

The Magic of Photography in the Media

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Photographers and most notably, editors have always had the power to persuade using the media as the messenger. Images can have powerful effects on people with photographs causing laughter, outrage, and action. Alternately, in our image-overloaded world, some images may even go un-noticed. People are tuned in by social conditioning and 'see' some images while 'not seeing' others. To gain the attention of such a visually bombarded audience, photographers and editors use many methods, including the use of image-enhancing software. Such infiltration of doctored photographs in the media is not a new phenomenon, however, trust issues are now being raised as the public becomes more digitally-savvy and media-wary. It is not that people do not trust the photos, so much as; they do not trust the media and the powers in control of it.

Photo District News, the leading photography trade publication in North America, published an article In February, 2001 by Stephen Mayes. Mayes the Chief Operating Officer of Photonica USA, a large stock photography agency was not afraid to air his unabashed views on the subject of photo-manipulation.

Once upon a time, in a more innocent age, photography used to be about facts. We would look at a picture and believe that we had witnessed a slice of reality. Photographers have always known otherwise, and they have wielded the camera much as a painter wields a brush, to interpret reality in an unreal medium. For many years this was a trade secret. The viewing public was happy in the belief that 'the camera cannot lie.' But there has been an uncomfortable awakening in the last ten years as viewers have become wise to photography's fickle relationship with reality. **1**

Mayes goes on to say that the public welcomes the fact that the camera can lie, liberating reality to show us only what we want to believe. That it seems to reflect what is inside our heads in a world where photography has become a "cultural stream of consciousness, hardly considered, and yet all around us." **2**

As far-fetched as Mayes statements sound, they are supported by Estelle Jussim, in the article "Propaganda and Persuasion". ³ Jussim argues that viewers interpret photographs in context of their own ideology. For example in the simple sender-receiver model of communication, the message sent is not necessarily the message received. Documentary and journalistic photography, like all forms of exposition are biased. Journalism photography suffers from multiple interpretations. The photographer taking pictures of an event must analyze the situation, bringing along their own (and their employer's biases), photograph it, and submit it to an editor who then marries it with a story of the same event. The editor interprets what the photographer saw in the context of the story (and perhaps in the context of other media) that was written by someone else. The person reading the newspaper must then interpret the photo and caption in context of what they have heard on the morning news. There are therefore numerous points in the process where the message received may not match the message sent. It becomes impossible to give neutral messages in the media. Jussim suggests that "Communication is intended to alter behaviors, even if only the behavior of believing. 'Information' is never neutral, since it is always received and interpreted by individuals according to their idiosyncratic beliefs, tempered by the massive conditioning which their socio-cultural environment provides."⁴

Photography has long been thought of as a powerful tool for change, for showing the world's injustice and provoking action for the disadvantaged. This was the goal in the work of a team of documentary photographers working under Roy Stryker for the American Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the depression. These now famous photographers included Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Russel Lee and Dorothea Lange.

Their objective was to document the effects of the Depression and the effects of mechanized agricultural practices amongst rural Americans so that aid money could be given out to the destitute. Lange's approach was "hands off", not tampering with or arranging anything in the scene and she had great compassion for the subjects. The function of documentary photography in the FSA project was to provide a quality of authenticity, that could be used as evidence or proof. However, today, documentary photography is thought more as a definition of style (as in the work of Mary Ellen Mark). Documentary photography can also be thought of as historic photography, recording culture in context of the time. **5**

Despite good intentions, even documentary (or historic) photography suffers from receiver biases. According to Jussim:

One photograph verifies two entirely opposing ideologies. That would seem to be inevitable, since what communications theorists call 'cognitive dissonance' is always operative. Cognitive dissonance is the process by which individuals reject information that does not support attitudes already held or decisions already made. A belief system of ideology represents a series of decisions to be made: namely, to believe or not to believe what the communications environment provides. It has been discovered that people tend to read only what will verify or support their opinions, since new thinking requires change and change is always painful or threatening. **6**

Showing a Dorothea Lange photograph of rural American farmland (see photo A) to an urban developer would not have the same power of persuasion as it would to rural settlers. Such photos would do little to change the opinion of those holding antithetical views. "As Einstein observed, 'Theory precedes seeing.' Theory is not altered by seeing if the seeing is skewed by strongly held opinions tied to emotional responses." **7** Jussim believes that a photograph is incapable of persuasion by itself.



