

MANIPULATION IN PHOTOJOURNALISM: Is it ethical? Is it corrupt?

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Abstract

Computing has had tremendous impacts on photojournalism as traditional 'wet' darkrooms have all but disappeared, and remarkably dynamic software has become commonplace in the newsroom. Technical advancement has helped photojournalism be more effective in many ways, but has also created ethical challenges in making deception expeditious and less transparent. This paper explores the ethics of computer-based photo manipulation and the use of images whose exposures are measured by intra-camera computers.

Furthermore, the paper will explore, using a model of corruption developed by Edward Spence, whether photo manipulation, computer generated or otherwise, is not only unethical but also constitutes corruption.

Ultimately, a solution is offered that exploits one of computers' best attributes – consistency in measuring visual data – but decries conduct that requires subjective interpretation that results in inaccurate and inconsistent imaging as well as other types of manipulation that can eventually result in a loss of media credibility through the public's recognition that photo manipulation is at best unethical at worst corrupt.

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Journalism

Introduction

Public trust in journalism is waning with each day that passes, but the press' role as watchdog is still necessary for democracy. One contribution to this decline in public trust is confusion about photographic integrity. Often for good reason, many people don't believe the images they see in print news are accurate and honest reflections of reality. The *New York Times* photography critic, Andy Grundberg, predicted a tenuous prospect for documentary photography: 'In the future, readers of newspapers and magazines will probably view news pictures more as illustrations¹ than as reportage, since they can no longer distinguish between a genuine image and one that has been manipulated' (Grundberg, 1990). By determining proper ethical actions in photo manipulation standards, part of which is determining how much journalists ought to rely on high-tech manipulations, we will establish guidelines that, if adopted, should rejuvenate some public trust in digital images and hence improve journalism's public standing in general.

There are three broad questions to be answered in this paper in regard to photo manipulation and ethics: (1) What are the proper ethical guidelines for post-shoot photo manipulations (manipulations made after the photo has been taken)? (2) How much should we rely on intra-camera exposure calculations instead of post-shoot manipulations? (3) Do photo manipulation constitute corruption of the journalistic process?

Making Choices

Before a news photographer lifts the camera to her eye she has the obligation to make choices – what lens to use, what settings best match the available light, how close or far to stand from a subject, to determine where the borders of the photo will be in terms of composition, among other considerations. By at least one definition, each of these choices, when put into action, is a form of manipulation, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing (Elliot & Lester; 2003).

There is also the form of manipulation that is part of the photo-editing process. This can be a matter of routine colour correction or a pejorative form of manipulation that changes reality for the sake of sensationalism or aesthetics. Although many of these manipulations can occur during the photo shoot by changing settings in the computers within digital cameras – in most cases they occur on desktop computers in the newsroom.²

Journalists exist, in theory, to enhance the public good by providing accurate information that people can use to make decisions about public life. We'll focus on two main ethical doctrines – consequentialism and deontology – that can help photojournalists and news audiences better understand issues surrounding image manipulation to meet their collective moral and practical ends. For example,

¹ Illustrations are, by definition, significantly altered photographs or drawings that are credited as such in journalistic publications so not to mislead readers or viewers about the reality or origin of the content.

² Two definitions of manipulation were chosen from the Oxford English Dictionary: (1)'To move, arrange, operate, or control by the hands or by mechanical means, especially in a skilful manner'. (2)'To influence or manage shrewdly or deviously; to tamper with or falsify for personal gain'.

utilitarianism – a form of consequentialism – can effectively help guide the practises of photo manipulation, as maximising news value to the greatest number is often a desired end. One way of maximising news value, for example, is to maximise journalistic truth³ and accuracy in dealing with photo manipulation, for without truth and accuracy, journalism is without moral grounding and credibility (Merrill, 1997).

Categories of Image Manipulation

In exploring photo manipulation, we must consider what manipulations occur during the shoot, but also what happens to images afterwards. Post-shoot conduct is the most commonly explored aspect of photo manipulation because it presents the most technical challenges and the majority of the moral problems that arise in digital imaging. Although unethical manipulation started with darkroom photography, and is more than a century old, the need for further exploration is evident because of the continuing decline in public trust in media, which is in part related to poor photojournalistic practise (Tompkins, 2002). Many scholars and journalists believe digital manipulation practises, both morally positive and negative, increased with new technology, because high-tech tools make manipulation more expeditious (Lowrey, 1998).

