IMAGE IN THE ERA OF POST-TRUTH

By Fred Ritchin

What is the role of the journalistic or documentary photograph for maintaining the public record and enabling constructive social change in this era labeled "post-truth"?

An exhibition at the UN in March 2015 of nearly two dozen of the 55,000 photographs of tortured and killed Syrian prisoners taken by "Caesar," the code name of a former Syrian military police photographer. Syrian President Assad commented to Yahoo News on the photos, "You can forge anything these days. We are living in a fake news era." Photo by Lucas Jackson.

The cover from a 1982 issue of *National Geographic* in which image-manipulation software was employed for the first time in mainstream media—in this case to relocate one of the pyramids of Giza behind another so as to fit it on the magazine's cover.
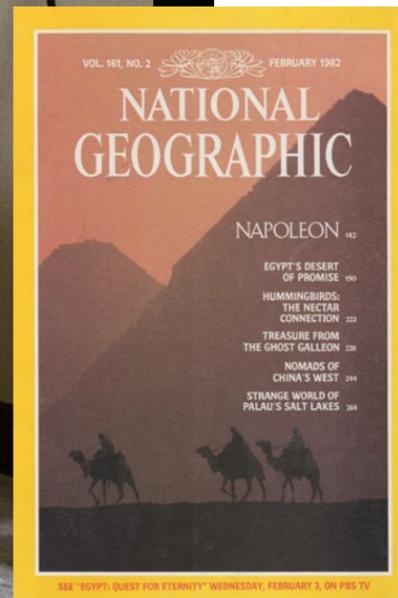
I n the first 466 days of his presidency, Donald Trump made 3,001 false or misleading claims. "Seventy-two times, the president has falsely claimed he passed the biggest tax cut in history — when in fact it ranks in eighth place," the *Washington Post* reported on May 1, 2018. "Fifty-three times, the president has made some variation of the claim that the Russia probe is a made-up controversy. (If you include other claims about the Russia probe that are not accurate, the count goes to 90.) Forty-one times, the president has offered a variation of the false claim that Democrats do not really care about the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that Trump terminated."

As well as his disdain for the truth, Trump's frequent attacks on the press as providers of "fake news" further undermine the functioning of democracy, dependent upon a credible press to report on issues and events so that citizens can decide how to vote and their political representatives on how to govern. Elsewhere, authoritarian leaders increasingly borrow from Trump's attacking strategy, describing as "fake news" that which can be construed as criticisms of their policies. For example, a January 25 piece in the *Guardian* asserts that "In February, an Amnesty International report said the Syrian government had killed at least 13,000 people in a military prison between 2011 and 2015. Assad disputed the report. 'You can forge anything these days,' Assad told Yahoo News. 'We are living in a fake news era.'"

THE AGE OF THE IMAGE

Simultaneously, we are living in the Age of the Image with billions of photographs and videos uploaded daily, trillions available online, yet we are not sure what they mean, how they help, or whether they can be believed. Is that "selfie" a self-portrait, an exploration of identity, or a form of branding formulated to increase someone's status online? Is that a photograph of an actual event, or a fabricated image made to simulate a photograph of an event that never happened? And we are left asking, in this era of social media, of strident opinions and media bubbles, of frequent and often unfounded allegations of "fake news," what is the role of the journalistic or documentary photograph for maintaining the public record and enabling constructive social change in this era labeled "post-truth"?

A 1990 book of mine, *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography,* argued that the imaging software being created then would allow us to re-create the world, and ourselves, "in our own image," using the myth that "the camera never lies" to camouflage purposeful deceits. My thinking was provoked, in part, by the 1982 cover image of the mainstream publication, *National Geographic*, in which image-manipulation software was employed to relocate one of the pyramids of Giza behind another to make a vertical image from a horizontal photograph so as to fit it on the magazine's cover. Two years later the modification was explained to me by the magazine's editor as, in his opinion, merely the retroactive repositioning of the photographer a few feet to one side so as to get another point of view. Surprisingly, in 1982 *National Geographic* seemed to have already embraced a kind of photographic time travel. In the digital environment the "decisive moment," photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson's famous formulation of "the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression," could now happen any time after the initial moment itself.

