The Positive and Negative

Uses of Photo Editing

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Photo-editing software, such as Photoshop or GIMP, has achieved popularity and notoriety in recent years. But photo manipulation is not a new phenomenon--pictures have been altered since the 1800s, when photographs were invented. Depending on how it is utilized, photo editing can be a positive tool that merely creates enhanced photos, or a negative tool that attempts to alter reality either intentionally or unintentionally, leading to the public's distrust of photography as a source of truth. The morality of photo-editing software depends entirely on the purpose for which it is used.

An early example of this editing is a photograph of General Ulysses S. Grant during the American Civil War which was revealed to be a composite of three separate images (Farid). Grant's head was taken from one photograph, the body and horse from another photo, and the background image from a third. Manipulation of historical photos is one type of photo editing that is generally dishonest and damaging to the historical record, especially when original copies of the photos in question are not readily available and preserved. This is much less of an issue today, when digital copies of a photo can be preserved in many locations. However, it can still impact the historical record if a photograph is manipulated in the same way, released to the public, but not archived and/or made widely available in its original form.

CNN was recently criticized for damaging the historical record when it edited a photo that other news organizations released unaltered (CNN's Photo Editing…). CNN blurred the faces of a group of men behind a news correspondent who was assaulted soon after the photo was taken. Many people criticized CNN for altering the photo, saying that they had "unethically tampered with a historic photographic record." CNN defended the decision, explaining that they blurred the crowd's faces because they had no way of knowing whether the people in the

photograph were the same people who assaulted the correspondent. Not wanting to incriminate the potentially innocent crowd members, CNN protected their privacy.

This type of photo manipulation, done to protect the individuals in the picture, does not harm the historical record since many other news organizations released the unaltered photograph, and because there is no reason to believe that the original, unaltered photo will become unavailable. Digital photos, especially those used in news media, are typically preserved in many locations and would be readily available to authorities if charges were pressed. Also, the facial blurring was done with good reason, did not change the photo's meaning, and did not misrepresent the situation within the photograph. CNN altered the photo in an attempt to be ethical, not for the purposes of deceiving the public in a harmful way.

Another controversial (but immensely less-defendable) case of photo editing is a 2009 Ralph Lauren advertisement, which depicts a model whose body has been so distorted by editing that her head appears to be larger than her hips (Heussner). The real issue in this case is not this particular photo, but that its extreme level of alteration is required in order for people to agree that the editing is unethical. Publishing photos of extremely thin models has become so entrenched in society's expectations that most people fail to recognize the near-impossibility of the models' physiques until a photo surfaces that is too absurd to pass as real.

Modification of fashion models' photos, as in the Ralph Lauren advertisement, is arguably the most frequently and hotly debated form of photo editing. Women in magazines and advertisements are often altered to appear inhumanly beautiful; they have flawless complexions and perfect proportions that most people could never achieve in reality. While there is some validity to the argument that these photo manipulations are art and should not be taken seriously, the real-life implications and consequences of the extensive use of airbrushing and photo editing

can be extremely damaging. Men's expectations of women are often heightened, and more frequently, women's expectations of their own bodies are unrealistic and thus harmful to both their self-esteem and even their health.

A study published in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* examines the damaging psychological effects of editing magazine photos to make models appear thinner. The authors argue that the image of the 'ideal' woman that is projected by this photo manipulation is in conflict with the reality of the female form. They also assert that not only photo editing in news media, but also editing done for cosmetic purposes is unethical. Their study consists of surveying 89 female undergraduate students about their opinion of two sets of magazine photos: one set of digitally manipulated, very thin models versus another set of the same photographs where the models had been restored to a "healthy slimness" (Reaves et al., 62). The students were also asked about their perceptions of photo editing in magazines and their emotional reactions to it.

The participants thought that both the manipulated and restored versions of the photos were equally attractive, which suggests that magazines may be promoting an ideal that is entirely unnecessary. The reason that magazines edit models' photos to make the women more attractive is most likely that the magazines believe that their readers find extremely thin women to be more attractive than women of average slimness. If this is the case, and the findings of this study are consistent with the majority of the population's views, then magazines may be going to unnecessary lengths to make their models look unnaturally perfect. There may be some limitation within the study, since every participant was female and in a narrow age group, but at the same time, this demographic is probably the most representative of this type of magazines' audience.

