

Photojournalism, Photomanipulation and Propaganda in the Post Truth Age



Leonard Scott

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Has the 'digital revolution' created more problems than opportunities for today's professional photographers?

It has already been pointed out during the course work that photo manipulation has been going on almost as long as photography itself has existed. Of course, some of this photo manipulation was done in the course of progress of photography within art, for example, Dadaism, but there has always been manipulation of images for political, newsworthiness or compositional reasons.

If we examine the manipulation of images solely for political purposes, we find it was usually undertaken by individuals or groups who had the skillset to create the new images through darkroom manipulation. In the digital age, photomanipulation is much easier with the advent of powerful home computers and it has become so common that even mobile phones are filled with applications to produce professional-looking images.

It is due to the availability of these modern tools, in the home, office and mobile forms that a problem has appeared which is as dangerous in its nature as in its ease of use. In this essay, I will be examining the dangers of photo and video manipulation of photojournalistic digital content when it is being used for nefarious, misinformation or propaganda purposes. I will focus on the recent misinformation which appeared on the internet following an explosion in Beirut as an example.

Firstly, we have to ensure that we acknowledge the major change the digital revolution has made. It shook up the ability for news agencies to obtain footage quicker. News agencies such as CNN gave their journalists smartphones with cameras which allowed them to replace any specific photojournalist and which allowed the journalist to photograph their footage at the same time as gathering news on an event. This also meant that everyone with a camera could become a reporter by using the very same equipment given to the journalist. This opened up the window of opportunity for the citizen journalist to create and broadcast events almost in real-time, posting their images and

videos quickly and easily on sites such as Flickr, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. The news agencies could then contact the individual and licence the images straight from the creator.

In Beirut, Libia, on the August 4th 2020, at 6 p.m. local time, a fire broke out which was then followed by a large explosion in a warehouse sited within the port. The explosion, caused by the fire detonating 3,000 tonnes of stored Ammonium Nitrate, not only flattened the port grain silos, warehouses and capsized a passenger vessel, it destroyed the towns' business district and ripped apart surrounding residential areas killing 170 people and injuring thousands more. The first footage broadcast was from a citizen photojournalist who posted an internet video showing a mushroom-shaped cloud and blast wave passing over the rooftop towards the camera view.

The video (Youtube, Yassine.A., 2020) posted allowed us to see the event as it unfolded, the camera shakes as the blast wave passes and the holder ducks out of the way. In the next few hours videos appear, one posted by another Beirut resident (Twitter, Kawtharani.Y, 2020) acting as a citizen photojournalist, who was on Rue Chafaka, half a mile from the site of the explosion, this time the video showed smoke rising from a building which was then followed by the explosion.

There was some initial confusion over the blast, some fearing that the explosion was caused by a foreign agency or power and that the explosion was even atomic in source.

This confusion was furthered when the Lebanese president Michel Anoin, initially reflected that the explosion was caused by a missile, he later withdrew these comments when it was confirmed that the explosion was caused by stored Ammonium Nitrate at the docks warehouse.

However, in the meantime, parties unknown took video and photo footage straight from the internet and started to manipulate and repost their compositions, whether it was for monetised reasons or a misinformation campaign to reduce trust in the media. They took the video of the smoke and explosion as viewed from Rue Chafaka and composited in a missile passing into frame from the top left corner and appearing to strike a building before exploding.



The faked video was posed across several social media sites, and at this point in time is still available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJcEUktpfUE&feature=emb_logo (Youtube, Higgins.E, 2020)

This was followed by a series of still images purporting to be thermal camera footage which again showed that the explosion was the result of a missile strike.



The faked Thermal video can be found at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HT9Jm2KCmsI&feature=emb_logo (Youtube, Higgins.E, 2020)

In both of these examples, the footage had to be investigated to see if they were showing something which others had missed. As a result of these investigations, it was seen that the missile had been taken from an animated source, probably a cartoon and that the thermal images were a result of

digital composition and manipulation to create a narrative of terrorism or international action. The reasoning behind it is unknown.

