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Journalism and Democracy

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Mid-term paper: The ethics of photo manipulation and illustration

Introduction

The codes of ethics developed by the Society of Professional Journalists, Society for News Design and the National Press Photographers Association devote their primary goal as retrieving/reporting/displaying the truth and doing so accurately. While many journalists can take that literally and simply focus on finding the facts, reporting them, attributing quotes and identifying sources, few realize the way the story is packaged and presented is also included.

The practice of using illustrations and photos has become common for news organizations today, but what happens if a line is crossed between photo illustration and photo manipulation? Where is the line? What if a computer program is used to change a photo to change a story it didn't originally tell? This has happened; it still happens. Is it acceptable to change a photo so it tells a different story? Is it okay to publish a manipulated photo if you give a disclaimer that says as much? These questions motivate me to look into the matter.

This paper will explore the history and practice of photo manipulation and tampering. The controversy will then be discussed, followed by several suggested solutions for the problem.

The practice

The invention of Photoshop, a photo editing software, in the late 1980s was not the starting point of photo tampering and manipulation. In fact, one of the first photographs discovered to have been altered was from about 150 years ago when a photograph of John

Calhoun had Abraham Lincoln's head superimposed on it to make Lincoln look more “heroic,” one of the many photographs shown on the Web site of computer scientist and Dartmouth College professor Hany Farid (Farid, “Photo Tampering Throughout History”).

The practice continued and expanded. Superimposing negatives, cutting film, airbrushing and darkroom pencils were all methods used to manipulate photos. Photos of Civil War generals were altered, Joseph Stalin was notorious for airbrushing members of his party out of photos when they fell out of his favor, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini removed people from photographs to ensure they looked powerful (Farid, Photo Tampering Throughout History). “In World War I, photos were forged for propaganda purposes, including one of Kaiser Wilhelm cutting off the hands of babies” (Ricchiardi, Distorted Picture). The Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of Mary Ann Vecchio screaming over the body of a dead student during the Kent State shootings turned out to be an altered photo. The original photo had a fence post positioned right behind her head. The fence was removed in the published version (Farid, Photo Tampering Throughout History).

A big year in notorious photo tampering was 1994. The first instance was the cover of New York Newsday in February of that year. Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding were to practice on the same ice rink despite the recent attack on Kerrigan. Newsday merged two separate photos of the women from another practice section into one photo, making it appear as if they were skating just feet apart. There was a small caption in small type at the bottom of the cover saying this is what their practice would look like two days from then, but many readers were still fooled. “It's a famous example of manipulated images that are used to manipulate readers into buying your paper,” said Janet Froelich, creative director of The New York Times Magazine and of T: The New York Times Style Magazine (Abrams, Little photoshop of horrors).

The other, and more well-known, occasion was during the beginning stages of the O.J.

Simpson trial. Simpson had been booked on suspicion of murder and his mug-shot was circulated through news organizations across the country. Both Time and Newsweek used the mug on their covers. It was obvious when they were published which magazine used manipulation techniques. Time had severely darkened and shadowed the image, making Simpson appear sinister and guilty. "The O.J. Simpson cover ... really was two issues. It was the issue of manipulation, but it also touched on the incredibly sensitive issue of race," said Matt Mahurin, the designer behind Time's O.J. Simpson cover (Abrams, Little shop of horrors).

These two incidents brought more awareness to the national public of the power of the press to manipulate photos, but it didn't stop the press from continuing to do so.

Several manipulated photos have arisen since the beginning of the war in Iraq. One such case is when the Los Angeles Times published a photo taken by a staff photographer of a British soldier telling Iraqi civilians to take cover. The photo was actually a composite of two photos. An editor at a sister paper of the Times, the Hartford Courant, discovered the tampering when they spotted one of the Iraqis was in the photo twice. The photo had already been published, and the photographer was immediately fired (Farid, Photo Tampering Throughout History).

Another photographer was fired when he manipulated a photo of smoke coming up from buildings in Beirut, Lebanon, after an Israeli air raid. The photographer darkened the smoke and expanded the smoke clouds to add intensity to the scene. Reuters originally published the photo on its Web site, but took it off once it was made aware that it was doctored (Farid, Photo Tampering Throughout History).

The controversy

A study by Sacchi, Agnoli and Loftus published in "Applied Cognitive Psychology" in December takes the first steps in proving that photo manipulation has an impact on how viewers

perceive reality by attempting to show that exposing a person to a doctored photo can change that person's perception of history. The study “investigated the effects of exposure to misleading doctored photographs of past public events.”

