Are Photo-manipulation and Photojournalism Inherently Incompatible?

Since its invention photography has been seen as ‘a medium of truth and unassailable accuracy’.\(^1\) However, as darkroom and digital post-production techniques have become more sophisticated it has become possible to radically alter photographs after they have been taken. It has been claimed that this has undermined the documentary value of photography, and caused a crisis of confidence in photojournalism as images which were once regarded as objective evidential representations of reality are now increasingly seen as ‘photographic fraud’.\(^2\)

Despite this crisis, image manipulation is still seen as a necessary journalistic tool and is employed by photojournalists and editors around the world, albeit within an informal framework intended to prevent its unethical use. The fact photo-manipulation has precipitated a crisis and yet continues to be used reflect its inherent duality, its power to ‘correct or to corrupt’.\(^3\) My intention is to show that this existing ethical framework, within which certain manipulation practices are tolerated while others are effectively banned is illogically arbitrary, largely ineffective in preventing abuses, and ultimately restricts the use of a valuable journalistic tool. I will also attempt to suggest an alternative framework, while exploring issues of accountability, public distrust of images, and future issues.

In contemporary newsrooms certain forms of photo-manipulation are considered ‘routine and innocuous’\(^4\) and therefore acceptable for photojournalists to use. Usually these are techniques used on a small scale to correct technical shortcomings that otherwise detract from the photograph’s content, without altering the image’s meaning. Examples include correcting

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colour balance or making minor crops of a photograph. Photojournalists and editors tend to justify these practices ethically by arguing that they bring the photograph closer to reality or are a necessity due to publishing constraints. Photo-manipulation in journalism becomes unacceptable where it significantly alters the meaning or reality of an image, as to do so conflicts with core journalistic virtues of ‘truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, completeness, independence, credibility and balance’. Adnan Hajj was the subject of the ‘Reutersgate’ scandal in 2008 when it emerged that photographs he had submitted to that agency had been extensively manipulated. In one of them Hajj copied or ‘cloned’ an image of the aftermath of an Israeli airstrike on Beirut to exaggerate the amount of smoke. When discovered Hajj argued he had done this for aesthetic reasons, to remove dust, but the case became politically charged because as a Lebanese citizen Hajj was open to the accusation that he had been seeking to exaggerate the damage done by the Israeli strike. Whether his actions were due to malign intent or negligence, Hajj actions compromised core journalistic values, not least his own credibility.

The problem with this guiding framework of acceptable versus unacceptable photo-manipulation is that it tends to conflate using specific editing techniques with not interfering with the reality of a photograph, while other techniques are seen as inherently misleading. Spence characterizes this in terms of the philosophical debate over which is right, a deontological approach of ‘morality derived from the inherent rightness of a principle applied in action’ or a utilitarian attitude that photo-manipulation is an acceptable practice ‘in cases when maximizing the aggregate news value can be seen as a morally good and hence desirable end’. For many photographers and editors the deontological idea prevails, that certain types of manipulation are

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5 Spence, Alexandra, Quinn, and Dunn, Media, Markets, and Morals, p.165
6 Spence, Alexandra, Quinn, and Dunn, Media, Markets, and Morals, p.159
8 Cloning is essentially a form of composite, whereby a portion of image is reproduced to cover another area of the same image, thereby either seamlessly hiding part of the scene, or reproducing part of it.
9 Spence, Alexandra, Quinn, and Dunn, Media, Markets, and Morals, p. 158
10 Spence, Alexandra, Quinn, and Dunn, Media, Markets, and Morals, p. 157
inherently wrong. I would argue a better attitude would be to recognize that all manipulations can positively or negatively impact the ‘reality’ of a photograph, depending on the method and context of their use. While Adnan Hajj allegedly used compositing techniques to distort the reality of a photograph, other photographers have used similar techniques to do the opposite. Struggling with the crude camera technology of the time, the first world war photographer Frank Hurley wrote that ‘to include the event on a single negative, I have tried and tried but the results are hopeless, everything is on such a vast scale, figures are scattered, the atmosphere is thick with haze and smoke, shells will not burst where required, it might as well be a rehearsal in a paddock’\textsuperscript{11}. To solve this problem he began to make composite images from multiple negatives. \textit{Over the Top}\textsuperscript{12} shows troops advancing through trenches beneath a flight of aircraft under fire. Investigation of Hurley’s archive shows that this image was a composite; the aircraft for example were originally a single photograph in their own right.\textsuperscript{13} Although Hurley’s composites initially attracted criticism, with Australia’s official war historian describing the images as ‘fakes’,\textsuperscript{14} they have subsequently come to be seen as highly accurate depictions of trench warfare.