A.

Unfortunately, traditional documentary photography now has little commercial value. (Consequently, it has gone over to the side of art photography.) The days of the pictorial magazines like LIFE are over. Much of today's documentary photography has been absorbed into photojournalism.

Brief history of manipulating photos in journalism

Manipulating photos did not start with the computer age as photographers have been altering negatives since the late 1800's. Ironically, the best negative retouchers were former painters, who had traded easels for tripods, cashing in on the new portrait photography trend. Photographic enhancing techniques such as superimposition, underprinting and solarization were made popular in the early 20th century by Lazlo Moholy Nagy, Man Ray and Alexander Rodchenko. Photomontage was used by subversive artists such as Hannah Hoch as political statements in the 20's.

In the editorial media, however, certain ethical standards are assumed to be in place, but history shows otherwise. For example, the first published instance of a doctored editorial photograph in North America occurred in 1928. The story was about a rich American named Kip Rhineland who wanted an annulment of his marriage. (See

photo below). Rhineland claimed his wife concealed the fact that she was part black from him. She in turn said he should have noticed that fact before the marriage and that she never concealed anything. As part of the court proceedings, Mrs. Rhineland was made to undress to the waist to reveal her skin colour. Photographers were not allowed in the court during that part of the trial; however, the editor and art director of the *Evening Graphic*, Emile Gavreau and Harry Grogin, reconstructed the forbidden scene in the newspaper office photographing stand-ins, a chorus girl substituting for Mrs. Rhineland. They then retouched and pasted faces of the real courtroom characters onto their newly photographed images. This collage was made up of twenty separate photos which Grogin named a “composograph”. The circulation of the *Evening Graphic* rose from 60,000 to several hundred thousand overnight as a result of the photo. The newspaper continued to create other faked photos, admitting so in a tiny printed disclaimer.



B.

In the 1971 text Visual Impact in Print, the authors give instructions on retouching for the picture handler. (See the three photos below.) The first photo is the original. The editor thought this was too busy and that the type would compete with the copy on the rest of the page. The first attempt at retouching seemed too unreal so the editor settled for the dirty cap in the last photo, and removed some background details as well. Is the sample photo retouched un-ethically? Would the man in the photo object to making him look dirty and unkempt?



C.

In more modern (1970's to 1990's) journalism texts, darkroom techniques and retouching are considered 'okay' to clean-up photos having stray details and cluttered backgrounds. Today even Canada's largest newspapers 'retouch' unwanted details or enhance areas of the photo for effect with Photoshop®. Photojournalists, who work for many of the country's leading newspapers including the Toronto Star, and The National Post, are 'taught' how to enhance the photos by the editors. The standard method being: after scanning, marquis (select) the main subject, brighten it up, and tone down

the background. Remove glare from foreheads and glasses, and crop out unwanted people. Then with another click of the mouse, zap it onto the CP news wire.

Photojournalists have also been known to re-stage simple grip-and-grin events like sod-turnings and cheque donations. In the late 1970's Walter Wilcox, who was then Chairman of the Department of Journalism at UCLA designed a study to determine the attitudes of readers, photographers, and editors towards staging news pictures. A questionnaire was sent to three groups; the public; photographers and managing editors. Each group evaluated three situations a photographer might face and ranked them as: "definitely ethical", "doubtful" or "not ethical". **8**

In the first situation a photographer is at a murder trial and is unable to get a clear photo of the woman on trial. He spots another similar looking woman and shoots her creatively and slightly out-of-focus. His striking photo will never be challenged as fake. In scenario two a photographer arrives late for a sod turning and asks the dignitaries to repeat the scene so he can get a shot. In situation three a photographer has to shoot a photo showing a plague of crickets destroying farmland. When he gets to the area the crickets are too spread out to demonstrate a good sense of the plight. He then decides that a better picture could be had if he can somehow get the crickets in a dense mass. He builds a device that lures the crickets in a chute and he gets the shot of closely massed crickets on the march.

