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**Author Address:** espence@csu.edu.au  
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Two Dimensions of Photo Manipulation: Correction and Corruption

Aaron Quinn, BS, MA  
Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, Canberra, Australia  
And  
California State University, Chico, USA

Edward Spence, BA (Hons), PhD  
School of Communication, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia  
And  
Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, Canberra, Australia

Abstract
The digitisation of news photography brought a myriad of advantages to photojournalists, but it also created ethical challenges because photographic deception is more expeditious and less transparent. This paper explores the ethics of computer-based photo manipulation within this latest evolution of imaging. Furthermore, the paper will explore whether photo manipulation, computer generated or otherwise, is not only unethical but also constitutes corruption. Ultimately, a solution is offered that exploits one of computers’ best attributes – consistency in measuring objective visual data – but decries subjective interpretation that results in inaccurate and inconsistent imaging thus untrustworthy and immoral reportage.

Introduction
Many journalists perceive that public trust in journalism is waning with each day that passes, but the press’ role as watchdog is still necessary for democracy. One contribution to this apparent decline in public trust is public confusion about photographic integrity (Irby, 2003; Lester 1999). Often for good reason, many people don’t believe the images they see in print news are accurate and honest reflections of reality. The New York Times photography critic, Andy Grundberg, predicted a tenuous prospect for documentary photography: ‘In the future, readers of newspapers and magazines will probably view news pictures more as illustrations1 than as reportage, since they can no longer distinguish between a genuine image and one that has been manipulated’ (Grundberg, 1990). By determining appropriate ethical actions in photo manipulation standards, part of which is determining how much journalists ought to rely on high-tech manipulations, we will establish guidelines that, if adopted, should hopefully rejuvenate some public trust in digital images and improve journalism’s public standing in general.

There are four broad questions to be answered in this paper in regard to photo manipulation and ethics: (1) what are the proper ethical guidelines for post-shoot photo manipulations (manipulations made after the photo has been taken)? (2) Should we rely on intra-camera exposure calculations instead of post-shoot manipulations? And (3) are photo manipulations unethical and (4) do they moreover, constitute

1 Illustrations are, by definition, significantly altered photographs or drawings that are credited as such in journalistic publications so not to mislead readers or viewers about the reality or origin of the content.
What is Corruption?
Corruption is a complex and multi-faceted issue and for the purpose of this paper we can only offer the briefest of outlines of what constitutes corruption. Although related, corruption and immorality are not the same thing. Though corruption is always immoral not all immoral acts qualify as corruption. Though immoral, the actions of the house burglar and bank robber, for example, are not what we would normally describe as corrupt.

The missing condition is a socially, professionally or institutionally pre-established fiduciary relationship of trust between the corrupt person or group and the person or persons or group who are harmed in some way by the corrupt person's or the corrupt group’s actions. The reason why house burglars or bank robbers though typically deemed immoral are not deemed corrupt is because there is an absence of a prior fiduciary relationship of trust between the burglar and the bank robber on the one hand, and those who are harmed by their actions on the other; namely, the household owners, the banks and their customers.

By contrast, typical cases of corruption and its sub-species fraud, involve a breach of a socially, professionally or institutionally pre-established fiduciary relationship of trust between the corrupt agents and their victims, namely, those wronged by the corrupt agents’ actions. The addition of the condition of a fiduciary duty of trust is in keeping with one of the traditional dictionary definitions of ‘corruption’, namely, ‘the changing from the naturally sound condition’ or ‘the turning from a sound into an unsound impure condition’ or ‘the perversion of anything from an original state of purity’². The fiduciary relationship of trust can be articulated in political, professional, social or familial terms (Miller, Roberts and Spence 2005).

The notion of a corrupt action or practice, in turn, presupposes the prior notion of an uncorrupted and morally legitimate process, role or institution. Hence, the corrupt condition of a process, role or institution exists only relative to some moral or other pre-existing regulatory standard(s), which are minimally definitional of the uncorrupted condition of that process, role or institution.

For example, insofar as the primary role of journalism is to inform the public on matters of public interest truthfully (in Australia the public’s right to know and truth are the two fundamental principles of journalism as per the current Media and Entertainment Arts Alliance Code of Ethics) a journalist who deliberately misinforms the public on some matter of public interest acts corruptly by corrupting the role of his

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² See the Shorter Oxford Dictionary
profession through a breach of his fiduciary duty to inform, and not to misinform, the public on matters of public interest.

Corruption can thus be said to be a failure to comply with pre-existing sets of widely recognized and acknowledged moral standards instantiated in legal, professional, social, or other institutional norms or regulations. Note also that contrary to popular belief, the self-regarding gain that accrues from corruption need not be financial. Typically, a person or group of persons act corruptly when they have the power, disposition and opportunity to engage in some immoral and/or illegal action or activity and do so, usually but perhaps not always, under conditions of concealment or secrecy for self-regarding gain, for themselves, their group, or institution or profession, in breach of a fiduciary duty of trust owed to others by virtue of a social, professional or other pre-existing institutional role which they occupy and by whose norms or standards they are duty bound.

