What are shaping the ethical bottom line?: Identifying factors influencing young readers' acceptance of digital news photo alteration

Qingjiang (Q. J.) Yao [a,*], David D. Perlmutter [c], Josie (Zhaoxi) Liu [b]

[a] Department of Communication, Lamar University, P.O. Box 10050, Beaumont, TX 77710, USA
[b] Department of Communication, Trinity University, San Antonio, TX, 78216, USA
[c] College of Media & Communication, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409, USA

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ABSTRACT

While most research on digital ethics has focused on professional codes or case studies in manipulation, there has been little formal research on what the readers thinks about what is and what is not visually ethical in a digital age. This study examines what affect young readers' acceptance or rejection of digital alteration of news images. The major finding is that the perceived prevalence of photo alteration, media credibility, and personal Photoshop use and knowledge are the major influencers of "non-professional" standards of acceptance of photo alteration. The study implies the necessity of intervention from scholars, media professionals, and ethical activists to discuss photo alteration and advocate ethical standards for it.
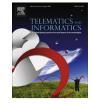
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In the almost 190 years since the birth of photography, there have been innumerable debates by news and documentary practitioners, artists, critics, and academics about by what means (if at all) someone can create an ethical photograph. Today, the term "digital ethics" has arisen to encompass the challenges news photography and videography face in an era when (a) the manipulation of image content (i.e., "Photoshopping") is now easier than ever and accessible to practically anyone; (b) the line between "professional" and "public" images has blurred since many well-known news images were originally produced by amateurs with cell phones; and (c) potentially any image from any (known or unknown, reliable or unreliable) source can rise to global prominence via social media and the internet (Wheeler, 2002; Perlmutter, 2004; Silcock et al., 2008; Perlmutter and Silvestri, 2013).

Notably, however, the holders of the ethics in question have been visual news practitioners. Most research on "photo ethics" has been focused on editors and news photographers (Reaves, 1991, 1993, 1995b; Russial and Wanta, 1998; Borden, 1997; Kelly, 1996; Gladney and Ehrlich, 1996; Lowrey, 2003; Fosdick and Fahmy, 2007; Carlson, 2009; Mäenpää and Seppänen, 2010) or government propaganda apparatuses (e.g., Brugioni, 1999; Jaubert, 1989[1986]). Other research offers the researchers' views of the ethical dilemmas raised by news photo practices or explores the effects of digital news production (Powell, 1998; Slater, 2002; Stephens et al., 2007). In addition, some scholars and professionals have argued for particular codes of ethics for photography—always professional photography—with increasing emphasis on the "digital" factor (cf. Mercedes, 1996; Newton, 2001; Perlmutter, 2004; Ricchiardi, 2007).

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: qyao@lamar.edu (Q.(Q. J.) Yao).

In contrast, the visual ethics of the viewing (and now image-creating and disseminating public) has been little studied (Huang, 2001; Watson and DeJong, 2011; Kim and Kelly, 2010; cf. McKinley and Fahmy, 2011). How people use pictures that they create personally is, as visual anthropologist Richard Chalfen notes, one of the least studied areas of visual communication (2002; 2003).

The case for studying the public's view of visual ethics is twofold. First, the meaning of an image has always been in the mind of the receiver, not just the photographer, and the two may not be in accordance. Wheeler (2002), for example, argues that the readers create their own meaning of news images. Citing the discussion of the ethical standard of quote usage in news writing, he argues that "visual journalists and their readers share a set of assumptions that provide the foundation for photography's long-lived credibility," which is the reader's "Qualified Expectation of Reality" (p. 131). Indeed, at least one survey of major news icons of the pre-internet past found that the "meaning" of each famous image varied for different audiences and was often dependent on the frame of their preexisting beliefs, i.e., believing is seeing (Perlmutter, 1998).

Second, the audience mind-eye is even more important than ever to study because not only do audiences make their own meaning, they are now creating their own images, and increasingly those images are becoming news icons in their own right. As was the focus of a special issue of *Visual Communication Quarterly*, the professional and the "home" sphere are merging (Perlmutter and Silvestri, 2013). "Amateurs" present at major news events are often creating the first visual draft of history via their cell phones and then disseminating them to the wider photo stream (e.g., the Hudson River plane landing) or creating pictures meant for personal or friend-group consumption that are then leaked into public and professional consciousness (e.g., the Abu Ghraib prison humiliation photos). We no longer live in an era when the photo ethics of professional editors and photographers is the only consideration.

It is the goal of this present study, then, to examine in depth the photo ethics of a particular "audience" and then further ask what preexisting variables (including knowledge of or personal experience in "Photoshopping") can affect public acceptance of ethical photo editing. Moreover, we will argue that public acceptance of photo alteration in turn affects what the public think is allowable ethical practice for professionals.

1. Literature review

Drawing a line between ethical photo editing and unethical manipulation for industrial news productions at any particular time period has not been easy, because no photo is published without being processed and standards can vary, albeit not widely between publications and types of media (Reaves, 1995a, 1995b; Wheeler, 2002; Mäenpää and Seppänen, 2010). Accepted processing techniques are within the "grammar" of photography: they serve the purpose of clarification, focus, or fine-tuning (Wheeler, 2002, p.92). For example, no matter in the film era or in the digital era, cleaning, repairing, and some cropping, dodging, burning, and color correction are considered acceptable photographic grammars. Professionals such as Joe Elbert, former assistant managing editor of the *Washington Post*, believe that the bottom line for acceptance is that "you never change the reality" (Johnston, 2003, p. 11). The Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists also reads that "image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible" but that a photographer or editor should "never distort the content of news photo or video" (1996). Deeper discussion, however, reveals that the very idea of keeping the "reality," or truth, in the photos undistorted may not be elaborated easily.

A crucial factor in these positions, even before the rise of Photoshop and the internet were assumptions about the "viewer's share," that is the idea that what the public thinks a picture means and what the public's expectations of the veridicality and verisimilitude of news pictures are matter. So digital alteration is acceptable as long as it does not change the public understanding of the reality portrayed in the photo.

Based on that idea, Wheeler (2002) developed his theory of "Qualified Expectation of Reality" from three perspectives. In the first perspective, an alteration that violates readers' expectation is certainly unethical. Stage-managed photos are unethical because, unless being told, readers would assume that activities pictured in the photo happened naturally and were just caught by the photographers (Wheeler, 2002).

On the other hand, a photo without manipulation can also be unethical, if its context (environment, placement, captions, and accompanying text, etc.) makes it violate reader's expectation. The April 1994 cover photo of *Time*, for example, drew protests because an older photo of a grim President Clinton was used to hint that the president was worrying about the Whitewater scandal.

Finally, drastic photo manipulation may be ethical or even required to ensure readers' expectations being met correctly. The *New York Times* has published a significantly manipulated photo that garnered applause because the manipulation helped the reading public understand that the photo was taken in a studio rather than in a natural setting (Wheeler, 2002). Wheeler (2002) also reviews five other ethical tests on photo editing and finds that all of them are based on public expectation and acceptance, the ultimate defining factor in his ethical theory on ethical photo editing. In the negotiation within editors and between them and the readers, public acceptance is also an influencing factor, albeit not the deciding one. For instance, the May 2013 issue of the *New York Times* monthly style magazine, *T*, used a cover model thinned by digital retouching, and some readers complained. The fashion editor argued that readers accept fashion photos being fantasy rather than news. *New York Times* public editor Margaret Sullivan blogged about that controversy and pointed out that *T* magazine is still an editorial product produced by journalists (DPReview Staff, 2013).