What can be drawn from these events is that there is now a threat to any footage or images directly uploaded to the internet without some form of barrier to protect it from manipulation. Due to the proliferation of devices which can capture high-quality images and video, anyone can now capture events as they unfold and easily upload them onto the internet with good intentions. The revolution in the ability to capture these events is equalled by the ability to edit, composite and regenerate footage with a different narrative.

This creates a real issue for photojournalists, as they now find themselves in the position where they have to consider that their work may be distorted by someone else, therefore causing a divergence in their message. How can you ensure that what you upload stays within the boundaries of the narrative in which the event happened? Photojournalists obviously cannot sit on images from an event until they can ensure that their work will be protected and un-editable, as this would create a time delay between the event happening and it being reported and would distort or render irrelevant their work.

There is no proven definitive answer to this problem, without the ability to quickly respond, record and report on an event, the photojournalist becomes just another powerless observer. Is this what the footage manipulators want? Is this their *raison detre*, to create mistrust in the media or delay the reporting, so that they can get their propaganda out instead?

Certainly, in this, post-truth age, the ability to sow doubt and mistrust in any form of media or news agency and ensure that the narrative is changed to infer or deflect blame is a powerful tool. What can be done to revoke the power from the manipulators?

In the case of the Beirut explosion, there were enough sources of information available and from different angles, positions, and narrative to show a cubatistic view of the event. Put together, the many, many pieces of footage, show a tragic fire, explosion and its immediate after effect.

So, having the sources and peoples' ability to gather them together has helped enforce the reality of the event. The immediacy of the digital sources has allowed the event to be verified and acknowledged as real.

It is exceptionally difficult to prevent images and footage from being altered when they are uploaded to sites such as Twitter or YouTube, as these images can be manipulated, the very exif information contained within the image can be removed or rendered redundant, watermarks cropped or blurred, new audio dubbed over. Without these source sites, however, the news would not break and events could go unreported and unknown, so they are important and useful in their own right.

It rests with the role of the photojournalist and by extension, the ethics of the photojournalist whether they be professional or citizen; to gather as much information as possible and present it in a manner which it makes it difficult to manipulate. They should also, try and get the event out to as many sources as possible to distribute the information so that it ties into and supports others who are also recording and reporting on the event. This is clearly supported by the evidence following what happened in Beirut that day; social media continues to collate and curate what was taken and uploaded to produce a clear contiguous narrative of what happened. The fake footage has to a large extent already been found wanting by people who investigated and reported on it and has been removed either by the site owners due to misrepresentation of the event or by the individual who initially uploaded it, who having done their damage, disappear back into the anonymity which is the internet.

In conclusion, photojournalists have to be aware that their work can and may be taken out of context either by accident or on purpose. The only way to ensure that what they report on continues

to have the intended narrative attached is to use the very social media tools which are being used against them to amplify their message. This can be done, by collating their own work with information and footage from other sources. The photojournalist cannot arrive, capture something and then disappear back to their office to produce a scoop, as they will miss part of the story due to the lack of investigation and information gathering. There will always be someone before you, uploading a smartphone or GoPro footage of the event, which will not be fully investigative nor informative. The photojournalist whether, they be professional or citizen, should ensure that what they report on is evidence-driven and that where possible they only grant permission to their work to valid agencies and bodies. They should also, where possible, use the social media tools to speak out against the misuse of their footage and gain back trust for the media by fighting the manipulators by saying, that this is my footage and it has been changed.

Only by using the very tools which have fed into the digital revolution can professional photographers counteract and overcome some of the problems created by the digital revolution. They can either stand back and not report, therefore reducing comment and news availability and validity, as reportage would take on a propaganda stance, or they can interleave their work with others and not only produce the cubatistic view of events, but also in doing so counteract the manipulators of footage, by enforcing the truism of the event, as Shakespeare himself wrote: "O, while you live, tell truth, and shame the Devil!". That is to say, photojournalists, must show and speak the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it is for them, even if they feel they have strong emotions and reasoning for canceling the truth.

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