

Accepting Manipulation or Manipulating What's Acceptable?

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Abstract

Computing has tremendous impact on photojournalism as traditional “wet” darkrooms have all but disappeared, and remarkably dynamic digital imaging software has become commonplace in the newsroom. Technical advancement has helped photojournalism be more effective in many ways, but has also created ethical challenges in making deception expeditious and less transparent. This paper explores ethics as it relates to the current practises of computer-based photo manipulation and the use of images whose exposures are measured by intra-camera computers. Ultimately, a solution is offered that exploits one of computers’ best attributes – consistency in measuring visual data – but decries conduct that requires subjective interpretation that results in inaccurate and inconsistent imaging and eventually a loss of press credibility. Although to many photographers and newsroom leaders, this approach will be radical because it can snub aesthetics – even very slight manipulations are often forsaken – it is more consistent with currently accepted journalistic values.

Keywords: photojournalism, ethics, manipulation

1 Introduction

Public trust in journalism is waning with each day that passes, but the press’ role as watchdog is ever more necessary for a thriving democracy. One contribution to this decline in public trust is confusion about photographic integrity. Often for good reason, many people don’t believe the images they see in print news are accurate and honest reflections of news events. The *New York Times*’ photography critic, Andy Grundberg, predicted a tenuous prospect for documentary photography: “In the future, readers of newspapers and magazines will probably view news pictures more as illustrations than as reportage, since they can no longer distinguish between a genuine image and one that has been manipulated”.¹ By determining proper ethical actions in photo manipulation, part of which is determining if journalists ought to rely on high-tech

manipulations, we will establish guidelines that, if adopted, should rejuvenate some public trust in digital images and hence improve journalism’s public standing in general.

There are two broad questions to be answered in this paper in regard to photographs and computers: (1) What are the proper ethical guidelines for post-shoot photo manipulations (manipulations made after the photo has been taken)? (2) How much should we rely on intra-camera exposure calculations instead of post-shoot manipulations? First, the initial question is essential because through analysis it illustrates ethical problems related to post-shoot manipulation, such as loss of integrity (in the form of losing the trust of readers/viewers), lack of consistency (which leads to diminished accuracy), and forsaking the photojournalistic duty of truth-telling, if for no other reason than that truth-telling is a theoretical principle of journalism that should not be sidestepped. Second, the final question asks us to consider ethical issues arising from giving the power of judgment to a machine (inside the camera) instead of the human mind in certain circumstances. That carries with it similar concerns with integrity, consistency, and truth-telling.

2 Making Choices

Before a news photographer lifts the camera to her eye she has the obligation to make choices – what lens to use, what settings best match the available light, and how close or far to stand from a subject to determine where the borders of the photo will be in terms of composition, among other considerations. Each of these choices, when put into action, is a form of manipulation (Elliot, Lester, 2003). Manipulation includes a neutral form that involves skilful use of the hands or a device. However, a second form of manipulation involves a deceptive element for the sake of personal or institutional gain. The former type of manipulation can be a matter of routine colour correction – changing colour in an image to correct unintended technical flaws – but the second type – the pejorative form – changes reality for the sake of news sensationalism or aesthetics.

2.1 Threading Ethical Theory

Journalists exist, in theory, to enhance the public good by providing accurate information that people can use to make decisions about public life. And all three of the main ethical doctrines – consequentialism, deontology, and virtue theory – can help photojournalists and news audiences better understand issues surrounding image manipulation and the way it affects people’s ability to make those decisions. For example, utilitarianism – a form of consequentialism – can effectively help guide the

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¹ Andy Grundberg, “Ask It No Questions: The Camera Can Lie,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 1990, Sec. 2, p. 1.

practise of ethically acceptable photo manipulation in some cases, as maximising news value to the greatest number is often an ethically desirable end. One way of maximising news value, for example, is to maximise journalistic truth² and accuracy in dealing with photo manipulation. For without truth and accuracy, journalism is without moral grounding and credibility, therefore damaging one's ability to trust the information he or she receives from a news source.

Journalism professionals and the public also benefit from implementing carefully chosen virtues – such as integrity, accuracy, and truth-telling – because virtues help guide reporters and editors through the many less-than-obvious decision processes they confront. Virtues often complement or tactfully replace utilitarianism's agent-neutral status (considers all people equal) in decision making, primarily in dealing with important individual roles and actions, which often needs agent-relative (specific characteristics relevant to an individual) attention, left aside by consequentialism and deontology (Oakley, Cocking, 2001).

