from old values . . . Only the established norms of standard photo printing methods such as burning, dodging, toning and cropping are acceptable. Retouching is limited to removal of normal scratches and dust spots . . . Color adjustment should always be minimal.

2 Staging photographs is unethical. Ethical photojournalists do not stage, recreate or alter a scene for a news photograph. As the Tampa Tribune's policy states,

We don't stage, re-enact or recreate news events for photos. Personality portraits and studio illustrations shouldn't create an artificial sense of spontaneity . . . Removing or adding an object in an editorial photograph is not permitted.

The rhetorical justifications for these axioms center on public service. Rather than simply selling newspapers or attracting TV ratings, journalists have a higher calling—to provide their audiences with the knowledge required to be informed contributors to a democracy. And this can only happen when the public believes in the newspaper's authority.

Beyond this consideration, credibility is essential to mainstream news organizations from a business standpoint. If audiences don't believe they can trust what they're reading—and seeing—it's the equivalent of a broken product. And consumers don't buy broken products for very long.

As the New York Times explains in its "Guidelines on Our Integrity":

Reporters, editors, photographers and all members of the news staff of the New York Times share a common and essential interest in protecting the integrity of the newspaper . . . Our greatest strength is the authority and reputation of the Times. We must do nothing that would undermine or dilute it and everything possible to enhance it.

The statement goes on to issue this specific mandate to Times photographers: "Images in our pages that purport to depict reality must be genuine in every way."

The Washington Post expresses its photographers' mission in similarly absolute terms: "Photography has come to be trusted as a virtual record of an event. We must never betray that trust."

And the Associated Press puts it this way: "Our pictures must always tell the truth."

But what happens when technology makes altering images infinitely easier to achieve—and far harder to detect? What happens when television videographers, who have never subscribed to strict newspaper guidelines on staging shots, come to the fore at journalistic organizations like the National Press Photographers Association? What happens when influential segments of the public lose faith in time-worn concepts like journalistic objectivity—and when every new manipulated and staged image seems to strengthen their case?

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That's when cracks start to surface in the monolith of photographic "truth." When the rulebook's pages begin to look gray rather than black and white. And when the ground beneath news photographers starts to feel like a slippery slope rather than solid rock.

Howard Chapnick, leader of the Black Star photographic agency for more than 25 years before his death in 1996, said the following of photojournalistic ethics:

Credibility. Responsibility. These words give us the right to call photography a profession rather than a business. Not maintaining that credibility will diminish our journalistic impact and self-respect, and the importance of photography as communication.

What implications do today's technological upheaval, rapidly changing media landscape, and other changes have for the future of photojournalism as a credible source of visual information? What actions can photographers, editors and publishers take to ensure photojournalism's authority with audiences, now and in the years ahead?

We examine these questions through the prism of photojournalism's past, present and future.

2

THE GOLDEN AGE OF PHOTOJOURNALISM

“PRE-ETHICS” PHOTOJOURNALISM: THE EARLY YEARS

The manipulation and staging of news photographs has not always been a question of ethics. In the early days of photojournalism, it was often a question of technological limitations. Photojournalism as we know it today—candid, “life as it is” photography—was difficult if not impossible to achieve before the emergence of innovations like the flash bulb, electronic flash and Leica camera in the 1920s and 30s.

Beyond the technology, explains Dennis Dunleavy—associate professor of communications at Southern Oregon University and author of The Big Picture blog—the concept of manipulation, in all its forms, had been inherent to

photography from its beginnings. “Historically, photography has always been about manipulation,” Dunleavy says. “Even the smile is a form of manipulation, because it may mask the true feelings of the subject.”

The New York Times began publishing photos in 1896, and by the early 20th century newspapers across the country were adding photos to their pages. Generally these were posed or staged photographs—often trumpeted as the “world’s first” photograph of various events, locations or phenomena. While more candid shots were sought after by the public—the 1898 paparazzi shots of German Chancellor Bismarck on his deathbed created a sensation—they appeared rarely.

Lacking the technology necessary to create the kind of compelling images the public craved, some newspaper editors got creative. Bernarr MacFadden, publisher of the New York Graphic,

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the New York City tabloid that launched the careers of Walter Winchell and Ed Sullivan, invented a photographic process that resulted in the “composograph.” Composographs, as described by Bob Stejno, were “startling front page images created in the art department by cutting and pasting the faces of celebrities onto the bodies of often scantily-clad models posed to illustrate some real-life scene where a camera simply couldn’t go (especially with the flash powder cameramen used in those days).”

