THE REALITY OF A FAKE IMAGE
News norms, photojournalistic craft, and Brian Walski’s fabricated photograph

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A few weeks into the start of the Iraq War in 2003, the front page of the Los Angeles Times featured a large photograph depicting a dramatic scene in which a British soldier motions to Iraqi civilians to stay down while a father carrying a child creeps across the dirt. The image ran in several US newspapers before it was discovered to be a composite of two different images cobbled together by the veteran photographer, Brian Walski, on his laptop in Basra. The Los Angeles Times immediately fired Walski and, along with other journalists, commented publicly on the wrongness of his actions while reasserting the soundness of their reporting. In keeping with paradigm repair, many in the US journalistic community eschewed questions surrounding the complex practices of photojournalism to instead insist on the principle of objectivity as a guiding news norm. This view omits much, including the importance of craft and the role of aesthetic criteria in photojournalism. Especially in war, journalism privileges the dramatic image to communicate conflict. From this perspective the Walski incident raised issues related to the proliferation of digital photography and editing software, the visual representation of war, and the uneasy relationship between images and reality.

KEYWORDS Brian Walski; Iraq; journalism; paradigm repair; photo manipulation; photojournalism

Introduction

On 31 March 2003, two weeks into the Iraq War, Los Angeles Times staff photographer Brian Walski sent his Los Angeles-based editor a stunning photograph from the field in Basra, Iraq. In the image, an armed British soldier motions to a crowd to stay down to avoid nearby fighting while a man with a child in his arms moves toward him. The photo was featured prominently on the front page of the Los Angeles Times and was shared with other Tribune company newspapers. After the Hartford Courant ran the picture across six columns, a photo editor at the paper discovered inconsistencies in the image. A call to Walski in Iraq revealed that the photo had been cobbled together from two separate photographs, taken seconds apart to produce a “better” image. The Times immediately fired Walski and issued a public apology casting his actions as journalistically inappropriate. Speaking publicly on the transgression, the Times photo editor summed up what was often the prevailing judgment of Walski: “What he did was so wrong and so unacceptable. It’s a no-brainer” (quoted in Reksten, 2003).

But is it so simple as to be unworthy of further reflection? To be so automatic in its response, the journalistic community must possess some pre-existing, shared criteria on which to base claims of Walski’s deviance from acceptable news standards. By positioning Walski’s actions as running counter to accepted norms of journalism, speakers within the
journalistic community explicitly and implicitly—and, above all, publicly—iterate these standards. This is not idle chatter. Rather, unraveling mediated interpretations used to condemn—or, in some cases, empathize with—Walski’s actions sheds light on the interpretive matrix of shared professional ethics, norms, and practices practitioners use to understand and act on complex issues of truth and realism relating to photojournalism. This essay examines these efforts to define and understand Walski’s transgressions through an analysis of popular and trade press discourse responding to the incident. Voices from three overlapping communities—the journalistic, photojournalistic, and photographic—converged to make sense of Walski’s image, not so much as an isolated incident, but as indicative of several trends: the ascension of digital as the chief image format, the increased portability of images, the competitive aesthetic pressures guiding photojournalists, the importance of images in news content, the complexities of the Iraq War, and widespread concern over credibility within journalism. What emerges is a mix of voices making sense of what occurred; some condemning Walski and others offering more nuanced considerations that complicate the initial snap judgments.

In confronting Walski’s actions as a storm to be weathered, the journalistic community, and especially the subset of newspaper journalists, too easily retreated to subsuming news images to rules established for verbal modes of journalistic practice—reportage consisting primarily words, whether written (e.g. print) or spoken (e.g. television and radio scripts). Verbal journalism practices overlap only so much with visual practices, which renders attempts to interpret the practices associated with news images through the lens of verbal practices inadequate. With news images, questions of fake and authentic are better approached through a framework that acknowledges the uniqueness of images and particular tensions related to craft. While this may seem commonsense among visual scholars and most journalism scholars, the journalistic considerations of Walski indicate that this division is not so neatly drawn among practitioners. To assess the evaluative frameworks made salient in public discussions of Walski, this essay first tracks evaluations of Walski through the perspective of paradigm repair. This strategy of swift ostracism prevented substantive discussions on the expectations and assumptions surrounding news images. This perspective did not account for all considerations of Walski; more nuanced discussions did address the craft dimension of news images in ways that were more thoughtful than dismissive.

