Academic Writing 230100

Assignment Three

Researched Argument

Student: Mary Fitzgerald

Student Number: 94081378

Monday 17 September 2012
News photojournalism is the presentation of news stories through photographs – photojournalists are journalists with cameras. Golden (2005) noted that the best photojournalism gets the audience to see and feel what is happening in the world and more importantly forces people to ask “Why?” (p. 235). Journalism has been one of the most prolific users of photography. News journalism produces, maintains, and transforms our perception of the world. According to Tirohl (2000) photography is employed to act as a witness to the comments made in news reporting and as photography has traditionally been seen as linked explicitly to objectivity, it presumes to be a tool ideally suited to the purpose of news reporting (p. 338). The credible reputation of news photojournalism has depended upon an audience believing that the photograph reflects experience unambiguously and this view has been widely and actively encouraged by professional photographers (p. 339). Today we treat the photograph as a reliable witness in news stories and need to believe in the photo truth depicted in these images for them to have news value. Digital manipulation transforms news photographs into illustrations. This essay will argue that there is not a place for digital manipulation of images in modern news photojournalism. Firstly I will illustrate this through describing the difference between digital imagining and digital manipulation, which both involve alternation to photographic images, but have a differing impact on the final interpretation of the image by the audience. I will then discuss news photojournalism’s responsibility to be objective in order to represent reality. I will discuss the fundamental principal of journalism and the code of ethics binding news photojournalists to fulfill their public responsibility to tell the truth.

Digital editing is a necessary and important function in news photography and is separate to the concept of digital manipulation being discussed in this essay. Digital editing is sometimes necessary to correct colour, and cropping is required in order for the image to adequately support the text. If there is no place for digital manipulation in modern photojournalism some may argue that photographs must be acceptable in an unedited way. I argue that in the dark room days, prior to digital photography, photographic editing occurred as a matter of course without affecting the credibility of the original meaning of the image. In the same way today, there is a place for digital editing in digital photojournalism. Digital editing can be achieved without misrepresenting the truth of the image.

Digital manipulation is difficult to categorize. For instance, some may argue that cropping an image can be categorized as digital manipulation. Post shoot editing
Involves digital touchups that can be ethical or unethical depending upon whether the touchups are deceptive, un-truthful, or misleading (Quinn, A, 1996, p. 2). For instance a few weeks in to the to the start of the Iraq War in 2003, the front page of the Los Angeles Times featured a large photograph depicting a dramatic scene in which a British soldier motions to Iraqi civilians to stay down while a father carrying a child creeps across the dirt. The image ran in several US newspapers before it was discovered to be a composite of two different images cobbled together by the veteran photographer, Brian Walski, on his laptop in Basra. The Walski incident raised issues related to the proliferation of digital photography and editing software, the visual representation of war, and the uneasy relationship between images and reality.

Carlson, M, 2006, p. 1). This is a good example of unacceptable, unethical post-production manipulation. Brian Walski altered the truth – the man carrying the child in reality never came close to the British soldier, but the image Walski submitted for publication indicated that this did happen. If Walski had left the two original images as they were and had only adjusted the colour and submitted both original imagines, un-spliced for publication, the truth of the photographs would have remained intact.

Technology has always driven photography and now photography has with digital capability, mobility and online services changed again bringing into question the credibility of some images. If the public do not believe in the image presented with an article, the image stands to undermine the credibility of the article, and the media group publishing the material as was the case for Brain Walski and the Los Angeles Times.