What the contrast between Frank Hurley and Adnan Hajj reveals is that the acceptability and utility of photo-manipulation in journalistic photography is partly a matter of the photographers own honesty about what he or she is doing. Although Hurley came under attack at the time for his practices, he made no attempt to conceal what he had done. Hajj may or may not have had a political motive behind his manipulations, in some ways it doesn't matter. What is important is that he was not open about what he had done, this was in itself compromising.

\textsuperscript{11} Frank Hurley the Man who Made History, (BBC, 2004) extracts available at http://aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/frank-hurley/clip1/ Also in six parts on You Tube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsZOsvWTmI0
\textsuperscript{14} Frank Hurley the Man who Made History, (BBC, 2004) extracts available at http://aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/frank-hurley/clip1/ Also in six parts on You Tube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsZOsvWTmI0
Again two separate issues can become easily confused; namely the belief in the inherent dishonesty of an editing technique and the personal honesty of an individual journalist. The former is meaningless, as I have hopefully demonstrated individual techniques are not honest or dishonest except in the way they are used. The latter however is absolutely critical, as without honesty journalism and lies open to claims of ‘unknown bias and prejudice, which are symptoms of journalistic vice’. The acceptability of photo-manipulation is therefore further complicated by the honesty of the journalists who use it, as Chapnick states ‘unethical people have always done unethical things and continue to do so’ however wide or narrow the range of tools available to them.

Credibility is key to journalism, and theorists argue that dishonest or unclear use of photo manipulation leads to a public distrust of photographs. Brugioni for example writes that ‘when a photo is manipulated in any way, truth is compromised; when truth is compromised, distrust begins’. In such a climate of public distrust no image will be taken at face value. North Korea, a serial state manipulator of images, offers an insight into how problematic this could be. In recent images from the funeral of leader Kim Il Jung, western viewers spotted what appeared to be a giant soldier amongst the ranks of people assembled as Kim’s funeral cortege passed through Pyongyang. Commentators and bloggers initially suggested some sort of image manipulation had taken place, although for what purpose no one could suggest. Further investigation has now led many to believe that the man in the picture is neither a digital glitch nor a Photoshop trick, but rather a very tall North Korean basketball star. This might seem humorous, but a future where unlikely events are immediately assumed to be fabrications is

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15 Spence, Alexandra, Quinn, and Dunn, Media, Markets, and Morals, p.159
16 Chapnick, Howard, Truth Needs No Ally: Inside Photojournalism (Colombia, 1994) p.299-300
17 Dino A. Brugioni, Photo Fakery, The history and techniques of photographic deception and manipulation (Virginia, 1999) p. 202
troubling. Loss of faith in images is particularly problematic for the media because they often play a vital evidential role in supporting text which on its own would be considered unreliable. If photographs are proved to be as untrustworthy as text, the media will have to find new ways to evidence it’s stories.

Blanket banning image manipulation in the hope this will bolster public confidence in photographs is no solution however. Such an approach neglects the bigger problem that photo-manipulation, whether corruptive or corrective, reveals the main problem with photography as a media, that every step in the photographic process is a form of manipulation, and that the meaning of the final image is always subjective. From the type of lens a photographer uses to the final image they select from hundreds of a single event, the photographic process is a series of arbitrary choices that render a split second of one point of view in two dimensions. For the purpose of journalism definitions of reality vary and are as subjective as the photographs they are applied to. Spence for example argues that ‘realistic images are those…that correspond as closely as possible to the way things exist in the world’. Yet by such a definition we could make the very dubious argument that the notorious Time magazine cover of a heavily manipulated OJ Simpson photograph was not without justification in the way it implied guilt, as despite being acquitted at his trial Simpson has continued to be implicated in the murders ever since. This inherent subjectivity is what undermines any attempt to develop a convincing ethical framework to guide the use of manipulated images. As Time editor Gaines pointed out in

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19 Spence, Alexandra, Quinn, and Dunn, Media, Markets, and Morals, p.157
20 Unknown, 1994, O.J. Simpson Police Photograph as it appeared on the cover of Newsweek (unaltered) and Time (altered), available at http://www.tc.umn.edu/~hick0088/classes/csci_2101/false.html
his editorial following the Simpson debacle, ‘No single set of rules will ever cover all possible cases. It will remain, as it has always been, a matter of subjective judgment’.  