MacFadden’s first composograph appeared in 1925, during the infamous divorce trial of Alice Rhineland, in which the woman’s attorney had her strip to the waist in front of the court (to demonstrate that her white husband should have known she was African-American when they wed). As Ken Kobre writes of the creation in his textbook, *Photojournalism: The Professionals’ Approach*,

Harry Grogin, The Graphic’s assistant art director . . . began tearing up photographs of Alice, of the judge, of opposing counsel, of the stolid Rhineland, of Alice’s mother, of Rhineland’s lordly father. Then he put them through a process by which they would come out in proper

proportion. Meanwhile, Grogin sent for an actress whom he posed as he imagined Alice Rhineland would have stood before the lawyers and the judge. For the photo, the art director had the actress wear as little as possible.

Grogin used twenty separate photos to arrive at the one famous shot, but for the Graphic, it was well worth the effort. The picture was believable. You feel you are looking in on the judge's chambers. With the birth of The Graphic composograph, The Graphic's circulation rose from 60,000 to several hundred thousand after that issue.

Kobre says that while industry publications like Editor and Publisher blasted the “shocking news-picture,” the criticism was reserved for the offense of putting a nearly nude woman on the newspaper’s front page—not for the photographic manipulation itself.

Toward a Golden Age

Early in first decades of the 20th century, a movement emerged to professionalize newspapers to enhance their authority and

credibility with the public. Part of this movement was promotion of the doctrine of objectivity, and the ideal that journalists could be depended on to be independent observers, delivering “just the facts.”

This became orthodoxy by the 1930s—about the same time that technological innovations made possible a more candid, spontaneous brand of photojournalism. The combination of new journalistic standards and the technology necessary to achieve them visually gave birth to an era commonly known as the “golden age of photojournalism,” from the 1930s to the 1950s.

This is where Life Magazine—as well as the Black Star photographic agency—enter our story. Before Life began publishing in 1936, newspapers had dominated the creation and dissemination of photojournalism in the United States. Photography was seen as subordinate to text, designed to support and illustrate the work of the writers.

Life turned this formula on its head, bringing a new style of photojournalism from Weimar-era Germany that demonstrated how images could tell stories in ways that words simply couldn't. In these pictures, as described in the book *Black Star: 60 Years of Photojournalism*,

People—prominent figures as well as the unknown flower seller—appeared in photographs of the time as both natural and spontaneous. The photographers staged nothing and gave the subjects of their curiosity no chance of posing . . . Those who saw the photographs thought they were actually present.

German photojournalism came to the United States with the help of Jewish émigrés fleeing the Nazi regime. Three of these émigrés founded the Black Star photographic agency, which brought Life some of its most famous photographers, including Robert Capa. Life was the country's first all-photography news magazine and would dominate the periodical market from its introduction through the 1960s.

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The most famous single image of the war, in fact, was embroiled in a controversy that would hardly have been imaginable two decades earlier. Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal's photograph of the flag-raising at Iwo Jima was an immediate sensation—appearing on the front pages of Sunday newspapers nationwide on Feb. 25, 1945.

Soon after, however, a Time-Life correspondent accused Rosenthal of staging the photo, and Time Magazine's radio show reported that Rosenthal arrived too late for the shot and "could not resist reposing his characters in historic fashion." Time later retracted the story but public doubt lingered for decades.

As Daniel Bersak points out in "Ethics in Photojournalism: Past, Present and Future," his MIT masters thesis, the public likely would not have cared whether or not Rosenthal's photo were staged in the 1920s. "In decades previous, there would have been no ethical problem either way—had Rosenthal posed the picture or had he not, nobody would have protested," Bersak writes.

Now that photojournalism had emerged as such an important force in news reporting, however, the question provoked a major ethical controversy. The year after Rosenthal's photo, the

National Press Photographers Association was formed; today, it remains the most influential arbiter on ethical issues in photojournalism.

Yet, while photojournalists were held to new and higher ethical standards during the golden age, the great photographers of the time still engaged in practices that today might be frowned upon as manipulation. And in telling stories with images, some photographers presented a strong point of view on their subject matter that today might be considered “slanted” or lacking objectivity.

“It is only since the advent of Photoshop that we have had this fundamentalist attitude about changing photographs,” says longtime Black Star photographer Michael Coyne. He explains:

Before Photoshop, it was considered OK to change the images in the darkroom—burn, dodge, crop, print excessively dark to give a different mood. or sandwich two negatives for a double exposure. We don’t have to look any further than the great photography legend W. Eugene Smith to see all of these tools being applied.