Applying the above conceptual notion of corruption to the different types of photo manipulation that are discussed below, those types of manipulation, individually or collectively, will constitute corruption if they are deceptive; for deception violates the institutional role of journalism whose two fundamental principles of truth and informing the public on matters of public interest are violated by intentional or negligent deception for self-regarding gain that results in the abuse of a journalist’s or photojournalist’s fiduciary duty of trust of informing the public truthfully.

What if, however, the deception emanating from photo manipulation was done for the best of intentions and not for self-regarding gain in the hope, let us say, of bringing about the greatest good for all people concerned – would it still constitute corruption? Using morally bad means to achieve morally good ends is known in the professional ethics literature as ‘noble cause corruption’ because the corruption perpetrated is for a ‘noble’ cause. However, even if the intention and the cause of the photo manipulation is ‘noble’, insofar as it results in deception that undermines the primary and overarching institutional role of journalism of informing the public on matters of public interest truthfully, then the photo manipulation still amounts to corruption. Putting it simply, it is so because it corrupts the journalistic role and process of providing, as far as possible, true and objective information. And manipulation resulting in deception, whether for ignoble or noble motives or causes, undermines that process and is thus a self-defeating and unjustifiable practice both epistemologically and morally.

Making Choices
Before a news photographer lifts the camera to her eye she has the obligation to make choices – what lens to use, what camera settings best match the available light, how close or far to stand from a subject so as to determine where the borders of the photo will be in terms of composition, among several other considerations. By at least one definition, each of these choices, when put into action, is a form of manipulation (Elliott & Lester, 2003).

There is also the form of manipulation that is part of the photo-editing process. This can be a benign matter of colour correction or a problematic form of manipulation that
compromises accuracy for the sake of aesthetics. Although many of these manipulations occur during the photo for the sake of adapting to changing lighting conditions in most cases they occur on desktop computers in the newsroom purely for prurient appeal.3

Here we plan to analyse key instances of photo manipulation by borrowing from two key areas of philosophy: epistemology or the study of knowledge; and ethics, the study of what is morally right and wrong. In this argument the two will be strongly intertwined. One example occurs in our discussion of reality. Since one moral premise of news reporting is that one ought to report objectively – that is, to report objective or at least impartial information – it is imperative that photojournalists follow suit by recording and publishing only realistic images insofar as they are objective or impartial. Realistic images are those that are captured, processed, and published using methods that convey images that correspond as closely as possible to the way things exist in the world. It is in this discussion that we suggest what those methods ought to be.

Of course oughts imply normative analysis and it is here that we give way to moral theories. For the purpose of this paper we will employ a pluralistic method of ethical analysis. That is to say, we will apply ethical theories according to their suitability in best describing and explaining the ethical phenomena in any given situation by reference to reflective equilibrium4 – to that end, we will borrow from several ethical doctrines for this analysis, including consequentialism, deontology, and virtue theory, all of which will help us evaluate this journalistic issue. We also hope that this ethical examination, both theoretical and practical, might be of help to photojournalists and news audiences in enabling them to better understand issues surrounding image manipulation that meet their individual as well as their collective moral and practical ends.

For example, utilitarianism, a form of consequentialism, can be viewed as an effective ethical guide to the practice of photo-manipulation in cases when maximising news value for the greatest number of people can be seen as a morally good and hence desirable end. One manner in which this can be done practically is to maximise instances of journalistic truthfulness5, for without truthfulness, journalism is without moral grounding and credibility (Merrill, 1997). One way we can maximise truthfulness in the news is by promoting photojournalistic standards that require photographic integrity.

However, there may be instances in which a deontological moral approach better embraces what is morally good. Deontology offers a notion of morality derived from

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3 Two definitions of manipulation were chosen from the Oxford English Dictionary: (1) “To move, arrange, operate, or control by the hands or by mechanical means, especially in a skilful manner”. (2) “To influence or manage shrewdly or deviously; to tamper with or falsify for personal gain”.
4 Reflective equilibrium is borrowed from John Rawls, who wrote in several instances (e.g. Theory of Justice, 1971) that one way to determine a suitable principle for a moral problem is to weigh all reasonable competing beliefs and compare them for their merits and applicability. The circumstantial details of specific cases may in turn require one to favour certain principled beliefs over others.
5 Truth in journalism is often known as ‘journalistic truth’ because information journalists provide is intended to be bits of truth about something, although it is usually impossible to get the ‘whole truth’. Merrill, John. (1997). Journalism Ethics. St. Martin’s Press, Inc. New York. Pp. 105-108.
the inherent rightness of a principle applied in action. In other words, actions are chosen because they are considered to have inherent moral worth, not because of what goal or perceived result might come as a result of the action.

Finally, we will add virtue theory to strengthen the deontological and consequentialist arguments in terms of their motivational aspects. Although deontology and consequentialism offer strong and coherent decision procedures compared with virtue theory, virtue theory offers a framework through which analysts can pinpoint the specific virtues and values that are most relevant to a given moral issue. Thus virtues like truth-telling and integrity offer complementary motivational force to the formal decision-making procedures of consequentialism and deontology.

