

Image Ambiguity in Contemporary Era

Faizan Adil
Independent Scholar

Abstract

This enquiry delves into an investigation of whether a photograph, due to its ambiguous nature, can be fabricated by removing or adding accompanying text, changing its placement, or editing, retouching, altering, or distorting it. This paper examines the art of photo-editing and manipulation both in the historical and contemporary context to assess the exploitative impact of photography in the form of spreading mistruths, distortion of facts, and propagating false narratives. I further investigate the ethics of contemporary photographs and photojournalism to see how the visual medium has evolved by not only becoming more accessible but also by providing easy access to several manipulation tools. Furthermore, to describe the application of ambiguous photographs in the contemporary era, this paper relies on Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's "Propaganda Model" theory (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

Keywords: Propaganda Model, Ethical Photojournalism, Photomanipulation, Doctored Images

Introduction

Photomanipulation is the practice of altering photographs using a variety of methods, tools, and techniques, including cropping, making composites, or retouching images. One of the earliest examples of photomanipulation is from the 1860s – just a few decades after the invention of the camera (Young, n.d). Today, photomanipulation has become a more accessible and acceptable practice with the help of various tools, making exploitation possible in the form of spreading mistruths, distortion of facts, and propagating false narratives.

This paper argues that a photograph is considered ambiguous in nature in the absence of clear context and altering an ambiguous photograph can consequently lead to deception. Several case studies have shown how people, organizations, and propagandists with harmful agendas have used photomanipulation to intentionally deceive and mislead their audiences. This enquiry proposes a model of photo archiving and metadata identification as a practical solution for tackling this issue.

Photographic Ambiguity

The book *Another Way of Telling* (Berger, Mohr & Philibert, 1982) uses the term "photographic ambiguity" to refer to the myriad possibilities of interpreting a single photograph. An example from this book (See Figure 1), at a first glance, depicts a man simply smiling at a horse. Nevertheless, this fact alone is not enough to establish the story the photograph aims to depict. Berger (1982) explains the "photographic ambiguity" concept by providing different plausible stories behind this image, which can all be true and false simultaneously, depending on the context in which the image is published. Some possible meanings of this image imagined by Berger are "The Man Who Set Fire to Farms (his smile becomes sinister)", "Before the Trek of Two Thousand Miles (his smile becomes little apprehensive)", and "After the Trek of Two Thousand Miles (his smile becomes modest)." With each interpretation, the context of a simple smile changes.

Figure 1

Image from the book 'Another Way of Telling' (Copyright by Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group)