Brian Ledbetter, author of the photojournalism criticism blog Snapped Shot, points out that when photographer Robert Capa rushed to cover the Spanish Civil War, objectivity was not one of his aims. Says Brian:

According to [Capa biographer] Richard Whelan, Capa and his girlfriend were 'eager to use their cameras to win worldwide support for the Spanish Republic and the anti-fascist cause.' This doesn't exactly lend itself to an impartial reporting of events, even though it does result in passionate, award-winning photography.

The golden age of photojournalism would be short-lived. David Weintraub, photography instructor at the University of South Carolina, mourns the era's end and wonders what the impact of photographers like Capa, Smith and others might have been had they lived in our present day:

How the photographers working during the Depression, World War II, and the 1950s would have visually interpreted global climate change or the war in Iraq is anybody's guess. Compared to our current day, there were probably

far fewer photographic images in circulation, but I wonder if those that were seen by the public—especially in magazines such as Life and Look—mattered more than the piles we blithely wade through each day.

Ultimately, however, the golden age ended not because of a lack of talented photographers—but because of technologies that spawned a new media universe.

Fragmentation, Disintermediation and the Public Trust

Starting in the 1950s, the audience that once turned primarily to print photographers for visual journalism began to fragment—first with the emergence of television news and then, four decades later, with the Internet.

Television killed Life magazine (which began to lose circulation in the late 1950s before its eventual demise), and mortally wounded newspapers. The percentage of Americans reading the paper has been in decline since the '50s, although tremendous population growth masked the problem for many years. Only in 1990 did absolute circulation figures drop for the first time; they've been in freefall ever since.

Fragmentation of the media began in earnest with the emergence of cable television in the 1970s, which pulled audience away from the broadcast networks. In the news business, the launch of CNN in 1980, followed by numerous other cable channels offering news, has led to a decline in ratings, influence, and budgets for the once-dominant broadcast news organizations.

As the media universe has splintered, an increasing number of media outlets—first in radio, then in cable news and on the Internet—have evolved from news reporting to news interpretation. A central element of the interpretive approach has been politically-charged media criticism—commentators and analysts weighing in on the limitations, biases, and missteps of so-called “mainstream media,” generally meaning those traditional print and television outlets striving for an objective approach to the news.

Nearly every week, it seems, the images of professional photojournalists are being put under the magnifying glass, as bloggers and others look for evidence of staging, doctoring, or other forms of manipulation.

Further distancing audiences from traditional media is the disintermediation enabled by the Internet, particularly in the era of social networking. The media, even in all its fragments, is no longer the all-powerful filter it once was. Today, corporations are writing their press releases as much for their customers—who can find them freely on the Web—as for the press itself. And citizen journalists are publishing their own accounts of the events they witness—including photography of these events. The media is increasingly seen as a flawed middleman in the dissemination of information, rather than an indispensable clarion of truth.

Distrust of mainstream media has become so ubiquitous that it now even comes from pundits within the very media organizations they vilify. The ideal of objectivity is increasingly viewed by the public as a false standard masking a hidden agenda. A poll conducted by Sacred Heart University earlier this year showed that fewer than 20 percent of Americans believe most of what they see in the news—down from 27 percent five years ago.

This crisis of confidence has taken its toll on news organizations—and on the photojournalists who work for them, whose work is under scrutiny as never before. Nearly every week, it seems, the images of professional photojournalists are being

put under the magnifying glass, as bloggers and others look for evidence of staging, doctoring, or other forms of manipulation.

Too often, they have found what they are looking for.

As David Perlmutter, professor and associate dean at the University of Kansas School of Journalism & Mass Communications, wrote in 2006 after a photo-doctoring scandal involving Reuters:

In twenty years of researching and teaching about the art and trade and doing photo-documentary work, I have never witnessed or heard of such a wave of attacks on the people who take news pictures and on the basic premise that nonfiction news photo- and videography is possible.

John Long, chairman of the ethics and standards committee of the National Press Photographers Association, describes the crisis this way: “The public is losing faith in us. Without credibility, we have nothing; we cannot survive.”

3

ALTERED PHOTOGRAPHS, STAGED SHOTS AND THE ERA OF DISTRUST

NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW TEMPTATIONS: ALTERING PHOTOGRAPHS

As challenges to photojournalism’s integrity come from the outside, in the form of a skeptical public, they also increasingly coming from within—as the combination of digital photography and Photoshop has made manipulating images easier to achieve and harder to detect.