**Categories of Image Manipulation**

In exploring photo manipulation, we must consider what manipulations occur during the shoot, but also what happens to images afterwards. *Post-shoot conduct* is the most commonly explored aspect of photo manipulation because it presents the most technical challenges and the majority of the moral problems that arise in digital imaging. Although unethical manipulation started with darkroom photography, and is more than a century old, the need for further exploration is evident because of the continuing decline in public trust in the media, which is in part related to poor photojournalistic practice (Tompkins, 2002). Many scholars and journalists believe digital manipulation practices, both morally positive and negative, increased with new technology, because high-tech tools make manipulation more expeditious (Lowrey, 1998).

The other relevant manipulation process occurs during the photo shoot through intra-camera computer processors that may be justifiably called upon to assume a function once left, at least in part, to the human senses. Inside all professional cameras are remarkably accurate computers that have eclipsed human optical judgment in measuring photographic exposures in most lighting situations. Therefore, one crucial ethical argument is whether photojournalists should risk embracing technology with measuring exposures, and in so doing reduce one aspect of their personal judgement. As we shall see, using technology to supplant the photographer’s personal judgment might seem to support raising the ethical bar in photojournalism without reducing photographic autonomy.

**Journalism Values and Virtues**

In order to make ethical determinations one must first refer to sound moral reasoning. Within journalism, professional codes and rules of conduct have long been available but in some cases, poorly conveyed, and often un-enforced. Therefore, developing coherent and explicit professional standards and implementing them is an important start in creating an ethical environment in news photography. Because the newsgathering processes of photojournalists and text reporters are so similar in terms of their telos – serving the public interest – they share the same foundational set of

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Even the most sophisticated camera processors can be ‘tricked’ into poor exposures by unusual lighting phenomena and may need manual overriding.
values. These are essentially journalistic virtues, as they all have qualities that closely correspond to traditional epistemological virtues such as truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, completeness, independence, credibility, and balance amongst others; values that are essential for guiding and supporting morally defensible behaviour (Cocking & Oakley, 2001).

These core journalistic values are essential to journalistic practice because they are conducive to objective reporting and truth-telling. We define the term “truth” in the following section, What is Real? Without an attempt by the photojournalist to be impartial with regard to the news, the visual newsgathering process becomes tainted with unknown bias and prejudice, which are symptoms of journalistic vice.

Credibility is an important value in relation to photo manipulation and is closely related to (or generated by) the virtue of honesty. Essentially, credibility is most at risk when readers realise they have been deceived by a photo, become sceptical and ultimately lose faith in the photojournalistic process. This scepticism not only can result in the loss of readers, which is bad for the press in terms of economic sustenance, but more importantly it can motivate individuals to forsake journalism as a news source thus giving up a vital tool in an informed citizenry.

Accuracy is also a seminal journalism value in regard to photo manipulation; it corresponds closely to the traditional virtue of truthfulness. Since the goal of the photojournalist is to re-create reality, aside from obvious technical limitations, being accurate in terms of technical considerations (composition, light, shadows) and as free of ideological influences as is humanly possible (imposition of personal and political biases on news event) is the aim. But whenever one mentions accuracy, as it relates to photojournalism, one never means to imply exact reality, but an effort towards precision, conceding only to insurmountable technical and physical limitations that arrive with the loss of a physical dimension – that is, the shift from the three-dimensional world to a two-dimensional representation (newspapers, computer screens, etc).

Manipulation, as we have seen, takes more than one form – not all manipulation is bad manipulation; nevertheless, some is. Manipulation that is morally problematic is manipulation that changes an image’s veracity and potentially results in deception or misunderstanding. This is not to imply there is less (or no) truth-value in artistic or drastically-manipulated images; rather, what this is meant to portray is that journalism is the wrong forum for artistic, manipulated photographs in most cases. The primary reason for this is functional. By analogy, consider the following: Would newspapers that used poetry as their dominant style, be as effective in portraying public-interest information as the objective-reporting method currently used? Although this question is rhetorical, and poetry is certainly an effective style for some sorts of expression, we must realise that each style has a particular function it fits: and news has objective

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7 Virtue ethics enhance what Aristotle called the ‘good life’ by adhering to sets of intrinsically good values (virtues) guided by ‘regulative ideals’ that promote excellence in the way the virtues are interpreted.

reporting for portraying matters in the public interest. Let us now see what a prominent code of ethics says about manipulation.

According to the professional code of the National Press Photographers Association, “editing should maintain the integrity of the photographic images' content and context. Do not manipulate images or add or alter sound in any way that can mislead viewers or misrepresent subjects” (NPPA Code, 2004). As we can see, there is nothing in the language of this or most other codes that is ethically controversial. It is in the interpretation of this statement that problems may arise. One of the aims of this paper is to provide an unambiguous interpretation of the above statement and others like it, in terms of a clear conceptual analysis of what constitutes manipulation in photojournalism that is deceptive and misleading and thus ethically objectionable and possibly, corrupt.

**What is Real?**

Although photographic images only portray a fraction of a given news event, it is the duty of the photographer to treat all aspects of that slice within justifiable journalistic and moral constraints. Although choices related to news judgment are essential to conducting oneself during a photo shoot, it is not part of this analysis per se because it deserves separate attention for its unique array of complexities.

