2020 Ethics Team Event

The Ethics of Photo Manipulation in Journalistic and Public Opinion

Technology has impacted media and information in many ways, and it presents some unique challenges. It has become easier to falsify information and make it appear to be the truth. One example of this, is the manipulation of photos, which includes using software to change, alter, or edit photos from their original state.

While doctored photos have been a problem for decades, today's technology makes it simple for anyone to do. It has become nearly impossible to tell when images have been retouched. Photo manipulation could also include positioning, captioning, or using images as evidence in a way that misrepresents the facts. This can be problematic when it influences people's thoughts and actions. For example, one photo of a politician making an unpleasant face paired with a negative headline can drastically impact public opinion – even if it does not represent reality.

In journalism, manipulating photos is generally seen as a distortion of the truth by most media outlets. Scandals have occurred when images have been edited and published by publications such as *Time* and *The New York Times.* However, the standards are different in marketing and social media. Nearly every photo in advertising has been edited and retouched, and people rarely object. When the lines between journalism and advertising are blurred, as they often are in the digital age, it can be difficult to know what is ethical.

Photo manipulation raises several ethical questions. Under what circumstances is it acceptable to retouch or edit photos? Is it just as wrong to retouch an image as it is to change an image in a way that misrepresents facts? Does it matter why the photo was manipulated, or just that it was? Should photo manipulation be considered acceptable now that it is so easy to do so?

These questions should be top of mind for anyone who works in media or who is responsible for informing public opinion. When faced with decisions related to photo manipulation, it is important to consider all possible consequences and ethical implications.

2020 Ethics Team Event

CASE STUDY

Tina works in the public relations department for a large technology company. The company is planning a huge launch event for the release of its latest mobile phone. Thousands of people are expected to attend and line up to get the latest devices. The company is banking on the launch to boost sales and create positive publicity.

However, when the launch day occurs, the crowds are much smaller than expected, and there are no lines around the corner. Top executives at the company are concerned. The buzz surrounding the launch event was a key part of their marketing strategy.

As a member of the public relations team, Tina is in charge of putting together a press release covering the launch event. As she is working on it, her supervisor, Andrew, approaches her and asks to see some of the photos she is planning to run with the press release.

After viewing the photos of sparse crowds and short lines, Andrew looks unhappy. He asks Tina to give him a few hours to find some better images before she sends out the press release. Tina agrees.

When Andrew comes back, he has a new set of photos for Tina to use. When Tina opens the photos, she is shocked. They aren't new or different photos. Rather, they look very similar to the photos she already had – only they have been edited to make the crowds look much bigger.

When Tina asks how Andrew was able to come up with the new photos, he tells her it was easy: he asked a graphic designer to edit the photos to make the crowds appear larger. He says that no one will be able to tell that the photos were edited, and they look so much better.

Tina tells Andrew that she feels conflicted about the photos and wonders if they are dishonest. She points out that the new photos make it look like the launch event had thousands of people attending when really there were only a few hundred.

Andrew tells her that it doesn't matter because no one can tell, and it's not going to harm anyone. All it's going to do is help the company have a successful product launch. Plus, he tells her, everyone edits their photos these days.

When Tina expresses that she is still uncomfortable with the photos, Andrew tells her that she has to run the new photos, no questions asked. If she doesn't, her press release will be considered a failure, and all of the blowback will fall on her.

Tina is not sure what to do. Should she use the doctored photos that will help her company in the long run? Or, should she use the unaltered images and risk her career success?

MICHIGAN DECA

2021 ETHICS TEAM EVENT ETH

BUSINESS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Should businesses be held responsible for implementing practices to protect the environment? Discuss both the positive and negative implications of holding businesses responsible for implementing practices to protect the environment.

Since the time of the Industrial Revolution, businesses have been impacting the natural environment on a massive scale. However, it was not until the 1960s, when ecologist Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, highlighting the widespread effects of pollution, was published that social support for environmental protection started gaining momentum.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as major environmental catastrophes such as oil spills increased pressure on businesses, corporations moved from passive regulatory compliance to strategic environmentalism, a more proactive approach to addressing environmental issues. Then, in the early 2000s, scientific research findings ignited even more global concern for the challenges of pollution, emissions, and climate change. Environmentalism commanded universal attention as resource stewardship, a resource management approach in which people and businesses serve as nature's caretakers, was presented as a moral duty.

