

# Chapter 12

## To Lie or Not to Lie: Interrogating Codes of Conduct on Photo Ethics in the Era of Digital Technologies

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### ABSTRACT

*New digital technologies have radically transformed the face of journalism in general and photo journalism in particular. These new technologies have not only made it easy for photo journalists to obtain images and to transmit them quickly to newsrooms and consumers across the globe, but they have also provided limitless opportunities for photo manipulation to take place, thus raising questions about the authenticity of those images. This has led to some scholars calling for the rethinking of media ethics to address these ethical dilemmas. This chapter, therefore, examines the codes of conduct for journalists in ten southern African countries to ascertain whether they have responded to this ethical dilemma brought in by the new digital technologies and if so, whether these responses give adequate guidance to journalists when called upon to make ethical decisions while processing photographs. The concepts of truth, reality and accuracy are also interrogated in the chapter. Findings revealed that most of the codes which do not make reference to photo manipulation are outdated and that those which do, are not comprehensive enough to give guidance to photo journalists.*

### INTRODUCTION

New digital technologies, such as smart cell phones, Adobe Photoshop and Silicon Beach Software's Digital Darkroom, to mention a few, have radically transformed the face of photo journalism, raising concerns about their impact on the ethics of photo journalism. These digital technologies have not only made it easy for professional photo journalists to capture, process and transmit images within minutes to newsrooms all over the world, but they have also brought with them limitless opportunities to manipulate photos, for example, by moving objects from or within the frame, adding elements which did not exist before or putting together two frames to make one. This manipulation has, in some cases, resulted in the distortion of news, promotion of propaganda and also in individuals or organisations being harmed (see

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Horner, 2015; Bersak, 2006). The exponential increase in the number of photo manipulation scandals that continue to rock the world of photo journalism all over the world proves that this ethical dilemma is on the increase in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The well-publicised *TIME* magazine's publication of the deliberately darkened face of OJ Simpson on their cover page is a case in point (Hofer & Swan, 2005).

Other notable examples include *Los Angeles Times* photographer, Brian Walski's splicing of two photographs of a group of British soldiers in Iraq to create one photograph (Bersak, 2006); the University of Wisconsin's digital insertion of the image of a black student in a crowd of white football fans to give the impression that the university respected diversity in its enrolment (Hofer & Swan, 2005); the Reuters journalist's manipulation of a photograph to increase smoke billowing from a building in Beirut, in order to create the impression that Israel's bombing of that city was worse than it really was (The Reuters Photo Scandal, 2006); and Egypt's state-run newspaper, Al-Ahram's doctoring of a photo of the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak walking in front of the Israeli, US, Palestinian and Jordanian leaders, yet in the original he is walking behind the other leaders (BBC, 2010, September 15). In recent times, 2015, the ethical dilemma of photo manipulation was underscored at the World Press Photo competition in which several images were disqualified and a major prize revoked because of excessive manipulation, staging and misleading captions (The *New York Times*, October, 16, 2015).

The increase in the number of scandals related to photo manipulation have prompted some scholars to call for the rethinking and the reinvention of media ethics, in order to address the ethical challenges brought by new media technologies (Horner, 2015; Bersak, 2006). The ease and the stealth with which photo journalists are manipulating photographs prompted Gladney and Ehrlich (1996, p. 506) to suggest that photo manipulation should be placed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century list of "ethical pitfalls". Thus, this chapter analyses the journalistic codes of conduct of ten southern African countries in the era of digital technologies to ascertain whether they have taken cognisance of this new ethical dilemma and if so, what stipulations they have put in place to address it.

In my choice of the codes of conduct, I am cognisant of the fact that some scholars do not believe in the efficacy of codes of conduct in dealing with ethical challenges in general, and photo manipulation in particular (see, Housley, 2002). Aies and Gottlieb (1999), for example, argue that codes of conduct take away professional journalists' ability to make difficult decisions, and instead make them passively obey the guidelines without asking why they should do so. In this chapter, however, I argue that codes of conduct are fundamental in addressing this dilemma. The online Business Dictionary defines codes of conduct as a set of guidelines issued by an organisation or professional body to its workers to help them do their duties in accordance with its primary values and ethical standards. Horner (2015) describes them as norms and rules which seek to determine how media practitioners should execute their duties.

Evidence abounds in literature which shows that many organisations, both within and outside the media, consider codes of conduct a vital element in maintaining the integrity of their organisations. For example, 17 empirical studies reviewed by Loe and Ding (2000) showed a positive relationship between ethical codes and behaviour. Harrington's (1996) study also found that the availability of a code of conduct in an organisation improved the judgements and intentions of some employees. Gonzalez (n.d.) argues that the accelerated pace at which the 21<sup>st</sup> century world is changing because of technological developments and globalisation requires ethical principles that would ensure "proper functioning of the economic, political and social network and, therefore, for the well-being and development of the potential of every world citizen".

According to Wilkins and Brennan (2004), codes of conduct were originally adopted by the media industry to, among others, gain public trust after the First World War. Some scholars argue that they

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