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Writing the World Wide Web: Digital Photography and Visual Truthfulness

Abstract:

Two weeks into the Iraq War in 2003 the *Los Angeles Times* published a dramatic photograph across six columns of its front page. Several sister newspapers published the photograph before an assistant photo editor noticed that at least one civilian appeared twice in the photograph's background. The photographer admitted that he had combined elements of two photographs taken in quick succession to create a stronger, composite image. He was immediately fired, and debates surrounding photographic and journalistic objectivity ensued.

This paper re-examines the composite image to argue that photographic communication has fundamentally changed since the adoption of digital technologies in ways that are not widely recognised or understood. Central to this change is photography's enhanced ability to communicate beyond the photographic frame, and, indeed, to manipulate the frame itself. These changes present several paradoxes to photojournalism, two of which are clear in the composite image.

This paper discusses the significance of these paradoxes for how photographic truth is read and understood, and subsequently argues for a paradigm of visual truth that places emphasis on professional transparency and truthfulness in representation. Drawing from the tradition of literary journalism, the paper argues that photographers and photo editors should respond to the creative potentials of digital photography by attempting to communicate not only what is seen, but also how it is seen.

Biographical note:

Benjamin Ball is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Technology, Sydney, where he also holds a first-class honours degree in Journalism and a bachelor degree in International Studies. His practice-led doctoral research investigates the challenge and possibility of producing long-form narrative journalism for the Internet, and focuses on documentary photography's potential to serve as an engaging form of digital literary journalism. Benjamin also works as a freelance writer, documentary photographer and multimedia producer for publications and webpages in Australia, Indonesia, Colombia and the United Kingdom.

Key words

Visual Truth – Objectivity – Photojournalism – Distant Others – Digital Photography
– Mediation – Composite – Manipulation – Ethics – Transparency – Truthfulness –
Iraq War – Brian Walski.

Introduction

On March 31, 2003, two weeks into the Iraq War, the *Los Angeles Times* published a dramatic photograph across six columns of its front page in which a British soldier directs Iraqi civilians to take cover from a battle on the outskirts of Basra. Several sister newspapers published the photograph before a photo editor at the *Hartford Courant* noticed that at least two civilians appeared twice in the photograph's background. The photographer, Brian Walski, admitted that he had combined elements of two photographs taken in quick succession to create a stronger, composite image. He was immediately fired.

This paper examines Walski's composite image, and the *Los Angeles Times*' response to it, to argue that photographic communication has fundamentally changed since the adoption of digital technologies in ways that are not widely recognised or understood. Central to this change is photography's enhanced ability to communicate beyond the photographic frame, and, indeed, to manipulate the frame itself. This paper explores how this change affects the reading and understanding of photographic truth.

Brian Walski lost his job because his actions threatened traditional notions of visual truth and jeopardised photojournalism's claim to authenticity. *Los Angeles Times*' response to this threat can be understood within the framework of paradigm repair, whereby the newspaper sought to protect itself, the journalistic establishment more broadly, and the credibility that is its currency of trade, by ostracising Walski's actions and casting them as an aberration (Carlson 2009).

However, this response failed to recognise or interrogate the paradoxes that Walski's photograph presented, and disabled a more progressive, reflexive discussion about his actions. The central paradox in Walski's composite image is that it depicted and communicated the reality of what he had witnessed more successfully than the two legitimate photographs, taken only seconds apart, that he had cobbled together on his laptop to create the false photo. A second paradox is that his photograph was criticised through the lens of print journalism, with several commentators stating that the composite image was analogous to altering a direct quote (Carlson 2009).

However, had Walski been writing and not photographing the battle scene, his narrative depiction of the fraught meeting of military might and civilian vulnerability would not have produced the same ethical concerns that led to his dismissal.