The value of examining journalistic interpretations of Walski’s actions extends beyond the single incident. While photography’s fidelity to the real world has long been subject to speculation within both the academy and journalism, the diffusion of digital imaging technologies and software raises further questions concerning manipulation and alteration. This is a problem for journalism. In adhering to the paradigm of objective realism, journalistic claims to cultural authority are based on an averred representational veracity enabled by particular news practices—including the use of news images. Yet every few months some new case of image manipulation crops up, with such recent examples as Adnan Hajj’s embellished images of Israeli attacks on Lebanon circulated by Reuters in 2005, the distortion of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s eyes by USA Today in 2005, and Iran’s fabrication of a missile launch in 2008. The Walski incident provides a view into how the journalistic and photographic communities are able to make sense of, and therefore confront, an era in which the representative capacity of digital images so often proves to be problematic. The interpretive strategies and patterns that emerge matter for how they impact journalistic practice.
The Response from the Journalistic Community

Brian Walski was a five-year veteran of the Los Angeles Times with over two decades of photojournalism experience when he went to Iraq in 2003. He operated as a unilateral photographer outside of the US Military’s embedding program and was responsible for his own safety and provisions. Walski had covered foreign stories in the past, earning a 2001 “Photographer of the Year” award from the California Press Photographers Association for work in Northern Ireland and Afghanistan.

Walski was photographing British troops in their effort to secure Basra on Sunday, 30 March 2003. Equipped with a laptop, he sent approximately a dozen photos to Los Angeles Times photo editor Colin Crawford. Crawford selected one he found particularly striking for the front page and forwarded it to photo editors at other newspapers owned by the Tribune Company. The Hartford Courant, Chicago Tribune, and South Florida Sun-Sentinel picked up the photo for their Monday editions. Following publication, staffers at the Courant noticed that several figures appeared twice in the image. Passing it off as a transmission glitch, Crawford called Walski in the field on Tuesday to inquire. Walski immediately confessed to combining elements from two separate shots to create a composite image and sent the originals to Crawford. Using Photoshop editing software on his laptop in Iraq, Walski combined the left and right portions of two different photographs taken seconds apart. Several figures on the left-side of the image appear twice.

The Los Angeles Times fired Walski hours after his confession and posted a correction on its website Tuesday evening. The correction appeared on page A6 in the Wednesday, 2 April, edition accompanied by the two original photos and the composite photo. The text read:

On Monday, March 31, the Los Angeles Times published a front-page photograph that had been altered in violation of Times policy.

The primary subject of the photo was a British soldier directing Iraqi civilians to take cover from Iraqi fire on the outskirts of Basra. After publication, it was noticed that several civilians in the background appear twice. The photographer, Brian Walski, reached by telephone in southern Iraq, acknowledged that he had used his computer to combine elements of two photographs, taken moments apart, in order to improve the composition.

Times policy forbids altering the content of news photographs. Because of the violation, Walski, a Times photographer since 1998, has been dismissed from the staff. (Los Angeles Times, 2003, p. A6)

The editor’s note struck a past tense tone in explaining the incident. To learn of the violation was simultaneously to learn of its resolution. It recapitulated how fabrication occurred while simultaneously reporting the termination of Walski on the grounds of violating the paper’s policies. The newspaper intended the terse statement to be the final word, rather than an entrée to questions about digital imaging and photo manipulation. The brevity of the note caused it to seem incomplete and impersonal; it did not elaborate on the newspaper’s policy nor did it include any source aside from Walski. Rather, it was decisive, unequivocal, and noticeably succinct. The use of passive constructions—“it was noticed,” “reached by telephone,” and “has been dismissed”—heightened the univocality of the newspaper. This note functioned to stymie further discussion or investigation into
the incident or Walski’s other photos. Beyond the pages of the *Times*, the note’s importance became magnified through its use as a primary source in the reportage around the Walski image in other news outlets. In addition, the editor’s note, as the first public notice of the fabrication, took on the added importance of setting the frame followed by subsequent evaluations, including editor’s notes in other newspapers that had run the photo.

