Ethics in the age of digital manipulation

By Mark M. Hancock Posted Jun 22 2009

Home / Recent Stories / Ethics in the age of digital manipulation

Please click at the link below for multimedia to view examples of questionable uses of Photoshop

Multimedia

The first day in April is called April Fool’s Day in the United States. In Israel this year, it was simply portrait day for the new cabinet and photographer Menahem Kahana. However, when Kahana’s image appeared in Yated Neeman, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish newspaper, someone had fooled with the image.

Someone at the newspaper used Adobe Photoshop or a similar software program to remove female ministers Limor Livnat and Sofa Landver and replaced them with two men to create an all-male cabinet.

While cloning over people in a portrait is a terminal offense at most U.S. daily newspapers, image manipulation has
recent precedents in the Middle East.

Los Angeles Times staff photographer Brian Walski was fired – ironically – on April 1, 2003. The international-award-winning 20-year news veteran combined elements of two photographs of a British soldier, taken moments apart, in order to improve the composition of the image. It cost him his job and his credibility. However, few lessons were learned by others.

Lebanese photographer Adnan Hajj submitted at least two digitally-manipulated images to Reuters during the 2006 Lebanon War. In one instance, Hajj digitally manipulated the image to show more and darker smoke rising from the buildings in suburban Beirut after an Israeli airstrike. The second image of an Israeli F-16 fighter over Nabatiyeh, southern Lebanon, was altered by Hajj to increase the number of flares dropped by the plane from one to three. Two days after Hajj’s digital manipulations were discovered, Reuters stopped its 10-year association with Hajj, removed his 920 photos from the company archive and fired a photo editor.

During the same conflict, Issam Kobeisi made two images for Reuters and Hussein Malla submitted one to AP of a woman wailing in front of a bombed house. The strange thing about all three photographs was that it was the same woman, but at three different locations on three different dates, according to times stamps on the images.

While both photographers were close enough to conveniently capture her emotion and the wreckage with wide-angle lenses, neither bothered to include the woman’s name in their captions.

Moving further east, the media branch of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards released an image of an Iranian missile test launch in July 2008. In keeping with Middle Eastern digital ethics, it was manipulated as well.

After one missile failed to fire, the non-firing missile was removed from the image and one of the three other missiles was duplicated to make the launch appear to be a complete success.

Digital manipulation isn’t limited to the Middle East, and the April Fool’s Day theme continues.

On April 1, 2007, the Toledo Blade ran a front-page image by photographer Allan Detrich, showing members of the Bluffton University baseball team kneeling in prayer before playing their first game since five of their players died in a bus crash in Atlanta.

However, the former Pulitzer Prize finalist had altered the image by removing the legs of a person standing in the background. By April 7, all 50 of Detrich’s images were removed from AP and the Toledo Blade Web sites and access to his images was blocked internally.

The 2007 National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) president Tony Overman took the unusual step of publicly condemning Detrich’s practices and said, “The Blade reports that a subsequent internal investigation of his work showed evidence of manipulations in 79 photos so far this year, an unprecedented amount of violations.”

Advice from pros

Millions of ethical, accurate images are presented to the public each year by professional photojournalists. These professionals often risk their lives to present honest images. Consequently, harsh, career-ending criticism is leveled at photographers who violate the core ethical rules of photojournalism and undermine the work of thousands of ethical photojournalists. “Most photojournalists in Nicaragua are aware of the basic ethical rules of photojournalism and follow them,” stated Tomas Stargardter, photo editor at La Prensa newspaper in Managua, Nicaragua. “The basic principle is ‘Do not lie.’”

Alex Lloyd Gross is a Pennsylvania-based freelance photojournalist. He stated, “Always follow tight ethics. Without them, there is no trust between the reader and the journalist.”

Defining ethical standards

The National Press Photographers Association released a “modernized” Code of Ethics in 2004. The old code was
written in 1946 and didn’t address television or digital editing. The new code includes these concerns and clarifies some other issues while clearly stating the expectations of members.

The code spells out the goal to achieve the highest standards while maintaining public confidence in the profession. This is accomplished through an honest, accurate and complete presentation of visual information. The code promotes accuracy and honesty in recording of events, event fidelity, digital editing and captioning.

While this standard isn’t universal, it is upheld by most professional photojournalists around the world.

