

Photo ethics – a blurry line

Written by Becca Cremer

With technology and digital media evolving at an incredible rate, it is not surprising that journalistic ethics have struggled to keep pace. In the struggle, we have yet to arrive at one set conclusion.

In March 2001, a Los Angeles Times photographer who was covering the war in Iraq used Adobe Photoshop to combine two photos. The resulting image was printed on the front page of two newspapers. Less than a week later, the photographer was fired.

The photographers responsible for the July 2007 cover of Redbook magazine also used Photoshop extensively. When someone leaked the original photos of Faith Hill – wrinkles and all – to Jezebel.com, the site posted a guide to the manipulation. Bloggers and mainstream media alike offered their criticisms. Despite the outrage of some at this use of photo-editing software, many others conceded – and commented online – that airbrushing of photos was to be expected.

And before first deadline this year, students across the country flipped photos, cut out backgrounds and created photo-based graphics to illustrate yearbook stories and themes. Some will appear on covers or get other prime placement. The consequences of these photos and photo illustrations will be seen when the books are distributed.

In some of these situations, it is clear that photojournalists or their editors made unethical decisions. In others, judgment is not so easy.

The capabilities of digital editing software such as Photoshop have made it easy for students and professionals to alter and manipulate photos quickly. With this ease, though, the line between right and wrong in photo editing has become increasingly blurry.

General philosophy

For Dawn Nelson, yearbook adviser at Mira Costa High School in Manhattan Beach, Calif., deciding what is ethical is easy. “We do not alter reality,” she said. “If you manipulate a photo, somebody always knows. And then it just destroys your credibility.”

Robin Sawyer, yearbook adviser at First Flight High School in Kill Devil Hills, N.C., also adheres to a basic journalistic philosophy. “Our readers have to expect that we are going to give them the truth,” Sawyer said. “Anything you do that alters reality alters the truth.”

Not all advisers have such clear-cut policies. Rose Gifford, yearbook adviser at Mercer Island High School in Mercer Island, Wash., said her staff does what works best for each page.

“I know that there are purists who think you should use a photo ‘as is’ but that’s not how you teach photography,” Gifford said.

Gifford teaches her staff to use Photoshop and the tools and techniques available, such as filters and cropping, to enhance photos. For example, the large class photo is edited every year to include every senior, she said.

Jai Tanner, yearbook adviser at Franklin High School in El Paso, Texas, takes a slightly different view. For her, yearbooks are both journalism and art, and the tools available should be used to do the best job possible.

“The important thing is, whatever you do, to do it well,” Tanner said.

The darkroom rule

Many photojournalism teachers and yearbook advisers stick to the “darkroom rule,” only using Photoshop to do things that can be done in a traditional darkroom.

“Photoshop is a digital darkroom to tweak color, contrast, exposure – that kind of thing. Anything that enhances the photograph but doesn’t change it,” Nelson said. “That’s just a standard of journalism.”

The technology, Nelson said, allows students to use photos that have technical problems that would take too much time and skill to fix in a traditional darkroom.

“You can save and use pictures that you might not have been able to use before. You can bring out the best in a photo, enhance the quality,” Nelson said. “That’s what Photoshop should be used for: to enhance the photograph, not to change reality.”

Tanner does not adhere strictly to the “darkroom rule.” Her staff has taken advantage of the digital tools available in Photoshop for its 2009 theme, “Shift.” The point of the book, Tanner said, is to look at things differently. In illustrating the theme, the staff was influenced by Andy Warhol, the artist famous for his pop art, and Shepard Fairey, the artist who created the famous Barack Obama hope poster.

The staff used the artistic technique – which they called “Warhol-izing” – on all of the divider pages. After that, Tanner said, the process became more subjective. Of the first 50 spreads the staff submitted, only four or five non-divider spreads included Warhol-ized photos.

The staff at Franklin High School in El Paso, Texas, used a technique they called “Warhol-izing” to create illustrations on their theme pages and a few additional spreads for their 2009 theme, “Shift.”