In the first two situations Wilcox found agreement between the public, the photographers and the editors on what was and was not ethical. In the trial example, 92% of the public, 93% of the photographers and 99% of the editors felt the photographer was definitely unethical to photograph one person and claim it was

another. For the re-staging of the sod turning ceremony, 83% of the public, 88% of photographers and 94% of managing editors thought it was not unethical to re-stage the event. Ethically this group felt, set-up photos were allowed but clearly faked photos were not.

The cricket shot proved harder for the respondents to decide. The public was nearly evenly divided in calling the inventiveness of the photographer definitely unethical (29%), doubtful (39%) or not unethical (23%). Managing editors had similar results as the public: definitely unethical (23%), doubtful (34%) and not unethical (44%). Photographers however did not share this view. Only 7% of photographers felt this was definitely unethical, 30% considered it doubtful, but 63% felt the photographer was not wrong, suggesting that photographers faced with the same situation would feel the need to 'rig' the shot. Similar conclusions were found in a study by Fred Parrish of the College of Journalism and Communication at the University of Florida. These studies suggest photographers stay within ethical boundaries as long as the photograph illustrates the news accurately.

We are aware of the types of photo doctoring that goes on in publications such as the National Enquirer. During the OJ Simpson trial, a photograph of a beaten Nicole Brown was on the cover of the Enquirer. Not until you looked at the fine print did you realize it was a re-creation of the bruises as told by Brown's sister. Around the same time, TIME Magazine had a cover photo portraying OJ Simpson's skin as being darker than it actually was. TIME got caught because Newsweek ran the photo at its normal density. Even readers of trusted publications like TIME have to be cautious.

A Very Unscientific Survey

A small questionnaire that was completed by 16 students, friends and colleagues provided an interesting cross-section of viewpoints regarding trust in photography in the mass media. **9** The questions were:

- Do you trust the editorial photos you see in the media to be showing you a slice of reality? Why or why not?
- Do you trust newspapers or magazines more? Why?
- Which specific publications do you trust or not trust?
- Age
- Education

Summary of results:

Do you trust the photos in the media ...?	Yes	No	yes & no
	3	8	5
Do you trust newspapers or magazines more?	Newspapers	Magazines	No pref
	5	6	5
What publications do you trust (top 4)			
Globe & Mail	5		
Macleans	4		
Various Trade, Business Publications or Journals	3		
National Geographic	2		
What publications do you <i>not</i> trust (top 5)			
Sun	5		
National Enquirer	5		
Calgary Herald	3		
National Post	3		
Globe & Mail	2		
	Age	Education	
	20-30	Any Post Sec.	13
	31-40	Grad School	3
	41-50		
	51-60		
	61+		

The comments were as interesting as the results and showed that people in this small sample held widely varying opinions. Answers to the first question ranged from an

immediate, “No way! I’m always suspicious.” “It depends on the publication.” to “Yes, I trust the integrity of the editors and the journalists to report the news truthfully.” Most people seemed skeptical of publications in general, not specifically the photographs in them. Results were evenly split on whether magazines or newspapers were the more trustworthy. The Globe and Mail won for the most trusted, but two respondents who have completed Masters degrees said the Globe is *not* to be trusted. The Sun and the National Enquirer tied for publications that are definitely not to be trusted. Oddly the Sun, a newspaper, sits in the standings equal to that of a grocery store tabloid, probably due to the fact that the subjects were quite well educated. Another comment was that independent newspapers and magazines were trusted more than ones owned by large corporate entities.