The 2010s onward reveal an expanded focus on sustainability, clean and green energy, and the integration of environmentally friendly policies into corporate management practices. Now, as climate change—worsened by human activity—intensifies deforestation, loss of biodiversity, soil degradation, melting ice caps, overfishing, and more, businesses are increasingly expected to implement practices that lessen their impact on the environment.

Today, businesses must comply with numerous environmental regulations issued by local-, state- and federal-level governmental agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Agriculture, and Department of Energy. If a business breaches mandatory requirement set by any of these agencies, it is likely to face serious penalties and fines. In 2017, for example, when Volkswagen pleaded guilty in U.S. court to tampering with its vehicles' emissions software, the company was ordered to pay a $2.8+ billion fine. The company also faced multiple class-action suits, penalties, and—in the case of a handful of its executives—federal prison time.

Beyond the guidelines issued by these different agencies, most businesses are left to determine how, or even whether, to curb their negative environmental impact. To what degree are businesses responsible for implementing practices to protect the environment?

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It is not a decision that companies necessarily make solely for the benefit of the environment—or for themselves. Businesses today are expected to be socially responsible and are held accountable to not only themselves, but also their employees, customers, stakeholders, and the public. Modern customers expect businesses to take a stand on ethical issues, including those related to protecting the environment. Mounting pressure from these belief-driven buyers means that the decisions businesses make regarding their social and environmental responsibilities have big implications for their future success.

Fortunately, companies interested in going green have many options these days when identifying and implementing practices to protect the environment. Businesses can lessen their carbon footprint by incorporating recycling programs, introducing energy-efficient equipment, and manufacturing processes, conducting sustainability audits, reducing single-use consumption, and various other sustainable business practices. Unfortunately, the practices that have the largest impact do not always come cheap. Some green initiatives, like installing facility-wide solar panels or sourcing materials from local suppliers, have higher front-end costs, which is not always feasible for smaller businesses or start-ups.

When the lines between protecting the environment and remaining profitable are blurred, it can be difficult to know what is ethical. The responsibility of businesses to protect the environment raises several ethical questions: To what extent are values compatible with profitability? What are the positive and negative implications of holding businesses responsible for environmental sustainability? Does a business's size and/or industry affect its responsibility? When faced with decisions related to environmentally friendly business practices, it is important to consider all possible consequences and ethical implications before determining what actions to take.

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CASE STUDY

Deja recently started working as the product manager of a small start-up technology company called Alchemy Tech. At first, Deja was nervous about leaving her old job to move to such a new business. She ultimately accepted the position, though, because she knew she would have the exciting opportunity to help build the company from the ground up.

Deja is interested in developing and implementing a variety of business practices that not only help Alchemy Tech, but also the surrounding community. Deja is most excited about the business adopting "green" processes and procedures that help preserve and protect the environment.

However, when Deja brings up the idea of sustainable business practices in a management meeting, she is surprised that she does not receive much support from her colleagues. Instead, several individuals argue that adopting sustainable business practices is too costly for the new business. Other managers say that they do not know what "sustainable" practices look like and would not even know where to start. The chief operating officer points out that since there is no specific law requiring "green" practices, the company is not responsible for protecting the environment anyway.

After the meeting, Deja expresses her thoughts privately to the start-up's chief executive officer, Annette. Deja feels conflicted. Adopting sustainable practices makes sense to her, but so many other members of management seem to be against it. She does not know how to convince them that it is the right thing to do for the business, the community, and the environment. Annette listens to Deja's concerns and suggests that perhaps they could revisit this conversation in a few years, once the start-up is more established.

Deja does not know how to move forward. Should she listen to Annette and her colleagues, agreeing to ignore sustainable practices for the time being because doing so makes the most sense financially? Or should she fight for the start-up to adopt environmentally friendly practices and potentially risk the new company's future success?

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2022 ETHICS TEAM EVENT

ETHICS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: WHERE IS THE LINE?