Digital technologies jeopardise photojournalism's claim to authenticity, but they also extend photography's narrative capacity, providing an opportunity to communicate not only what is seen through the lens, but also how the photographer sees it. It is argued that in place of paradigm repair, a more appropriate response would be a shift towards a new visual paradigm that recognises the fragility of objective reporting, and places its emphasis instead on transparency and truthfulness. The intent of this paper is not to justify Walski's actions but to interrogate their meaning, and to consider if his composite photograph could have been produced and published in a more ethical, productive manner.

The paper begins by locating these issues within the context of the author's practice-led doctoral research, which explores the moral and practical challenge of producing

long-form narrative journalism for the Internet, and the role that documentary photography plays in engaging people with digital literary journalism. The paper then examines the notions of truth and objectivity by which Walski was judged and compares them to the ideals of truthfulness and transparency that might inform a more ethical and serviceable paradigm of visual truth. Finally, the paper interrogates the two central paradoxes of Walski's image in light of photography's evolving narrative capacity, and in consideration of the contradictions and demands inherent in professional photojournalism, including the historical strain between aesthetic craft and realist reporting, and the challenge of engaging a public with consequential journalism in the context of 24-hour news coverage.

Digital Photography in a Mediated World

Our media is the environment through which we conduct conversations about the world, and through which we can relate to life beyond our geographical neighbourhoods (Postman 1987; Silverstone 2007). Photography accounts for only a small part of our mediated world, but its rapid transition from static analogue film to dynamic pixels is emblematic of the digital rivers that are reshaping the greater media landscape.

This paper is part of a critical discussion attempting to understand the nature of online, digital communication, and what its nature means for journalism, and literary journalism in particular. The online medium presents many challenges to literary journalists, the first of which is the tendency to skim across online information rather than sink into it, making considered engagement with mediated communication a harder outcome to achieve, and rendering our relationships with Distant Others less meaningful (Carr 2010; Immodino-Yang et al 2009; Richtel 2010; Silverstone 2007).

Photography, like art and music, is a universal language with the potential to facilitate conversations across social, cultural and political borders, vesting it with moral and practical significance in the near-global realm of online communication (Jordan 2008, p.165; Silverstone 2007). Of significance, too, is empirical evidence showing that digital photo essays are capable of making people 'stop', of slowing our habitual online skimming and sustaining our attention for periods of up to 21 minutes¹ (Storm 2009). Digital photojournalism may therefore serve as a platform for in-depth narrative reportage, but to achieve this end it must first reconsider its own claim to truth.

On objectivity, truth, and truthfulness

In the final chapter of *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt writes that the moment that marked the birth of modernity was when Galileo looked through his telescope and observed that the world was not as it appeared; being and appearance parted company, doubt touched everything between, and the necessary conditions for scientific investigation were created (Arendt 1998). However, modern media has created what Silverstone describes as a 'post-modern reconciliation of Being and Appearance,' in which the world is once again as it appears; this time as it appears *on*

television (Silverstone 2007, p. 50-1). On the conflation of image and reality, Sontag writes:

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks. (2008, p.23, original emphasis)

It is here that digital technologies provide a means of intervention, of deconstructing photography's tenuous claim to objectivity and opening the door once again to doubt and understanding. Photography is not as it appears.

Of course, photojournalism has rarely depicted life without distortion, and photography has always claimed to communicate beyond its rectangular frame. Griffin, for example, argues that the 'great' photographs of the last century are celebrated not for the specifics of what they reveal so much as for their symbolic depiction of universal experience (1999, p.131). Digital technologies extend this claim by providing a practical means of communicating not only the 'what' in the photographic frame, but also the 'how'.