The other relevant manipulation process occurs during the photo shoot through intra-camera computer processors that may be justifiably called upon to abdicate a duty once left at least in part to human senses. Inside all professional cameras are remarkably accurate computers that have eclipsed human optical judgment in measuring photographic exposures in *most*⁴ lighting situations. Therefore, one crucial ethical argument is whether photojournalists should risk embracing technology with measuring exposures, therefore reducing one aspect of their personal touch. As we shall see, welcoming technology could support raising the ethical bar in photojournalism without reducing the most essential forms of photographic autonomy.

Journalism Values and Virtues

However, to make ethical determinations one must first refer to sound moral reasoning. Within journalism, professional codes and rules of conduct have long been available but in some cases, poorly conveyed, and rarely enforced. Therefore, developing professional standards and using them is an important start in creating an ethical environment in news photography. Because the newsgathering processes of photojournalists and text reporters are so similar, they share the same general set of values, which are essentially journalistic virtues,⁵ as they all have qualities that

³ Truth in journalism is often known as ‘journalistic truth’ because information journalists provide is intended to be bits of truth about something, although it is usually impossible to get the ‘whole truth’. Merrill, John. (1997). *Journalism Ethics*. St. Martin’s Press, Inc. New York. Pp. 105-108.

⁴ Even the most sophisticated camera processors can be ‘tricked’ into poor exposures by unusual lighting phenomena and may need manual overriding.

⁵ Virtue ethics enhance what Aristotle called the ‘good life’ by adhering to sets of intrinsically good values (virtues) guided by ‘regulative ideals’ that promote excellence in the way the virtues are interpreted.

Cocking, Oakley. (2001). *Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K. pp. 25-38.

closely correspond to traditional epistemological virtues (virtues of knowledge) such as truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, completeness, independence, credibility, and balance amongst others, that are essential for guiding and supporting morally defensible behaviour (Cocking & Oakley, 2001).

These core journalistic values are essential to journalistic practice because they are conducive to objectivity and truth. Without an attempt by the photojournalist to be impartial to the news, the visual newsgathering process becomes tainted with unknown bias and prejudice, which are symptoms of journalistic vice.

Credibility is an important value in relation to photo manipulation and is closely related to (or generated by) the virtue of honesty. Essentially, credibility is most at risk when readers realise they have been deceived by a photo, become sceptical and ultimately lose faith in the photojournalistic process. This scepticism not only costs readers, which is bad for the press in terms of economic sustenance, but causes individuals to forsake the news source and to give up a valuable tool in his or her own citizenship.

Accuracy is also a seminal journalism value in regard to photo manipulation; it corresponds closely to the traditional virtue of truth. Since the goal of the photojournalist is, with obvious technical and philosophical limitations, to re-create reality, being accurate in terms of all of the technical (composition, light, shadows) and idealistic (no posing subjects; reducing imposition on news event) components is the aim. But whenever one mentions accuracy as it relates to photojournalism, one never means to imply exact reality, but an effort towards precision, conceding only to insurmountable technical limitations that photography and visual perception present.

Ideally, photojournalists maximise technical capabilities but concede to unavoidable flaws, so although accepting the challenges of exactitude is unavoidable, this should not open the door for technological philandering. Computers have a way of bridging the exactness gap or extending it, depending upon how ethically they are used to mirror reality.

What is Real?

Although photographic images only portray a fraction of a given news event, it is the duty of the photographer to treat all aspects of that slice within justifiable journalistic and moral constraints. Although choices related to news judgment are essential to conducting oneself during a photo shoot, it is not part of this analysis per se because it deserves separate attention for its unique array of complexities. The assertions that will be made in the coming paragraphs will presume that photojournalists are making proper moral choices in news judgment (what to include in this limited slice of reality), but are now considering how to properly handle exposures, cropping, and colour balance to re-create reality.

