



visual appeal



True lies

Manipulating images: Is it ethical?

by Suzanne Salvo, ABC



Some people say any alteration of an image is a lie. They think of photos as uncensored slices of truth that should never be soiled by human intervention. They argue that at the moment of capture, photographs are pure, undisputable facts, void of prejudice. They believe that manipulating a photo is the same as manipulating the truth. These same people hark back to the good old days when you could trust what you saw in a photo to be a totally accurate rendition of reality. They tend to think of a camera as a dumb machine capable only of making objective, exact duplications of its surroundings. They forget that it's a human who decides where to point the lens and when to push the button.

see the difference?

When shooting in public places such as the Piazza del Duomo in Milan, Italy, it is difficult to control background elements. Unimportant but distracting objects such as signs and even people were removed. (No pigeons were harmed in the making of this image!)



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A health care client preferred to show employees without glasses in its annual report, so Salvo Photography re-shot the representative and switched out the heads.



ethics guidelines for executive photos
When taking photos of the CEO and other executives, keep it real. The subject should look like he or she is having a good day—not 10 pounds lighter or 10 years younger. Slight teeth whitening is deemed OK, but teeth straightening is not. Slight complexion smoothing is acceptable, but outright elimination of scars or lavish wrinkle removal is over the top. For that matter, no image taken more than two years ago should be used to represent a company leader. Such images are as much a misrepresentation of company assets as an image doctored to hide a safety violation.
—S.S.

Technology has made it possible for anyone with a computer to digitally manipulate an image. With a click of a mouse, it is now possible to completely alter reality or even change history. And chances are no one will know you did it. Sounds sneaky, doesn't it? But does that mean digital manipulation is evil or at least unethical? Should communicators ban their photographers and designers from using Photoshop to avoid falling into an ethical quagmire? The answer is no, because Photoshop and other photo-enhancement software such as Picasa are not the real problem.

Truth is in the eye of the photographer

The fact is, every image ever captured is in some way a distortion of reality. The mere act of deciding what segment of a

scene to include or exclude from a frame can drastically affect a photo's integrity. For example, you see a vast field of beautiful red tulips, but one of the plants is dying. If you focus your camera only on the healthy ones, you have not digitally altered the image, but you have warped the audience's perception of the scene. The resulting unretouched image is an intentionally misleading representation of the field of tulips. It makes no difference if the decision to crop out the healthy plants happened at the moment of capture or afterward in Photoshop.

In other words, it's not the technology that is at the heart of the photo manipulation controversy; it's the ethics behind the manipulation. If your goal is to deceive, the

manner of the lie is not important. Hal Buell, the former head of The Associated Press Photography Service, put it succinctly in Howard Bossen's 1985 article "Zone 5: Photojournalism, Ethics and the Electronic Age" (in *Studies in Visual Communication*): "I don't think your ethics can be any better or any worse using electronic methods than they are using the classical methods. Ethics is in the mind. It is not in the tools you use."

Viewer beware

Photos are created by people using machines, not by the machines alone. That is why all photos should be interpreted as one person's personal opinion and view of reality, not as reality itself. Don't believe me? Ask 10 photographers to photograph the same thing.



You will get 10 different versions of “the truth.”

The credibility of a corporate image depends on the principles of not only the photographer but also the art director and the communicator involved. The person who pushes the button decides what is in the frame and creates an atmosphere, an emotional context, through the use of composition and lighting that can be as powerful as the subject matter itself. For example, a person lit from below will appear ghoulish, while the same person with the same expression lit from the side will look much more attractive. The resulting two images leave the viewer with totally different impressions, accomplished by moving a light, not a pixel. The designer and the communicator also have the godlike

power to alter an image to make it express a certain concept or feeling. Take, for instance, the two dramatically different covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* featuring the same photo of O.J. Simpson (shown below right).

The ability to lie with a camera comes not from the creation of digital technology; it has always been with us. The question is, Where is the ethical line for communicators? Is lighting a person to camouflage a skin flaw more of a sin than applying makeup to the spot? And if makeup is OK, then where’s the crime in zapping the zit in post-production?

Photojournalism vs. photo illustration

Like a writer who decides what words to use to describe an

event, a photographer decides what lens and what angle to use. While a writer decides what to highlight in a story, a photographer selects a focal point for the image. A photographer uses light and perspective as his



The same photo of O.J. Simpson was altered by *Time* for a more dramatic effect.



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about the author
Suzanne Salvo, ABC, and her husband/partner, Chris, are co-owners of Salvo Photography, an international award-winning studio based in Houston, Texas, and near Milan, Italy. They specialize in location shooting, and their assignments have taken them to more than 60 countries. Typical projects include annual reports, ad campaigns and editorial work.

accents the way a writer uses adjectives and metaphors. These communicators can use their particular storytelling devices to deceive if they choose, at any point in the creative process. It makes no difference to the bottom-line ethics if the distortion happens in the first draft (that is, at image capture) or during the final edit (digital manipulation).

Is adding dramatic lighting in Photoshop really much different than adding dramatic elements to copy? The answer is, it depends on the context and use of the image. Generally speaking, images fall easily into a photojournalistic or a photo-illustration category. If a photo is destined for a news release (as with the *Time* and *Newsweek* covers), stricter manipulation rules apply. Woe to the communicator who gets caught altering any significant portion of a news image, and that includes lighting that changes the mood of the photo.

The *Webster University Journal* "Policy for the Ethical Use of Photographs" lists these guidelines:

Photojournalism/news—allowed manipulation

- Brightness/contrast control
- Burning and dodging to control tonal range
- Color correction
- Cropping a frame to fit the layout
- Retouching of dust and scratches

Photojournalism/news—never allowed

- Adding, moving or removing objects within the frame
- Color change other than to restore what the subject looked like
- Cropping a frame in order to alter its meaning
- Flopping a photograph (left/right reversal)
- Printing a photograph in other than "true" orientation

Photo ethics and the modern communicator

So what can you do to ensure ethical image behavior in your company? As with most ethical questions, there is no single right or wrong answer. Instead I suggest you ask yourself these questions:

- Where did this photo come from?
- Has it already been manipulated? How?
- Does the copyright allow me to alter it?
- Why am I changing this photo?
- How will the audience interpret the altered photo?
- How would they have interpreted it without alteration?
- What is the context of the photo? Is this photo supposed to be news (journalism) or illustration (art)?

Most important, talk to the photographer, art director and anyone else who could potentially alter your images. Each photographer has his or her own definition of what crosses the

ethical boundary. On his Photoshop Insider blog, well-known photographer and Photoshop guru Scott Kelby declared: "I have no qualms whatsoever with removing any distracting element in my photo. So, if there's a distracting telephone wire, or a sign, or a piece of trash on my beach photo—it's gone. No questions asked. Although I don't want to add anything to a photo, I have no problem whatsoever with duplicating something in my photo. For example, if I take a photo of a child standing in a pumpkin patch, and there's an empty spot to the child's right, I'll clone one of the other pumpkins in the photo over that empty spot to fill in the gap. My personal Photoshop moral code says: If it's already in the photo, it's OK to have more of it in the photo."

Obviously, he was not talking about news images! Instead he is referring to photo illustrations, which make up the bulk of corporate image usage. Like most professional photographers, Kelby believes that there is nothing ethically wrong with enhancing photo illustrations to make them better communication tools. If a photo can be made more compelling by adding or deleting elements, why not make use of the technology? Good photo enhancement should be like good copyediting—the goal is to improve the message, not create science fiction. •

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