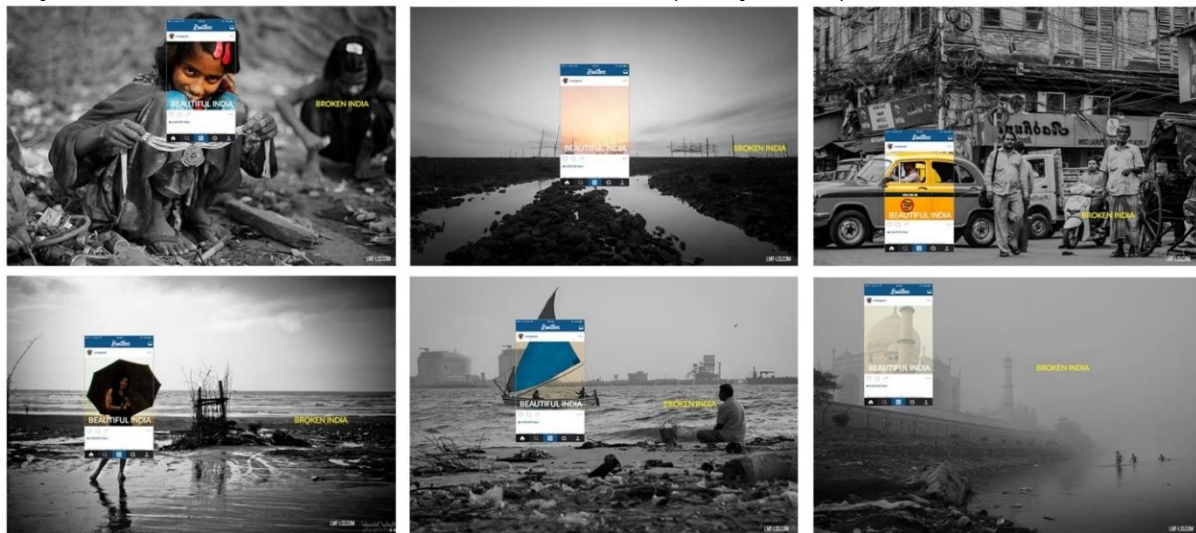
The Impact of Framing

The frame of a photograph plays a part in influencing its context. A photographer may consciously or unconsciously add or remove elements from the frame of a photograph or may even use photo-editing tools to remove entire objects or people from the photograph. As harmless as it seems, cropping a picture can often drastically change its context.

In the contemporary era, framing pictures becomes more prominent on social media, particularly on platforms like Instagram. Projects such as “Broken India” (See Figure 2) by a Singapore-based tech company emphasize this phenomenon by showing what lies beyond the “beautiful” frames on Instagram (Borges, 2015).

Figure 2

Project Broken India shows what lies outside the frames (CC by SA 2.0)



Cropping a photograph to remove “extraneous details” is considered acceptable by several photography organisations, such as the World Press Photo (World Press Photo, n.d); however, the conscious attempt to remove or add objects or people from a frame to intentionally alter the context and meaning of a photograph can lead to negative consequences. In 2010, British news agency Reuters came under criticism for cropping out a knife and blood from photographs (See Figure 3) released by a Turkish organisation called Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (Barnes, 2017).

Figure 3

On the left, the uncropped photo. On the right, Reuters' released photo (CC by SA 2.0)



Media Theories

What happens when the context of an image changes from its original intent and is differently propagated by a distributor? The answer lies in several media theories that have been put across through the ages. One of the most prominent theories is Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's "Propaganda Model" from their book "Manufacturing Consent" (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

The Propaganda Model

The "Propaganda Model" theory lists five filters that make it impossible for the media to be impartial. Chomsky and Herman (1988) argue that the media does not merely inform us but rather "manufactures" our opinions. This paper applies the same theory to the medium of photography. The five filters are:

1. Media ownership: Global media is owned and run by powerful conglomerates whose main purpose is to earn profit through their venture.
2. Advertising: The media's primary source of revenue comes from advertisements. Advertisers pay the media, and the media, in turn, sells its audience. This gives advertisers an upper hand, enabling them to manipulate the media.
3. The media elite: Powerful institutes, including the government, the social and political elites, as well as private entities, know how to maintain control over the media by publishing stories or highlighting experts who speak in their favour.
4. Flak: If a person or entity attempts to report on the misdoings of the powerful, they face criticism and hostility.
5. The common enemy: The powerful media elite creates a bogeyman, a common enemy, or a target to divert public opinion.

These filters manufacture consent among the consumers of the media.

Other Theories

Several more psychology and media theories help in understanding the impact images have on human perception.

A study called "The Influence of Color on the Perception of Scene Gist" illustrates how the same photograph, if presented in different colour tones or with varied blurriness, is perceived differently (Castelhano & Henderson, 2008). Another popular media theory is the "Magic Bullet Theory," which states that the information the media publishes hits the audience like a bullet and implants ideas and opinions in

their minds. A study called “Rethinking the Bullet Theory in the Digital Age” establishes this theory’s relevance in the digital age with users strongly influenced by social media (Nwabueze & Okonkwo, 2018).