Even before digital photography came to the fore, however, instances of manipulation had begun capturing the public’s attention. Some of these—as David Weintraub of the University of South Carolina points out—have become the “stuff of legend” in photography circles, including:

... National Geographic moving the Pyramids to fit on its cover (February 1982); Day in the Life of America manipulating a horizontal image to fit vertically on its cover (1985); and Newsday featuring Olympic hopefuls (and bitter rivals) Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding ice-skating together (Feb. 16, 1994)—a day before the joint practice session actually took place.

While these instances provoked intense discussion in the photographic community, they did not create the broader public outrage that more recent instances of manipulation have provoked—spurred by political polarization, blog criticism, and a widening awareness of Photoshop and its capabilities, all of which have served to amplify public skepticism.

In the past two years alone, the photojournalism community has been rocked by scandals that have chipped away at the profession's credibility with audiences—and in some cases, have caused photographers to wonder what's right and wrong today.

These incidents include:

- **The firing of Charlotte Observer photographer Patrick Schneider, July 2006.**

Sensitive to rising concerns over photo manipulation, the North Carolina Press Photographers Association in 2003 rescinded three awards to Schneider for excessive “dodging” (lightening a specific area) and “burning” (darkening a specific area)—standard darkroom practices that had now become common Photoshop techniques.

Schneider was suspended but stood by his work, saying, “I used the tools that for decades have been used in the darkroom and now in Photoshop I do them with more precision. My goal is to bring more impact to my images, to stop the readers and draw their attention.”

Three years later, in July 2006, Schneider was fired after altering the background color of an image of a firefighter. He claimed he was only attempting to recapture the actual color of the sky, lost when he underexposed the photo. Upon discovering

the manipulation, the paper released this statement: “Photographer Patrick Schneider’s photo depicted a Charlotte firefighter on a ladder, silhouetted by the light of the early morning sun. In the original photo, the sky in the photo was brownish-gray. Enhanced with photo-editing software, the sky became a deep red and the sun took on a more distinct halo. The Observer’s photo policy states: No colors will be altered from the original scene photographed.”

■ **The Adnan Hajj/Reuters controversy, August 2006.**

Lebanese freelance photographer Adnan Hajj created an image depicting thick black smoke rising above buildings in Beirut after an Israeli air attack. The Reuters news agency pulled the shot from its Web site after conservative blogger Charles Johnson of Little Green Footballs posted evidence that

the photo had been altered with Photoshop's clone stamp tool to increase and darken the amount of smoke in the image. Soon after, bloggers identified other images by Hajj that appeared to have been altered; to many, Hajj's actions seemed designed to arouse public outcry against Israel.

The photo manipulation set off a firestorm among U.S. political conservatives—first on the blogosphere, then on radio and cable news—because it seemed to validate accusations that the mainstream media advocates “liberal” causes. The controversy spread to images distributed by the Associated Press and other news organizations during the 2006 Lebanon War, encompassing charges of digital manipulation, staging and other ethical offenses. As Wikipedia describes the controversy:

Four types of misleading photojournalism have been alleged as part of the controversy: photo manipulation using computer software, photo staging by press photographers, photo staging by others at the scene, and false or misleading captioning of unstaged photos.

Ultimately, Reuters fired Hajj and a photo editor, the AP disciplined other photographers, and both organizations put new practices in place to protect against future embarrassments.

■ **The “slimming” of Katie Couric, September 2006.**

Giving celebrities “Photoshop makeovers” for magazine covers has become a common practice in the publishing industry—a fact that drew particular attention when the subject was newly named CBS news anchor Katie Couric, and the magazine was the CBS publication *Watch!*

Watch! made both Couric's face and body thinner in its cover image. A CBS spokesman said the photography department had simply gotten overzealous and that such an incident would not recur.

■ **The resignation of Toledo Blade photographer Allan Detrich, April 2007.**

Allan Detrich resigned after admitting he had altered a photo that appeared in the newspaper. An internal investigation showed that Detrick had altered dozens of published images; the Blade said "the changes Mr. Detrich made included erasing people, tree limbs, utility poles, electrical wires, electrical outlets, and other background elements from photographs. In other cases, he added elements such as tree branches and shrubbery."

■ **China's "top 10 photo" fraud, February 2008.**

By early 2008, the issue of Photoshop

manipulation of news images had clearly become an international phenomenon. In February, it was discovered that Chinese photographer Lui Weigiang’s award-winning image of antelopes and a train, poignantly juxtaposing nature and technology, was a composite of two separate photographs. The photo had been named one of the 10 best news images of the year by China state television in 2006.