Since we have already determined the inherent flaws in re-creating reality, we must now acknowledge that journalistic reality is a matter of closeness. A mortal enemy of closeness in photojournalism is the self-regarding desire some photojournalists have for inauthentic beauty. Aesthetic desires beget complex moral considerations in photojournalism because practitioners often fight internally for or against artificial

beautification, which challenges the truth-telling advantages of accurate but potentially less beautiful photographs.

Many photojournalists think it is harmless to make minor touch-ups for visual aesthetics so long as they don't go 'too far'. But, for example, when photographs of dark scenes are brightened by Photoshop for the sake of revealing more detail – seemingly innocuous – the photo becomes tainted. The brightening alters the image from its more accurate form. A hypothetical dark room (not the laboratory) conceals physical details that bright room clarifies, but such is the visual reality for a dark room⁶. As North Carolina Press Photographers Association's President Chuck Liddy said in regard to a recent photojournalistic scandal, 'As news photographers, we have a duty to accurately portray what we see, not what we WANT to see' (Irby, 2003). But there are exceptions to this point. Darkness, especially, begs photographers to use strobes (artificial lighting) in order to have a usable image at all. Often, without the use of a strobe, there would be no opportunity to have a photograph at all, therefore leaving potentially useful images in the wake of overly strict ethical standards. This is clearly a case where photographers must use their 'spot judgment' to make decisions on where artificial lighting is necessary to get images that the public would be at a loss to be without.

In terms of adhering to truth, we can legitimately claim that a dark scene, which is artificially brightened, is at least an untruth, or lacking a kind of complete truth, but there is consistency in the use of strobes, as they are calibrated for various exposure settings. Debate over realism in news photography first developed in the early 1900s when the burgeoning photojournalism community argued over 'straight' photography and 'art' photography. 'Straight photography was unretouched (or lightly retouched) by the artist's brush. In art photography, the photo was heavily painted – the original photo only served as a base for a future painting' (Lowrey, 1998). But by acknowledging photojournalism as a form of bona fide reporting in the late 20th Century, its practise advanced to what most modern practitioners consider ethical.

Common Practises

Below is a list of commonly accepted manipulation practises, some of which many argue are routine and innocuous. Based on aforementioned moral theories, an argument will be made for accepting or refuting each practise:

Colour Balance -- rendering a match (or the closest thing to a match) in colours in an image to that of the scene that was photographed. Colour balance commonly involves consistently correcting technical flaws (acceptable) and making aesthetic improvements (theoretically unacceptable).

The most widely used digital camera in the photojournalism industry as of the commencement of this paper, the Nikon D1, is well known for a few technical flaws, one of which is an ugly yellow haze that covers every image it records. No matter

⁶ There is a good news-value argument for ethical use of artificial lighting, such as on or off-camera flash, so its use is justified under certain circumstances, but for the sake of concision a specific argument will be withheld. As will be argued later in this paper, use of the computers inside cameras, one of which is also in a flash unit, there is an acceptable precision and consistency in some computer-driven equipment that eclipses human judgment in comparative quality.

what camera lighting settings are adjusted for the various basic lighting scenarios (daylight, outdoor-cloudy, fluorescent, incandescent, tungsten, etc), the images always appear with this yellow scum – this scum, according to the naked eye, does not exist in reality and therefore must be removed. This is one situation in which Adobe Photoshop digital imaging software – the industry standard – is a saviour. It allows for colour corrections that bring an image to its fullest realisation of realism.

On the flip side, this function can be easily abused. For example, it is not uncommon for photographers to ‘warm’ or ‘cool’ photographs as added effect after making a legitimate colour correction. Warming involves artificially infusing reds, yellows, or a combination thereof for aesthetics, which is analogous to someone wearing make-up – possibly pretty, but unnatural. Cooling involves artificially infusing shades of blue, and is popular for cold weather photos or for enhancing already some existing colours, although in most cases irresponsibly. The mere act of colour correction often tempts photographers to make aesthetic enhancements that go beyond acceptable adjustments used to re-create reality, thus violate the virtues of accuracy and integrity. For the most virtuous photographers who resist artificially improving the aesthetic appeal of their images by warming or cooling, there is still the challenge of colour recall. Colour recall is simply accurately remembering the colours in an image as they were in reality for the purposes of re-creating reality through manipulation. Although many proud photographers claim to have the ability to recall visual images – including colours – with absolute accuracy, it is an impossible task for any human, and in being so, creates an ethical problem in terms of most colour-manipulating processes.