Pierre Bourdieu’s Generative Formula [**Habitus x Capital**] + **Field = Practice** is the perfect analytical tool for such a survey. To briefly summarize the formula, Habitus refers to a set of pre-determined dispositions, based mainly on socio-economic class and cultural background. Capital has to do with things like education, media savvy, computer and digital imaging literacy, and photo knowledge. The Field in this case is editorial media. The Practice is photography. Habitus and Capital are the real variables determining the survey outcome.

Interestingly, the small survey responses back Bourdieu’s generative formula as applied to the practice of photography suggesting that Habitus is a major contributing factor in how the public interprets photos in the media. Those with more education tend to trust the media the least. Those with computer imaging backgrounds query the use of Photoshop® in the press. Moreover, people with less education (who are generally

older) trust the media more. Media savvy seems to equal media mistrust. One respondent who had emigrated recently from Guatemala, does not trust the media at all, and even believes there is conspiracy among the media moguls in the playing out of world political events.

Repeatedly the 'slice of reality' component of the question was commented on. People seem to be well aware that they may not be getting the whole story via media channels. A couple of respondents even said that the information in the newspapers, due to their deadline-oriented structure, should be taken with a grain of salt.

Surprisingly, only two people commented about media use of digitally manipulated photos. Perhaps if a more direct question had been asked there would have been more discussion on the subject. Perhaps people trust the ethics of most editors of mainstream media in terms of photo manipulation. (No one brought up OJ Simpson on the cover of TIME.) Most people are probably aware that some form of retouching goes on, even if it is just minor cleaning up of the image. As there is often more than one photographer at public events, care needs to be taken not to alter the meaning of photos. For instance, unlike the crickets, you should not add a crowd of a thousand if only ten people showed up to a demonstration. Consideration might be given to the idea that there is no real need to alter the meaning of photos, as truth is so often stranger than that which we can create.

Truth is stranger than fiction

The word 'surrealism' had been used first by Apollinaire in 1917 in a context that coupled avant-garde art with technological progress. (André) Breton in 1922 defined it as a certain psychic automatism that corresponds rather closely to the state of dreaming. Formally, SURREALISM: noun, masculine. Pure psychic automatism, by which one intends to express verbally, in writing or by any other method, the real functioning of the mind. Dictation by thought, in the absence of

any control exercised by reason, and beyond any aesthetic or moral preoccupation. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of dreams, in the undirected play of thought... **10**

Surrealism has always been an element of photography, especially in documentary and journalism. In photography, we think of surrealism as the bizarre qualities inherent in pictures – things we may not see when experiencing the scene first-hand. Photographs allow us more time to look at things. For instance in journalism, photographers do not often get the chance to sit and stare at the person or situation being photographed when they have only seconds to catch the moment. When viewing the photos after, details of the event can reveal themselves in a surreal fashion. The juxtaposition of people in the frame, the use of different lenses and lighting, or the personality of the people themselves, may cause surreal effects. These effects can be serendipitous or planned (or both) depending on how the situation and subject lends itself to surrealist tendencies, and to the shooting style of the photographer. Look at the photo below of Nixon getting out of the car – his enlarged head and crowded quarters definitely makes this a surreal photograph. An editor choosing photos for publication can attract the attention of viewers using the surreal qualities in images.



D.

Susan Sontag in her essays in On Photography, says much on the subject of surrealism in photography. Sontag writes that “Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision. The less doctored, the less patently crafted, the more naïve – the more authoritative the photograph was likely to be. Surrealism has always courted accidents, welcomed the uninvited, flattered disorderly presences.” **11** These take photography beyond the deliberate brush strokes of a painter or the castings of a sculptor. An accidental painting can never occur. If it does, it can be labelled abstract. It is thus deliberately abstract.



E.



F.

Unlike painting, photographs do not rely solely on the intentions of an artist. Instead, they rely on what Sontag calls the “quasi-magical, quasi-accidental” relations between the photographer and the subject, as in the photos above. **12** The decisive moment is captured at the peak of this interrelation. There may be more than one decisive moment in any given situation provoking more than one response.