Finally, the third major ethical doctrine – deontology – is also worth inculcating into the photojournalistic psyche. By instilling Kant's Categorical Imperative, the journalistic duties of being accurate and telling the truth are grounded in what Kant refers to as a moral law – the action that a fully rational person would choose without question, regardless of its possible or actual consequences.

2.2 Categories of Image Manipulation

As mentioned earlier, we must consider what manipulations occur during the shoot at a news event, but also what happens to images in post-shoot manipulations. Manipulations that occur during the shoot include the manipulation of various camera settings that control the way the camera measures light, measures exposure, and frames an image. Post-shoot conduct, on the other hand, is the most commonly explored aspect of photo manipulation because it is the stage that presents the most technical challenges and therefore the most moral problems. Post-shoot manipulation involves digital "touch-ups" that can be ethical or unethical depending on whether the manipulations are deceptive, untruthful, or misleading.

Although unethical manipulations started with darkroom photography, and is more than a century old, the need for further exploration is evident because of the continuing decline in public trust in media, which is in part related to poor photojournalistic practise (Tompkins, 2002). Many scholars and journalists believe digital manipulation practises, both positive and negative, increased with new

technology, because high-tech tools make manipulation faster (Lowrey, 1998).

3 Journalism Values and Virtues

However, to make determinations on good and bad professional practise, one must first refer to sound moral reasoning. Within journalism, professional ethics codes and rules of conduct have long been available but in some cases, poorly conveyed and unenforced. Therefore, developing professional standards and enforcing them is an important start in creating an ideal environment in news photography. Because the newsgathering processes of photojournalists and text reporters are so similar, they share the same general set of values, which are essentially journalistic virtues³, as they all have qualities that closely correspond to traditional epistemological virtues – virtues related to knowledge – and can be treated as such for guiding morally defensible behaviour. In a succinct summary of journalism values, Fred Mann (1998) offers photojournalism a handful of what can be considered journalistic virtues to guide morally good actions. To the right of Mann's suggested values are traditional virtues (both Cardinal and epistemic) to which these values correspond, showing journalism's natural theoretical identification with virtue theory:

- Balance/ Fairness -- **Justice**
- Credibility -- **Integrity**
- Accuracy/Authenticity -- **Honesty/truth-telling**
- News Judgment -- **Prudence**

There are a number of interrelationships among these well-chosen values that we will now refer to as journalistic virtues. In fact, it is traditional in philosophy to consider an agent (in this case the agent is a journalist) a virtuous person only if he inculcates all of the virtues, not just one or a few where it is convenient. Each virtue does hold great importance, however, and single virtues can dominate specific considerations, and even compete with one another for prominence. The key factor in avoiding virtue abuse is to abstain from using a virtue out of convenience. For example, it would not be virtuous in most situations to claim that lying (violating the virtue of truthfulness) to obtain information or documents is acceptable because it is prudent in that it yields a desirable and instrumental end (using the virtue of prudence). Although lying may be instrumentally prudent in many situations, it should not dominate the virtues of honesty, integrity, and ultimately, credibility, when it is more morally damaging than progressive. A major presupposition to virtue theory is that humans possess the ability to reason, and it is reason that allows one to be virtuous by balancing virtues in difficult circumstances.

Now that we have established a description for using virtues, we must further explore Mann's journalism virtues for a better understanding of how they relate to

² Truth in journalism is often known as "journalistic truth" because information journalists provide is intended to be bits of truth about something, although it is usually impossible to get the "whole truth". Merrill, John. (1997): *Journalism Ethics*. New York, St. Martin's Press, Inc. Pp. 105-108.

³ Virtue ethics enhance what Aristotle called the "good life" by adhering to sets of intrinsically good values (virtues) guided by "regulative ideals" that promote excellence in the way the virtues are interpreted. Oakley, J., Cocking D. (2001): *Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles*. Cambridge, U.K., Cambridge University Press, pp. 25-38.

philosophy and how they will be used in photojournalism. The balance/fairness journalism virtues relate closely to the traditional virtue of justice. Although justice has wide meaning and has received countless hours of conceptual analysis, we will consider justice a standard by which one makes decisions that are based on equity and equality. Therefore, balance and fairness are seamlessly analogous to justice. When photojournalists consider how to approach a story, capture images and manipulate images after a news event, they are required to consider the balance of the images that are used based on fair and equal representation of information, opinions, and demographics, among other factors.