It is not surprising the *Los Angeles Times* chose to stifle any ambiguity by decisively casting off Walski. When apparent violations of journalistic practice occur—especially with fabrication—news outlets face a challenge to their claims of being able to present accurate representations of the real world (Eason, 1988). Journalistic authority rests, partly, on claims of minimal distortion. And while generations of scholars have problematized notions of journalistic truth, journalists avow their fidelity to what they cover (Zelizer, 2004a).

**The Response as Paradigm Repair**

The *Times’s* efforts at preserving journalistic authority in light of the Walski photo can be analyzed through the lens of news paradigm repair (Bennett et al., 1985). Paradigm repair emphasizes the discursive regulation of boundaries between what is acceptable and unacceptable. In the United States, the dominant journalistic paradigm has been objectivity (see Schudson, 1978; Schiller, 1981) and its concomitant values—balance, distance, neutrality, and autonomy. Individuals deemed to violate acceptable practices—to go against this normative paradigm governing news objectivity—are set outside of the rest of the community. This is done to protect these normative underpinnings from scrutiny, even when the relationship between journalism’s norms and its practices appear fraught—which is often the case with objectivity. As Berkowitz notes, paradigm repair both reinforces shared norms among journalists while working to reestablish journalism’s status among the public. “[P]aradigm repair may be seen as a ritual performed, at least in part, to set ‘objective’ journalists apart from the ‘unobjective’ journalists for both themselves and society, outlining the boundaries of the communities along the way” (Berkowitz, 2000, p. 127). It is ritual involving the invocation of certain modes of practice as correct and acceptable. That is, in addition to efforts to bring the community together, it has a real bearing on practice. This occurs through a tripartite “normalization process” (Reese, 1990): first, the community “disengage[s] threatening values;” second, it “reassert[s] journalistic routines;” and, finally it “minimize[s] the man and his message” (1990, 400–2). By casting the violator as deviant, norms and practices come to be protected and reasserted.

Paradigm repair indicates that interpretations of an incident must do two things: show it to be a transgression from the normal, and show it to be isolated. In this way, removal of the perpetrator equals a rooting out of the problem. The onus lies particularly with the news organization of the purported offender, and the *Times* was not lacking in its public haranguing of Walski. Crawford, the *Times* photo editor, told a group at the Associated Press Photo Managers meeting, “If you take two photos and sandwich them together, guess what, that’s wrong folks” (quoted in Reksten, 2003). Similarly, the *Times* media critic David Shaw wrote:

Brian Walski, a *Los Angeles Times* photographer since 1998, used his computer to combine elements of two photographs, taken moments apart in Iraq, into one
photograph that was then published on the front page of the *Times*. That’s a no-no. *Times* policy prohibits altering the content of news photographs. So the *Times* altered Walski’s career. He was fired. (Shaw, 2003b, p. E14)

Shaw presented the case as unambiguous and justified, even invoking the infantile language of calling the photo alteration a “no-no” to indicate the simplicity of the violation, even if the “altering of content” does little to clarify the borders of acceptable practice. Regardless, the blunt tone Shaw adopted stamped out any attempts at nuance or further probing of photojournalistic practice. Rather, it further individualized Walski’s actions and solidified the newspaper’s resoluteness in casting him off.

Evaluations were as far-reaching as they were decisive. For example, after running the image across five columns on the back of its news section, the *Chicago Tribune* responded: “Such manipulation of photos is unethical and is strictly forbidden at every reputable news organization” (*Chicago Tribune*, 2003, p. A2, emphasis added). The ascribed wrongness of Walski’s action was not just upheld but, by including “reputable” outlets, extended to the whole of journalism. A belief in unmanipulated news images became a boundary marker separating trustworthy journalism from other, ostensibly less reputable, news sources. It also invoked journalistic ethics in order to further situate Walski as operating outside the boundaries of acceptable practice.