Snapchat is one of the most popular social media apps, especially among teens. What sets Snapchat apart is that the messages – text or image – disappear after a set time limit.

The Snapchat app is quite popular with around 300 million daily users. However, it has received some negative attention. Many people are concerned that there is no record of postings since messages disappear. This makes it hard to prove that messages were even sent. Also, when messages disappear, they seem less serious and permanent. Students often say hurtful things without thinking since there don't appear to be any consequences.

Social media allows people to hide behind a screen. They say things they normally would not say to someone's face. When the message disappears, people take even less care with their words. These messages are hard to monitor.

Some people blame Snapchat itself. The app makes it easier to bully others. It makes it harder to catch bullies in the act. Snapchat has a policy against this behavior, and users can report bullying. The company can remove accounts when bullying occurs. However, students still face bullying on the app. How much ethical responsibility does a social media platform have when it comes to the way its users behave?

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2022 ETHICS TEAM EVENT

CASE STUDY

Layla works for Snapchat. She handles customer questions and issues. Sometimes, she deals with accounts that have been reported. These users might have been harassed or bullied.

One day, Layla receives an email from a woman named Stacy. Stacy's son Jay has been the victim of bullying on Snapchat. Stacy tells Layla the names of Jay's classmates who have bullied him. She says that these students use the app to post embarrassing photos of Jay. They send the photos around with hurtful captions.

Jay is often told about the photos or sees them on other students' phones. He does not receive the photos himself, so he can't take screenshots. Jay cannot prove that the harassment is occurring. The messages disappear too quickly. He has gone to the principal, but the bullies deny it.

Stacy asks Layla to help her find proof. "I know the images are deleted, but the bullying is taking place on your app," Stacy writes. "Can you help me prove that my son is being bullied? Do you have files that show all of the horrible things that are being said about my son?"

Layla knows that she cannot give Stacy any files. However, Stacy told her the bullies' names. She could suspend their accounts. Layla feels that her company should be held responsible for enabling bullies. However, this would go against Snapchat's rules. Does Layla have a responsibility to stop the bullying? Or should she stick to the company's rules?

MICHIGAN DECA

2023 ETHICS TEAM EVENT

ART CLUB SUPERVISOR TRIES TO PLAN CRAFT FAIR AMIDST BUDGET CUTS

CASE STUDY

The Art Club always puts on an annual Craft Fair for the school and community. This fair is an important funding source for the Visual Arts department, whose budget is typically used to cover the cost of art supplies, field trips, and Art Club activities. In the past, products for sale have always been made from high-quality materials. Due to district budget cuts as a result of COVID-19, this year's budget for the Visual Arts department has been reduced.

Mr. Kim, who is the Art Club supervisor and responsible for organizing the fair, is considering buying lower-quality supplies with this year's budget while maintaining the typical Craft Fair prices. This will allow the Art Club to sell items for a higher profit, and recoup some of the money lost in budget cuts. Mr. Kim knows that using lower-quality components to cut costs, especially following COVID-19, is a strategy used by larger manufacturers. However, Mr. Kim worries that school and community members may notice the decrease in quality from last year's fair, and the students may be disappointed by the lack of quality materials.

Is following in the steps of larger manufacturers the way to go in this scenario? How can companies conduct business ethically when trying to remain profitable in such difficult circumstances? What steps can Mr. Kim take to preserve the integrity of the Craft Fair event while still supporting the Art Club amidst budget cuts?

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2023 ETHICS TEAM EVENT

ART CLUB SUPERVISOR TRIES TO PLAN CRAFT FAIR AMIDST BUDGET CUTS

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Who are the stakeholders involved in Mr. Kim's decision? In what way(s) are they potentially impacted—and to what extent?

- Are businesses acting with **integrity** when they use lower-quality components to recoup costs lost from difficult circumstances? Why or why not? How is this responsibility made more complicated by circumstances out of their control?

- To what extent should businesses be expected to maintain quality and prices when there are unprecedented circumstances impacting production? Can we hold companies **accountable** for changes in product quality as a result?

- How **transparent** should businesses be about their decisions regarding quality level and pricing? How does this affect **trust** in the companies and manufacturing process?

