

**Pulitzer Ethics Project “A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words...But Only the Right Picture”:
Kim Moseman, Salisbury University**

For years, journalists and news organizations have been blurring the lines of reality and fiction when it comes to photography.

This problem is often referred to as “Media Manipulation”, where a photographer will edit or alter a photograph as well as the meaning the image conveys. This manipulation can also involve using a misleading caption, using an image out of context and staging pictures.

The Society of Professional Journalists [Code of Ethics](#) states that a journalist should “never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.” Yet, photo manipulation has been occurring since the early [1900s](#).



“This is a century long problem,” Jeanne Anderton, a former photojournalist and current photography professor, said. “This is a fluid and controversial area.”

The reasons behind these journalist’s unethical actions vary. Some experienced photographers may feel they can get away with it. Other so-called “journalists” just do not carry the same ethical values as most.

“Anyone can call themselves a reporter,” Vanessa Junkin, a former reporter for *The Daily Times*, said. “They may not have the same ethics or care what the rules are.”

A *L.A. Times* [photographer](#) was fired for compositing two images together. A freelance



Associated Press [photographer](#) was fired for editing out his shadow from a photo.

Regardless of how big or small editing a photograph may be, it is “altering reality” and cannot be permitted in the world of journalism.

While this is a very intricate and complicated issue, this blog will go into three particular aspects and how they violate journalist ethics:

- Staging
- Editing
- Misleading captions

All of these subjects draw a line between truth and lies because they change the message of the image, the image’s overall impact and what was really happening in the image during that time.

Staging:

Staging a photograph refers to when a photographer controls every aspect of the photo to the point where whatever is happening in the photo is not



authentic. There are many examples of this, such as one [photographer’s](#) image of two lovers in the back of a car. It turned out it was his cousin and his girlfriend.

Staging goes against the core ethics of journalism when it comes to capturing real events in real time.

“If you stage something, you’re done. You’ve probably done it before and you will probably do it again,” David Burns, an experienced former reporter, said.

Editing:

When it comes to editing a photograph, it can appear rather benign to increase the contrast, add toner or darken the image. Yet this can change the entire message of the picture and therefore alter reality.

Editing also includes combining [two](#) photographs to

convey a strong meaning or using Photoshop to add more to a photograph.

Take when *TIME Magazine* darkened a mugshot of O.J.

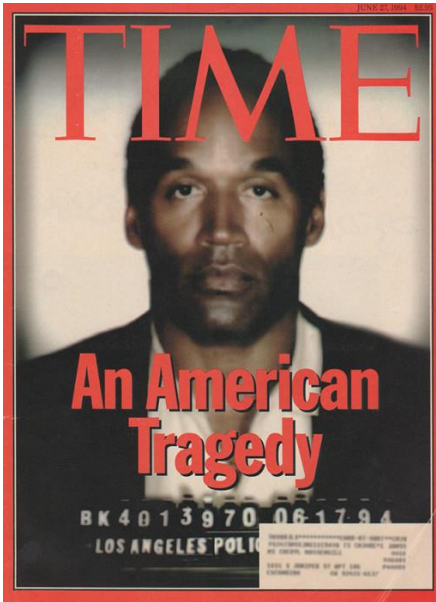
Simpson on its cover. This brought about a lot of racial tension.

“Editing techniques such as cropping, changing the image

to black and white, toning may only be acceptable if it best clarifies

the meaning,” Anderton said. “Not when it gives the photograph a

whole new meaning.”



Misleading Captions:

One of the main ethical issues that arise when it comes to photo manipulation is the use of wrong captions. Usually captions are controlled and written by and editor and the photographer has no control of when and where the photo will be used.

A famous example of this would be this image of a father and his injured son that was used in an article about the Taliban. In reality, the boy was injured from a United States air raid. When the photographer captured this moment, he was not aware that it may be taken out of context and used for another article than what was actually happening.

“What power does a photographer have when images are captioned and portrayed?” Anderton said.



Technological advances only make catching these journalist fibbers more difficult. Thankfully, there are websites such as [litzru](#) that can identify if a photo has been modified in anyway.

Yet this may not be enough. Photographs are constantly being disqualified and [removed](#) from major contests after Photoshop or other altercations have been detected. But the only real solution to this ethical dilemma is for journalists to hold themselves to a higher standard of professionalism and honesty.

“Editing pictures has become relatively to do, especially anyone who has access to Photoshop,” Junkin said. “But hopefully most people wouldn’t want to.”

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