Historical Examples of Image Manipulation for the sake of Propaganda

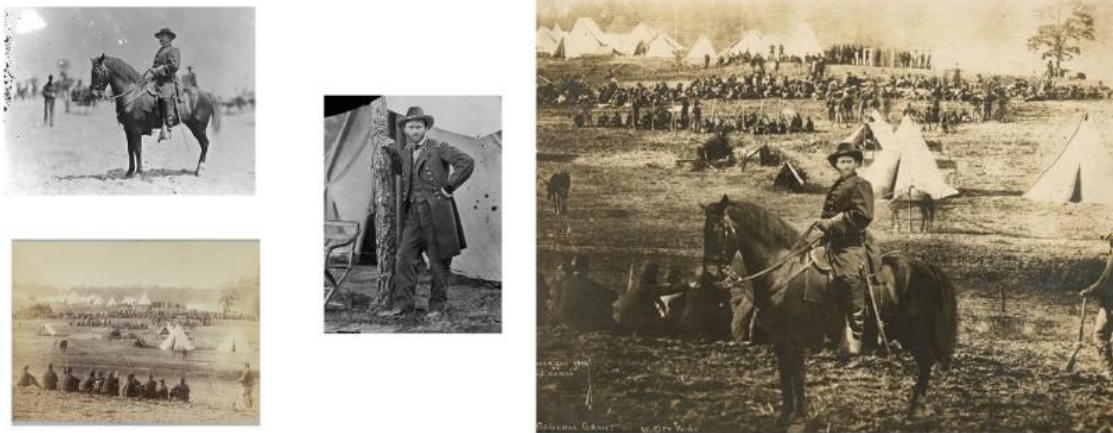
To understand how the Propaganda Model applies to the medium of photography, the following are some examples of images that were altered or edited to propagate a certain biased narrative.

Circa 1902

To present a heroic image (See Figure 4) of General Ulysses S. Grant during the American Civil War, a photograph was released showing him on a horse in front of a battlefield full of his troops. The doctored image continued to fool people for a century before an investigation in 2007 by researchers at the Library of Congress revealed that the image was a composite of three different images (Graham, 2015).

Figure 4

General Ulysses S. Grant during the American Civil War. Composite photo on the right. (CC by SA 2.0)



The year 1982

The renowned *National Geographic* magazine admitted to warping an image (See Figure 5) of the pyramids vertically to fit it on its cover (Goldberg, 2016).

Figure 5

The Pyramids of Giza, Egypt (CC by SA 2.0)



The year 1989

A US-based magazine featured Oprah Winfrey on its cover to promote its daytime show. In the picture (See Figure 6), Oprah's head was real, but the rest of the body was of an actress photographed ten years earlier. Neither had consented to the image manipulation (Fix the Photo. n.d.).

Figure 6

Oprah Winfrey on the Time magazine cover, on the left. Original image on the right. (CC by SA 2.0.)



The year 1994

The *Time* magazine published a mugshot of OJ Simpson (See Figure 7) on its cover when his murder trial was ongoing. The magazine darkened his portrait to make him look menacing and to perpetuate subliminal racial biases (Carmody, 1994).

Figure 7

Photo Illustration for Time by Matt Mahurin, on the left. Unaltered image on the right. (CC by SA 2.0.)