Take any five photojournalists who have photographed the same scene and have them independently adjust colour balance or brightness from memory, and it is likely that there will be five different results. So who is likely to have the true colours and exposure? Probably, no one. Research in the area of oral history reveals some of the issues of accuracy in memory recall. Scholars writing about the expanding academic realm of oral history study have made note of new and varying research methods for distinguishing truth in the information they gather. Although mentioning the specific research methods would not be useful here, the acknowledgment of challenges in accuracy due to memory is the relevant point from which to draw comparison.

Essentially, researchers who are interviewing witnesses to historical events are finding blatant errors in recall that presumably foreshadow undetected errors. For example, a man who was interviewed about a 1953 massacre in Italy insisted it happened in a different year (Stille, 2001). In the same interview, several other ‘facts’ were deemed false by the researcher, leading the researcher to be sceptical of any of the interview’s objective value. Since photographers are witnesses to news, and if they rely on memory to re-create reality in post-shoot manipulations, one must presume there are inherent inaccuracies in the recall of details, especially with the many subtleties in photographs.

One possible solution to this memory problem is to leave the colour balance and exposure work to the camera, except in the rare circumstances where cameras are known to fail – photographers are well aware of these challenges. Although cameras have some small weaknesses in judging colour, the advantage they have is consistency in their errors. Cameras use internal computers to judge colour, brightness, contrast and a host of other things. Although these computers are not

perfect in their rendering, they create a consistent and reliable measuring tool, whereas people do not have that consistency, and produce results ranging from near perfect to major difference. Since every photojournalist uses a camera and most photojournalists are using the same camera model, it is feasible to let the camera make the judgment and avoid further colour manipulation at the office – especially since modern intra-camera computers are so accurate.

But there are exceptions where inexact corrections are warranted. One exception is the aforementioned technical flaw in the Nikon D1 camera. It is acceptable to eliminate the yellow scum it records to its images, because it is a measurable inaccuracy that can be systematically and consistently eliminated from an image. Any accurately measurable flaws (flaws in accuracy, not aesthetics) that can be repeatedly identified and eliminated with near-exactness, qualify as acceptable manipulations.

This brings us to two underlying requirements for manipulation in an ideal practise: (1) the manipulation must make the photo more accurate/meaningful and (2) the manipulation must be formulaic – the change must be objective and not subject to human recall for fear of inviting errors. These criteria should guarantee that photos at least don't lose accuracy.

Still, there are likely to be objections to condemning some of the more subtle aesthetic manipulations. I presume most objectors would ask this: What are the consequences to minor errors in images? To this question we reply that the inherent problem in accepting manipulation is that it openly invites untruth, and accepting untruths may open, at least potentially, the floodgates for lying and the denigration of trust.

Most photojournalists would argue that there are exceptions for every rule, and this manipulation is no different. News judgment plays a huge role in justifying what material is ethically publishable. Many journalists would argue for publishing a photo of immense public importance, even if it has significant colour or exposure manipulations to correct accidental or unintended flaws. Sometimes cameras or their operators make unintended errors in judging exposure that affect an immensely important photograph, and skew its accuracy. For example, if a photographer accidentally chose the wrong lighting setting (for tungsten lighting setting, say, instead of fluorescent) it could change the way people perceive an image. For example, in an instance in which an ill person with an ill complexion was photographed with an improper lighting setting, there is a chance the ill person would look unrealistically ill or unrealistically healthy because of the colour error. Albeit potentially a small error in some cases, it may change the way the picture is understood which is ethically and journalistically unsound.

Where this scenario qualifies as an exception, for example, is if the ill person is a head of state and shortly after the photo is captured, hypothetically, the high-ranking politician dies. In this case, one must consider the public value of the photograph even if it has been manipulated, versus the potential damage of losing credibility and risking misinterpretation because of manipulation.

