**Photojournalism on Steroids**

**By Snorri Gunnarsson**

In recent years photojournalism has gone through major changes. Switching from film to digital has been a fast and a furious process. Digital imaging has many advantages but it also raises new ethical dilemmas. The main dilemma being how easy it is to manipulate photographs, turning good photos into perfect ones. For some photographers the temptation to perfect their photos by manipulation is too hard to resist. For some, just like with athletes and steroids, the prize at the end becomes all that matters.

 There have been many highly publicized cases of photographers bowing down to Photoshop and its mighty power in the last few years. In all the examples the photojournalists have lost their jobs, their dignity, and their future in the business. The most recent case is Allan Detrich, a respected photojournalist formerly with the Toledo Blade in Ohio. In March 2007, Detrich shot a very powerful photograph it was powerful visually and in the effect it had on his whole life.

The dramatic photograph showed members of the Bluffton University baseball team, kneeling in prayer before playing their first game, since five of their players died in a bus crash in Atlanta, earlier that month. Immediately after the photograph was published on the front cover of the Toledo Blade, rumors began to spread on the Internet regarding its merit. Apparently Detrich had removed a pair of legs that protruded from the lower end of a billboard. The legs belonged to another photojournalist, who was quoted as saying, “I was just looking for another angle.”  Detrich claimed that he had inadvertently placed the photo in the folder with his submissions to the newspaper. He said that the manipulated photo had been intended for his personal archive.

His editors requested his laptop for investigation, a routine in such cases. What they discovered was that Detrich was, as the Toledo Blade editor puts it, “a serial manipulator of photos.” In 2007 Detrich had manipulated more than 70 photos intended for publication. Some were minor manipulations, clearing up busy backgrounds and getting rid of distracting objects growing out of his subject’s heads. Others were more severe and in one photo, Detrich had actually “saved” a photograph from a basketball game by cloning in a missing basketball.

Allan Detrich is a veteran in the field of photojournalism; he has taught photojournalism courses, is a four-time Ohio News Photographer of the Year and in 1998 he was a runner up for a Pulitzer Prize for his reportage, Children of the Underground. The question is why would a photojournalist of this standing risk his career by altering his photos?

Don Denton is a photojournalist in Victoria BC, Canada and a former photo editor at the Calgary Herald. “Everyone wants to be the best. Nobody wants to fail. For some photographers the temptation of making an ordinary shot great is too much and they give in without thought to the future.” Denton continues, “I also assume that often it starts out as a one-time thing and then becomes, over time, a habit especially when your real photos are not as good as your Photoshopped images.”

Josh McCulloch an outdoor photographer in Victoria, BC, Canada has a similar view. “As a press photographer, I think they shouldn’t be doing anything to their images. I completely understand why he does it. We all try to find that perfect shot, and when we don’t get it, sometimes we make it instead. As a news photographer though, the photo should be presented as it was seen.”

Readers have become saturated with perfect photographs and the standards for publication are very high. Could these high standards make photo editors expect perfect photos, forcing photographers to fix it in the mix?  “There is a difference between expecting excellence and expecting perfection. Everyone understands perfection is a rare thing but excellence can and should be a daily occurrence. Everyone makes mistakes and if an editor is seeing perfection on a daily basis it might be time to take a closer look at the images,” says Denton.

Photography has been manipulated from its beginnings, since the early photographs of war, where photographers used to arrange dead bodies for aesthetics, to the February issue of National Geographic in 1982, where the production artist decided to rearrange the Pyramids of Egypt, to fit them all together on the front cover. Flash photography was a breakthrough when it appeared and today it is considered a classic technique. Some argue that it is a manipulation in itself, as it adds artificial light that changes the scene.  “Adding artificial light to a scene is acceptable because the viewer is aware it is there. We can see the extra light has been added. It is there to overcome deficiencies with the camera sensor. A flash will show you what is in a dark room but it will never show you a ball that wasn’t there in the first place,” says Denton.

Where is the line in photojournalism, what can you manipulate, are there gray areas? “Not really, other than basic Photoshop work, lightening, darkening etc. photographers should leave the image alone. Content should never be altered,” says Denton.

McCulloch has different thoughts on this matter. “Absolutely. Does using artificial light constitute a gray area? Does using a reflector to throw additional light onto a subject constitute a gray area? How about spraying water on a flower to make it look freshly rained on? Colour enhancing filters? Polarizer? I think all of these are gray areas, and I’ve done them all. For editorial however, I think they shouldn’t be doing anything to their images.”

The media has responded to this new landscape in the technique of photography. After the Associated Press discovered a manipulated photograph from one of their correspondents in Iraq, they took action by issuing rules for the manipulation of photographs submitted to them. The rules are quite extensive but the bottom line is, you can enhance the photograph to look true to the scene but if anything is added from another frame or deleted from the photograph it is no longer a photograph, it is a photo illustration. This will without a doubt become a standard just as code of ethics are a standard at every news organization for journalists.

As with the use of steroids in sports, manipulation of photographs for editorial purpose will depend on the conscience of photojournalists. There will always be those Ben Johnsons and Allan Detrichs but the majority will play by the rules. As in many other fields the black sheep will get a lot of short-span attention, but history will always record and hopefully remember, the true champions.

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