To put to rest news paradigm violations, the community separates the individual violator from the presumably healthy practices of other journalists. The violators are then sentenced to remain apart from mainstream news indefinitely: “I doubt that any media outlet is without sin. But usually the offenders sink out of sight, never to be seen, heard or read again” (Martinez, 2004, p. E37). Ostracism becomes a remedy and a warning to other potential deviants. It symbolically detaches the unacceptable from the acceptable while making each visible.

### Setting Visual Standards

The paradigm repair process involves more than the itemizing of transgressions and the ostracizing of deviant individuals; just as central is reiterating the value of the guiding paradigm. With regard to the growth of digital imaging technology within photojournalism, paradigm repair is part of the setting of standards in an area in which no clear, unproblematic standards exist. The Walski incident became a key moment for considering the growing use of digital images due to the convergence of three factors: it occurred with a respected newspaper and an award-winning photographer, it involved hard news, and the alteration was carried out by a photojournalist working in the field. Poynter Institute’s Kenneth Irby pointed out: “This was a new breach of ethics. To my knowledge, there hasn’t been a case where a photographer has manipulated [a photo] in the field in a time-intensive deadline situation” (Johnston, 2003, p. 10). The novelty of the case required a strategy for confronting general questions regarding the representational accuracy of digital photography.

In coping with these uncertainties, journalists often turned to standards governing verbal journalism (i.e. written or spoken news accounts) to make sense of news images. The visual realm comes to be treated as equivalent to the verbal in such statements as: “Just as a newspaper must exhibit journalistic accuracy, it must adhere to visual accuracy” (Lake, 2003, p. J5). By drawing on one mode of journalistic practice to make sense of another, journalists portrayed these practices as analogous. Dean Baquet, managing editor
of the *Los Angeles Times*, connected Walski’s manipulated image to fabrication. “Any time you make up anything at all, you shouldn’t be working at a newspaper . . . He heightened the drama of the picture. It’s like *changing a quote* to make it more dramatic” (quoted in Kurtz, 2003, p. C10, emphasis added). The quote-image likeness appeared elsewhere: “Any reporter worthy of the name would no sooner fiddle with direct quotes than a reputable photojournalist would alter his or her picture. Remember: *news photographs are the equivalent of direct quotations* and therefore are sacrosanct” (Van Riper, 2003, emphasis in original). In portraying Walski’s actions as journalistically deviant, these journalists suggested a correlation between images and direct quotations from sources. From this perspective, the automatic dismissal of Walski originated from a belief that news images should be considered as objective traces of reality—a belief Newton labels the “assumed veracity of the photographic image” (Newton, 2001, p. 3). Confronted by the composite origin of the image, the *Times* and other outlets reasserted journalistic objectivity through analyzing norms of visual reportage through norms affiliated with verbal—either spoken or written—journalism.

This attempt to signify the violation of objective norms without the recognition of differences between verbal and image practices invokes the “mirror metaphor” of journalism—the belief journalists simply capture what it is out there and relay it to their audiences (Epstein, 1973, p. 13). Drawing on the mirror metaphor, criticisms of Walski centered on the question of representational fidelity with assumption that “reality” was transmittable through news: “His was the most grievous of journalistic sins: He intentionally misrepresented reality to the paper’s readers” (Wycliff, 2003, p. A31). Fabrication amounted to lying due to misrepresentation: “To Photoshop the image is lying, and this is unacceptable. Images should not be run if the only way to print them is to change the reality” (quoted in *Photo District News*, 2003, p. 26). Or, put even more tersely by a *Washington Post* editor, “you never change reality” (quoted in Johnston, 2003, p. 10). The persistent epistemological assumption that news images can equal reality underscores the quick categorization of image manipulation as a breach of the relay function of journalism and, therefore, outside the boundaries of acceptable standards. Normatively, news images assist efforts to promote objective journalism, and claims of objectivity lie at the core of arguments journalists make in supporting their cultural authority. While this form of journalism helped establish boundaries of professionalism and the social role of news, particularly in the United States (see Schudson, 1978), at its heart it ignores the inescapable divide between representation and reality much discussed elsewhere (for a summary, see Zelizer, 2004a). This general aversion to acknowledging news as a subjective cultural practice shaped by naturalized conventions extends to image-making practices.