This is a scenario that at first sight seems to create conflict between two of the leading doctrines of moral philosophy. Immanuel Kant, the deontologist, might say: 'No, one must not manipulate under any circumstances because manipulation may result in

deception and deception being inherently morally wrong is in all circumstances ethically objectionable.’ A utilitarian like John Stuart Mill might on the other hand say: ‘Yes, the overall maximisation of utility (say, happiness) for the greatest number of people depends upon people being informed of the politician’s condition before her death. These results are more important than the harm that might result from manipulation’.

However, Mill may, upon further reflection consider further that the distrust in photojournalism that may result from this one instance of manipulation may cause more harm in the long term than good, and thus he may decide against the manipulation. He might do so on the basis of ‘a rule-utilitarian principle’, such as ‘generally, manipulation perceived as a form of deception engenders distrust’, that counsels against image manipulation in all circumstances over ‘an act utilitarian principle’, such as ‘a single act of manipulation is morally acceptable if it increases overall utility for the greatest number of people’, that counsels, perhaps prematurely, in favour of image manipulation if it enhances overall utility for the greatest number of stakeholders in a single specific instance. Thus, even a utilitarian such as Mill may on balance offer his allegiance to a rule utilitarian principle that favours the avoidance of long-term harm through loss of public trust, rather than to act utilitarian principle that favours a short-term gain.

Cropping – eliminating elected outer edges of an image to increase impact of the item or subject that is thereafter displayed more prominently in the image.

Use the full frame as much as possible. If there was no risk in shooting pictures with the intention of cropping, then photographers would shoot all of their images ‘loose’ and set their cameras to record large, high-resolution files and then crop to their hearts’ delight. Modern technology allows for this because one can shoot massive image files, from which small fractions can be cropped, and the cropped image can then be enlarged while maintaining remarkable clarity.

Because of problems that can develop from cropping, photographers are trusted to use their judgment on how to compose a newsworthy photograph rather than worry about later alterations. But the reason for avoiding cropping is not as clear-cut as the colour-correction argument. For example, a photographer could argue that cropping a picture has no negative consequences since he could have legitimately made the same ‘tight’ image by further ‘zooming’ his telephoto lens or by moving closer to the subject. The problem with cropping, however, is its unintended side-effects.

Photographers don’t always remember – back to recall problems – the reasons why they shoot a particular frame the way they do when they are editing many hours or days later. But almost no photographer would ever say she did not shoot a frame with a specific purpose in mind. Therefore, there is often reason to believe there is relevant visual data in the secondary regions of an image that a photographer might overlook and eliminate in the cropping process. So great care must be taken before a crop – and a loss of important information – is made.

The option to crop photographs should remain available to photojournalists, but not without a certain wariness for risk of losing the aforementioned journalistic virtue of wholeness, including the components of accuracy and integrity. Cropping is valuable

because it can make photographs more meaningful by increasing the impact of the image's salient regions. But ethical cropping is contingent upon maintaining photographic value. Careful cropping, then, will enhance the virtues of accuracy and integrity when its potential can be safely realised.

Fortunately, cropping does not have comparable risks to colour balance in terms of recall. Cropping is more closely related to acceptable subjective decisions initiated by the photographer's cognition, such as how to use his zoom or wide-angle lens, so long as the photographer has carefully reviewed secondary regions of an image for valuable news details. Therefore, responsible cropping is not a threat to the integrity of photographs, satisfying both conditions for acceptable manipulation mentioned before. ((1) It must make the photo more accurate/meaningful and (2) it must be formulaic if it relates to the re-creation of objective data.) Since the first condition is satisfied as the crop helps to increase meaning, and the second condition is satisfied because it does not relate to objective, but rather subjective, decision making – cropping usually passes the acceptable-manipulation test.

Dodge and Burn – Using imaging tools to brighten or darken selected parts of a photograph.

One could go as far as to call a dodge or burn a lie in almost all situations, so there is little question over what place this process ought to have in photojournalism: none. A lie is a direct or indirect violation of truth, and truth is a seminal journalistic virtue. Perhaps the Categorical Imperative would give even more strength to this claim: For example, do not lie. Even Mill would support the notion that truth-telling will generally maximise happiness, whereas generally lying does not. So to define a lie, and work through how a dodge or burn qualifies as such, we'll use Sissela Bok's definition: '... any intentionally deceptive message which is stated' (Bok, 1989, p. 13).