**Historical perspective**

Photographic manipulation is nothing new. In 1858, English photographer Henry Peach Robinson was a proponent of photography as an art form. Throughout his career, he made composite photos from separate negatives.

The first such composite image was placed on exhibit without an explanation. The image was initially criticized for its apparent intrusion on a private moment of a family’s grief. Later, the artist was criticized for fooling the public with a manipulated image, which combined five separate negatives.

The first widely-known American instance of an altered image was by Mathew Brady’s photography company in the 1860s. The company placed a portrait of Abraham Lincoln’s head on the body of John C. Calhoun, a Southern slavery supporter.

Joseph Stalin regularly had enemies removed from images. Stalin most famously had the former Great Purge executioner and head of the Soviet secret police Nikolai Yezhov removed from an image after Stalin arranged for Yezhov to be executed.

In the golden age of photojournalism, W. Eugene Smith also combined negatives to change the impact of images for Life magazine. He was also known to print images down to black and use potassium ferricyanide to reveal only the areas he wished to show. The chemical dissolved silver molecules to lighten or completely remove elements from images.

**Digital manipulation enters the market**

During the 1980s, powerful computer-based image processing methods were developed. While supermarket tabloid newspapers continued to piece together supposed exclusive images of aliens, mermaids, Big Foot and other fiction, most legitimate newspapers had accepted basic ethical practices.

Meanwhile, magazines sat on the newsstand racks next to the tabloids. Both vied for the impulse purchase and income generated by casual shoppers. Ultimately, Fashion, Glamour, Lifestyle and similar magazines frequently employed airbrush and digital manipulation to make sales while news magazines primarily presented factual images.

In February 1982, National Geographic created controversy by digitally moving two Egyptian pyramids closer together so both would fit onto the magazine’s cover. Later, Tom Kennedy became director of photography for the magazine and stated, “We no longer use that technology to manipulate elements in a photo simply to achieve a more compelling graphic effect. We regarded that afterwards as a mistake, and we wouldn’t repeat that mistake today.”

In March 2007, Time added a teardrop to the face of former President Ronald Reagan. Time officials later said the image was a legitimate illustration because the teardrop’s illustrator was listed in the table of contents.

It wasn’t the first or most controversial step over the line by the magazine. When O.J. Simpson was arrested, Time magazine darkened his mug shot to make him appear more menacing on a June 1994 cover. Because the unaltered image appeared on nearby Newsweek magazine covers as well, the manipulation was immediately evident.
While digital manipulations are often easy to make, old-fashioned staged images are still useful to fulfill questionable political agendas.

The Daily Mirror newspaper in the United Kingdom fired editor Piers Morgan in May 2004 after learning he was a party to staged images of British soldiers supposedly abusing Iraqi prisoners. Morgan had refused to resign. Instead, he said the photos “accurately illustrated the reality about the appalling conduct of some British troops.”

While political image manipulations are nothing new, the ease of modern software programs has accelerated the frequency of manipulated images for political gain.

A 2004 composite image appears to have a young Sen. John Kerry and Jane Fonda sharing the stage at an anti-war rally. In reality, the images were made by two separate photographers in two separate states more than a year apart. The doctored Kerry-Fonda photo is not known to have run in newspapers as a legitimate news image.

In October 2008, Newsweek ran a particularly close-up image of Gov. Sarah Palin on the magazine’s cover. Republican media consultant Andrea Tantaros, vice president at Sloane & Company, appeared on Fox News to voice her displeasure. The crisis communications specialist with a journalism degree from Lehigh University was upset because Newsweek had not manipulated the image to make her client look better than reality.

Possibly Tantaros should move to France.

Recent manipulations of images inside France appear to favor the administration of French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Paris Match magazine removed body fat from a shirtless image of the French leader in August 2007. In June 2008, the newspaper Le Figaro digitally removed a large diamond ring from the hand of French justice minister Rachida Dati.

Recent newspaper cutbacks and closings have many photojournalists concerned about future photojournalistic integrity.

“With papers leaning towards citizen journalism, I am very concerned,” says freelancer Gross. “It’s nothing for the citizen with a cell phone to take out a tree, manipulate the background or something even more sinister.” La Prensa photo editor Stargardter believes ethical behavior has become a prerequisite.

“Photojournalists are taking more care to follow ethical rules since the labor market is limited,” Stargardter says. “The ability to protect your actual job and make sure that you have good references for any future job becomes a priority in these troubling times.”

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