

New Standards for Photographic Reproduction in the Media

by Fred Ritchin

With the increasing sophistication and availability of digital imaging technology those reading or viewing mass media no longer can be sure that an image represents something or someone that actually existed. It becomes necessary to inform them as to whether an image is actually a photograph or its simulation, just the way readers are now informed as to whether something written in the press was, for example, actually said by someone (a quote) or not.

In order to aid the reader or viewer, we are suggesting that a label be placed next to every image that has been significantly manipulated while still appearing to have been created by photographic processes. Since the essential difference between conventional photographs and those that have been physically modified is whether the information that has passed through the lens was respected or manipulated, we are suggesting that an icon be used that reflects this choice.

The icon  standing for "not a lens" should be appended to all images published in the media where significant manipulations have occurred so that the reader/viewer is seeing other than what was in front of the camera. In situations where uncertainty exists as to the nature of the imagery being presented, or in media which primarily publish manipulated imagery, the icon  can be used to indicate that the image is a conventional lens-based photograph.

When the "not a lens" icon is employed, the reader can then expect, if so interested, to find an explanation of the manipulation in the picture credit published next to the image. (For example: "The actors in the background were added to the image.") If a reader is not interested in further information then the symbol will serve to alert them to the nature of the image that they are looking at, and contrast it with the other images in the publication.

The use of the icon  would be required when any alteration of the photograph occurs that goes beyond accepted conventional darkroom techniques (removing dust spots, changing color saturation, spotting, burning or dodging, or cropping that does not substantially change the meaning of the photograph). Electronic darkroom techniques in wide use, in particular sharpening or blurring and minimal extension of the edge of the cover photograph to place graphic elements would also not require the use of the icon . In order to make it easier for the reader or viewer, the icons should be placed just outside the bottom perimeter of the image, either on the left or right corner.

We would expect that these icons would be employed in newspapers, magazines and books of a journalistic or documentary nature (or in the portions of such publications that are of such a nature; the sensationalist media would presumably exclude themselves). They would also be employed for television news shows and documentary films (excerpts or in their entirety) with two or three words explaining what has occurred for the viewer ("Manipulated images," etc.). In interactive media, including digital networks, it would be possible for the viewer to click on the icon and get further information when desired. Obviously, anyone supplying imagery to any of these media, including photographers and activists, would be required to utilize the icons and state when and in what ways modifications were implemented.

It is also possible that in other arenas--such as music and scientific visualizations, to name but two--similar icons could be used to indicate when manipulations have occurred (to indicate the presence of a music synthesizer, for example, or scientific data that has been modified so that its graphic appearance is more pleasing). These areas need to be further explored, but interest by other groups in such fields indicates that the adoption of such icons might be very much the norm, not the exception.

Similarly, since various manipulations occur in the photographic process in the taking of the picture (photo- opportunities, photo-illustrations), it would benefit the publication's credibility to explain to the reader when what they are seeing has been staged or "media-managed" while appearing to be spontaneous and genuine. Evidently, no photograph is simply a recording of reality--at most each is what might be called a "quotation from appearances"--but there are degrees of manipulation both of the photographic subject and the photograph itself that are done to unfairly influence the reader. It is up to every photographer, cameraperson and editor to be vigilant in preventing such excesses, and to inform the reader when necessary. What

is at stake is the photographic document's credibility, the authority of the news media, and the ability of citizens in a democracy to be informed as to the nature of the world in which they live.

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