Bok indicates that speaking or writing usually executes 'stating'. Since digital technology has its own form of communication, which is initiated by keystrokes and mouse-clicks, it requires a separate semantic representation. With photographs, the analogous process of stating is publishing with the intent of someone seeing a photograph. Essentially, the act of manipulating a photo can be likened to a speaker who would manipulate a phrase in her mind before speaking. Therefore, the published word can be analogous to speech in regard to stating.

Essentially, the photographer knows this manipulation technique is used to give artificial prominence to a subject, or a particular section of the photograph, although a common justification for the alteration is that it will help an audience better understand an image. Therefore, we have established a form of deception – the photojournalist knows the image is ingenuine either by the intention of making an aesthetic improvement, by attempting to assist understanding by highlighting detail, or simply in the doomed but well-intended attempt to correct perceived imperfections. All but the latter are obvious forms of deception and even the latter is logically deceiving, even if it is intended for helpful purposes.

Having established deception, now we must establish intent in order to satisfy Bok's definition of lying. As mentioned before, photojournalists know their altered photographs are intended for an audience. They also know their altered photographs

are inaccurate because (1) they are altered for impact/understanding (2) aesthetics and/or (3) re-creating reality. Now, to prove that photojournalists intend to deceive, one only needs to combine the aforementioned statements with the fact that photojournalists know readers expect to have truth, accuracy, and reality – and are receiving something from a photojournalist that a photojournalist knows to be otherwise, good intentions or not. This consciousness of potential inaccuracy, therefore, arguably qualifies as intent in the form of a known, calculated risk.

Although this is a secondary notion of intent – meaning that photographers' primary intentions are not necessarily to deceive – there are few, if any, photojournalists or photo editors who don't know that their actions are likely to deceive at least some of the time by default of the inherent risk associated with this type of manipulation (Irby, 2003) Therefore, although it may not be a robust intention to deceive readers, it is, for them, a calculated risk, which qualifies as intent, because of their knowledge that false information will reach the audience and it could have been prevented.

People Versus PCs

Although some of the suggestions made in this paper for relying on computers with some judgments may appear to threaten a photographer's autonomy, this is not the intention or the result. Especially when it comes to image capturing, photographers are expected to make good decisions on how to maximise the strength of their visual storytelling, backed with sound journalistic idealism, including good news judgment. And there isn't just one answer in determining how to make a good news judgment decision – justifiable, even superb, news judgments can vary greatly.

For example, knowing when to zoom in close for a 'tight' image and when to back off for a 'loose' image is a subjective matter. That is why it was made clear earlier that news photographers are bona fide journalists who oft need be choosers of news-related decisions. In determining significance in news, there is no better known tool than the human mind.

The impetus for restricting post-shoot cropping and other manipulative adjustments after images are captured stems from human limitations when manipulations require objective calculations. How much can one rely on one's memory to adjust an image to mirror reality? There certainly would arise a number of problems that would dilute the reliability of this process.

One simple factor is time. Will any human remember precise visual data better a week after she has seen it, as opposed to five minutes after? Could other job demands and, say, a race from event to event cause confusion about information from shoot to shoot? The answer to both of these questions is: 'Yes'. And that brings to a logical realisation: Since time fades the accuracy of our memories, and heinous workloads can skew our recall, we are then dealing in varying degrees of truth and accuracy once time has passed; the more time, the greater the loss of accuracy. This guarantees error and diminishes the aforementioned journalistic virtue of wholeness, integrity, and truth-telling. For example, if I lose 10 percent of my memory each day in relation to visual information, I am then, for argument's sake, 10 percent less truthful if I edit a photo the day after I have captured it.

Because the camera is more methodical and reliable than people in the way it measures its data, it is more consistent than the photographer when it comes to matters of exposure – which is a measure of objective data. In the fairly recent past, intra-camera computers were not as reliable as they are today. Intra-camera metering was primitive compared to today's cameras, but the technology has changed, and, in most cases, it is more accurate than the photographer's post-shoot judgment, and even more importantly for this argument, it is more consistent.