Less sanguine and concerned about the enduring integrity of the journalistic photograph, *National Geographic*'s director of photography said that the introduction of such a technique was "like limited nuclear warfare. There ain't none." In any case, the reader had not been informed of the modification, and a series of highly publicized alterations of cover images in other publications (*Time, TV Guide, Newsday*, etc.) that would follow contributed to public skepticism concerning the photograph's witnessing function. Given this erosion of trust, the photojournalistic community did little in response to bolster public confidence in the photograph, refusing to take these challenges seriously.

But the issue was not only one of digital modifications. While photographs have always been interpretive, constructions dependent upon the knowledge and intuition of the photographer who makes the picture, the widespread use in journalistic publications of photographs of staged events as if

they were spontaneous, and of imagery that emphasized the spectacular without providing context, were similarly deleterious to photography's role as a social referent.

So, for example, after the 2011 killing by US forces of Osama bin Laden, mastermind of the September 11 attacks a decade before, a historic retaliation that was sup-

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posed to be a partial resolution to a nation's enduring pain, President Barack Obama said: "It is important to make sure that very graphic photos of somebody who was shot in the head are not floating around as an incitement to additional violence—as a propaganda tool." House Intelligence Chairman Mike Rogers concurred with the president's contention but added: "Conspiracy theorists around the world will just claim the photos are doctored anyway." And Obama agreed: "Certainly there's no doubt among Al-Qaeda members that he is dead. . . . And so we don't think that a photograph in and of itself is going to make any difference. There are going to be some folks who deny it. The fact of the matter is, you will not see Bin Laden walking on this earth again."

WHAT ARE PHOTOGRAPHS GOOD FOR?

If we are now no longer of the opinion that "a photograph in and of itself is going to make any difference," And if too contested, too inflammatory, too malleable, too questionable, too much implicated in an image war to be useful to the public as evidence of a very major event, what are photographs good for? Such skepticism also helps to explain why in recent years, with the exception of two images of very small children, the 2015 photograph by Nilüfer Demir of the drowned three-year-old Syrian refugee, Alan Kurdi, and the 2018 photograph by John Moore of

two-year-old Honduran migrant Yanela Sanchez hysterically crying at the US border, there have been few photographs that have attained the iconic status necessary to focus the world on critical issues (some photos may go momentarily "viral," but soon fade from public consciousness, in part due to a lack of a "front page" to sustain them). In this media environment innovative strategies that are less dependent upon the previous century's belief system in the inherent power of the photograph need to be formulated as well.

Furthermore, this era of photographs made malleable via Photoshop and other software may very soon seem like a moment of comparative innocence. In the very near future it will become increasingly easy to synthesize from scratch not only photographs but also video and audio, so that the results will be nearly indistinguishable from the actual thing. Work is being done in laboratories in many countries, much of it with artificial intelligence, to provide inexpensive tools to create realistic photographic-like portraits of non-existent people, to produce videos realistically portraying non-existent events, and to synthesize speeches that sound like they come from the mouths of world leaders (one such recently synthesized speech online, simulating the voice of President John F. Kennedy, was the one he was to give the day he was assassinated in Dallas).

Photograph from the Guantanamo Bay detention camp by Edmund Clark from "Guantanamo: If the Lights Go Out." Example of a photograph emphasizing a conceptual approach to using documentary images.

IF ANYTHING CAN BE REAL, NOTHING CAN BE REAL

A recent discussion concerns the ethically challenging advent of "deepfakes" of female celebrities, their faces composited onto those of others performing in sexually explicit videos. Soon this software is expected to be made more efficient and easier to use, available for widespread use. And the potential to use this kind of software to place prominent people in a variety of situations, such as having a world leader seem to declare war or confess to corruption, will create a multitude of challenges. Whether such software has actually been utilized or not, its existence will call into question much of what we view online, hear on the radio, watch on television, or read in our newspapers and magazines. As one deepfakes user commented, "If anything can be real, nothing is real." Or, as technologist Aviv Ovadya, who has recently gathered a consortium of colleagues in the tech industry to try to combat fake news and camouflaged bots, asked, "What happens when anyone can make it appear as if anything has happened, regardless of whether or not it did?"

