Electronic imaging ethics

Image enhancement and image manipulation are not new, but with today’s software, they are much easier and quicker to do. But should there be limits to the alteration of photos? This has become a key question as more and more photographs are being processed electronically.

Every time you work on your imagery in photo-editing software, which we will cover later in this course, you must ask yourself: Is this the way the scene was when I captured the image? You don’t ever want people to be skeptical of your photographs. As a military photojournalist, you are held to a high standard of ethics regarding photo enhancement and manipulation.

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**Ethics (ˈethiks) noun** -- defined as a set of moral principles; a theory or system of moral values. *(Webster’s Dictionary)*

**Enhancement & manipulation**

Distinct differences exist between enhancement and manipulation.

To enhance is to make greater, as in attractiveness, or to intensify (i.e. density, contrast, etc.). Enhancement does not alter the content or intent of the photograph. Repairing mechanical defects caused by photographic processing is considered enhancement and is authorized.

In contrast, to manipulate is to change by artful means so as to serve one’s own purpose. Once manipulated, photographs lose their “reality” and become no more informative than an advertisement or illustration.

Electronic images are made up of pixels that can be rearranged, changed, duplicated or eliminated. We can alter an image in almost any way imaginable: retouching, adding or deleting visual elements, changing position of elements, and creating montages and entire imaginary scenes.

Although manipulating photographs has been possible since the dawn of photography, image manipulation began in earnest during the Civil War era. Modern photojournalists consider themselves bound, like other news professionals, by journalistic codes of conduct. Unfortunately, ethical standards in the electronic imaging area are vague and are not followed by all in the publishing industry.

We in the military are bound by directives, instructions and regulations prohibiting image manipulation.
DoD Instruction 5040.05

Department of Defense Instruction 5040.05 states: "Mission success and the protection of lives and property depend on official DoD imagery being complete, timely, and above all, highly accurate." Its paragraph 4.3. best summarizes the spirit and intent of the instruction: "Anything that weakens or casts doubt on the credibility of official DoD imagery in or outside the Department of Defense shall not be tolerated."

The instruction prohibits alteration of official DoD images with some exceptions, including: photographic techniques common to traditional darkrooms and digital imaging stations, such as dodging, burning, color balancing, spotting, and contrast adjustment that are used to achieve the accurate recording of an event or object.

The instruction authorizes enhancement under either of the two conditions:

- When the enhancement does not misrepresent the original image.

- If it is "clearly and readily apparent from the context or from content of the image or accompanying text that the enhanced image is not intended to be an accurate representation" of the event.

The instruction in its entirety is included in the course's Photojournalism Handbook.
Potential areas of abuse

A vigilant watch for areas of potential abuse in electronic imaging is paramount.

Setting ethical standards for publications requires close management of six areas where abuse can occur. Most of these potential abuse techniques are traditional darkroom procedures.

1. **Contrast** maximizes the difference between shadows and highlights, but it can be taken to extremes. Contrasting is acceptable unless it alters the intent of the original image.

2. One of the most basic darkroom skills is **dodging and burning**, which refers to selectively lightening (dodging) or darkening (burning) parts of the photo. Dodging and burning only creates potential ethical issues when they are used to make changes to the meaning or intent of the photograph or their use misrepresents reality.

3. **Flopping** is always considered manipulation, whether accomplished in traditional darkrooms or electronically. In the darkroom, flopping is accomplished by placing the negative in the enlarger upside down before printing it.

4. To **cut and paste**, meaning to move or add an element to change areas of the picture. This is sometimes known as electronic cloning because the process uses the cloning tool, or rubber stamp, in image-editing software. This tool may be used to remove dust spots, scratches or other imperfections caused by the mechanical process, however, cutting and pasting should never be used to compose a photo from different elements and pass it off as an accurate scene.

5. **Color correction** helps ensure an image’s colors match the original scene as photographed. Colors may be selectively altered to fix a mechanical defect (such as a white uniform in the photo being made white again after it somehow acquired a red hue from the camera), but color correction becomes unethical when you alter colors for your own purpose.

6. **Cropping** can be used to remove distractions and improve composition of a photo, but if doing so changes the meaning and intent of the image, cropping crosses the line into manipulation.

It is often very difficult to detect an enhanced image from a manipulated one. On the next few pages are examples of some of these potential abuse techniques.
Dodge and burn

Selectively lightening or darkening portions of a photo; one of the most basic darkroom skills; only becomes an ethical problem if used to change the meaning or intent of a photograph.