Since we have already determined the inherent flaws in re-creating reality, we must now acknowledge that journalistic reality is a matter of verisimilitude. A mortal enemy of closeness in photojournalism is the self-regarding desire some photojournalists have for inauthentic beauty. Aesthetic desires beget complex moral considerations in photojournalism because practitioners often fight internally for or against artificial beautification, which challenges the truth-telling advantages of accurate but potentially less beautiful photographs. Moreover, it is beautification performed with public impunity that constitutes corruption. But we will say more about that shortly.

In this paper we will define *reality* very broadly as whatever exists in the world independently of our wishes, beliefs, opinions, judgements or statements about it. We may wish that we could take to the air and fly unaided just by flapping our arms, but that wish does not correspond with reality. The law of gravity and the laws of aerodynamics of this world frustrate any such wish regardless of how vigorously this wish is felt or expressed. In keeping with our proposed definition of reality, we will define *truth* as the semantic relationship between our beliefs, opinions, judgements or statements on the one hand, and reality on the other.

According to this *correspondence definition of truth*, true beliefs, opinions, judgements or statements are those that correspond to reality – correspond to how the world is independently of those beliefs, opinions, judgements or statements. It is the reality of the world that makes our beliefs, opinions, judgements and statements true and not our beliefs, opinions, judgements or statements that make the world real. Our reality check is to ensure that our statements, oral or visual, describe or depict reality truthfully, and they do so when the words or images used to make those descriptions, correspond with how the world actually is in reality and not how we wish or imagine it to be.
According to our correspondence definition of truth, a photograph is true if it corresponds to reality as closely as it is reasonable to expect, given the visual transformation from a three-dimensional world to a two-dimensional image. Analogously, a photograph is untrue, if it deviates from its correspondence to reality in the ways in which a two-dimensional image represents reality. This philosophical inquiry about realism and truth necessitates two further distinctions about photographic accuracy: pictorial accuracy and epistemic accuracy.\(^8\) We define the two concepts as follows: Pictorial accuracy concerns the relationship between a photographic image reproduced in a publication and what was in the photographer’s visual field at the moment the image was captured. Epistemic accuracy, on the other hand, concerns the meaning garnered from the photographic image by the audience of a journalistic publication in which the image is displayed.

Although a photograph in isolation may depict reality accurately it may nevertheless fail to epistemically describe reality accurately when placed in a certain journalistic context. This could be either because, let us say, the image though accurate was not typical of the context in which it was placed or because the context was misleadingly manipulated by being fictitiously staged to look real.

As such, basic and important as pictorial accuracy is, epistemic accuracy is no less important. For an otherwise accurate depiction of a photographic image could still be rendered deceptive through a false or misleading description of the context in which it is placed. Therefore, although pictorial accuracy is certainly necessary for ensuring the integrity of photographic images re-produced in journalistic publications, it is not sufficient to preclude deception through the manipulation of the context in which the image is placed. For that reason, although photojournalists will be deemed ultimately responsible for the pictorial accuracy of their photographs, editors and other journalists will be deemed ultimately responsible for the selection of the contexts in which they place otherwise pictorially accurate photographic images.

Although primarily responsible for pictorial accuracy, photojournalists who knowingly or foreseeably allow their photographs to be placed in a misleading context likely to deceive viewers of a certain journalistic publication are also morally responsible for the epistemic accuracy of their photographs.

Therefore, a photograph will be deemed unethical or immoral if its untruth has a tendency to deceive or mislead its intended audience, either by (a) design or (b) negligence through pictorial or epistemic inaccuracy or both. The immorality of an untrue photograph will be deemed to be directly proportional to the relevance the truth of the photograph has to its oral or visual semantic content. Thus the immorality of an untrue photograph will directly vary with the capacity of its semantic content to deceive.

Many photojournalists think it is harmless to make minor touch-ups for visual aesthetics so long as they don’t go ‘too far’. But, for example, when photographs of

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\(^8\) Our sincere thanks and gratitude to the reviewer who made this useful suggestion for carefully distinguishing between pictorial and epistemic accuracy.
dark scenes are brightened by Photoshop for the sake of increasing appeal and for the sake of revealing more detail – seemingly innocuous – the photo becomes morally tainted. The brightening alters the image from its more accurate form. A hypothetical dark room (not the laboratory) conceals physical details that a bright room clarifies, but such is the visual reality in a dark room⁹. As North Carolina Press Photographers Association’s President Chuck Liddy said in regard to a recent photojournalistic scandal, ‘As news photographers, we have a duty to accurately portray what we see, not what we WANT to see’ (Irby, 2003).

But there are exceptions to this point. Darkness, especially, begs photographers to use electronic flash (artificial lighting) in order to have a usable image at all. Often, without the use of a strobe, there would be no opportunity to have a photograph, therefore leaving potentially publicly-important images in the wake of overly strict ethical standards. This is clearly a case where photographers must use their ‘news judgment’ to make decisions about using artificial lighting. Nevertheless, to justify using an artificial lighting source, three necessary conditions must first be satisfied: (1) there is no non-artificial method to effectively capture the photograph (2) the photograph, once captured, is a newsworthy photograph and (3) the use of artificial lighting does not distort the semantic content of the photograph or when it does, the distortion does not deceive or mislead its audience in relation to the veracity of the photograph. Essentially, this value judgment on the photograph’s newsworthiness is the key to justifying the use of artificial lighting because it either supports the pursuit of truthful information or at least does not detract from it.