This challenges the functioning not only of journalism, but of democratic institutions. As Zeynep Tufekci stated in a recent issue of *Wired* magazine, "The most effective forms

of censorship today involve meddling with trust and attention, not muzzling speech itself." In this vein, software that allows the public to easily synthesize realistic-looking people and events requires a strong response from institutions that take authenticity seriously. But after recently reporting on the use of artificial intelligence to create fake videos, *New York Times* writer Kevin Roose remarked: "And there's probably nothing we can do except try to bat the fakes down as they happen, pressure social media companies to fight misinformation aggressively, and trust our eyes a little less every day."

But if we cannot trust our eyes in this age of image, what then will be able to rely upon? On an institutional level, considerably more has to be done by publications and photographers themselves to verify media and assure the readers of its integrity. Should there be a labeling system that is strictly enforced among reputable publications and photographers to categorize photographs, such as "reportage," "photo illustration," "photo opportunity," "altered photograph," and so on, similar to one that I proposed in the 1990s with a group of colleagues? The "four corners project" that I have been working on would allow photographers to use each of the photograph's corners to add supplementary information online, including their own code of ethics, the backstory, image context and links to other websites. And there are many other ideas that need to be urgently investigated.

One of the productive responses to this evolving media climate by a number of photographers is to rely less upon the assumption of the photograph's inherent veracity and more upon a slower accumulation of evidence via a number of media, photography included, that ultimately provides insights into an underlying process rather than concentrating primarily on its symptoms. It is not a new approach, but one that is now much more broadly practiced. Philip Jones Griffiths' 1971 book, *Vietnam Inc.,* can be considered a pioneer in this effort, showing the decision-making process among military leaders, juxtaposing the relatively unseen pilots with their victims, explaining how young girls are introduced into the sex trade, and undermining his own dramatic, at times heroic black-and-white imagery captions

From Mathieu Asselin's "Monsanto: A Photographic Investigation," a book that resulted from a documentary process conducted for five years throughout Vietnam and the United States which portrays a comprehensive portrait of the ancient and current practices of the Monsanto Corporation and their environmental practices.

that he wrote pointing out the absurdity of what he depicts: "US combat troops arrive, outnumbering the enemy 3 to 1 and possessing the most sophisticated military hardware; the job seemed easy. Earlier, spirits were high among the troops, intoxicated as much by the spectacle of their own strength as by the cold beer delivered to them daily."

There are many photographers today exploring massive social ills with more of a conceptual documentary approach — from chemical poisoning by Monsanto (Mathieu Asselin) to torture at Guantanamo (Edmund Clark, Debi Cornwall) to the blue skies over 1,078 World War II concentration camps (Anton Kusters), drones as weaponized surveillance (Tomas van Houtryve), and the satellites monitoring us (Trevor Paglen). Utilizing techniques of the artist, journalist and documentarian, much of this work is published in books and shown in exhibitions as well as appearing in various publications.

And there are some interesting metrics as well: Gideon Mendel's photographic work on a pilot program to provide HIV-positive South Africans with anti-retroviral medicine is credited by UNAIDS with encouraging contributions that allowed eight million people to get life-saving treatment, and Magnum's Access to Life project that highlighted the work of eight photographers raised $1 billion for a similar goal.

More recently, a screening at a 2015 fundraising conference in Kuwait of a virtual reality film on the life of a 12-year-old Syrian refugee, "Clouds Over Sidra," is reported to have raised $3.8 billion for

relief efforts; the use of virtual reality is becoming more widespread among humanitarian organizations attempting to get potential donors and others to empathize with the plight of those in difficult circumstances.

Paradoxically, and hopefully, there are more media strategies than ever before at our disposal while the media's credibility is under widespread attack. Ways must be found to help restore the requisite referents necessary for society to function, and to provide a greater understanding of crucial processes that currently remain largely opaque. At this point a reactive stance, simply covering events in traditional ways while contemplating the growing morass, is insufficient. It is apparent that newer strategies, including hybrid ones that will take advantage of the enormous and largely untapped visual resources of social media, must be devised to engage a wary, divided, confused, and increasingly exhausted public.

The media revolution is only beginning.

Fred Ritchin began writing on photography and digital imaging in 1984 for the *New York Times Magazine.* Since then he has authored three books on the subject: *In Our Own Image: The Coming Revolution in Photography* (1990), *After Photography* (2008), and *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen* (2013), the latter exploring media strategies for social change. He is Dean Emeritus of the International Center of Photography.