The journalistic value of credibility is the most direct relative to the epistemological virtue of integrity, and is closely related to the sacred journalistic notion of objectivity.⁴ Without an attempt by the photojournalist to be impartial to the news as an ideal objective journalist would, the visual newsgathering process becomes tainted with unknown bias and prejudice, which are symptoms of journalistic vice and renders the information passed onto the public either useless, tainted, or ambiguous.

Accuracy and authenticity are also seminal journalism values in regard to photo manipulation; they correspond closely to the traditional virtue of truth-telling. Since the goal of the photojournalist is, with obvious technical and philosophical limitations, to re-create reality, being accurate in terms of all of the technical (composition, light, shadows) and idealistic components (no posing subjects; reducing imposition on news event) is essential. But whenever one mentions accuracy as it relates to photojournalism, one ought not to mean exact reality, but an effort toward precision, conceding only to insurmountable technical limitations that photography and visual perception present.

Finally, news judgment is one of the most sensitive and worrisome areas in photojournalism because it is subject to the interpretation of the individual and is usually inconsistent in the way it is applied. However, this is an opportunity for well-trained photojournalists to use professional judgment to make the best of an imperfect process, which is a natural complement to the traditional virtue of prudence. News judgment in photojournalism involves making choices of content and context as to what appears in an image. Among nearly countless content and context considerations is: storytelling, maximising visual information, balancing representation of viewpoints, avoiding unfair juxtapositions, etc. Therefore, prudence, when it relates to photojournalism, is about making tough choices when there may be more than one good choice, or making a good choice when there are few good choices available. Nevertheless, photographers have a myriad of decisions to consider as

they approach news assignments, and their prudent judgment affects the veracity and dynamics of the news content, which then affects the audience's ability to make good choices about public life. And so the dominoes fall.

This list of ethical essentials is not meant to be exhaustive, but certainly includes some of the most prominent and necessary virtues about which journalists should be aware. Additionally, these pairings of virtues and values are not as limited to those that were shown before. Essentially, the journalistic virtues listed by Mann can be paired with many or all traditional virtues in some cases, as each of the journalistic virtues are wide ranging in their complement to traditional virtues. The pairings were made merely to illustrate the close relationships between journalistic values and traditional philosophical virtues.

4 Common Practises and Ethical Challenges

The aforementioned virtues are more than just theoretical tokens for academics and pretentious news managers to spout for posterity. They are meant to walk side by side with professionals on the streets and sit beside them in the digital laboratory. Therefore, we must explore the real areas of photojournalism that have the most ethical eggshells upon which we must walk. The photojournalistic practises that cause most ethical problems in terms of digital manipulation include: colour balancing, cropping, and the dodge-and-burn techniques. Colour balancing requires rendering a match (or the closest thing to a match) in colours in an image to that of the scene that was photographed. Colour balance commonly involves consistently correcting technical flaws (acceptable) and making aesthetic improvements (theoretically unacceptable). Cropping involves reducing an image from its outer edges inward to increase the impact of a prominent item or subject close to the centre of the image. Finally, the dodge-and-burn technique involves using digital computing tools, such as Adobe Photoshop software, to brighten or darken selected parts of a photograph.

Each of the three aforementioned practises has ethical implications when the process damages an image's truth-telling faculty, when it reduces integrity, when it causes or facilitates injustice, and/or when it damages the photojournalist's, publication's, or profession's credibility. As we will see, each practise can be considered unethical under some circumstances, sometimes under most circumstances.

4.1 Colour Correction

Colour balancing – making the colours in an image the most realistic colour quality – is often thought an innocuous task that has little or no ethical difficulty. However, in times that require the strictest ethical behaviour from news professionals because of their reputation for impropriety, they must abide carefully by honest and accurate practises. Therefore, we'll explore how the aforementioned virtues are best for the task of creating acceptable guidelines for colour balancing both during and after the photo shoot.

⁴ Objectivity in journalism is part truly objective in that journalists gather objective facts, but also more broadly theoretical in that the journalists themselves make an effort to eliminate personal bias and prejudice in newsgathering and in context, although those vices are impossible to eliminate altogether.

