

Ethical Consideration in Editing for Professional Photojournalism

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Abstract: Photographs are powerful iconic mediums that play a vital informative role in our public and private lives. It is worth studying ethics in photojournalism because both history and popular lore have encouraged us to view photographs as direct, unmediated transcriptions of the real world. Since the introduction of photography, viewers have vested the medium with a level of authority and credibility unparalleled by other modes of communication. The iconic similarity of the photograph to its subject masks the distinction between image and reality, and obscures the significance of the picture-making and picture—altering processes in the construction of a photographic message. Photojournalist’s photographs are particularly influential sources of information because of their status in newspapers and news magazines. If readers assume, as historical evidence suggests, that viewers trust that photographs correspond to a real situation, that they are windows to the real world, then accurate and fair representations of news events should, and must be, of primary importance. This study reviews and proposes studies on how photojournalists have attempted to understand photographic/image alterations and secure truthfulness in their work has led us to examine the history of photographic technology and its influence on news reportage; the evolution of ethical awareness in photojournalism; the complex range of Digital Imaging (DI) technology and other techniques associated with image alteration; and finally, the industry’s views on photojournalism ethics and the appropriate use of photographic techniques in news representation to expand literature and discourse on photojournalism ethics.

Keywords: Photojournalist, photography, Journalism, Iconic, Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

With the invention of photography, it seemed that a way had been found to capture the world exactly the way it was, void of the inaccuracies of artists’ drawings. The first photograph, created in 1826 by a French physicist, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, is still legible today. Fifteen years later in 1842, newspapers and magazines started including news photos [1].

Numerous monumental inventions and events mark the history of photojournalism. Some historians credit the invention of the half-tone engraving process in 1880 as the start of photojournalism. This process made it easy to mechanically reproduce photographs. The reproductions had better quality because they included shades of gray, instead of only black and white [1].

In the 1920’s, the invention of the 35-mm camera made candid shots popular. This miniature camera had faster lenses and was able to use available light. It enabled photographs to show people casually in informal, realistic situations [1].

Another significant event in the history of photojournalism was the founding of Life and Look

magazines in the middle nineteen-thirties. These publications enabled pictures and stories of people around the world to be brought into millions of people’s homes. Some felt these magazines “glorified the photojournalistic profession” and became “the greatest vehicle for photojournalism for more than a generation” [2].

Television was the next giant step for news images. Although television technology had been around since the 1920’s, it wasn’t until after World War II that television became popular in America. The first nationally televised presidential address aired in 1950. Television had a tremendous social impact. By 1953, there were twenty-one million television sets in American homes. Four years later, in 1957, the number of television sets doubled. In 1960, there were fifty-four million sets in America [3].

Television’s ability to transmit coverage of a live event as it unfolds, in color, remains its unique attribute. Just as the photograph was able to capture the world the way it was, void of the inaccuracies of artists’ drawings, television has brought images even closer to a true replica of reality.

Photojournalists, the recorders and organizers of these images, have a tremendous potential to impact the public. They are in control of the visual matter of newscasts, and often much more. It is their daily duty to disseminate important news and information to the public (Sherer, 1994).

PHOTOJOURNALISTS

There are many different titles of the professions photojournalist, news photographer, videographer, photographer, and 'cameraman. Most television news photographers prefer the title photojournalist [4]. Each title implies a different definition of what role the photographer should play. Photojournalist assumes the photographer plays a more active role in decision making and is not just a camera operator. It also suggests a higher level of status than news photographer. Currently, however, many do not make this distinction between the titles photojournalist and news photographer. Most often they are used interchangeably.

The job of a news photographer encompasses many other characteristics besides knowing how to work a camera. Some photojournalists see themselves as having the creativity and skill of an artist, or the precision of a scientist [5]. Others feel the job requires them to be a humanitarian, a psychologist, a technician, and an editor. In addition, the photojournalist must work under the pressure of deadlines. There are also elements of danger involved. Since 81% of the award-winning news photographs (prints, not video) involved either accidents, disaster, crime, or violence, it is obvious that a photographer must be present at these types of scenes in order to gather these specific images. Many news photographers have been threatened or attacked while working. One study found that about 75% of newspaper photographers had been directly threatened in their career, with over 25% having been threatened in the previous year of the study.