Of these incidents, the Adnan Hajj/Reuters affair attracted by far the most attention because of its political component. Among its consequences, the affair inspired Brian Ledbetter to start the blog *Snapped Shot*, which acts as a photojournalism watchdog from Ledbetter’s politically conservative perspective. Ledbetter believes there is a steady stream of staged and/or manipulated photos released by the major wire services, including “situations which are either abjectly manipulated by the subjects, set up ahead of time by ‘media coordinators’ (as Hezbollah liked to do), or otherwise not a totally genuine scenario.”

The combined impact of these controversies and others, says Dennis Dunleavy, the Southern Oregon University associate professor, is a loss of public trust that may be impossible to recapture:

It remains difficult if not impossible for the news industry to restore public confidence in its role as the arbiter of the so-called "truth" in a digital age. Trust and credibility reside at the heart of journalistic integrity and I am afraid that we have burned too many bridges in terms of public perception.

Adds the University of South Carolina's Weintraub:

The thread of journalistic credibility is stretched thin with each new revelation of fakery in the newsroom. Remember when journalist Walter Cronkite was the most trusted public person in America? Today, many people cannot even distinguish between journalists and entertainers.

Others counter that the ubiquity of digital photography and Photoshop, which has helped to educate the public about photo manipulation, has forced a new level of transparency by

news organizations that can have a positive impact on journalism's credibility. Author David Perlmutter believes that, by some standards, this is the golden age of photojournalistic ethics. Says Perlmutter:

If you are caught faking a picture today, you are fired. Fifty years ago, it was just part of the business. Now most people have gone to journalism school and learned ethics. Newsrooms are taking these things more seriously. Standards are higher than ever.

However, Heather S. Hughes, a former staff photographer for the Daily Press of Newport News, Va., says that most news organizations are still only concerned about the most egregious offenses—or the ones caught by the public. While news organizations may have updated their ethics policies, most manipulation falls into a gray area, where it usually goes unpunished.

Says Hughes:

In general, news organizations are only addressing the most obvious cases of digital manipulation. It is still not acceptable to add or remove content, but many are still

allowing what I consider gray area manipulation—heavy burning and dodging to create mood in a photo.

Some publications have addressed the issue, but most are allowing it for contest entries and sometimes even for the pages of the newspaper . . . There are a lot of college students and recent grads that have seen the manipulation winning contests, who have no experience in a darkroom, that see no problem with the practice.

Weintraub says the issue of where to draw the line in photo manipulation comes down to two questions posed by author Ken Kobre:

- 1 Who benefits?**
- 2 Would I be comfortable telling the reader/viewer what I've done?**

Weintraub explains:

The “Who benefits?” test simply asks whether the manipulation benefits the reader/viewer—i.e., is it done

to make the communication clearer—or does it benefit the photographer, subject or news organization. In the most famous cases, such as National Geographic moving the Pyramids, the manipulation was done not to help the reader/viewer, but to make the photographer, subject or news organization look good.

The “Comfort” test means would I, as a photojournalist/ editor, be comfortable telling my readers/viewers that I’ve manipulated the photograph in some way. If not, that is a signal that I shouldn’t be doing the manipulation.

There are other tests, of course. Some people say it’s OK to do anything we routinely used to do in the darkroom, e.g., burning and dodging. But adding pixels, cutting/

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pasting, etc., is not OK. The trouble with this approach is that you can talk yourself into doing things that don't meet the two tests I've described above.

Weintraub points out that one of recent history's most infamous digital manipulations—the darkening and blurring of O.J. Simpson's portrait in the June 27, 1994, cover of Time—could have easily been achieved in a darkroom.

STAGED SHOTS: IS VIDEO A TROJAN HORSE FOR PHOTOJOURNALISTIC ETHICS?

Tension has always existed between television and print journalists. While casual observers tend to write this off to ink-stained newspaper staffers being jealous of the higher profile—and paychecks—of their TV brethren, the reality is that significant differences exist in how TV and print news organizations gather the news.

Of particular relevance to photojournalistic ethics, television news is often driven by a quick turnaround mentality that can lead videographers to take shortcuts such as staging shots—a

clear ethical no-no from the vantage point of many still photographers. And in the biggest photojournalism ethics controversy of recent years—the coverage of the 2006 Lebanon War—staged shots were as much a factor as digitally altered images.

“Television photojournalists have always been held less accountable for their visual reportage, because TV has been perceived by the public as a form of entertainment in popular culture. For example, a print photojournalist can be fired for setting up a picture, but a TV photographer often sets up re-enactments,” Dunleavy says.