In the camera: The most widely used digital camera in the photojournalism industry as of the commencement of this paper, the Nikon D1, is well known for a few technical flaws, one of which is an ugly yellow haze that covers every image it records. No matter what camera lighting settings are adjusted for the various basic lighting scenarios (daylight, outdoor-cloudy, fluorescent, incandescent, tungsten, etc), the images always appear with this yellow scum – this scum, according to the naked eye, does not exist in reality and therefore must be removed. This is one situation in which Adobe Photoshop digital imaging software – the industry standard – is a saviour. It allows for colour corrections that bring an image to its fullest realisation of realism.

Outside of the camera: On the flip side, this function can be easily abused. For example, it is not uncommon for photographers to “warm” or “cool” photographs in the process of making a legitimate colour correction. Warming involves artificially infusing reds, yellows, or a combination thereof for aesthetics, which is analogous to someone wearing make-up – possibly pretty, but unnatural. Cooling involves artificially infusing shades of blue, and is popular for cold weather photos or for enhancing already existing blue and green colours. The mere act of legitimate colour correction often tempts photographers to make aesthetic enhancements that go beyond acceptable adjustments used to re-create reality, thus violating accuracy and integrity, which leads to a loss of credibility.

One possible – although imperfect – solution to this problem is to leave the colour balance and exposure work to the camera, except in the rare circumstances where cameras are known to fail – photographers are well aware of these situations through basic photography training. Although cameras have some small weaknesses in judging colour, the advantage they have is consistency in their errors, whereas photographers are inconsistent. Cameras use internal computers to judge colour, brightness, contrast, and a host of other things. Although these computers are not perfect in their colour rendering, they create a consistent and reliable measuring tool, whereas people do not have that consistency, and produce results ranging from near perfect to off base. Since every photojournalist uses a camera and most photojournalists are using the same camera model, it is feasible to let the camera make the judgment and avoid further colour manipulation at the office – especially since modern intra-camera computers are so accurate.

But there are exceptions. One exception is the aforementioned technical flaw in the Nikon D1 camera. It is acceptable to eliminate the yellow scum it records to its images, because it is a measurable inaccuracy that can be systematically and consistently eliminated from an image. Any mathematically measurable flaws (flaws in accuracy, not aesthetics) that can be repeatedly identified and eliminated with near-exactness, qualify as acceptable manipulations.

Another possible exception, for example, is if a head of state dies shortly after a flawed photo is captured. In this

case, one must consider manipulating the colour balance to properly convey the subject’s illness (in the case that camera flaw obscures the illness) because the news value outweighs other ethical considerations. This is an area, in philosophical terms, where virtues can help, for example, they help to sort through a utilitarian-deontological conundrum. On the one hand, one might say it is wrong to colour correct in an inconsistent way, as this situation would demand, because it would violate the Kantian-like maxim that might altogether decry manipulation or at least severely limit it to when it is necessary for the sake of truth-telling. On the other hand, utilitarians would ask whether it would create more pleasure for more people if news value (in the form of allowing imperfect manipulation) were given prominence over more consistent manipulation (as Kant demands). Historically, the utilitarians would win, because the news value overrides the conventional standard; the news is just too important to risk a bad image. Too much information – truth – could be lost, and in such an extreme circumstance as a presidential death, this would be too damaging.

4.2 Cropping

Cropping – reducing the size of an image by reducing its borders – can be an effective tool for creating visual impact. However, it can also cause a loss of vital visual information if it isn’t executed carefully. The best advice: Crop only when you can increase the news value of an image. If there were no risk in shooting pictures with the intention of cropping, then photographers would shoot all of their images “loose”, and set their cameras to record large, high-resolution files and then crop to their heart’s delight. Modern technology allows for this because one can shoot massive image files, from which small fractions can be cropped, and the cropped image can then be enlarged while maintaining remarkable resolution. But by maximising news value – a utilitarianism goal– we can assure the most news value in an image with few ethical risks.

Because of problems that can develop from cropping, photographers are trusted to use their judgment on how to compose a newsworthy photograph rather than worry about subsequent alterations. But there is often relevant visual data in the secondary regions of an image that a photographer might overlook and eliminate in the cropping process if he isn’t careful. So great care must be taken before a crop – and a loss of important information – is made. Careful cropping, then, will maximise the amount of visual information and impact an image can provide.