**Common Practises**

Below is a list of commonly accepted manipulation practises, some of which many argue are routine and innocuous. Based on aforementioned moral theories, an argument will be made for accepting or refuting each practise.

*Colour Balance -- rendering a match (or the closest thing to a match) in colours in an image to that of the scene that was photographed. Colour balance commonly involves consistently correcting technical flaws (acceptable) and making aesthetic improvements (unacceptable).*

The most widely used digital camera in the photojournalism industry, as of the commencement of this paper, is the Nikon D1, a camera well known for a few technical flaws, one of which is an ugly yellow haze that covers every image it records. No matter what camera lighting settings are adjusted for the various basic lighting scenarios (daylight, outdoor-cloudy, fluorescent, incandescent, tungsten, etc), the images always appear with this yellow scum – this scum, according to the naked eye, does not exist in reality and therefore must be removed. This is one situation in which Adobe Photoshop digital imaging software – the industry standard – is a saviour. It allows for colour corrections that bring an image to its fullest realisation of realism.

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⁹ There is a good news-value argument for ethical use of artificial lighting, such as on or off-camera flash, so its use is justified under certain circumstances, but for the sake of concision a specific argument will be withheld. As will be argued later in this paper, use of the computers inside cameras, one of which is also in a flash unit, provides acceptable precision and consistency in some computer-driven equipment that eclipses human judgment in comparative quality.
On the flip side, this function can be easily abused. For example, it is not uncommon for photographers to ‘warm’ or ‘cool’ photographs as added effect after making a legitimate colour correction. Warming involves artificially infusing reds, yellows, or a combination thereof for aesthetics, which is analogous to someone wearing make-up – possibly pretty, but unnatural. Cooling involves artificially infusing shades of blue, and is popular for cold weather photos or for enhancing already some existing colours, although in most cases irresponsibly. The mere act of colour correction often tempts photographers to make aesthetic enhancements that go beyond acceptable adjustments used to re-create reality, thus violating the virtues of accuracy and integrity.

For the most virtuous photographers who resist artificially improving the aesthetic appeal of their images by warming or cooling, there is still the challenge of colour recall. Colour recall is simply accurately remembering the colours in an image as they were in reality for the purposes of re-creating reality through manipulation. Although many proud photographers claim to have the ability to recall visual images – including colours – it is a very difficult and inherently fallible task for any human, and in being so, creates an ethical problem in terms of most colour-manipulating processes.

Take any five photojournalists who have photographed the same scene and have them independently adjust colour balance or brightness from memory, and it is likely that there will be five different results. So who is likely to have the true colours and exposure? Probably, no one. Research in the area of oral history reveals some of the issues of accuracy in memory recall. Scholars writing about the expanding academic realm of oral history study have made note of new and varying research methods for distinguishing truth in the information they gather. Although mentioning the specific research methods would not be useful here, the acknowledgment of challenges in accuracy due to the unreliability of memory is the relevant point from which to draw comparison.

Essentially, researchers who are interviewing witnesses to historical events are finding blatant errors in recall that presumably foreshadow undetected errors. For example, a man who was interviewed about a 1953 massacre in Italy insisted it happened in a different year (Stille, 2001). In the same interview, several other ‘facts’ were deemed false by the researcher, leading the researcher to be sceptical of any of the interview’s objective value. Since photographers are witnesses to news, and as such rely on memory to re-create reality in post-shoot manipulations, we must presume that there are inherent inaccuracies in the recall of details, especially with the many subtleties in photographs.

One possible solution to this memory problem is to leave the colour balance and exposure work to the camera, except in the rare circumstances where cameras are known to fail – photographers are well aware of these challenges. Although cameras have some small weaknesses in judging colour, the advantage they have is consistency in their errors. Cameras use internal computers to judge colour, brightness, contrast and a host of other things. Although these computers are not perfect in their rendering, they create a consistent and reliable measuring tool, whereas people do not have that consistency, and consequently are liable to produce
results ranging from near perfect to major difference. Since every photojournalist uses
a camera and most photojournalists are using the same camera model, it is feasible to
let the camera make the technical judgment and avoid further colour manipulation at
the office – especially since modern intra-camera computers are so accurate.

But there are exceptions where inexact corrections are warranted. One exception is the
aforementioned technical flaw in the Nikon D1 camera. It is acceptable to eliminate
the yellow scum it records to its images, because it is a measurable inaccuracy that
can be systematically and consistently eliminated from an image. Any accurately
measurable flaws (flaws in accuracy, not aesthetics) that can be repeatedly identified
and eliminated with near-exactness, qualify as acceptable manipulations.

This brings us to two underlying requirements for manipulation in an ideal practise:
(1) the manipulation must make the photo more accurate/meaningful and (2) the
manipulation must be formulaic – the change must be objective and not subject to
human recall for fear of inviting errors. These criteria should guarantee that photos at
least don’t lose accuracy.