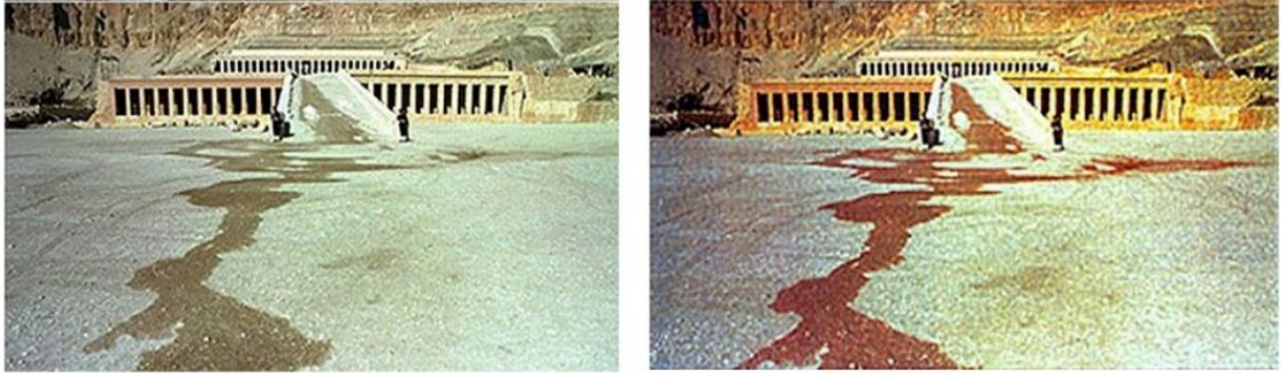


The year 1997

A Swiss tabloid edited an image (See Figure 8) from an attack on Hatshepsut's temple in Luxor, Egypt, turning a puddle of water into blood. The attack had left 58 people dead, and such edited imagery was a deliberate attempt to ignite anger and hatred among the people (Battiato & Messina, 2009).

Figure 8

Unaltered image of the Hatshepsut's temple on the left. Altered image on the right. (CC by SA 2.0)



The year 2003

This photograph (See Figure 9) of a British soldier telling Iraqi civilians to take cover was a composite of two images from the same place and time to show more people in the background for impact (Riper, n.d.).

Figure 9

Brian Walski, a Los Angeles Times reporter, combined two photographs into one used on the newspaper's front page (CC by SA 2.0)



The year 2008

Iran claimed it had launched four missiles (See Figure 10). The U.S. later refuted the claim that the fourth missile was photoshopped (Lyons & Nizza, 2008).

Figure 10

In an Iranian Image, a Missile Too Many (CC by SA 2.0)

**The year 2011**

A doctored image (See Figure 11) of Osama bin Laden's corpse was all over the media after he was killed in a U.S. operation in Pakistan (Hill, 2011). To date, it is unclear what happened to his corpse.

Figure 11

Osama bin Laden's corpse published in The Guardian (CC by SA 2.0)

**The year 2020**

Former U.S. President Donald Trump's administration used an advertising campaign (See Figure 12) showing rival Joe Biden sitting alone in a basement (Kessler, 2020). In the original photograph, Biden was praying at a church after the murder of George Floyd (Parks, 2020). Although the edits to the picture were minor, the edits distorted the picture's context.

Figure 12

Trump campaign ad manipulates three images to put Biden in a 'basement.' (CC by SA 2.0.)



The Dangers of Presenting Photographs as Facts in Photojournalism

In the above-mentioned examples, Chomsky and Herman's (1988) five filters come into play in one way or another and show how powerful entities successfully propagate false images. This model becomes even more dangerous in photojournalism, where photographs are presented as facts by media houses and are published in newspapers, etched into history forever. A study called "A camera never told the truth: An exploration of objectivity in photojournalism" questions the ethical implications of altered photographs in journalism by exploring several published examples of doctored images, warning photographers of the consequences of spreading propaganda (Rehman, 2018).

Moreover, popular photo magazines have come under fire for featuring and awarding manipulated photographs, such as the "2013 World Press Photo of the Year" by Paul Hansen (Petapixel, 2013), which was altered. While photomanipulation techniques are generally looked down upon in the journalism world, Magnum Photos member Christopher Anderson says:

"It is beside the point to argue about the degree to which facts have been altered because all photography does that... I am more interested in the truth in what they have to say, even though I know it is subjective. When a suburban kid in [a] garage in New York is retouched to look like he is in a burned-out alley in Aleppo, I don't have to examine the raw file to know that the photographer has created something that has nothing at all to do with facts." (Laurent, 2013)

In Pakistan, editors often receive edited images by the government's Ministry of Information (See Figure 13). The newspapers are compelled to publish these doctored photographs despite the apparent and often hilarious obviousness of the edits (Tahir, 2017), as newspapers are often dependent on politicians and capitalists for advertisement revenue.