Original image

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Robert R. Attebury
9 Aug 2005

Manipulated image

U.S. Navy
digital illustration by Petty Officer 1st Class Nathanael T. Miller

Has it suddenly become monsoon season in Iraq?!!
Flopping

Always manipulation, no matter what the reason.

Original image
U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Eric Petosky 3 Nov 2006

Manipulated image
Digital illustration by Petty Officer 1st Class Nathanael T. Miller
Cut and paste

Also called electronic cloning; unethical when used to change the nature of the picture.

U.S. Naval Historical Center

Manipulated image

U.S. Navy
Digital illustration by
Petty Officer 1st Class
Nathanael T. Miller
Color correction

Can be considered enhancement if you are restoring the original scene; manipulation if you alter the original scene.

Original image

U.S. Army photo by Chief Warrant Officer 4 Daniel McClinton

Manipulated image

Digital illustration by Petty Officer 1st Class Nathanael T. Miller
Ethical considerations and credibility

In the next few pages you will view actual published military photos that were manipulated, some albeit ever so slightly. As you go through the photos and the explanation of what was done to alter them, think of what you could have done to ensure you followed DoD guidelines on electronic imaging ethics to maintain the credibility of your unit and your service, as well as your own credibility as a military photojournalist.

Subtle manipulations were used to make the original image “acceptable” for the cover of Soldiers magazine in the images below. In the manipulated published image, the chief of staff and the sergeant major are closer together, and the photo (on the wall) and lamp have been removed. If you must run this photo, call it a photo illustration or state, “This photo has been digitally altered.”

The general was slid over to eliminate some dead space.
These two individuals both won awards—the Civilian Volunteer of the Year and the Military Volunteer of the Year awards, respectively—at a ceremony in Alaska. The installation newspaper staff only had room to run one photo, so what did they do?

They decided to put both of them together. Then, in the credit line they used the phrase “Photo by,” indicating that the image was an actual photograph. If you have to run a manipulated photograph never use “Photo by” in the credit line. But perhaps more importantly, remember is that it is never appropriate to add, remove or move people in a photograph.

What might have been a better solution in this case?
The monitor in the top left background in the original image for this Navy publication contained potentially sensitive information, so it was blurred in the published image. Removing, covering or blurring portions of an image for security reasons is authorized, but the alteration must be obvious and clearly noted in the caption.

The sailor’s moustache in the original image was not in accordance with Navy regulations, so it was manipulated to conform to regulations in the published image. This is unethical.
This image was submitted for the Military Photographer of the Year Contest in 2003, but was removed from the competition for not adhering to DoD Instruction 5040.05. Why?

Cranes in the background of the original image were removed in the published image (as seen through their reflections in the pool), and a brush stroke was added around the outline of the Washington Monument to make it stand out.

The image begs the question: What else was done to it?

The image was published on the cover of the 2003 USO Guide to Washington and Baltimore and labeled as a “photo.” What is the correct way to label this image?
KORUS magazine, a former military magazine for U.S. servicemembers in South Korea, used electronic imaging techniques to try to hide the identity of two Army Criminal Investigation Command (CID) agents. While ethical to black out the agents’ identities, the agent’s license plate is readable in the picture.

Just because electronic imaging makes life easier, it shouldn’t overpower common sense.

A better solution could have been to use an illustrative photo if this topic had to be on the cover of the magazine.
Although almost completely unnoticeable, the cover of this Army publication was manipulated. In the original photo, the third Humvee back had a burnt-out headlight. The editor was ordered by a superior to manipulate the photo by adding a glowing headlight to the vehicle. If you look closely in front of the vehicle, you’ll see there is no reflection shining on the road from the “new” headlight.

This image was also originally photographed as a horizontal image, but it did not fit the vertical format of the cover of the magazine, so information above the tree line was created in image-editing software. [A good point to remember while you’re out shooting photographs is to be sure to capture both vertical and horizontal shots of the same images just in case you need one or the other for your publication.]

A better solution to using this manipulated photo would have been simply to select another image.
Conclusion

Being a photojournalist gives you the awesome responsibility of documenting the lives of your fellow brothers and sisters in arms. Their stories deserve to be told with vigor and truth. It is your responsibility to be the ambassador for your respective service and the United States. If we in the military are perceived as trying to deceive the public, whatever we publish will be considered suspect at best. This will ruin our mission of telling the true story of our servicemembers. If we attempt to bring the most accurate representation of reality as we can create to the reader, we will have acted ethically on behalf of our profession. It all comes down to credibility as journalists and our service’s credibility in the public’s eye.
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