In 1999, John Long, chairman of the US National Press Photographers' Association (NPPA) Ethics and Standards Committee, wrote,

One of the major problems we face as photojournalists is the fact that the public is losing faith in us. Our readers and viewers no longer believe everything they see. All images are called into question because the computer has proved that images are malleable, changeable, fluid. (in Newton 2009, p.239)

The resurgence of doubt vis-à-vis photojournalism should not compel photographers to defend the objectivity of their craft, which itself has long been subject to critique, to the extent that Fontcuberta states that 'manipulated photograph' is a redundant term, because photography is, by nature, manipulated (1995, p.12). Rather, photographers should explore more ethically accountable ways of communicating through their work. In his seminal book, *After Photography*, Fred Ritchin suggests that digital photographs be treated as hypertexts in which each of a photograph's corners provide contextual information for the viewer, including a standardised symbol of veracity to assure that no post-production manipulation has occurred (2009).

For Ritchin, as for Sontag, Silverstone and Arendt, the shadow of doubt that digital technologies cast over photojournalism's claim to authenticity is, potentially, a positive outcome of the digital age, but only if photographers and photo editors are able to shift the dominant paradigm governing photojournalistic practice from realist objectivity (Carlson 2009; Cunningham 2003), to one of transparency and truthfulness.

Photography is an imperfect witness, but a witness nevertheless. Its evidence has been crucial in informing global citizens of life's unfolding dramas, and, occasionally, of prompting people to act. In the absence of post-shutter-release manipulation, photography is read, and should be read, as non-fiction, but photography's evidence of the world is not objective (Fontcuberta 1995; Ritchin 2009). To clarify how truth

and objectivity are understood in the context of this paper, it is helpful to consider an example.

Prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq, 70 per cent of letters sent to *The Tennessean* newspaper were against the war, however, in fear of appearing biased, the newspaper's editors published pro and anti-war letters in equal measure (Cunningham 2003). This is an example of a simple objective truth (a percentage) being made subjective and misleading through editorial selection. To take the example further, if the editors were to claim that 70 per cent of Americans were against the war, or that 70 per cent of their readership was against the war, the result would be a misreading of objective truth that could only be clarified with further investigation. The proposition might be true, but in itself it is a false extrapolation of the evidence.

This misreading is illustrative of the way photography is read, as true beyond the specific reality that is captured in one precise spatial and temporal moment. Speaking of a German steel and munitions factory in 1931, Bertolt Brecht remarked to his friend Walter Benjamin that 'less than ever does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works ... tells us nothing about the conditions and relations within' (in Curran 2008, p.139).

Brecht's concern with image, reality, context and truthfulness led him to create his 'epic theatre', in which a series of interruptions obscure the performance to make transparent the mechanisms behind it. His actors play out a script, but they also make the audience aware that they are acting (Brecht 1964). Similarly, the politics of the 'new journalism' is based on deconstructing its own claim to truth by persistently disrupting the taken-for-granted relationships between writers, subjects and readers (Pauly 1990, p.111-12).

In a transition towards a paradigm of truthfulness, photography would do well to borrow from these two traditions. According to Silverstone, the production of truth stems from accuracy and sincerity. 'Truthfulness,' he writes, 'implies a respect for the truth' (2007, p.159). For photography, this involves not only the production of visual truth in the moment of shutter-release, but also consideration for how the truth is received and read. Expanding on his idea of 'hyperphotography', Ritchin writes,

A documentary photograph has always required contextualization to evoke its intended meanings ... The same person crying in a photo could be suffering from dust in an eye or from hearing terrible news. The digital, unlike the analog, easily allows the photograph's ambiguity to be respected – the first reading of the visual – before it is concretized, while providing hidden amplifying information to confirm and provoke other ideas. (2009, p.72)

Becker argues that readers do not expect to spend time deciphering the ambiguities of photographs that appear in daily newspapers and magazines (1995, p.6). However, this is not necessarily because such an expectation is unrealistic, but because a critical public that looks beyond surface truths is anathema to the dominant paradigm of objective realism (Carlson 2009; Cunningham 2003; Fontcuberta 1995). A collaborative approach to reporting is an added burden for both journalists and the public, but how else is it possible, asks Ritchin (2009, p.80), to communicate that a tomato that is grown and gassed to look perfect is actually insipid and chalky? How

else does one move beyond image to communicate truth, escaping the false comfort of objectivity to create a landscape in which citizens and journalists take responsibility for how our communication shapes the mediated world?