In the study, they had two versions of photos of past events — one of the protest in Tiananmen Square and another of a protest in Rome. Each original photo was doctored to show a more attended and/or violent scene. After viewing the photos, participants who were shown the doctored photos recalled a larger number of people present at the protests and a more violent atmosphere than originally occurred. The study found that “viewing modified images affected not only the way people remember past public events, but also their attitudes and behavioural intentions” (Sacchi, Agnoli and Loftus p. 1019).

Granted, this study had more of a focus on the recollection of a past event based on recently doctored photos. The study takes an extra step by addressing the prominence of doctored photos in the media today, and not just the ones published in newspapers and magazines. Anyone with a basic knowledge of Photoshop can modify an image and post it on a Web site, all within a five-minute time span. The study recognizes more specific research is needed in order to report on viewing images during “the retrieval stage” — or the instance where one collects and/or expands on knowledge upon viewing new material — and how it would affect our memory of recent events.

... the results obtained so far suggest a consideration. Television, newspapers and magazines often constitute the primary channel through which we learn about public events of the past and the present, and they are generally trusted as reliable sources. When such media employ digitally doctored photographs, they may have a stronger effect than merely influencing our opinion; by tampering with our malleable memory, they may ultimately change the way we

recall history” (Sacci, Agnoli and Loftus pgs. 1020-1021).

Photo critic Andy Grundberg said as much in an article he wrote for The New York Times in 1990: “In the future, readers of newspapers and magazines will probably view news pictures more as illustrations than as reportage, since they will be well aware that they can no longer distinguish between a genuine image and one that has been manipulated” (Grundberg, Photography View).

Is there a solution?

There is no way to measure the extent that photo manipulation and tampering takes place. In the new digital age, it has become easier for a photographer to send in manipulated photographs than ever before. Before the introduction of the digital camera, a suspicious photo could be traced to its negative for proof of tampering. Now, the photo can be immediately touched up and manipulated once photographers upload it to their computers. So steps have been taken to try to slow down the amount of tampered photos circulating the news industry.

Some news organizations have discussed the possibility of developing a standardized rule to running illustration credits or have an icon of sorts (Abrams, Little photoshop of horrors) to run with all manipulated photographs, therefore training the reader to recognize the illustrations immediately before assuming otherwise. This idea hasn't been widely adopted because many still simply disagree with the idea of photo manipulation. “No amount of captioning can ever cover for a visual lie or distortion. If it looks real in a news context, then it better be real,” said John Long, chairman of the ethics and standards committee of the National Press Photographers Association, (Ricchiardi, Distorted Picture).

Hany Farid is developing “mathematical and computational algorithms to detect tampering in digital media” (Farid, Digital Tampering & Forensics). Farid met with a director of

photography at the AP to discuss his method. When given known-to-be-altered photos, Farid's method worked in all but one case. This process is “too cumbersome,” however, “given that (news organizations like) AP receives between 2,000 and 3,000 pictures a day” (Ricchiardi, Distorted Picture). To be effective, the process would have to be easily accessible and immediate.

Conclusion

The most popular and basic argument against the manipulation of photos is an ethical and moral argument. Altering the content of a photo — superimposing a head on a different body or inserting a basketball where there wasn't one — changes its story. It becomes a lie. As a lie, it goes against all journalists try to stand for. It goes against accurately reporting the truth. Unfortunately, a moral argument can never be strong enough to compel all manipulators to stop. So what will?

In his book “Phototruth or Photofiction?” Thomas H. Wheeler discusses the numerous reasons why publishing manipulated photos is wrong. To him, the practice violates not only the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics, but more revered codes of ethics as well: the ninth commandment (“Thou shalt not bear false witness against they neighbor”), the “Golden Rule” (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”), Aristotle's Golden Mean (a method of balancing interests that is rooted in virtue and derived through reason) and Kant's Categorical Imperative (humans should “act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature”)(Wheeler, p. 70-72).

When a photo is manipulated, it's doing more than help sell the newspaper or magazine. It is now affecting how a person sees the news, retrieves the news and stores it in his or her mind. The manipulated photo creates a false representation of the truth, and it is now embedded forever in that persons mind. How can it be right to alter the truth of an event to better fit how a person

would like to retrieve it?

The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics first states: Seek the truth and report it. Publishing a manipulated photo is reporting a lie, therefore a violation of the first quarter of the code. Secondly, it says to minimize harm. Reporting false information, whether in a story or in a photograph, causes harm. Journalists are given the task of supplying society with the necessary information to be a self-governing people. False information leads to misinformed decisions, which leads to a failed society. An entirely misinformed society could not function.

This belief might seem extreme, but it is heartfelt. News organizations do not gain anything of worth by publishing manipulated photos. An award might be won, but that feeling of success is fleeting, especially when won dishonestly.

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