Interestingly, the study's participants were generally very aware of the photo editing techniques used by magazines, and their attitude toward that editing was "highly skewed to disagreement" (Reaves et al., 66). If we assume that this group of participants is representative of the audience of magazines that employ these techniques, some difficult questions are raised. If the magazines' audience knows about and disapproves of the use of photo editing, why are many of these magazines so successful? If women know about these techniques and therefore know that magazine models are not so perfect in reality, shouldn't they be immune to being negatively emotionally affected by a perceived failure to measure up?

Unfortunately, these questions don't have easy answers. The study's participants were disinclined to want magazines to place warnings or disclaimers on photos that have been manipulated, or to write the magazines a protest letter. And, as other research suggests, these idealized photos negatively impacts women's own satisfaction with their bodies (Eating Disorders). Similar advertisements also make women afraid to grow old or to be unattractive, and this accumulation of negative body image makes women and girls more likely to take unhealthy measures in an attempt to achieve a near-impossible perfection.

Men are not immune to this phenomenon, although in their case, photos of male celebrities are edited to make the celebrities look more muscular and fit than they are in reality. Tennis player Andy Roddick appeared on the cover of a 2007 issue of *Men's Fitness*, and expressed surprise at the appearance of muscle volume that he did not actually have (How is Your Body Image…). The disorder caused by this type of editing is called Bigorexia—wanting muscles that could, in reality, probably only be achieved by the use of steroids (What Do You Know…).

Photo editing is not an entirely negative, or even ambiguous, force in the media, however. In many cases, it can be used in positive ways, to create works of art that are harmful to no one and helpful to many. Photo editing creates jobs, encourages artistry, and can be used to promote and generate interest in anything from history to science.

One positive use of photo editing is the restoration of old or damaged photographs. This type of photo editing is difficult to see in a negative light because the purpose is not to alter the subject matter in the photograph, but to recover a piece of history. A number of defects can be repaired, such as water damage, creases, chipped away ink, scratches, and stains. Depending on the restorer's skill, photos with holes, torn edges, or other severe defects can be made whole again. Photo restoration allows families to have long-lasting, undamaged mementos of their ancestors. Some of the minor to moderate restoration can be done at home by someone of limited skill, and there are many online companies that offer major repairs that should be handled by a professional, or minor repairs for anyone who is unfamiliar with how to edit photos (Fixing Photos).

Another very positive use of photo editing is found in the field of astrophotography, or photography of astronomical scenes. Astrophotography does not have to include photo editing, but many photographers choose to enhance the black-and-white images to include color, sometimes a true representation of what the object would look like and sometimes not. Regardless, creating beautiful photos of celestial bodies can create interest in science, astronomy, photography, and art, all at the same time.

A picture of a galaxy or nebula that is thousands of light-years away sounds very impressive, but a black-and-white image of it can be a bit disappointing if the viewer expects to be dazzled. This is why astrophotographers often enhance the photo to display a spectrum of

colors that are, surprisingly, often at least somewhat accurate. Jerry Lodriguss, a prominent astrophotographer, composed an essay about how 'real' the colors in astronomical photos are. It is a complicated question with an infinitely more complicated answer, but his final verdict is that color *can* be accurately represented in these photos. Some of it has to do with how long the exposure is and what filters are used, but editing can also contribute heavily to the visual beautification of these pictures.

The Hubble Heritage Project (HHP) is a staunch supporter of using photo editing to enhance astronomical photos. HHP is an initiative with the goal of providing high-quality, compelling images of astronomical features to the general public in order to promote interest in astronomy and the universe in general. The members of HHP take a different approach than Lodriguss in that they are more liberal with the color choices they make regarding their photos. They choose colors and contrast levels that will most emphasize interesting features in celestial objects, not necessarily colors that are accurate or even within a human's abilities to visually detect in a natural environment.

While someone could argue that the HHP is misrepresenting facts by publishing astronomical photos that are inaccurate, the overwhelmingly positive influence of the organization cannot be denied. By providing free, visually appealing photos of celestial bodies that were previously unknowable, the HHP is piquing interest in astronomy, science, and technology. Its website offers in-depth explanations of the photo editing process, and it uploads some of the raw data that it receives from the Hubble Space Telescope, so that anyone interested in editing the photos themselves can participate as well. There is supplemental information and stories about astronomy as well—people who visit the site to view the photos are more likely to read about and become interested in the field of astronomy.

While photo editing in some forms does have undeniably negative impacts on society and individuals, it is important to remember that photo editors are only tools. The way that they are wielded depends entirely upon the person using them, and though many editors use them for shallow or harmful purposes, many others utilize the digital editors to create works that contribute positively to education, art, and much more.

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