The immediate defensive strategy of paradigm repair enacted by not only the *Los Angeles Times*, but across journalism, indicates the degree of concern with public opinion. The preservation of credibility remains a paramount concern in the face of polls showing declining trustworthiness over a 20-year span (Pew Research Center, 2008). News of Walski’s confessed fabrication induced fears of further damage to public opinion of journalism: “What makes Walski’s action so tragic has very little to do with what he did to his picture, but a hell of a lot to do with the fragile currency in which all reputable journalists trade: their credibility” (Van Riper, 2003). Credibility is seen as a *sine qua non* for journalism, but one supported through an adherence to objectivity often portrayed through the mirror metaphor. News photographs are made to work in the service of objective journalism, which is why Walski is seen as such a threat. And even if paradigm
repair seeks to individualize deviance, the diffusion of digital imaging brings with it anxiety stemming from the ease with which images can be edited and transported. Image fabrications “cast doubt on the authenticity of photographic realism” (Taylor, 1991, p. 13) and threaten journalism's ability to present its reportage as a faithful accounting of reality.

The turn to paradigm repair was an effort to shore up credibility, conceal challenges to the objectivity norm, and show a united profession. Yet with efforts to protect journalism through paradigm repair journalists move away from questions of craft, the role of aesthetics, the subjectivity of news images, pressures put on photojournalists, and broader questions regarding the role of images in news discourse. Paradigm repair strategically closes off inquiry: “the Walski case demonstrates that the large and more significant ways in which pictures structure reality through exclusions are themselves excluded from the discussion so long as the professional responsibility not to alter what the shutter secures is maintained” (Campbell, 2003, p. 107). The pledge of non-alteration obscures not only the realities of image-making, but also differences among practitioners. In their efforts at repair, various journalists speak for the entire journalistic community about the unacceptability of image manipulation. Such a view glosses over the diversity of positions and viewpoints regarding images within newsrooms (Lowrey, 2003). Given the centrality of images in the news, the lack of attention to image practices becomes a blindspot within journalism, which prevents needed conversations about news images as separate from other journalistic modes.

The Craft of Photojournalism

Not all the mediated discourse around Walski adhered to the above patterns of paradigm repair. A more nuanced position emerged from photographers and visual scholars mostly outside of mainstream news through online sites and the trade press. These discussions focused more closely on the craft of photojournalism, giving attention to unique pressures faced by photojournalists—particularly those who, like Walski, work in the unrelenting danger of conflict zones. Shifting attention toward the experiences of photojournalists in the field, an embedded photographer recounted his interaction with Walski shortly after his termination:

He got into a zone. He was on a head roll, making fantastic images, and it got out of hand. He told me that he did not plan to send the image and was just messing around. He sent it anyway . . . didn’t know what he was doing, but he did it. With all that he was facing, how did he have the presence of mind? It just got out of hand. (quoted in Irby, 2003)

The disorienting physical and journalistic pressures in the perilous space of war add a burden to journalists who are unable to turn to fixed routines for news gathering. In particular, for photojournalists the applicability of ethics codes diminishes with the rise in ambiguity over acceptable practices in conflict zones (Keith et al., 2006). Individual decision-making practices take precedent when pre-established practices are lacking.

In this view, the stark divisions emblematic of paradigm repair give way to an appreciation of photojournalism’s own uncertainties, particularly regarding the relationship between images and reality. Rather than assume images to be real moments captured unobtrusively, the subjectivity behind what is being rendered must be recognized. An
Every step a photographer makes in taking a picture involves subjective choices, from the camera angle (looking up, looking down, eye level) to the framing (what to include and what to leave out) to the moment of exposure (when to shoot and when to wait). A photograph is always a decontextualized representation of reality recorded by a human being who makes conscious and even unconscious choices based on his or her cultural upbringing, experiences and biases. (Share, 2003)

Similarly, veteran war photographer Kenneth Jarecke dismissed claims that photography provided objective evidence: “It’s all subjective, so as a journalist all I can do is to be as truthful as I possibly can, taking in mind that I come from a certain background and culture and certain things interest me” (quoted in Weideman, 2003, p. P32). By invoking the subjectivity of news photography, the grounds on which Walski was vilified need to be rethought. But more than this, journalism must recognize images to be subjective undertakings. While visual scholars have long acknowledged the points raised above, journalism—particularly in the United States—has been hesitant to move away from the objectivity claims on which it bases its cultural authority.