Still, there are likely to be objections to condemning some of the more subtle aesthetic
manipulations. We presume most objectors would ask this: What are the
consequences to minor errors in images? To this question we reply that the inherent
problem in accepting manipulation is that it openly invites untruth, and accepting
untruths may open, at least potentially, the floodgates for lying and the denigration of
trust.

Most photojournalists would argue that there are exceptions for every rule, and this
manipulation is no different. News judgment plays a huge role in justifying what
material is ethically publishable. Many journalists would argue for publishing a photo
of immense public importance, even if it has significant colour or exposure
manipulations designed to correct accidental or unintended flaws. Sometimes cameras
or their operators make unintended errors in judging exposure that affect an
immensely important photograph, and skew its accuracy. For example, if a
photographer accidentally chose the wrong lighting setting (for tungsten lighting
setting, say, instead of fluorescent) it could change the way people perceive an image.
In an instance in which an ill person with an ill complexion was photographed with an
improper lighting setting, there is a chance the ill person would look unrealistically ill
or unrealistically healthy because of the colour error. Albeit potentially a small error
in some cases, it may change the way the picture is understood which is ethically and
journalistically unsound.

Where this scenario might qualify as a justified exception, for example, is where the
ill person is a head of state who dies shortly after the photo is taken. In this case, one
must consider the public value of the photograph even if it has been manipulated, and
compare it to the potential damage of losing credibility and risking misinterpretation
because of manipulation.

This is a scenario that at first sight seems to create conflict between two of the leading
doctrines of moral philosophy. Immanuel Kant, the deontologist, might say: ‘No, one
must not manipulate photographic images under any circumstances because
manipulation may result in deception and deception being inherently morally wrong is
in all circumstances ethically objectionable.’ A utilitarian like John Stuart Mill might on the other hand say: ‘Yes, the overall maximisation of utility (say, happiness) for the greatest number of people depends upon people being informed of the politician’s condition before her death. These results are more important than the harm that might result from manipulation’.

However, Mill may, upon further reflection consider further that the distrust in photojournalism that may result from this one instance of manipulation may cause more harm in the long term than good, and thus he may decide against the manipulation. He might do so on the basis of ‘a rule-utilitarian principle’, such as, ‘generally, manipulation perceived as a form of deception engenders distrust that counsels against image manipulation in all circumstances over ‘an act utilitarian principle’, such as, ‘a single act of manipulation is morally acceptable if it increases overall utility for the greatest number of people’, that allows, perhaps prematurely, image manipulation if it enhances overall utility for the greatest number of stakeholders in a single specific instance. Thus, even a utilitarian such as Mill may on balance offer his allegiance to a rule utilitarian principle that favours the avoidance of long-term harm through loss of public trust, rather than to an act utilitarian principle that favours a short-term gain.

*Cropping – eliminating elected outer edges of an image to increase impact of the item or subject that is thereafter displayed more prominently in the image.*

Use the full frame as much as possible. If there was no risk in shooting pictures with the intention of cropping, then photographers would shoot all of their images ‘loose’ and set their cameras to record large, high-resolution files and then crop to their hearts’ delight. Modern technology allows for this because one can shoot massive image files, from which small fractions can be cropped, and the cropped image can then be enlarged while maintaining remarkable clarity.

Because of problems that can develop from cropping, photographers are trusted to use their judgment on how to compose a newsworthy photograph rather than worry about later alterations. But the reason for avoiding cropping is not as clear-cut as the colour-correction argument. For example, a photographer could argue that cropping a picture has no negative consequences since he could have legitimately made the same ‘tight’ image by further ‘zooming’ his telephoto lens or by moving closer to the subject. The problem with cropping, however, is its unintended side-effects.

Photographers don’t always remember – back to recall problems – the reasons why they shoot a particular frame the way they do when they are editing many hours or days later. But almost no photographer would ever say she did not shoot a frame with a specific purpose in mind. Therefore, there is often reason to believe there is relevant visual data in the secondary regions of an image that a photographer might overlook and eliminate in the cropping process. Great care must therefore be taken before a crop is made so as to avoid the potential loss of important information.

The option to crop photographs should remain available to photojournalists, but not without a certain wariness for risk of losing the aforementioned journalistic virtue of completeness, including the components of accuracy and integrity. Cropping is valuable because it can make photographs more meaningful by increasing the impact
of the image’s salient regions. But ethical cropping is contingent upon maintaining photographic value. Careful cropping, then, will enhance the virtues of accuracy and integrity when it’s potential can be safely realised.

Fortunately, cropping does not have comparable risks to colour balance in terms of recall. Cropping is more closely related to acceptable subjective decisions initiated by the photographer’s cognition, such as how to use his zoom or wide-angle lens, so long as the photographer has carefully reviewed secondary regions of an image for valuable news details. Therefore, responsible cropping is not a threat to the integrity of photographs, as long as it satisfies both conditions for acceptable manipulation mentioned before, namely: (1) It must make the photo more accurate/meaningful and (2) it must be formulaic if it relates to the re-creation of objective data. Since the first condition is satisfied as the crop helps to increase semantic meaning, and the second condition is satisfied because the subjective decision taken to crop does not undermine objectivity though undermining truth or accuracy, cropping usually passes the acceptable-manipulation test.