Moreover, the camera does not have self-regarding motivations, like aesthetics, because it is non-cognitive and most certainly without an ego. Another advantage of giving the camera most of the exposure work is the increased attention to news judgment that is made available for the photographer, because it frees the photographer from distracting exposure duties. By all means, this should increase the storytelling quality of photographs because it lightens the photographer's workload.

What is Corruption?

Corruption is a complex and multi-faceted issue and for the purpose of this paper we can only offer the briefest of outlines of what constitutes corruption. Although related, corruption and immorality are not the same thing. Though corruption is always immoral not all immoral acts qualify as corruption. Though immoral, the actions of the house burglar and bank robber, for example, are not what we would normally describe as corrupt.

The missing condition is a socially, professionally or institutionally pre-established fiduciary relationship of trust between the corrupt person or group and the person or persons or group who are harmed in some way by the corrupt person's or the corrupt group's actions. The reason why house burglars or bank robbers though typically deemed immoral are not deemed corrupt is because there is an absence of a prior fiduciary relationship of trust between the burglar and the bank robber on the one hand, and those who are harmed by their actions on the other; namely, the household owners, the banks and their customers.

By contrast, typical cases of corruption and its sub-species fraud, involve a breach of a socially, professionally or institutionally pre-established fiduciary relationship of trust between the corrupt agents and their victims, namely, those wronged by the corrupt agents' actions. The addition of the condition of a fiduciary duty is in keeping with one of the traditional dictionary definitions of 'corruption', namely, 'the changing from the naturally sound condition' or 'the turning from a sound into an unsound impure condition' or 'the perversion of anything from an original state of purity'⁷. The fiduciary relationship can be articulated in political, professional, social or familial terms.

The notion of a corrupt action or practice, in turn, presupposes the prior notion of an uncorrupted and morally legitimate process, role or institution. Hence, the corrupt condition of a process, role or institution exists only relative to some moral or other pre-existing regulatory standard(s), which are minimally definitional of the uncorrupted condition of that process, role or institution.

⁷ See the Shorter Oxford Dictionary

For example, insofar as the primary role of journalism is to inform the public on matters of public interest truthfully (in Australia the *public's right to know* and *truth* are the two fundamental principles of journalism as per the current Media and Entertainment Arts Alliance Code of Ethics) a journalist who deliberately misinforms the public on some matter of public interest acts corruptly by corrupting the role of his profession through a breach of his fiduciary duty to inform, and not to misinform, the public on matters of public interest.

Similarly, insofar as the primary role of parents is to nurture their children, a parent who sexually abuses one of his or her children is a corrupt parent. Corruption can thus be said to be a failure to comply with pre-existing sets of widely recognized and acknowledged moral standards instantiated in legal, professional, social, or other institutional norms or regulations. Note also that contrary to popular belief, the self-regarding gain that accrues from corruption need not be financial. Typically, a person or group of persons act corruptly when they have the power, disposition and opportunity to engage in some immoral and/or illegal action or activity and do so, usually but perhaps not always, under conditions of concealment or secrecy for self-regarding gain, for themselves, their group or institution or profession, in breach of a fiduciary duty of trust owed to others by virtue of a social, professional or other pre-existing institutional role which they occupy and by whose norms or standards they are duty bound.

Applying the above conceptual notion of corruption to the different types of photo manipulation discussed above, those types of manipulation, individually or collectively, will constitute corruption if they are deceptive; for deception violates the institutional role of journalism whose two fundamental principles of truth and informing the public on matters of public interest are violated by intentional deception for self-regarding gain.

What if, however, the deception emanating from photo manipulation was done for the best of intentions and not for self-regarding gain in the hope, let us say, of bringing about the greatest good for all people concerned – would it still constitute corruption? Using morally bad means to achieve morally good ends is known in the professional ethics literature as ‘noble cause corruption’ because the corruption perpetrated is for a ‘noble’ cause. However, even if the intention and the cause of the photo manipulation is ‘noble’, insofar that it results in deception that undermines the primary and overarching institutional role of journalism of informing the public on matters of public interest truthfully, then the photo manipulation still amounts to corruption. Putting simply, it is so because it corrupts the journalistic role and process of providing, as far as possible, true and objective information. And manipulation resulting in deception, whether for ignoble or noble motives or causes, undermines that and is thus a self-defeating and hence unjustifiable practice both epistemologically and morally.