- If businesses decide to use lower-quality components that impact the integrity of their products, how will this affect company and product **viability**? What if companies spend money on higher-quality components and potentially sacrifice profit?

- In what way(s) does this dilemma impact large corporations? What about small businesses? Is it **fair** that companies may be affected differently?

Please follow the event guidelines to prepare your response, which can be found at:
https://mideca.org/events/eth/

MICHIGAN DECA

2024 ETHICS TEAM EVENT MIETH

CASE STUDY

Jace is a software manager for Synergy Consulting, a company that specializes in information technology services and consulting. His primary responsibility at the company is integrating new programs and applications into Synergy's processes to increase efficiency company-wide.

Synergy is always looking for new ways to innovate, and recent advances in generative artificial intelligence have motivated them to incorporate this technology into their processes. The company has decided to modernize and streamline their customer service operations with an advanced chatbot called ANNETTE (Artificial Neural Network for Telecommunications Engagement). ANNETTE possesses highly sophisticated comprehension and language skills, allowing it to have complex conversations with customers.

Jace is responsible for overseeing ANNETTE's interactions with Synergy's clients and adjusting the chatbot's behavioral procedures accordingly. This includes catching any errant responses, providing any missing data or information when needed, and monitoring and modifying ANNETTE's interpersonal conduct when communicating with customers.

As the chatbot begins its role as a customer service representative, things appear to be going well. In fact, customers have loved their interactions with ANNETTE. To make ANNETTE as "human" as possible, the chatbot is programmed to make informal conversation, talk in a casual tone of voice, and even display emotions. This programming has allowed ANNETTE and customers to form personal connections, leading to improved customer relations overall at Synergy Consulting.

However, Jace recognizes potential ethical issues with designing a charismatic chatbot. He worries that customers forming a close connection to ANNETTE will lead to a false sense of support and trust. After all, no matter how genuine ANNETTE appears, it cannot feel or demonstrate real emotions and is simply responding to prompts based on collected data. If Synergy's clients become trusting of or vulnerable towards ANNETTE, this could lead to them divulging sensitive personal or professional information and being emotionally manipulated.

Jace raises his concerns to his department manager. He recommends modifying ANNETTE's behavior to be much more impersonal and rigid with customers, to decrease the risk of customers being manipulated or deceived. However, Jace's manager doesn't seem to share his concerns. They remind Jace that ANNETTE's personable nature is what makes it such an effective customer service representative and dialing that element back would defeat the purpose of incorporating chatbots into their business processes. Besides, they argue, even human customer service representatives run the risk of developing unhealthy personal connections with customers. Jace's manager urges him to keep ANNETTE's engaging personality, and even floats the idea of expanding ANNETTE's responsibilities to other roles and departments.

Next week, Jace is slated to meet with the top executives at Synergy Consulting and provide recommendations for the future of AI use at the company. What should Jace suggest to his company's leadership? Should he recommend reprogramming ANNETTE to be more formal and transactional? Or should he recommend continuing with ANNETTE's design as-is, knowing this may lead to ANNETTE—or other chatbots—receiving an expanded role at the company?

MICHIGAN DECA

2025 ETHICS TEAM EVENT MIETH

CASE STUDY

As the newspaper editor, Sun has worked hard with her classmates for the past two months to prepare the most recent edition of the school newspaper. Now, all that is left is to fill the ad space in the back – an important source of revenue for the struggling news class. Usually, the staff will approach business owners near the school to sell advertisements. However, the staff is having trouble selling ad space for the upcoming issue.

One day, Sun is approached by a potential advertiser who is happy to buy ad space. She is thrilled until she realizes that the proposed ads are from a weight loss company trying to sell diet pills to students. Sun knows that not only do weight loss fads typically not work, but they can also send problematic messages to consumers – especially teenagers. However, she knows that the newspaper might not be able to afford to be picky about its ads.

Sun is unsure if she should sell the ad space and compromise her values for the sake of the paper. Are teenagers able to make their own decisions in response to advertisements, or should they be protected from targeted, potentially predatory messaging? What ethical actions should Sun take to keep a decade-old organization alive?