

The Integrity of the Image

– David Campbell/World Press Photo

Accepted Standards and Current Practices

Media organizations respond to the ethical challenges of manipulation through a combination of codes and practices that embody accepted standards.

In some cases, those standards are codified in formal ethics policies. This is most common in North America. From the people we interviewed or contacted for information, we received only two written policies from an organization outside of North America. Professional journalism associations both have their own policies and aggregate links to others. Prominent examples include the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Pew Research Journalism Project, and the Society of Professional Journalists.^I Not every organization with a written ethics policy explicitly mentions photography. In some of those cases, policies implicitly suggest that the guidelines for fair and accurate reporting are also the criteria for judging what may be done to a photograph. There are publicly available codes of ethics dealing with photography from The Associated Press, *The New York Times*, and the National Press Photographers Association.^{II} The Consumers Union report *Photo Manipulation Policies* summarizes the codes of 38 American organizations.^{III} Outside of North America, and taking a global perspective, is the Reuters code, along with codes from Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Turkey.^{IV}

On reviewing these written policies, a consensus on how news and documentary images should be handled becomes evident, regardless of whether we are dealing with legacy media companies or new media organizations. The essence of this consensus is that media organizations prohibit the alteration of images beyond traditional darkroom techniques. The consensus has the following elements:

- The alteration of images—where alteration means the digital addition or subtraction of elements—is forbidden.
- The ban on alteration is often cast in terms of not deceiving or misleading readers/viewers.
- The only generally permitted alteration is retouching or the use of the cloning tool to eliminate dust on camera sensors or scratches on scanned negatives/prints.
- Some media organizations additionally permit the blurring of faces or other forms of identification (e.g. vehicle registrations), where this is either required by the law or judged by the organizations to be necessary.
- Any images that are altered for illustrative purposes must be credited and/or captioned as “photo-illustrations”, or with a similar term.
- Adjustments made by image-processing software (e.g. limited cropping, dodging and burning, toning, color adjustment, conversion to grayscale) are acceptable so long as they are deemed “minor/normal/subtle/moderate”, while “excessive use” is not acceptable.

- Those “minor/normal/subtle/moderate” adjustments are regularly justified by reference to “traditional darkroom practices”, or to not violating the “emotional truthfulness” of an image, and are considered necessary in order to make clear and accurate reproduction possible.
- Photos cannot be staged, posed or re-enacted.

This consensus applies most directly to news and documentary images. Our respondents noted that they generally regarded nature and sports images in the same way as news and documentary images. Fashion and staged portraits were a different matter altogether. In those genres, there were no policies, and in fashion especially the prevailing attitude was that anything goes and all is permitted. Even for *The New York Times*, certain images (“portraits or still-lives...photos of food, shoes, etc.”) could be set up or altered without being clearly labeled as a photo illustration.

It is clear from this consensus that “manipulation” means alteration to an image where something is added to, or subtracted from, the image after capture; or something is posed in order to create a scene to photograph. As such, manipulation is a specific form of processing, where the material change to the image through the addition or subtraction of element(s) is designed to deceive or mislead the reader/viewer. In the discussion on “The Grey Area of Processing” we will discuss the issues arising from the consensus on permitted adjustments in processing.

Our research found that many organizations rely on conventions and norms instead of written codes and policies. In fact, relying on conventions and norms is more common than written codes and policies. This is the case in Europe and North America as well as in the rest of the world, and includes both established and newer media organizations. These organizations depend either on a culture that has been established in photo departments over a long period of time, or on the personal convictions of photo editors managing those departments.

However, even when written policies were few and far between, the way our respondents described their conventions and norms mirrored exactly the consensus on manipulation as described above, suggesting a broad, if de facto, global agreement. This conclusion is obviously contingent on the number of responses we received, but their uniformity is significant. As one Russian respondent said “we follow the policy regarding image manipulation common for the photojournalistic industry and particularly for news-related images.” An Indian respondent similarly noted their organization’s practices were “based on the general notion and standards of the industry everywhere...[of] a strict policy against manipulation.”

This de facto global agreement means that, without exception amongst our respondents:

1 Manipulation was seen as involving material changes to an image through the addition or subtraction of content, and was always deemed unacceptable for news and documentary pictures.

2 Adjustments (such as limited cropping, dodging and burning, toning, color adjustment, conversion to grayscale) to photographs were accepted. These changes were usually described in terms similar to those detailed above: “minor” changes, such as those said previously to have been used in darkrooms, were permitted; “excessive” use of such adjustment was not.

3 What constitutes a “minor” versus an “excessive” change is necessarily open to interpretation. Respondents said that judgment was on a case-by-case basis, and often used the anachronistic terms of the dark-room analogy.