The concern over differing ethical standards most recently came to the fore in May, as the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) voted on whether to change its name to the Society of Visual Journalists—a formal acknowledgement that the premier association for print photojournalists was now at least equally focused on television and videography. While the proposed name change was deferred until a branding expert could be brought in to consult with the organization, such a change seems inevitable. This is particularly true given that virtually all photojournalists may soon need to add video to their repertoires.

For some print photojournalists—who have viewed the NPPA Code of Ethics as the closest thing to a Bible the industry has—this evolution of the organization is a slap in the face. In particular, still photographers say that TV news photographers routinely stage shots in violation of their interpretation of NPPA directives, including:

- *Resist being manipulated by staged photo opportunities.*
- *Respect the integrity of the photographic moment.*
- *While photographing subjects do not intentionally contribute to, alter, or seek to alter or influence events.*

Television news crews, meanwhile, openly defend the staging of shots that could get their print brethren fired, critics say. As Travis Lynn writes for the Journal of Mass Media, their justifications fall into three categories:

- 1 Staging for purposes of editing.** The conventions of TV news call for reverse angle shots, cutaways, and other devices that often require the cooperation of the subject. They cannot be achieved by simply letting events unfold naturally.

2 Staging for purposes of time. Subjects are often asked to repeat, recreate or simulate actions that the videographer missed or does not have time to stay and witness in person. Videographers argue that this does not necessarily alter the integrity of the story, but many print photographers differ on this point.

3 Staging for purposes of storytelling. This is when a videographer stages an event that may or may not naturally occur—and then does not reveal that it has been staged. Most TV journalists draw the line at this kind of staging and consider it unethical. A notorious example of this is Dateline NBC’s staged explosion of a GM truck for a 1993 segment on faulty gas tanks.

“I cringe at being equated with videographers who train their subjects to ask ‘What do you want us to do?’ instead of taking the time to allow reality to unfold.”

Jack Zibluk, an associate professor of journalism at Arkansas State University and former vice president of the NPPA, says that print photographers must accept that television is a different medium with different requirements.

Given audience expectations, there are different ways to tell truths, and one is not better than another. A voiceover narration of a television story is standard in broadcast format, but some still photographers consider additional sound that hasn't really occurred in real time to be unethical. In a converged environment, we have to recognize that different practices may be accepted as truthful to the audience. That doesn't make them unethical. So, while there are different practices, one medium is not more ethical than another.

But in the minds of many print photojournalists, TV's justifications for setting up shots represent a slippery slope—one that starts with the relatively innocent staging for editing purposes, but can eventually descend into changing the nature of the story.

“Like many print photojournalists, I have questioned whether our television counterparts are truly committed to the NPPA's

ethics code,” says Hughes, an NPPA member. “Many TV photographers routinely set up shots, have subjects ‘redo’ things or pretend to do them because they either missed the shot, want a different angle or want B-roll.

“I cringe at being equated with videographers who train their subjects to ask ‘What do you want us to do?’ instead of taking the time to allow reality to unfold.”

Adds print photojournalist Douglas Tesner, “Unless you are blind you have seen video journalists and multimedia specialists or new media specialists routinely setting up shots . . . I do not want to join that group.”

Melissa Lyttle, a photojournalist for the St. Petersburg Times, expresses the same concern: “Who let them (video) into our clubhouse without making them play by our rules . . . namely, having some ethics?”

As the wall separating video from print has come down symbolically within the NPPA, so it is coming down in practice in newsrooms across America. Newspapers and other print media outlets are adding video and multimedia packages to their Web sites—and asking still photographers to do the work. This puts them in the position of competing directly with TV videographers.

With photojournalism's leading ethical voice embracing TV videographers (and by implication, their newsgathering practices), and print news organizations asking print photojournalists to compete on TV's turf, is it only a matter of time before print photojournalists routinely embrace the shot-staging practices that many of them now consider unethical?

Print photographer Hughes, for one, says she has resisted this pressure when taking on video assignments:

Having had a taste of the video side, I can understand the need for "B roll" and extra footage that requires them to get the same action from multiple angles, which is not possible as a single videographer. I dealt with it by getting different [shots], because I am not comfortable asking someone to "pretend" or "do over" a candid moment. The problem is TV has no issue with using the staged moment and presenting it as real . . . You can get the moment and your "B roll" without faking anything; you just have to work a little harder.

At the least, the interpretation of ethical standards is becoming less clear-cut—generating considerable confusion. As Karen

Slattery and Erik Ugland write in *The Digital Journalist*:

Although it is natural for disagreement about ethical boundaries in photojournalism to exist, and although it is expected that professional norms will evolve over time, photojournalists often work without a clear understanding of what their colleagues, employers or audiences expect of them.