Over 35% of the photographers had been physically attacked during their career. Interestingly, television photographers encounter hostile persons more often than print media photographers. A different study found that photojournalists are "likely to stay at the scene of a news story, despite their presence possibly encouraging violence." This might explain why many of them have reported incidents of hostility.

There is another downside to the life of a photojournalist. The job takes a toll on families and bodies. Many experience missed family dinners, missed holidays, and stress. Plus, television news photographers carry about 20 to 30 pounds of bulky gear balanced on each shoulder.

ETHICS IN PHOTOJOURNALISM

On a more subtle level we have to see that every photograph is the result of specific and, in every sense, significant adjustments which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic. The simple idea that a photograph 're-presents' a three dimensional reality onto a two dimensional plane complicates any assertions that there is truth in photographic images. To make a photograph, the projected image of an object has to be focused, cropped, and distorted by the flat, rectangular plate of the camera which owes its structure not to the human eye, but to a particular theoretical conception of the problems of representing space in two dimensions. Hence, by manipulating any mechanical variable (e.g., shutter speed, film speed, or focal length) an altered image will result. This is problematic for photojournalists and photo-editors since they are part of a profession that ranks truth and accuracy as premier values. It is also problematic for those who must determine what is permissible given the inherent unavoidability of two dimensionality, the history of allowing certain types of technical/mechanical manipulations, and a human tendency toward individual artistic expression.

When it comes to photojournalism, there is a premise, historically supported, that photojournalists and photo-editors have a public trust, a covenant, as it were, with their readers. Readers generally expect that photographers will provide viewers with just and accurate representations of the realities they are sent to cover, whether by mechanical/chemical processes or digital/computer technologies. The photojournalism photograph differs from other categories of photographs since it is a professionally established form of information gathering and news coverage and, as such, it is a socially, politically, and culturally consequential medium. It is also an inference-nudging medium that must be monitored for possible abuses and misuses. While historically photography has had a reputation of truthful re-presentation, it is possible, particularly with the advent of newer technologies such as digital imaging (here after referred to as DI technology), that there could be an even greater potential threat to the observance and tradition of the public trust [6].

Photographic manipulation is not new, but never before has it been so flawless and fast. Recent developments in computer technology now make it possible for a photographer to, "shoot a picture, view it, and send it anywhere in the world - within seconds. A newspaper editor can receive the image, enter it into a computer, and then integrate it into a page design" [7]. Digital imaging technology optically scans the photographer's image and stores that information digitally. An agent, a computer operator or photo-editor, can then call up the file, and rearrange the stored digits so as to produce a radically different picture. Depending

on the philosophical and ethical stance of the photographer and the photo-editor, their commitment to ethical codes, and the category of photograph, digital imaging or DI technology can be used for a variety of design purposes. Some agents use the DI technology solely for speed and for corrective purposes (correction of transmission errors, colour correction, removal of dust, processing errors, mechanical difficulties). Others use DI technology to aesthetically enhance photographic images (flattening or lightening contrast, darkening or lightening foreground/background, softening of image). Others actively engage in reconducting the initial image. Digital imaging technology, unlike its predecessor, silver based film and chemical processing, allows the photographer to reconstruct the initial image (adding or subtracting digitally recorded elements thereby affecting the physical relationships of the objects represented, darkening or blurring backgrounds, or cropping them out entirely, thereby removing or altering vital contextual information). Such uses of “digital retouching” or “electronic manipulation” have created controversy and discussion about their appropriateness in various settings.

A photograph, then, is no guarantee of a corresponding pre-photographic existent. The indexical nature of the photograph - the causative link between the pre-photographic referent and the sign - is highly complex and technical, and may guarantee little or nothing at the level of referential meaning [6]. It is the reputation of the photographer and his or her publication that produces the social expectation that the photograph is truthful, accurate, and meaningful, and that it corresponds to the reality of a news story. What makes the photojournalists photograph an acceptable piece of evidence is, then, a much larger context - the technical, social cultural historical and ethical process in which particular optical and digital devices are set to work to organize experience and produce a new reality.