Conclusions

On the surface, the main concern with photo manipulation is that it sometimes distorts reality, or the closest version of reality a photograph can convey. Although there are a number of abstract arguments about the definition of reality, insofar as photography is

related, reality means capturing a still image that has as many accurate properties in colour, lighting, shadows, and depth as a two-dimensional image allows with a reliable degree of consistency. Although it is a foregone conclusion that reality in photos is technically limited, a close rendering is desired because it is: (1) presumed to be practical in what people need from news and (2) what people expect to find in a news source, therefore how they measure the credibility of that source.

Although point (1) is self-evident, the second might need some clarification. Journalists' credibility leads to public trust, which is a hallmark of journalism because, without it, news loses its value. And journalists set these expectations by establishing certain virtues and other guiding principles, which include a trust-protocol contingent on consistent execution of ethical actions, among other things, codes of ethics. Although journalism values are not perfect, they are, for now, the closest things to truth and reality that journalists can provide in their respective formats – radio, television, the Web, and newspapers.

There are obviously a variety of ethical constructs that can justify actions of different kinds. Sometimes they conflict, but regardless of their occasional clashes, they lend a form of ethical continuity to an agency that chooses to employ one or several of them. The purpose of this analysis is not to advertise a specific ethical doctrine (i.e. deontology or teleology) but to show how these doctrines and the various ethical theories they support can be used to determine defensible moral behaviour.

So in going back to the imperfect practise of photojournalism, how do you increase the likelihood of producing an accurate, newsworthy image? The answer: with consistency and reliability. This is accomplished by eliminating the most confounding factors in photojournalism: (1) self-regarding measures – the temptation for a photographer to artificially improve aesthetics; and (2) recall – the human inability to precisely remember subtleties in colour and exposure.

But this analysis goes beyond even the surface concern of re-creating reality. Preserving photojournalistic standards is largely for the purpose of rejuvenating and maintaining press credibility for the long-term sake of, among other things, protecting and improving democracy. Although the practical limitations these suggestions impose may seem restrictive, or at least inconvenient, they are necessary. Not only will they reduce human error – regardless of the photographer's intentions – but will also protect the veracity and merit of journalism, which should be high on any practitioner's list of professional desires.

Yet another reason to greatly limit digital alteration and reduce public mistrust is that even the appearance of regular improper ethical action forces the public to mistrust the press.⁸ However abstract this idea may seem, its effects are exacerbated by photojournalism's self-made reputation for ethical inconsistency. Because of either

⁸ Dennis Thompson developed the idea that even the appearance of conflicts of interest matter in politics because appearances oft have the same impact on people as actual conflicts of interest. In this paper, the same underlying idea is used as it relates to possibility/expectation of photo manipulation. It is the underlying scepticism of both politics and photojournalism that set the stage for this elemental mistrust from which the expectations come.

Thompson, Dennis F. (1995). *Ethics in Congress: From Individual to Institutional Corruption*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute.

the ambiguity of manipulation standards or the consciously unethical nature of some photojournalists' standards, the public is sceptical of manipulation even when it is justifiable in the strictest sense. The public scepticism is sometimes so great, even good decisions are often assumed to be deceitful.

By developing a more consistent formula for ethical manipulation and eliminating error-prone practises – however rigid it seems – we have a formula to bolster public trust with only minimal impositions on practitioners. These rules not only make photojournalists more objectively consistent, but also give the public evidence⁹ that photojournalists care about the veracity of their profession. These new rules, coupled with a consistent, transparent manipulation policy within the profession, could be a tonic for healthier journalism and a more robust democracy. And insofar as photo manipulation constitutes corruption as described above, the implementation of such an ethical regime in photojournalism will reduce the risk of corruption. This is important, especially with regard to investigative journalism, for if the watchdogs themselves become corrupt, who will we trust to expose corruption?

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⁹ Newspapers regularly include in their pages, policies that exist or change when they become relevant. It would be beneficial for newspapers that adopt new rules – such as these – to publicise it for the sake of making the public aware of the increased reliability of the newspaper's photographs.

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