Will engaging in a form of staging that has typically been acceptable or routine in one context cause a photojournalist to be disciplined or fired in a different context? Right now that possibility exists.

Then again, perhaps the issue of print vs. TV photojournalism will soon be moot. *The Digital Journalist*'s editor, Dirck Halstead, points out that most major print news organizations have issued video cameras to their photographers. He predicts that virtually all photojournalists will be transitioned to video within just a few years.

Things change in life, horse and buggy was great a hundred years ago but you wouldn't consider driving a horse

and buggy on a freeway today. I've been a photojournalist now for almost 50 years and I have never been more excited about the future of photojournalism than I am today. It's a far richer medium and essentially all photojournalists are going to become film-makers.

4

TOWARD A 21ST CENTURY ETHICAL MODEL

With photojournalism under attack, is there a need for a new approach to ethics?

In general, newspapers tend to cling to long-held standards; practices have changed little in the wake of dramatic changes in the overall landscape. But official standards, while strict, are not enforceable on an industry-wide basis. All news organizations have their own guidelines for what is right and wrong. A photojournalist fired for an ethical breach at one news outlet can get a job at another.

Freelance photographers and now “citizen photojournalists”—amateurs snapping pictures of breaking news events on their cell phones and digital cameras—present an even more difficult challenge. Says Michael Coyne:

Even though some newspapers, news agencies and news magazines have issued their staff and contract photographers with strict digital guidelines, it has still been possible for the occasional manipulated image to slip through . . . But of more concern is the fact that news organizations advertise for people to send in their images of an event that they happened to have witnessed and photographed.

The news groups are doing this mainly to save money, so they don't have to hire a photojournalist to undertake a professional assignment. The problem with hiring amateur photographers is that there are not always the checks and balances in place to guarantee that the image has not been manipulated.

Since it's likely that news photography will come from an ever widening array of sources, and that ethical standards for photojournalists will continue to be decentralized among individual news organization, can the industry's current approach to ethics—strict rules with spotty enforcement—be sustained?

Many photojournalists are not overly optimistic, particularly with the print journalism industry in a state of financial crisis.

Says San Francisco-based freelancer Mike Fox:

There is nothing that I think could be done realistically to make the situation any better . . . I think that news editors constantly driving their photographers for the next, most sensational, front-page image does not help matters. I wish that the value of photojournalism was based on its ability to make a difference to the world and not on its ability to sell more newspapers.

Zibluk, the former NPPA vice president, says the best way to determine what changes need to be made is to formally study the news audience:

It's when we break that social contract between image maker and the audience that we get in trouble. In a photojournalistic setting, it's safer to tell the truth and the less manipulation the better . . . The answer lies with those who do audience measurement. We need to know what the audience accepts as truth in order to tell it the best way possible. That's done through surveys, experiments, focus groups, etc.—and not gut instinct.

With or without such studies, a number of recommendations for improving the status quo are certainly worth considering. These include the following:

1 Begin using manipulation-detection software industry-wide—and invest in its ongoing improvement.

In recent years, new technology has emerged that can help news organizations identify Photoshop fakes. If ethics are as critical to newspapers as they say they are, these organizations must prioritize deploying this type of technology in the newsroom, to prevent further erosion of credibility.

Dr. Hany Farid, who runs the Image Science Group at Dartmouth College, is a leading authority on digital forensics. His

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team has developed some of the most advanced software currently available to detect photo manipulation. Says Farid:

While a good photo editor can spot certain types of fakes, there are many subtle statistical and geometric inconsistencies that are effectively impossible to spot with the naked eye. And, as photo-editing software improves, it will become increasingly more difficult to detect fakes.

We have developed many different tools to detect tampering. One tool detects cloning (copy/paste), another detects inconsistencies in lighting, another detects inconsistencies in optical aberrations, and there are many more. Our general philosophy has been to develop a large suite of tools, each of which detects a different form of tampering. Combined, these tools will make it harder to create convincing forgeries (but, of course, never impossible).

It will always be easier to create forgeries than it will be to detect them. I predict, however, that we will take the ability to create convincing forgeries out of the hands of the average user, and make it more difficult and time consuming for the expert to create a fake that cannot be detected.

Unfortunately, media organizations have not yet embraced manipulation-detection technologies, largely because of the cost. Farid says he does not know of a single media organization employing his—or any—anti-manipulation software as part of its photo editing process.

Even in an age of budgetary panic, it would seem in the interest of news organizations to make the investments necessary to maintain their most important asset—their authority and credibility.