I argue that in this environment of increased digital manipulation in some sectors of photography, there is an ever-increasing need for news photojournalism to present un-manipulated images. In this digital photojournalistic age where our expectation is so often that images will have been manipulated it may be argued as reasonable that images presented within news photojournalism can also be acceptable following manipulation. The digital manipulation of images allows photographers increased scope in making their images more creative and artistic and importantly therefore, more saleable. Photo fakery or manipulation is a commonly accepted procedure to audiences of some genres of photojournalism. For instance, fashion photography and travel photography, house and garden magazine photography all routinely use digitally manipulated photographs. Johnson (2007) suggests that in this way the media feeds on itself, drawing ideas from each other with the end result of
audiences not knowing what was real in the first place (p. 61). Audiences are inundated with photographs that look real but in some cases at least we are able to determine that they have been manipulated. For example a few weeks after the World Trade Centre was attacked, an image circulated on the Internet, apparently photographed from the upper level of one of the towers. The picture was of a 747 plane flying at close range toward the building, supposedly taken just seconds before the plane made impact with the first tower. No one believed this to be a “real” picture because it was understood no one escaped the building where the impact of the plane occurred, therefore no images such as this could have survived. Although it looked real, it was recognized as an image that had been manipulated. The context of this image was important too. It was not placed in the New York Times but instead was circulated as a curiosity on-line, meaning audiences understood the image was not being used to represent reality. News photojournalism’s role is to represent as closely as possible, reality and its credibility relies on photo truth.

Misrepresenting the truth in news photojournalism is unethical and runs against journalists’ codes of ethics. Respect for truth and the public’s right to information are fundamental principles of journalism. Accountability engenders trust. Without trust, news photojournalists do not fulfill their public responsibilities (Johnston, J, 2007, p. 61). The responsibility of news photojournalists is to provide images that support the text and accurately inform the reader. Any artistic element to news photography must be secondary. Washington Post photography columnist and former New York Daily News reporter Fran Van Riper explained that as such news photographs are the equivalent of direct quotations and therefore are sacrosanct, just as a writer can in the interests of brevity or impact, choose which quotes to use in a story, so can a news photographer or picture editor crop out dead space in a news photo. The news photojournalist must capture the truth. This means the news photojournalist can only capture what has happened, when it happened and not recreate a situation because they did not get there in time. The news photojournalist takes pictures of life in action to support news stories in accurate, digitally unmanipulated format.

With well chosen words, visual images combine to educate, entertain and persuade. These images if manipulated however, also have the power to misrepresent, mislead and misinform. For this reason there is no place for digital manipulation in modern photojournalism. Changes in digital technology have bought a threat that
photo-fiction, images that have been altered, can be presented as something true and original. Digitally manipulated images are not easily detected, but the pre-digital manipulated images often could be. If manipulation has always occurred to some extent in photojournalism some may argue that in the digital era, image manipulation is simply part of the ongoing trend. The old adage of “seeing is believing” was once applied to the reliability of photographic evidence and a trust in photojournalism’s reputation for truth and objectivity. From photography’s beginnings however the technical capacity to alter images has been available and practiced, but manipulations then were easy to detect (Roberts, P & Webber, J, 2002, p 1). Manipulation detection in the pre-digital era was due to the clumsy photographic techniques of the time. These earlier techniques also required time-consuming expensive work. Now in the digital era the application of computer technology has allowed photographic modification to be accomplished with ease and speed, and with little evidence of alterations. According to Ritchen, (1991) the result of this electronic manipulation is a seamless, fast alteration of the photograph and of its representation of reality (p.168). Checking the authenticity of photographs can be, with today’s technology, near impossible. Because images evoke almost immediate emotional responses among viewers, pictures have tremendous power to affect thinking and opinion. For this reason, I argue there is no place for digital manipulation in modern news photojournalism.

A photojournalist goes out in to the world to places many of us will never visit and experiences the reality in these places for us, records events in these places for us and we experience these reporters experiences where ever we view their photographs. We expect these images to depict what the photojournalist saw and captured, as close as possible. A digitally manipulated photograph is no longer about representing truth – it becomes an illustration. For there to be value in the image as a news photograph it needs to accurately represent the moment it depicts. For photojournalists to misrepresent the truth through post production manipulation, is contrary to the fundamentals of ethical news photojournalism and affects the credibility of news photojournalist.
References