“It’s enough to remind people that it’s there,” Tanner said. “We are also doing a lot of other things to drive home the theme, to make it about seeing things differently in a myriad of ways.”

One student, Nando Vasquez, does nearly all of the photo manipulation for Tanner’s staff. That way, Tanner said, none of the students can “go wild” with the technique.

“Nando really takes direction from me or the editors. We say ‘do this,’ and he said ‘OK’ and he goes and he does his magic,” Tanner said.

Vasquez said he decides what modifications to make to a photo on an individual basis. He chooses something to Warhol-ize in a photo, then evaluates the message the change sends. If the change does not work with the story, he chooses something else.

“I like doing the artwork because it makes you look at it in a different way,” Vasquez said. “It makes you look at a picture’s meaning. I can make you look at an expression, or look at a photo for more information.”

At the beginning of the year, Tanner’s head photographer expressed concern about having his photos used for photo illustrations.

“[He] is a purist photographer. He likes his work used AS IS,” Tanner said. “I have a staff that’s OK with the manipulation of a photo and one photographer who hesitates. He has a good reason for it. He wants to build a portfolio. He had to do a lot of compromise. Everything you do is always about give and take and compromise.”

Of course, Tanner said, she and her staff are aware that, if they are not careful, they could take Warhol-izing too far. “The issue is knowing when to do it, how much to do it and how to do it,” Tanner said.

Photoshop enables you to move objects from one image to another. But just because you can, should you? Staff members need to determine where to draw the line in manipulating images. In this example, sports photographers are taught to include the ball in play with the players. Maybe the photographer knew the player hit the ball, but just missed taking the image. Yet, the new image does not accurately reflect reality. Ask yourself what you want your yearbook images to say.

Call it what it is

Tanner’s staff is also careful to label every photo that has been manipulated with a dual photo credit that reads “Photo by” and “Photo illustration by.”

Sawyer and Nelson agree that labeling a photo illustration as such helps clarify ethical boundaries.

“If it’s no longer a representation of reality, then it’s a photo illustration,” Nelson said. “That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it, but it has to be labeled as a photo illustration.”

However, Nelson believes staffs should limit the number of photo illustrations in their yearbooks.

“The purpose of the yearbook is to document the year,” Nelson said. “When you’re substituting art for a photo you’re cheating people in the school by saying that that is more important than what people are actually doing.”

Airbrushing

It is important to keep the audience of the book in mind, Nelson said. She teaches her students that photo editing sensitively means selecting photos that subjects will be glad to see in the yearbook.

“I encourage them to always remember that every photo they run is about somebody,” Nelson said. “And I ask them to look at each photo and ask, ‘If it were you, would you want that photo to be run?’ ‘Is that what you want to say about that person, that group, that sport?’”

In the 2008 Hoofprints yearbook, for example, Nelson’s photo editor chose to use a picture of two seniors dancing at the winter formal. One of the girls had scars from severe burns on her arms. The student had worn a sleeveless top to the dance, and her arms are prominent in the photo. Nelson asked her students to take the photo to the girl and ask her how she felt about it running. The girl was fine with it, and the photo was included on the spread.

“What we don’t do is Photoshop the burns off her arms,” Nelson said. “You make an ethical decision. You don’t manipulate the photo.”

Gifford feels differently about cosmetic changes made in Photoshop; her policy is much less strict.

“Pretty much all studio photos are airbrushed anyway, and pretty much all of the photos we see in magazines are airbrushed, too. I think that’s real life,” Gifford said.

“If, for instance, we took a photo of someone who had really bad acne, we would probably offer to take the acne off,” Gifford said.

“Airbrushing of the senior photos happens every day, so what’s the difference?” Gifford said. “We don’t do it just because it looks better, but I’d change it if they asked.”

Photo manipulation for inclusion

One place that Gifford said Photoshop helps her staff present a better product is a large, foldout senior photo spread. These pages, Gifford said, are edited for appropriateness and to include all of the seniors.