2 Embrace the photo illustration as an acceptable photojournalistic practice.

The photojournalism community needs to become comfortable with the term “photo illustration”—an industry term indicating that a photograph has been manipulated. Many photographers have been dishonest in order to avoid having an image labeled a photo illustration, or because their editors refuse to publish them. If the stigma is removed from the term, photographers will have less incentive to lie.

Argues Michael Coyne:

Images used in publications, especially news media outlets, should have some sort of symbol, sign or comment notifying the viewer that the images have been manipulated if that is the case. Once we are open and honest about which images are manipulated and the term “photo illustration” is common practice then there will be less incentive for the photojournalist to be deceptive.

Let us accept the term “photo illustration” and acknowledge that there are certain circumstances where it has, does and will always happen. It may be that the photographer feels that this is necessary to show the viewers the totality of a situation.

Other photojournalists strongly resist this idea, however. Says longtime newspaper photographer Mark M. Hancock, formerly of the Dallas Morning News:

In a news environment, photo illustrations should be deliberate and obvious. A pig riding a flaming motorcycle while juggling sharks is a photo illustration. Digitally

removing a soda can from an image is simply a lie. Minimizing the photo illustration term and allowing photojournalists to digitally manipulate images or set up images is contrary to journalism and truth . . . No news image is made “more important” through digital manipulation. The manipulated images and the people who create them have cheated authentic photojournalists and the public.

Adds Weintraub:

Photo illustration, along with other terms, is meaningless, in my opinion—because the reading/viewing public doesn’t have a clue what it means. It’s a shorthand way of saying, “This photo is a lie, but we want you to believe it, so we put a disclaimer, usually in tiny type, to make ourselves feel ethical.” Hooey!

Then again, since much of the controversy over photo manipulation has originated with skeptical bloggers taking the time to study individual pixels in Photoshop, it may help satisfy this increasingly influential audience to introduce labels like “photo illustration,” along with accompanying explanatory detail, where appropriate.

Blogger Ledbetter extends this idea to the practice of photo staging—and the issue of media bias generally:

As far as improving the industry goes, I'd like to see a stronger distinction between "news" reporting and "advocacy" reporting . . . especially if the news agencies themselves are as concerned as they claim to be about more than a mere glossy coating of "impartiality" in their reporting. Whenever photographers encounter situations which are either abjectly manipulated by the subjects . . . or otherwise not a totally genuine scenario, there probably ought to be a notation to that effect in the caption.

3 Hold freelancers and citizen journalists to the same standards as staff photographers.

As photojournalist Daniel Bersak writes:

Sorting out the ethics of the "citizen photojournalist" phenomenon is one of the challenges facing the photojournalism community in the future. Since the non-professional is not bound by a code of ethics (and may compromise the integrity of an image without even

knowing it), newsrooms must be cautious when using images that were taken by the general public.

Bersak points to a number of tests that Al Tompkins of the Poynter Institute recommends to editors when accepting material from non-professionals, including:

- *How do you know the image is authentic?*
- *What do you know/need to know about how the image was captured?*
- *What was the photographer's involvement in the incident he or she captured?*

Will news organizations have the patience—and staff resources—to satisfactorily answer these questions in every instance?

Scoopt, the citizen photojournalism arm of Getty Images, claims to have experts who carefully screen images to ensure no digital tampering has occurred. As Farid points out, however, tampering is becoming increasingly difficult to detect with the naked eye—particularly for understaffed organizations trying to push through photos of breaking events. The staging of photos, of course, may leave no digital clues whatsoever.

Clearly, the use of anti-manipulation software will be critical to the credibility of citizen photojournalism. And just as labels such as “photo illustration” can provide valuable context when a photojournalist wishes to alter an image, so too can labeling and annotation of consumer-generated images.

Ultimately, the public will determine what kind of job media organizations are doing by either using or not using their news products. For still photographers, in particular, to remain relevant, photojournalists must deliver images that are going to draw and maintain audiences. That is the most important standard of all for news organizations that wish to survive in the 21st century.

Many photojournalists are not optimistic about the future given the challenges from without (the decline of print, the rise of video, an increasingly skeptical public) and within (the ease of Photoshop manipulation). However, there are reasons for hope. Research shows that the public’s appetite for news and information is greater than ever before. And the public’s love for, fascination with, and *connection to* photography is also at an all-time high, thanks to digital photography, photo-sharing, and other technological innovations.

The challenge, then, is for photojournalists to provide the kind of news images that the public can enjoy, respect—and perhaps even aspire to create themselves. Photojournalists can only hope to achieve this by maintaining, and enforcing, ethical standards that clearly elevate them above their audiences.

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