In the move away from simple objectivism toward questions of photojournalistic craft, the importance of aesthetics emerges. As a mode of visual representation, news photographs simultaneously possess a set of journalistic and formal criteria. Photojournalists “must insist on the objectivity of their pictures at the same time that they attempt to demonstrate their mastery of the craft” (Schwartz, 1992, pp. 96–7). This is a commitment not only to norms related to newsmaking, but to the added criteria of “picture-making” and “visual appeal” as well (1992, p. 106). The emphasis on formal aspects of photojournalism becomes codified through norms of image quality, including photographic awards. In the development of photojournalistic practice, “Aesthetic standards became fixed through regular clips contests that exemplified successful reproduction of the journalist’s visual codes” (1992, p. 174). A duality develops in which photojournalists and their editors praise the objectivity of news photography while, simultaneously, the same photojournalists receive awards based on compositional and formal factors (Schwartz, 1999, p. 160). In the practice of image-making, photojournalists internalize aesthetic importance, contributing to notions of career success and satisfaction. For example, Morrison and Tumber locate journalistic “delight . . . in the technical composition and the power of the statement,” alluding to the intrinsically artistic dimension of photojournalism (1988, p. 109).

Several individuals commented on the aesthetic outcome of Walski’s splicing. One critic referred to Walski’s composite photo as “the kind of picture that wins a Pulitzer . . . Walski deliberately combined two of his good legitimate photographs to make one superb illegitimate one” (Van Riper, 2003). Again, the tug of veracity superseded stylistics, but the importance of stylistics was acknowledged. The Pulitzer Prize remains the acme of US journalistic success, endowing its recipients with status and the recognition of their peers. Similarly, the Times labeled Walski as the “photographer who was fired last month for combining elements of two photographs to make one better but fraudulent photograph” (Shaw, 2003a, p. E14, emphasis added). Implicitly, the original photographs were not of poor quality, but the combination provided a much more dramatic, stunning photograph. It made the image “a little more front-page and award worthy” (Bothum, 2003, p. D1).
These comments indicated the pressure on photojournalists to not simply capture a newsworthy moment—which Walski apparently did—but to exceed newsworthiness in achieving artistry.

With war photography in particular, a heightened prejudice toward the aesthetic pushes photojournalists—including Walski—to pursue, as Griffin (1999) puts it, the “great pictures.” Images both promote war as spectacle—the ultimate in “spot news”—as well as help news audiences make sense of the confusing space of war. “War images are typically bigger, bolder, more colorful, more memorable, more dramatic, prettier, shocking, and more aesthetically pleasing or noteworthy than the relays received otherwise” (Zelizer, 2004b, p. 121). At the same time, images of war in the news are presented as unscripted and stark, providing audiences with a raw look at the mix of valor and tragedy encompassed by war. “Combat journalism has come to represent the height of photographic realism” (Griffin, 1999, p. 123). With this realism comes a tension of representation between the sanitized and unsanitized as the emblematic image of war. Journalists grapple with a balance between providing startling images and avoiding gruesome imagery (Carruthers, 2000, p. 278). This situation creates a challenge for photojournalists seeking images that represent war in a meaningful way.

With the Iraq War, the images that emerged in the opening days of the war in March 2003 rarely showed active fighting or its gruesome aftermath. Despite the embedding of journalists and photographers with US military units, images of death or injuries comprised only 10 percent of mainstream US news images during the first month of the war (Silcock et al., 2008; see also Griffin, 2004). In the pattern of visual representation that emerged early on, the dramatic came to stand in for the gruesome. Instead of shots of carnage, emotional images filled in for the unseen human tragedy. For photojournalists working in the field, this trend increased the pressure to provide dramatic images that conveyed meaning beyond the composition. “More than they describe, photographs tend to symbolize generalities” in which “transcending frames of cultural mythology or social narratives” emerge (Griffin, 2004, p. 384).