Walski lost his job because, judged from within the paradigm of objective realism, he had committed the worst of journalistic sins: intentionally misrepresenting reality (Carlson 2009). This assertion, in turn, rests on the belief that a journalist merely captures reality and relays it to the public; that is, on the belief that what the public receives is objective reporting (Carlson 2009, p.130). Within a framework of truthfulness, however, reality is not perceived as a static commodity to be transported from one place to another, but as an unfolding, conditional narrative. Walski's composite photograph would not be read as an objective fact for public consumption, but as a starting point begging further information.

How conversation might stem from a photograph depends on where it is published. On a digital platform like the Internet, photographers and editors can facilitate exploration of an image by layering it with print or audio captions, video interviews, and links to other websites, photographs and articles containing further contextual information. The photograph could also be a threshold for a narrative photo essay in which the photographer combines an audio account of what he had seen with other related imagesⁱⁱ. A composite image could be made transparent via a simple animated reproduction of how the two original photographs come together to create it.

In a print publication like the *Los Angeles Times* it would also be possible to contextualise a composite image, by making transparent its creation through a caption, or article, and via the omission of Ritchin's aforementioned symbol of veracity. Had this been the case with Walski's image, he would have been able to depict the intensity and chaos of the situation that he had photographed more profoundly and ethically than he was otherwise able to do; and he may not have lost his job.

A better photograph?

If two legitimate photographs are combined into one, is the resulting image 'fictive' if all its elements are factual and the public understands how and why it is created?

Indeed, how Walski created the image is clear, but not the reasons *why* he did it. In a public response to his dismissal, Walski offered the following perspective in an email to former colleagues:

Covering a story on the scale of the war in Iraq, there is a self-imposed pressure to achieve the best possible images. Combining two images or altering an image is something that under any circumstance would never enter my mind, yet on this particular day, under a kind of self-imposed pressure to produce the highest-quality images, [it] did. (in Johnston 2003, p.10)

The key element in this statement is the ambiguous notion of 'quality'. Walski combined two photographs because he instinctively knew that the resulting image would more powerfully convey the scene he had photographed. The composite was

only one of many photographs that he sent to his editor that day, but, back in the newsroom, it stood out as outstanding, for two reasons.

Aesthetically, the composite is stronger than its legitimate parents. Its visual power lies in its juxtaposition of a soldier carrying an automatic weapon, marshalling civilians away from a violent battle, and a father carrying his child, trying to find safe ground. Critics described the composite as ‘the kind of photograph that wins a Pulitzer,’ and, ‘a little more front-page and award worthy’ (in Carlson 2009, p.132). The *Times* labelled Walski the ‘photographer who was fired last month for combing elements of two photographs to make one *better but fraudulent* photograph’ (in Carlson 2009, p.132, emphasis added).

As a profession, photojournalism insists that its social function resides in objective reporting; yet its industry awards invariably celebrate aesthetic style, not accuracy (Carlson 2009; Fontcuberta 1995; Ritchin 2009). Style is central to photography’s ability to make people stop (Jordan 2008, p.161), and it acquires additional value when one recognises that a journalist’s role is not merely to relay reality as faithfully as possible, but to do so in a manner that reaches an audience. ‘A little more front-page worthy’, in this context, is an ethical intervention in itself.