_Dodge and Burn – Using imaging tools to brighten or darken selected parts of a photograph._

One could go as far as to call a dodge or burn an untruth in almost all situations, so there is little question over what place this process ought to have in photojournalism: none. An untruth is a direct or indirect violation of truthfulness, and truthfulness is a seminal journalistic virtue. Perhaps Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative would give even more strength to this claim: For example, do not deceive. Even John Stuart Mill would support the notion that truth-telling will generally maximise happiness, whereas generally deception does not.

Deceptive photographic manipulation can be likened to deception in speech. However, since digital technology has its own form of communication, which is initiated by keystrokes and mouse-clicks, it requires a separate semantic representation. With photographs, the analogous process of ‘stating’ is publishing with the intent of someone seeing a photograph. Essentially, the act of manipulating a photo can be likened to a speaker who would manipulate a phrase in her mind before speaking. Therefore, the published photo can be analogous to speech in that regard.

Essentially, the photographer knows this manipulation technique is used to give artificial prominence to a subject, or a particular section of the photograph, although a common justification for the alteration is that it will help an audience better understand an image – its epistemic accuracy. Therefore, we have established a form of deception – the photojournalist knows the image is not pictorially genuine either by the intention of making an aesthetic improvement, or by attempting to assist in understanding by highlighting detail, or simply in the doomed but well-intended attempt to correct perceived imperfections. All but the latter are obvious forms of deception and even the latter is a form of deception, even if it is intended for helpful purposes.

As mentioned before, photojournalists know their altered photographs are intended for an audience. They also know their altered photographs are inaccurate because (1) they are altered for impact/understanding (2) aesthetics and/or (3) re-creating reality. Now, to enable one to form the reasonable belief (a belief that any reasonable person would
be epistemologically entitled to form) that photojournalists intend to deceive, one only needs to combine (a) the aforementioned statements; with (b) the fact that photojournalists know or ought to know that readers expect or ought to expect truth, accuracy, and reality to be present in any information communicated to them by journalists either in the form of words or photographic images; and finally with (c) that their audience are receiving something from a photojournalist that a photojournalist knows or ought to know to be otherwise than intended, good intentions or not. This awareness of inaccuracy, therefore, arguably qualifies as intent to deceive.

Even if the known inaccuracy is viewed by the photojournalist as merely potentially misleading and tolerated on the basis of a calculated risk, such known inaccuracy could still be assumed as an intention to deceive. Although this is a secondary notion of intent – meaning that photographers’ primary intentions are not necessarily to deceive – there are few, if any, photojournalists or photo editors who don’t know, or if they don’t know they at least ought to know, that their actions are likely to deceive at least some of the time by default because of the inherent risk associated with this type of manipulation (Irby, 2003) Therefore, although this second notion of intent may not constitute a robust intention to deceive readers, it nevertheless qualifies as intent, because of the photojournalist’s knowledge that false information that could have been prevented will reach its intended audience.

**People Versus PCs**

Although some of the suggestions made in this paper for relying on computers for some of the technical judgments may appear to threaten a photographer’s autonomy, this is not the intention or the result. Especially when it comes to image capturing, photographers are expected to make good decisions on how to maximise the strength of their visual storytelling, backed with sound journalistic idealism, including good news judgment. And there isn’t just one answer in determining how to make a good news judgment decision – justifiable, even superb, news judgments can vary greatly.

For example, knowing when to zoom in close for a ‘tight’ image and when to back off for a ‘loose’ image is a subjective matter. That is why it was stated earlier, that news photographers are bona fide journalists who often need to make news-related decisions. In determining significance in news, there is no better known tool than the human mind.

The impetus for restricting post-shoot cropping and other manipulative adjustments after images are captured stems from human limitations when manipulations require objective calculations. How much can one rely on one’s memory to adjust an image to mirror reality? A number of problems could certainly arise that would dilute the reliability of this process.

One simple factor is time. Will any human remember precise visual data better a week after she has seen it, as opposed to five minutes after? Could other job demands and, say, a race from event to event cause confusion about information from shoot to shoot? The answer to both of these questions is: ‘Yes’. And that brings us to an inevitable realisation: Since time fades the accuracy of our memories, and heinous workloads can skew our recall, we are then dealing in varying degrees of truth and
accuracy once time has passed; the more time, the greater the potential loss of accuracy. This contributes to error and diminishes the aforementioned journalistic virtues of completeness, integrity, and truth-telling. For example, if I lose 10 percent of my memory each day in relation to visual information, I am then, for argument’s sake, 10 percent less truthful if I edit a photo the day after I have captured it.

Because the camera is more methodical and reliable than people in the way it measures its data, it is more consistent than the photographer when it comes to matters of exposure – which is a measure of objective data. In the fairly recent past, intra-camera computers were not as reliable as they are today. Intra-camera metering was primitive compared to today’s cameras, but the technology has changed, and, in most cases, it is more accurate than the photographer’s post-shoot judgment, and even more importantly for this argument, it is more consistent.