Figure 13

Photoshopped image of the chief minister on the left. Original image on the right. (CC by SA 2.0.)



In 2021, Pakistan's political party, Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI), uploaded a photograph (See Figure 14) on Twitter featuring a person with text reading: "My name is Kashif Chaudhary. I am an employee at a workshop in Klotiya, Daska. I will vote for Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf NA - 75 Candidate Ali Asjad Malhi" (PTI, 2021). The image showed the person as a resident of Punjab, Pakistan, but the photograph was of a model released as a stock image by an Indian creative agency called Triloks (See Figure 15).

Figure 14

Image posted by political party PTI on Twitter (CC by SA 2.0.)

**Figure 15**

Stock photo of an engineer, featuring a model (CC by SA 2.0.)



Similarly, a study conducted in Finland asked editors of several newspapers about the levels of photomanipulation and photo editing that are acceptable in the field of photojournalism (Mäenpää & Seppänen, 2010). Many editors were open to basic editing, such as cropping, brightening, and changing saturation, but disapproved of removing entire objects or people. They were also in consensus about having guidelines on photo editing.

Another dangerous impact of manipulated images occurs when courtrooms use photographs as evidence. A study “A new approach to photography forensics using 3d analysis for correcting perception errors” attempts to provide a solution to this by using three-dimensional (3d) modelling and Google satellite images to reconstruct a photograph of a location or a building and to ascertain its factual accuracy (Kim et al., 2010).

With all conventional journalists now also moving towards digital documentation and photography, it is essential that tools and platforms are put together to assess the veracity and accuracy of photographs and interrogate those who indulge in malpractices. There should also be an association of photo editors, especially in countries like Pakistan where there is a need for more skill-based education on journalism. The thesis project I undertook during my bachelor’s degree investigated the role of press photography and photojournalism in Pakistan. During my analysis of image placements, I found it very easy to identify a newspaper’s political, economic, and social inclinations just by comparing the placements of the published photographs (Adil, 2015).

Contemporary era

In today's world, cheap smartphones and easily accessible editing software have changed how images are produced, reproduced, distributed, and consumed. On Instagram, users share 1.3 billion images daily (Broz, 2023). Photo editing has become such a common tool that Instagram has hundreds of filters that change over time. The filters not only include colour palette changes but also changes to the face and eye shape, adding make-up, and even transforming faces into younger or older versions of a person. Moreover, the filters that change faces follow a stereotypical standard of beauty by lightening skin tones, colouring or enlarging the eyes, and slimming the face. A study published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* showed a link between the practice of editing selfies with body image issues and eating disorders (McLean et al., 2015), and another study links selfies to narcissism and self-esteem (Barry et al., 2017).

Oversharing images in the digital world also raises the question of what exactly an image is now. The 1.3 billion number from Instagram mentioned earlier not only consists of material shot through a camera lens but also contains graphics, memes, and gifs that fall into the same category of an image because of their similar impact.

In June 2020, when the *Black Lives Matter* movement was at its peak after the murder of George Floyd, activists commemorated a "Blackout Tuesday" urging people worldwide to post a plain black image on their social media profiles using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter (Coscarelli, 2020). While this activity seemed to support the movement, it ended up "doing more harm than good" because all the black square images cluttered the hashtag page and consequently censored the actual images from the movement (Willingham, 2020).

The Propaganda Model theory also applies to visual content on social media channels. Photo editing tools and social media filters give power to the users to morph their image or identity online, often leading to scam, lies, and deception – a practice now commonly known as "catfishing". The term catfishing is used to describe the act of online deception, in which an individual creates a fake online persona and pretends to be someone else, usually for the purpose of tricking, manipulating, or misleading the audience, often with the help of fake photographs. In 2021, social media was a "gold mine" for scammers with 770 million U.S. dollars in losses to fraud, as it is "easy to manufacture a fake persona" online, according to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (Fletcher, 2022).