“We cut out hand signals, no matter what they are. We warn them in advance that we will take them out,” Gifford said. “We have to go through one person at a time. Every once in a while a junior sneaks in. I’ll clone a wall in to take them out.”

These edits are important, Gifford said, because they help the photo tell the complete story of the senior class.

“The yearbook’s supposed to be a representation of the whole school and we want to make sure we include as many (seniors) as possible,” Gifford said.

She adds that the students who miss the senior photo are often the students who are less involved in the school and, therefore, less represented in the yearbook. Adding them in to the senior photo helps get them into the book.

Truth be told, the reader is not getting the entire story from an image with cut-out background. This image may now be out of context and not tell the entire story, or tell it in a truthful way. Consider the story you are trying to tell in words and images when you think about using a COB.

Photoshop cheating

In the same situation, though, Tanner would arrive at a very different conclusion.

“You have to think about what is your objective in Photoshopping a shot. Doing it to a group photo, that’s where you’d be doing it for journalism. That to me is really cheating. For me there’s a clear line,” Tanner said. “What we’re doing, it does differ from Photoshop cheating – putting people in, taking things out... that kind of thing.”

However, Tanner and Gifford both shun another kind of Photoshop “cheating,” including flipping photos to keep them from facing off the page.

“We talk about flipping pictures,” Sawyer said. “Why can’t you flip a picture? Because it’s not real.”

An exception to every rule

“Senior ads are kind of different. You don’t control the content. It’s not journalism, not news,” Sawyer said.

“The only students who have asked for airbrushing are seniors, and we’ve done that. That’s only happened a couple of times,” Gifford said. “They say things like ‘my face is all red. Can you take away that red tint?’ It’s the same thing as when you take pictures in the gym and the colors are all wrong. Certainly we adjust that.”

Nelson said that, over the years, her staff has occasionally blurred profanity in photos, but that is a “last ditch choice.” She said she would send students to reshoot and consider all of the options before using a photo that requires altering to meet community standards.

“I would hope that it’s not the only photo. I would assume that my photographers would have brought back more than one image and we’d have options,” Nelson said. “I would ask them to use a better photograph.”

When in doubt, reshoot

“I can’t think of any really good reasons you would manipulate a photo and use the manipulated photo instead of reshooting,” Nelson said. “It would be better, more ethical, to choose a different photo than to use the manipulated one.

“You have to ask yourself, ‘What is the purpose of a yearbook? What is your mission?’ The mission of a yearbook is to tell the story of the school year for that year and that school. It’s not supposed to be an art piece. That doesn’t mean it can’t be artistic, because it certainly can be, through beautiful design,” Nelson said. “But if it becomes about what the staff can do with photo manipulation and Photoshop to be artistic, then you are just cheating the audience.”

Nelson feels strongly that students want to see themselves and their friends in the book. Too much photo manipulation compromises that.

“You can use graphics to create a beautiful book in places, but not to be substitutes for real, unaltered photography of what actually happened,” Nelson said.

Teaching ethics

Enforcing a staff policy on photo ethics begins with setting a standard early. Nelson begins the school year by asking her students to define photojournalism. She explains the difference between photos and photo illustrations and engages her students in conversations about what is acceptable and unacceptable. Then, after her students have photographed their first assignments, she has students cull through their own photos, keeping only the very best.

“If they’re blurry, they get thrown out. If there’s no center of interest, they get thrown out. If there’s no ball, throw it out,” Nelson said. “They have to learn to hold their own work to a high standard.”

In addition to class discussions, Sawyer uses the Newspaper Photographer’s Association code of ethics as part of her staff manual. She said teaching ethics in photo editing goes hand-in-hand with teaching basic journalism ethics.

“It begins in teaching ethics – that journalism is truth. If it’s not the truth, it’s ethically wrong,” Sawyer said. “Was that person in the photo when you took the picture. No? Then it’s not the truth. Was that pole in the photo when you took it? Yes? Then you can’t take it out.”