

the Lying lens

Don't blame the camera



Digital technology is rattling the credibility cage of news photography. The talk is of dangers deriving from 'digital manipulation'. But what counts as 'manipulation', and how exactly does it damage credibility?

Angie Lazaro surveys the field of South African photojournalism:

The public's reliance on news photographs as a vital component in newspaper reporting is central to the question of journalistic credibility. For years newphotos have served as visual confirmation of the truth and accuracy of newspaper reports. But today the controversial use of digital image technology threatens to change this historic relationship between picture and paper.

The majority of South African photojournalists working for daily newspapers agree that news photography's credibility is at risk. This is according to the views of a quarter of the estimated 100 photojournalists in the country who responded to a study late last year. There is an interesting theory embedded in their responses and their reasoning behind the dangers of digital manipulation.

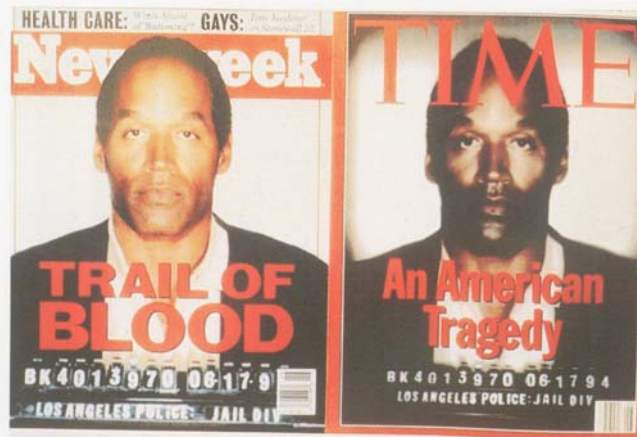
News photographs have never been pure unadulterated representations of reality. Manual photographic techniques have been in evidence since the origin of photography, and only in recent years have they been supplemented (and surpassed) by digital technology. Framing, focus, depth-of-field, shutter-speed, lenses, film, lighting and other devices have always been used to make specific photographic meanings; techniques such as burning, dodging, colour enhancement and cropping have been traditionally accepted. What's new now is simply that this can all be done much faster – and more invisibly – with digital programmes such as Photoshop.

But if making, adding or changing meanings in news photographs is not something new, why the fuss caused by 'digital manipulation'? Clearly, it cannot be the operation as such, nor the use of new technology, that raises the spectre of 'manipulation' and damage to credibility.

The apparent cause for alarm lies in two complex criteria that photojournalists use to call 'foul': the realism of the image, and the traditional techniques used in its making. South African photojournalists operate intuitively with these two criteria to define manipulation. They work with rules, or what theorists call 'codes', of what is realistic, and rules or codes of what is normatively acceptable in photographic production.

Their responses show that a photograph appears credible if it fits the familiar recognitions of how news photographs are represented (codes of realism). That is, if the image incorporates 'natural' and 'normal' concepts (naturalism). The realism codes of a photograph also include 'intertextuality' elements such as the accompanying caption and news story which contribute to its credibility.

Thus, if the photograph complies with realism codes it is



Did Time darken its cover, or did Newsweek lighten theirs?

accepted as credible – but only up to a point. When the reader discovers that the photograph deviates from the accepted codes of production, things change – according to the photojournalists surveyed.

Production codes pertain to all the stages of the photographic process. There are standard ways of making meanings which are acceptable within the realm of news photography. Techniques such as retouching, bleaching, producing print composites and deleting or moving elements in a photograph are perceived as changing the denoted meaning and thus deviating from the accepted codes of production. Other normally accepted techniques (e.g., burning) can also be branded as illegitimate if they change the codes of realism in the resulting image.

If a photograph is recognised as deviating from the accepted codes of production, its credibility may be questioned. Thus the increasing power of photographic technology can lead to increasing cases of production codes being crossed.

According to these South African photojournalists, then, for a news photograph to count as credible and non-manipulated it must meet two distinct conditions: it must be both realistic and the product of accepted practices. It is not enough that the product looks 'okay' if the process behind it was not. Nor is a newphoto credible if the production process is 'okay' but the resulting image contradicts the codes of what we take as realistic.

What can be done to rescue newphoto credibility when the seamless character of digital technology means that no

one can easily tell if production codes have been broken? South African photojournalists are uncertain as to whether a caption explaining the changes would enhance or jeopardise credibility. They mostly prefer to avoid any 'manipulation' of news photographs in the first instance. But some suggested that a category system identifying an illustration or news photograph as manipulated could enhance credibility.

The survey also revealed that the credibility of a newphoto depends partly on source authority codes, such as the publication in which it appears. The two case studies used in the research, (including the O.J. Simpson images, left) illustrate the differences between a news photograph appearing in a newspaper and a news photograph appearing on the cover of a magazine. Manipulated newspaper photographs are more at risk of losing their credibility than a newphoto on the cover of a magazine. A third of the photojournalists said that the public expects magazines to manipulate their covers and the breaking of codes is therefore more acceptable.

Capturing images digitally – or making digital changes on news photographs – does not imply manipulation *per se*. Manipulation occurs only if those changes contradict accepted codes of realism and/or production. Manipulation is not so much about the techniques or the technology used, but rather the way that technology relates to the codes of photographic representation. It is the act of deviating from these codes that impacts on credibility.

This model of photographic representation, based on the codes of realism and production, shows that credibility is always constructed, and is not something intrinsic to photojournalism, old or new. What complicates things today is that photographic digital retouching is more sophisticated than its manual predecessor. It not only provides clean, 'realistic' representations; it also allows the invention of photo-realistic images – in other words it goes beyond changing photographically captured images.

The implicit theory of credibility and manipulation held by South African photojournalists is thus only a starting point. It will probably be remoulded as the dynamics of photographic production and representation continue to shift.

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