Why is the issue of manipulative practices in photojournalism important and why should it be studied? It is important because photographs are powerful iconic mediums that play a vital informative role in our public and private lives. It is worth studying because, both history and popular lore have encouraged us to view photographs as direct, unmediated transcriptions of the real world, rather than seeing them as coded symbolic artifacts whose form and content transmit identifiable points of view... Since the introduction of photography, viewers have vested the medium with a level of authority and credibility unparalleled by other modes of communication. The iconic similarity of the photograph to its subject masks the distinction between image and reality, and obscures the significance of the picture—making process in the construction of a photographic message... [M] ost

contemporary viewers continue to think of the photograph as a transparent window on the world, capturing the reality in front of the camera lens [8].

Photojournalists photographs are particularly influential sources of information because of their status in newspapers and news magazines. If readers assume, as Dona Schwartz has, that viewers trust that photographs correspond to a real situation, that they are windows to the real world, then accurate and fair representations of news events should, and must be, of primary importance.

Lorraine Code addresses such matters in her book *Epistemic Responsibility*, in 1987. Although Code makes no specific mention of news photography in her book, her approach to knowledge enquiry and the responsibility of the knower in the process plays a central role in the development of this paper’s thesis on ethics in photojournalism. It does this through supplying a theoretical model of responsibility which will help us tie together the present framework of fragmentary and piecemeal progression in the area of photo/image ethics. The universal appeal of Code is her reconciliation of existing theories of knowledge and approaches to enquiry which outlines a responsible approach to knowledge claims, one that underscores the responsibility of the knower and those responsible for out perceptions. Her approach best fits the aim of this paper which is to argue that a photojournalists photograph should, and must be, a just image, not just an image. Consistent with correspondence theory of truth (since the correspondence theory is the one implied in virtually all discussions of photographic integrity), Code yields a new perspective on the knowledge seeking enterprise. “The goal of enquiry might be described ...as that of arriving, by a process of inductive inference, at the best total explanatory account” (Code, 1987, p. 5). She stresses that good knowing or knowing well and a fundamental respect for realism (the core of the correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic theories of truth) is a worthwhile academic endeavor. “Science is one sort of knowledge among many, albeit an important and distinctive sort. But it is not a paradigm for knowledge in general, such that only those methodologies modeled upon it merit philosophical respect” (p. 67). Extending the focus of epistemological enquiry to include a study of intellectual virtue and epistemic responsibility, Code believes that the confidence that can be extended to knowledge claims can be enhanced, even when absolute certainty is unattainable. Aristode observes that “an educated person will expect accuracy in each subject only so far as the nature of the subject allows” (p. 67). Likewise Code urges us to be reasonable in our expectations so not to impede genuine possibilities of insight by imposing unattainable goals.

Code's theory of epistemic responsibility applies at two levels in this thesis. First, it applies directly to the photograph and its use. The photograph, as a visual imprint of events, scenes, and persons poses as a truthful record thereof. The degree to which that representative role is or is not respected is ultimately a function of the agent's epistemic responsibility - where agent is either the photographer, the photographic editor or the digital compositor. This is demonstrated through the quality of ethical accountability which is greatly underscored by the long history of assumed truthfulness in the photograph, a continuous assumption which dates back to the beginning of photography itself. Epistemic responsibility, this paper argues, is also the ultimate and the unifying feature which dominates and co-determines the ethical impact of other features (e.g., staging; cropping; digital inventions).

Second, Code's notion of epistemic responsibility and knowing well applies reflexively to the work of this thesis itself. The decision to study the ethics of photographic alteration and digital imaging in a serious academic fashion instantiates the responsibility of the communication theorist. That in turn takes the form of extending the analysis of image ethics beyond its present fragmentary status in order to secure, if possible, a more unified and systemic response to modern photographic alteration and its uses. That responsibility unfolds as an academic undertaking to situate image alterations within a history of the profession and its evolving ethical consciousness.