Is there any hope for an effective ethical framework to guide the use of manipulation in photojournalism? Perhaps, but it would need to be one that breaks markedly with the present model. As has already been discussed certain practices are currently sanctioned, while others are effectively banned in a way that makes little sense and only contributes to the public perplexity and suspicion around image manipulation. In 1990 Grundberg prophesied that ‘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’.  

This has not yet happened, but moving towards a system whereby ‘pure’ photographs and manipulated images are clearly marked apart might be a positive step in reaffirming public confidence. Watermarking manipulated images with a prominent symbol is just one example of how this might work. Whatever the system, imposing it comprehensively across many publications and platforms is both the biggest challenge, and central to its success.

However, even if it were possible to develop a comprehensive framework and persuade major news organisations to use it, the changing nature of the media industry would make it difficult to enforce. The erosion of staff photographers in favour of freelancers, photographs from citizen journalists and from official sources (e.g. government, companies and so on) are all eroding editorial control and oversight, in some respects for better, but in this context for the worse. To take citizen journalists as an example, their position as non-professionals is often assumed to mean that they are non-political. Broomberg touched on this phenomenon in a

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23 Grundberg, Ask It No Questions
recent lecture when he pointed out the tendency to believe that ‘if an image is low resolution it speaks the truth because quality has been compromised’. This is clearly a problematic assumption, for example citizens producing anti-government media in countries like Syria are not neutral sources. The video and photographs they post to the internet and which is reused by global media organisations is produced to make a political point that is rarely discussed, most likely because it is one most media organisations sympathise with. With basic versions of photo-manipulation software already available on mobile phones, coupled with phone cameras of ever greater resolution a future where citizen journalists make use of these tools to manipulate images to serve an agenda is not unlikely. In 2003 it required a journalist with a laptop to manipulate an image of an Israeli airstrike, in 2013 it might only require a bystander with a telephone.

Even apparently trustworthy official sources are not above reproach, and the use of images released by the very organizations supposedly under media scrutiny pose important credibility issues. For example in 2005 Jean Charles Mendezez was shot dead in London by an undercover police officer who mistook him for suspected suicide bomber. In the aftermath of the shooting a composite image of Mendezez and the man police had believed Mendezez was when he was shot was released by the Metropolitan police and widely published in the British media. The implication of the image was that Mendezez closely resembled the suspect, and that the police officer who fired the shots had made a justifiable mistake. During the inquest into his death however, a forensic expert stated that he believed the image had been manipulated to make the two men look more alike. The accusation was never pursued, but if true, the Metropolitan Police had deployed photo-manipulation to corrupt the media to serve their own

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24 Broomberg, Adam, guest lecture at the London College of Communication, 18th March 2012
agenda. The media for their part had apparently failed to question the validity or purpose of the photographs that they had been provided with. This failure to question is exacerbated by changes in news consumption that have resulted in an ‘increase in the volume and importance of images’. As the photographs needed for print and the number provided grow it seems inevitable that however good their intentions editors and newsroom staff will have less time to spend determining when images are manipulated in unethical ways.

In summary photo-manipulation is a huge problem for photojournalism, a rapidly changing one, but not by any means a new one. Manipulation has the power to corrupt and undermine the assumed truth telling function of photojournalism, serving the political agenda or the aesthetic priorities of the manipulator. At the same time it can play an important function in heightening and enhancing that same truth telling power of photography and overcoming and fundamental limitations of photography. For some the debate about photo-manipulation is simply a smokescreen used to avoid engaging with more important issues about photography and photojournalism. Pedro Meyer argues that news organisations are ‘chastising creativity and the use of the tools of the 21st century, rather than taking a good look at the real causes behind any loss of trust by the public’ while Grundberg questions whether ‘photography’s loss of its documentary authority has less to do with the arrival of video and computer images than it does with its own superabundance and stereotypicality.’ Whichever outlook we accept, image manipulation will continue to occur in one form or another, and whether prohibited or embraced it will continue to present problems for individual practitioners and the industry as a whole. The only thing that cannot be done is to ignore it.

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27 Spence, Alexandra, Quinn, and Dunn, Media, Markets, and Morals, p.155
28 Meyer, In defense of photographer Patrick Schneider
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