Within a 24-hour news environment there emerges what might be called an *ethics of being heard*. Journalists are compelled to communicate, but the ability to do so is sabotaged by a public that is too often rendered deaf and mute by the twin forces of commercialism and individualism (Ritchin 2009; Silverstone 2007; Stallabrass 1997). Photographs that attempt to communicate the nuance and human complexity of events must compete with advertisements, gossip, and spectacle (Ritchin 2009; Stallabrass 1997). Walski, too, was arguably privileging spectacle over substance when he merged his photographs, but the fact that he was in Iraq, where 32 photojournalists and camerapersons were killed between March 2003 and April 2008 (Carlson 2009, p.134), suggests that his instinct was at least partly inspired by a desire to tell the story, and to have it heard.

Indeed, the second reason why Walski’s image was outstanding is that it portrayed an aspect of the three-week-old Iraq War that had not yet been seen. Walski was one of the few photojournalists working in Iraq outside the embedding system controlled by coalition troops (Carlson 2009; Stallabrass 2006). In this sense, his photographs portraying the intersection of military power and civilian bewilderment were arguably less staged than those of his colleagues, at least until the moment of post-shutter-release manipulation (Stallabrass 2006).

On words and light

According to Dean Baquet, managing editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, Walski’s composite was akin to journalistic fabrication. It was, he said, like ‘changing a quote to make it more dramatic’ (in Carlson 2009, pp.129-30). Other commentators reacted in the same terms: ‘*news photographs are the equivalent of direct quotations* and therefore are sacrosanct’ (in Carlson 2009, p.130, emphasis in original).

Such a reaction reflects the paradigm of objectivity and its associated values of accuracy, balance, distance and neutrality (Cunningham 2003). But is a photograph analogous to a direct quote, or more akin to a narrative depiction?

A direct quote is an objective truth. Even when what is said is untrue, the words themselves and the act of speaking them are facts that journalists must not alter. However, like truth, quotes always exist within narratives, and how the quote is used, and the choice to use it at all, are subjective decisions for the journalist to make. A photograph's relationship to truth is similar. When treated merely as fact, the fraught contextual information – structure, composition, and what is excluded from the frame – face the same ethical scrutiny as a print article that fails to recognise its own subjectivity, and in which quotes are used in ways that are less than transparent.

Treating a photograph as a narrative depiction of reality, however, allows more room for discussion, for a productive ambiguity based on the photographer's awareness of her own subjectivity, and this holds true for legitimate photographs, and composites. To speak of a fraudulent paragraph means little. If it is written, it is real. The question revolves around truth, around fact and fiction, and the onus is on the writer to tell us what she sees, and how she sees it. Walski's composite is not an accurate quote, which is why he was fired, but it is still arguably a factual depiction of what he saw. Had he been writing the scene and not photographing it, his depiction would not have caused a stir, partly because it would not have been given six columns on the front page of a major newspaper. Unfortunately for Walski, he was describing the scene in a medium that is yet to be fully understood, or employed to its full capacity.

Conclusion

Walski's composite image does not threaten photography's claim to truth so much as it jeopardises the media's claim to objective realism. It presents not only a clash of fact and fiction, of truth and misrepresentation, but also of old and new, a collision of superficial understanding with an unsettling doubt that, tended to thoughtfully, may lead to a more genuine understanding of the world we live in. Composites should not be encouraged. But when two photographs can merge to artfully depict an important reality, we must have the mechanisms to consider how such a photograph can be received. Digital technologies allow photographers and editors to attend to this dilemma in a way that is truthful, creative, engaging, and respectful.

Could Walski's composite be considered a non-fiction depiction of what happened on the outskirts of Basra that day? The question itself is a productive response to our mediated world.

Endnotes

ⁱ Digital photo essays, or slideshows, are narrative stories in which photographs, sometimes combined with moving image, accompany a soundtrack, much like an illustrated radio story. For examples of outstanding digital photo essays, see www.mediastorm.org

ⁱⁱ Another *Los Angeles Times* photographer, Luis Sinco, turned a celebrated photograph of an exhausted US Marine serving in Iraq into a 16-minute photo essay about the realities of war and post-traumatic stress: <http://mediastorm.com/publication/the-marlboro-marine>

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