4.3 Dodge and Burn

One could go as far as to call a dodge or burn – artificially lightening or darkening regions in an image – a lie in almost all situations, so there is little question over what place this process ought to have in photojournalism: none. A lie is a violation of truth, and truth is a seminal journalistic virtue. But for the sake of choosing an ethical doctrine within which to analyse the dodge and burn, deontology’s Categorical Imperative will be ideal: Many academics and professionals believe journalists should always tell the truth. Kant would likely say the same as

truth would seemingly always be the dominant maxim for a journalist. So to break down how the dodge and burn is in violation of truth – and Kant’s imperative – we’ll use Sissela Bok’s (1989) definition of a lie: “... any intentionally deceptive message which is stated” (Bok, 1989, p.14).

Bok indicates that speaking or writing usually executes “stating”. Since digital technology has its own form of statement, which is initiated by keystrokes and mouse-clicks, it requires a separate semantic representation. Essentially, the act of manipulating a dodge and burn – running a mouse cursor over a region of a photo – can be likened to a speaker who would manipulate a phrase in her mind before speaking. Therefore, the published word can be analogous to speech in regard to “stating”.

Essentially, the photographer knows this manipulation technique is used to give artificial prominence to a subject, or a particular section of the photograph. Therefore, we have established a form of deception – the photojournalist knows the image is tainted either by the intention of making an aesthetic improvement, by attempting to assist understanding by highlighting central visual details, or simply in the doomed but well-intended attempt to correct perceived imperfections. All but the latter are obvious forms of deception and even the latter is indirectly deceiving, regardless if it is intended for good purposes.

Having established deception, now we must establish intent in order to satisfy Bok’s definition of lying. As mentioned before, photojournalists know their altered photographs are intended for an audience. They also know their altered photographs are inaccurate because (1) they are altered for impact/understanding (2) aesthetics and/or (3) re-creating reality. Now, to prove that photojournalists often intend to deceive, one only needs to acknowledge the methods of manipulation with the fact that photojournalists know readers expect to have truth, accuracy, and reality – and are receiving something from a photojournalist that a photojournalist knows to be otherwise, despite other possible outcomes. This conscious knowledge of potential inaccuracy, therefore, arguably qualifies as intent in the form of a calculated risk.

Although this is a secondary notion of intent – meaning that photographers’ primary intentions are not necessarily to deceive – there are few, if any, photojournalists or photo editors who don’t know that their actions are likely to deceive at least some of the time (Irby, 2003). Therefore, although it may not be a robust intention to deceive readers, it is, for them, a calculated risk, which qualifies as intent, because of their knowledge that false information will reach the audience and it could have been prevented. As Kant’s Categorical Imperative clearly implies, being truthful is a universal journalistic law, and this is undoubtedly an untruth.

5 Conclusions

Photojournalism is a profession that, as we have seen, invites pluralistic ethics. That is, we have shown that photojournalism can make effective use of multiple doctrines of ethical theory – deontology,

consequentialism, and teleology (virtue theory) – to determine right ethical actions. Moreover, this pluralistic approach helps us cope with the multifaceted issues that arise from ever-increasing use of technology in media.

Although technology has not brought wholesale change to photojournalism manipulation, as similar manipulation existed 100 years ago, it has made manipulation easier and more pervasive, perhaps leading to a normalisation of questionable manipulation practises. This paper has questioned the ethical meaning of this ever-increasing normalisation. It has shown that no matter what advances come from technology, virtue, consequentialism, and deontology help weed out ethical problems. In virtue theory, truth, integrity, justice, and prudence have remained the standard for good professional decisions. In deontology, we know that whether one uses computers or dark rooms to make publishable images, telling the truth is still the journalistic imperative for imaging decisions. Finally, in a consequentialistic framework, we know that no matter what tools are used to bring an image to press or broadcast, photojournalists ought to cater to the public and serve its best interests. That interest is often, by default, the interest of the majority – the greatest happiness for the greatest number – as Jeremy Bentham, the famous utilitarian, said.

But no matter what ethical theories one uses to justify actions, because circumstances may dictate choice, it is crucial to consider all of the ethical options one has at one’s disposal. Photojournalism, like and unlike other professions, affects the thoughts of millions of people every day. Without taking great care in the way photojournalists practise, they can knowingly or unwittingly contribute to growing social ailments – and technology is not solely to blame.

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