Sontag discredits the notion that surrealism is something universal and that it is only about psychology. Instead she believes it is part of local, ethnic, class bound and

dated qualities. Early, 1850's photographs by Eugene Atget of urban street scenes seem surreal now due to the capturing of the aura of lost time and traditions. (See below.) They evoke the same feelings you get visiting a museum of cultural artifacts from early North American society. The objects have surreal qualities whether by design or intangible traits that you cannot hold in your hand such as the fact that they were actually used by someone to perform daily chores. The same surreal experience can happen when spending time at a remote cabin with no running water or electricity as the place and the experience associated with it can be felt as surreal and quasi-magical.



G.

“What renders a photograph surreal is its irrefutable pathos as a message from time past, and the concreteness of its imitations about social class.” **13**

Conclusion

Our insatiable need for images in our “cultural stream of consciousness” **14** raises the bar as to what will attract our attention. This can result in “hyping up the real”. **15** We notice photos with what Roland Barthes calls *punctum*, the sting. “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant

to me).” **16** Where does that leave the media when “attempts by photographers to bolster up a depleted sense of reality contribute to the depletion”? **17** We expect and need photographs to substitute for first hand experiences. Do we crave more at the expense of become visually inert from over exposure to imagery of such things as tragic events?

As the public looks at editorial photographs in newspapers and magazines there appears to be an inherent understanding by many that things are not *always* as they appear. Much of this thinking is a result of viewing the obviously doctored photographs used in advertising and tabloids. This suggests that there is no chance of being led astray unless one is devoid of education and cultural understanding. Our brains work to discount certain features and fill in the blanks; moreover, cognitive dissonance prevents us from seeing that which does not match our belief systems.

In our present society, we have always known photography. We likely have all taken photographs and we have a certain understanding of the use and the process of photography – even if it just means dropping the film of new baby pictures off at the lab in the mall. It is one way the masses are creative and a way the masses preserve and relive their personal culture. We often cherish the photograph of something more than the thing represented. (We come back from a holiday and people want to see the photos.) This understanding is unlike painting or music, where public appreciation of the arts may be naïve. Many of us who have never studied the arts do not understand what makes a painting or symphony music ‘good’. We get different messages from art. Art’s message is deliberate and purposeful. Photography’s message is magical.

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17. Szarkowski, J. (Ed.) (1973) From the Picture Press. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

Endnotes

1. Mayes, p. 1
2. Mayes, p. 2
3. Jussim, Estelle. Has written numerous books on the history of photography and is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1982. She is Professor Emeritus Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science.
4. Jussim, p. 104
5. Newhall, History of Photography. p. 235 paraphrased.

6. Jussim, p. 107
7. Jussim, p. 107
8. Kobre, pp. 325-327
9. Survey Explanation – This survey did not get ethical clearance at the University of Calgary. As such it is referenced only as a means for discussion and the data is not to be used for the basis of any other work that may follow. It was meant to be informal, and started out as more of a discussion among friends, and as such the statistics entered are not considered reliable.
10. Rubin, pp. 63-64. The word ‘surrealism’ had been used first by Apollinaire in 1917 in a context that coupled avant-garde art with technological progress; his neologism possessed none of the psychological implications that the word would later take on. “Up to a certain point,” wrote Breton in November 1922, “one knows what my friends and I mean by Surrealism. This word, which is not our invention and which we could have abandoned to the most vague critical vocabulary, is used by us in a precise sense. By it, we mean to designate a certain psychic automatism that corresponds rather closely to the state of dreaming, a state that is today extremely difficult to delimit.” By the autumn of 1924, Breton had assumed exclusive rights to the magical word and in the Surrealist manifesto published then he gave it formal definition: Surrealism ... (etc. as quoted in the text).
11. Sontag, p. 52
12. Sontag, p. 53
13. Sontag, p. 54
14. Mayes, p. 2
15. Sontag, p. 169
16. Barthes, p. 27
17. Sontag, p. 179

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