

Case 8-B

Manipulating News Photos: Is It Ever Justified?

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Author's Note: *By the decision of the Los Angeles Times, the photos in question in this case are not available. However, various Web sites have covered this controversy and some include the photos.*

The visual images of the 2003 war in Iraq were extraordinarily controversial. Photo editors, particularly at large media outlets, had to make decisions about hundreds of photographs every day. Sunday, March 30, was no exception. That night, *Los Angeles Times* director of photography Colin Crawford had edited about 500 photos of the war when he saw a picture from staff photographer Brian Walski. The photo depicts a group of Iraqi citizens sitting on the ground as an American soldier, armed with a rifle, stands in the foreground.

The *Times* ran the photo on Page 1, and so did sister publications the *Hartford Courant* and the *Chicago Tribune*. Thom McGuire, the *Courant's* assistant managing editor of photography and graphics, said, "It was a great image."

But a *Courant* employee, who was looking through the images for a friend, thought he noticed a problem—what appeared to be a duplication of the Iraqi citizens in the background of the picture. He brought the problem to the attention of a copyeditor, who alerted McGuire. "After about a 600 percent magnification in Photoshop, I called Colin to ask for an investigation," McGuire said.

In Los Angeles, Crawford was disbelieving. He thought the apparent duplication of the background crowd was probably due to some sort of technical, satellite-related glitch. "He sent us 13 very good images Sunday," Crawford recalled. "We had to get information and give him the benefit of the doubt."

As it turned out, Walski had used his computer to combine elements of two photographs, taken moments apart, in order to improve the composition. Once that admission was made, Crawford fired him. All the publications that ran the composite photo ran corrections.

In his apology, Walski told other *Times* employees, "I deeply regret that I have tarnished the reputation of the *Los Angeles Times*, a newspaper with the highest standards of journalism . . . and especially the very talented and extremely dedicated photographers and picture editors and friends. . . . I have always maintained the highest ethical standards through my career and cannot truly explain my complete breakdown in judgment at this time."

Another *Times* staff photographer, Don Barletti, told the Poynter Institute's online discussion group that he recalled seeing Walski after he returned. Walski told him, "Now no one will touch me. I went from the front line of the greatest newspaper in the world, and now I have nothing. No cameras, no car, nothing."

Barletti also said he understood how the alteration might have happened. Walski had been in the desert for days under harsh conditions with little sleep and food and under enormous pressure. "He got into a zone," Barletti said. "He was on a head roll, making fantastic images, and it got out of hand. He told me that he did not plan to send the image and was just messing around. He sent it anyway . . . didn't know what he was doing, but he did it. With all that he was facing, how did he have the presence of mind? It just got out of hand."

When asked about the issue, *New York Times* photographer Vincent LaForet agreed that the breach was serious. “There is not ever a good time for such manipulation, but this is the worst time. What really differentiates us from other photographers and media is our credibility. We have a history of getting it right, accurately. . . . Our credibility is all that we have.”

Micro Issues

1. How should the newspapers that ran the original photo have corrected the error?
2. Should Walski have been fired? Why?
3. Many journalists who examined the photo did not notice the problem until it was pointed out to them. Is the minor nature of the alteration relevant in the ethical discussion? Why or why not?

Mid-range Issues

1. Suzanne Lainson, also commenting on the issue on the Poynter Web site, said, “Why is the culture of the photojournalist supposed to be different than that for the print, audio or video editor . . . rather than condone editing photos, perhaps we should not condone editing print, audio and video data.” Evaluate this comment.
2. What should be the role of editors—in an ethical sense—in the newsroom?
3. Should employees blow the whistle on colleagues when they think there has been an ethical breach? If not, why not? If so, how should they do it?
4. How does the electronic manipulation of the persons in the background differ from the photographer simply asking the people to move to a certain location before the photo is taken? Are they equally culpable from an ethical sense?

Macro Issues

1. “People do not expect ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ from their media—today’s media audience is much more aware of the doctored nature of everything they read, see and hear than we like to think. I’m sure this *LA Times* story did not come as a surprise to most people,” wrote Mark Deuze. Analyze this statement. How might media organizations assure viewers and readers of the veracity of the information they publish?
2. Eric Meyer, who commented about the issue on the Poynter Web site said, “A photo is like a direct quote. You chose what to quote or what to photograph. But, when you run a direct quote or a photograph, you don’t alter it to ‘make it better.’” Evaluate this statement.