Then, photojournalism ethics research should document the history of photographic technology with an emphasis on photography's reputation for representing reality. This requires a historical analysis of the development and proliferation of the medium, and its technological advances in a wider political, social, cultural, and ethical context. Technology is not developed, or adopted by the public, in a social vacuum. Examination of the complex historical context into which media are introduced provides some guidance into understanding how they have come to take on the social and cultural forms we are familiar with today.

Knowing well, we have said, also includes studying the issue of photographic ethics historically in order to get clear what photographers and photojournalists themselves have thought and said about their craft, and what, if any, protocols and practices they have developed. Then an examination of the often fragmented and chaotic history of the growing awareness of ethical issues in photojournalism. It looks to the words and writings of photographers and photojournalists themselves for their incipient ethical concepts. What the literature review should yield is a piecemeal approach to photographic/image ethics that has brought with it no systematic or sustained attempt

to organize, categorize, and develop a coherent theoretical approach to the study.

One of the welcome results of the historical review of photographic technology and the literature review of photographic ethics is that it allows us to lay out a taxonomy of photo related terms and concepts along with a typology of their appropriate use. As a result the research should be able to come up with a way to itemize and classify the kinds of adjustments and manipulations available to photographers in order to secure a common, workable language with regard to image manipulation and deception. Pictorial misrepresentation is a category distinct from conventional verbal misrepresentation, and has created difficulties for more than one writer. If we wish to explore the 'truthfulness' of pictorial content in newspapers and magazines, the range and language of visual adjustments must be identified, translated, and agreed upon. "Like any language, pictorial language has its own codes, symbols, nuances, signs, metaphors, ambiguities and the like" (Zakia, 1981).

There is a general assumption that photographs appearing in reputable newspapers and magazines are truthful and accurate. This assumption is problematic. Many of the photographs appearing in so-called reputable newspapers and magazines have been altered in some manner. Some of the adjustments seem innocuous, they appear not to have affected the integrity of the photograph in any way. Other adjustments are more injurious to the narrative integrity of the photograph. Why do photojournalists alter photographs? Part of the answer can be found in how the photojournalist(s) and photo-editor(s) envision themselves and their role. Strict subscribers to the realist notion of representation do not believe that photographs should be altered, at all. Other photojournalists and photo-editors see the photograph as offering the reader more than a record of an event. They see the photograph as offering the reader a generalization and therefore do not feel bound by rigid epistemic standards. This group tolerates a wider latitude of adjustments and alterations. The majority of photojournalists and photo-editors practicing in the industry tend to fall under this latter category. All of this can be made clear in research findings in which the news industry's attitudes and views toward the appropriateness of photographic alteration and manipulation can be surveyed. The industry's views and practices concerning image adjustment and manipulation are extremely important as an introduction to any further normative discussion regarding DI technology and the ethics of image representation in the news media.

CONCLUSION

In much the same way that constitutions and laws seek to balance individual freedoms and the common good, journalistic codes of ethics attempt to balance in a moral fashion the interests of the journalist, the public, and journalistic institutions. The interests of journalists might include advancing their status, salaries, or careers; contributing to the efforts of their colleagues; and serving the public. The interests of the public include a desire to be well informed with regard to public policy, politics, health, culture, safety, the weather, sports, news at the local, regional, national and international levels, and so on. The interests of media organizations might include informing the public and, to some extent, entertaining the public (in the sense of presenting information in a compelling fashion), as well as making a profit.

From photography's inception, the public has been encouraged to accept the premise that the photograph was an objective and truthful record. This expectation is an important reason why photographic alteration in news has always been an ethical issue. This study reviews and proposes studies on how photojournalists have attempted to understand photographic/image alterations and secure truthfulness in their work has led us to examine the history of photographic technology and its influence on news reportage; the evolution of ethical awareness in photojournalism; the complex range of Digital Imaging (DI) technology and other techniques associated with image alteration; and finally, the industry's views on photojournalism ethics and the appropriate use of photographic techniques in news representation to expand literature and discourse on photojournalism ethics.

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