Proposed Method: Image Upload Metadata

This paper proposes the following method as mandatory practice for photographers uploading an image onto any platform to ensure that the context of the image is truthfully communicated to the viewers. Photographers should be required to fill out a form while sharing their photographs to minimise misinterpretation of their work. The more details the photograph contains, the easier it will be for viewers to understand the context. Each photograph should have the following information:

1. Year
2. Location
3. Focal length
4. Genre
 - Photojournalism/ Documentary Photography
 - Press Photography
 - Fine art
 - Landscape
 - Portrait
 - Surreal
 - Still Life

- Editorial
 - Fashion
 - Architectural
 - Street Photography
 - Personal Collection
5. Medium
- Analogue
 - Digital
6. Characteristics
- Single Image
 - Photo-series
 - Screenshot
7. Attributes
- Changed Perspective
 - Anything removed or cloned from the image.
 - True Colour
 - Modified Colour
 - Photo Montage (If another image is used from the external source, mention the source, title, and artist information)
 - Photo Collage
 - Endorsement
8. Consent
- Subject Consent
 - Subject Consent is not required
 - Without Subject Consent
 - Public Event
9. Ownership
- Sole
 - Partnership
 - Collaboration
 - Sponsorship
10. Image License TYPE
- Public Domain/ Royalty Free
 - Copyrighted
 - Creative Commons share-alike license (CC by S.A.)
 - Creative Common no derivatives license (CC by N.D.)
 - Creative Common non-commercial license (CC by N.C.)
 - Creative Common non-commercial - share-alike license (CC by C.N.C. - S.A.)
 - Creative Common non-commercial - no derivatives license (CC by N.C. - N.D.)

The outcome of the proposed method is provided in Figure 16 (n.d, 2017).

Figure 16

Industry of Dissolving Portraits (CC by SA 2.0.)



Title: Industry of Dissolving portraits

Location: Lahore, Pakistan

Focal Length: 75mm

Medium: Digital

Ownership:

Collaboration with Pakistan Photo Festival

Image License Type: CC by S.A.

Characteristic: Image Series

Consent: Subject Consent Taken

Genre: Photojournalism, Portrait and Documentary Photography

Attributes:

- Background cloned from the image to remove dust particles.
- True Colour
- Used one flashlight.
-

Conclusion

“Seeing is believing” is an age-old notion, but the truth of an image will always remain open to interpretation even if its raw files and metadata information are closely examined. All images must always be viewed with scepticism as even their placements and framing can play a considerable role in changing their context. If a viewer is going through a magazine featuring images from a famine, spread over six pages, but on the third page in the middle is a full-page advertisement of a beer, the impact of the famine may be lessened as the viewer’s attention is likely to get diverted.

The famous one-million-dollar photograph of a potato (Chalasan, 2016) also exposes the façade of the photography industry, which is primarily run by corporate conglomerates infamous for exploiting the medium and the masses. Photographer Steve McCurry came into the limelight for his edited photographs, but no amount of criticism affected his career, and he continues to be a member of the National Geographic claiming that he is a visual storyteller and not a photographer (Naga, 2016). Nikon, another giant in the industry, also once awarded a photographer for an image that was later proved to have been altered (DiyPhotography, 2016).

Today, we see a trickle-down effect as photography takes over the world by being more democratic. However, with power comes responsibility. Moreover, now the masses are indulging in the same practice of exploitation that was earlier done on a higher level by corporate entities. Digital media users have turned themselves, their lives, and their homes into a brand, with the help of images, photo-editing tools, and free excessive use of social media. Furthermore, they are also now propagating their biased messages, carrying out subliminal campaigns and advertisements, and actively changing public perception using their influence.

In conclusion, this enquiry was just the tip of the iceberg and opens space for further investigations as well as retrospection on the best and worst practices in the field of photography and what needs to be done to ensure that there are enough critical awareness around crucial issues.

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