Moreover, the camera does not have self-regarding motivations, like aesthetics, because it is non-cognitive and most certainly without an ego. Another advantage of giving the camera most of the exposure work is the increased attention to news judgment that is made available for the photographer, because it frees the photographer from distracting exposure duties. By all means, this should increase the storytelling quality of photographs because it lightens the photographer’s workload.

Having established that certain techniques and practices of manipulating photographic images as described above constitute deception, either by intention or culpable negligence, and are thus ethically objectionable, we should now explore further the question whether such manipulative techniques and practices are not only unethical but moreover constitute corruption; namely, corruption of the media information process and its delivery.

**Conclusions**

On the surface, the main concern with photo manipulation is that it sometimes distorts reality, or the closest version of reality a photograph can capture and convey. Although there are a number of abstract arguments about the definition of reality, insofar as photography is related, reality means capturing a still image that has as many accurate properties in colour, lighting, shadows, and depth as a two-dimensional image allows with a reliable degree of consistency. Although it is a foregone conclusion that reality in photos is technically limited, a close rendering is desired because it is: (1) presumed to be practical in what people need from news and (2) what people expect to find in a news source, because that is how they measure the credibility of that source.

Although point (1) is self-evident, the second might need some clarification. Journalists’ credibility leads to public trust, which is a hallmark of journalism because, without it, news loses its value. And journalists set these expectations by establishing certain virtues and other guiding principles, which include a trust-protocol contingent on consistent execution of ethical actions, among other things, codes of ethics. Although journalism values are not perfect, they are, for now, the closest things to truth and reality that journalists can provide in their respective formats – radio, television, the Web, and newspapers.
There are obviously a variety of ethical constructs that can justify actions of different kinds. Sometimes they conflict, but regardless of their occasional clashes, they lend a form of ethical continuity to an agency that chooses to employ one or several of them. The purpose of this analysis is not to advertise a specific ethical doctrine (i.e. deontology or teleology) but to show how these doctrines and the various ethical theories they support can be used to determine defensible moral behaviour.

So in going back to the imperfect practise of photojournalism, how do you increase the likelihood of producing an accurate, newsworthy image? The answer is, with consistency and reliability. This is accomplished by eliminating the most confounding factors in photojournalism: (1) self-regarding measures – the temptation for a photographer to artificially improve aesthetics; and (2) recall – the human inability to precisely remember subtleties in colour and exposure.

But this analysis goes beyond even the surface concern of re-creating reality. Preserving photojournalistic standards is largely for the purpose of rejuvenating and maintaining press credibility for the long-term sake of, among other things, protecting and improving democracy. Although the practical limitations these suggestions impose may seem restrictive, or at least inconvenient, they are necessary. Not only will they reduce human error – regardless of the photographer’s intentions – they will also protect the veracity and merit of journalism, which should be high on any practitioner’s list of professional desires.

Yet another reason to greatly limit digital alteration and reduce public mistrust is that even the appearance of regular improper ethical action forces the public to mistrust the press. However abstract this idea may seem, its effects are exacerbated by photojournalism’s self-made reputation for ethical inconsistency. Because of either the ambiguity of manipulation standards or the consciously unethical nature of some photojournalists’ standards, the public is sceptical of manipulation even when it is justifiable in the strictest sense. The public scepticism is sometimes so great, even good decisions are often assumed to be deceitful.

By developing a more consistent formula for ethical manipulation and eliminating error-prone practises – however rigid it might seem – we have a formula that can bolster public trust with only minimal impositions on practitioners. The formula we suggest is comprised in two broad statements. First, photojournalists must retain their ability to make news judgments; that is, they must use their skill and judgment to choose what to photograph and when and where to photograph it. Second, and what we consider to be a new idea, photographers must leave measurements of light, colour, etc to the camera because the camera is both fairly accurate and objectively consistent.

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10 Dennis Thompson developed the idea that even the appearance of conflicts of interest matters in politics because appearances oft have the same impact on people as actual conflicts of interest. In this paper, the same underlying idea is used as it relates to possibility/expectation of photo manipulation. It is the underlying scepticism of both politics and photojournalism that set the stage for this elemental mistrust from which the expectations come.

These rules are not only likely to make photojournalists more objectively consistent, but also give the public evidence\textsuperscript{11} that photojournalists care about the veracity of their profession. These new rules, coupled with a consistent, transparent manipulation policy within the profession, could be a tonic for healthier journalism and a more robust democracy. And insofar as deceptive photo manipulation constitutes corruption as described above, the implementation of such an ethical regime in photojournalism will reduce the risk of corruption. This is important, especially with regard to investigative journalism, for if the watchdogs themselves become corrupt, who will we trust to expose corruption?

References

Address for correspondence
Authors Name: Aaron Quinn and Edward Spence
Department: Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics
Institution: Australian National University and Charles Sturt University
Street address: Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, The Australian National University, LPO Box A260
Location: Canberra
Country: Australia
Email address: Aaron Quinn: aquinn_writer@yahoo.com, aaron.quinn@anu.edu.au and Edward Spence: espence@csu.edu.au

\textsuperscript{11} Newspapers regularly include in their pages, policies that exist or change when they become relevant. It would be beneficial for newspapers that adopt new rules – such as these – to publicise it for the sake of making the public aware of the increased reliability of the newspaper’s photographs.