All of this can be found in the image Walski created. The composite photo, with its armed, shouting soldier and bent Iraqi man bearing a child, increased the tension in the image: “The power of the dramatic moment, as the photographer well knew, rested in the detail of the gestures . . . The tension was palpable, the potential for conflict clear” (Hynes, 2003, p. 341). The confusion of the scene and inclusion of a child highlighted the ambiguity of the then new war. It showed the intermingling of the military and civilian spheres and the potential for suffering that would become the hallmark of the Iraq War. It is no surprise that the image was featured so prominently in some of the top US newspapers; it communicated the war in a way not communicated by official press conferences or the experiences of reporters embedded with troops. To this point, the Walski image was not an illustration accompanying a specific news story, but a story itself. With only the thinnest amount of information included in the caption, the image worked in larger sense with the body of coverage in the newspaper that day, all working together in an effort to communicate a sense of the nascent Iraq War.

This view of the Walski image supports claims by scholars that news images of war find their basis beyond information relay. They privilege a certain familiar aesthetic for understanding the complexity of combat that is at least as, if not more, central as their recognizability in a specific news context (Zelizer, 2004b, p. 116). The generic qualities of war photography challenge notions of the indexical nature of photojournalism by
moving from the particularistic to the universalistic. “The ‘great pictures,’ those customarily included in the histories of war photography and photojournalism, are seldom analyzed as informational illustrations of specific events and locations. Rather they are celebrated on a more abstract plane as broader symbols of national valor, human courage, inconceivable inhumanity, or senseless loss” (Griffin, 1999, p. 131; see also Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). War photography decontextualizes news images and provides a deeper understanding of what occurs not in a war but in war. As such, photojournalists “attempt thematic shots about the human condition, or the human condition of war, such as misery, suffering, dejection or especially dramatic incidents, the quintessence of which may be caught in the shutter’s movements portraying friend and foe alike” (Morrison and Tumber, 1988, p. 109). The images are then made sense of through their position among the words on the page; their interpretation lies outside the image itself (Barthes, 1977; Hall, 1973).

In their competitive striving to deliver memorable images, photojournalists—including Walski—endure extreme hardships and constant risk. As Morrison and Tumber note: “to gain his [sic] images the photo-journalist tends to share the artist’s pursuit of perfection as an ideal to be chased at almost any price” (Morrison and Tumber, 1988, p. 109). The physical risks of photojournalists are palpable—between March 2003 and April 2008, 32 photojournalists (including camerapersons) were killed in Iraq according the Committee to Protect Journalists. As a non-embedded reporter in Iraq, Walski endured greater hardships in both news gathering and personal safety (Tumber and Palmer, 2004, pp. 33–4; see also Greenberg et al., 2007). At the same time, he faced competition from other photographers at the front: “Along with the pressure to survive a war, there is the pressure to feed the deadline beast, to make the shot, to compete with the best, the hungriest and the craziest shooters in the business” (Gelzinis, 2003, p. 12). Photojournalists working in conflict zones, including Walski, negotiate numerous incessant pressures from bodily risks to “the pressure to be selective with the facts, . . . to censor themselves, to accept restrictions on their movements, to submit to the tyranny of the satellite uplink and the demands of the 24-hour ‘real-time’ news agenda” (McLaughlin, 2002, p. 23).

In his own public response to the image, Walski acknowledged aesthetic pressures in an email offering his perspective to former colleagues:

Covering a story on the scale of the war in Iraq, there is a self-imposed pressure to achieve the best possible images. Combining two images or altering an image is something that under any circumstance would never enter my mind, yet on this particular day, under a kind of self-imposed pressure to produce the highest-quality images, [it] did. (quoted in Johnston, 2003, p. 10, emphasis added)

The ambiguity of “quality” is key in this statement. Quality at once refers to the informational content and the artistic style of the image. To Walski, the quality of the composite image better captured the drama of the scene he was shooting. Even still, it is hard to quantify the value gained in the composite, as Walski’s friend and former colleague made clear: “The sad irony is that Walski had made the shot. His photo . . . did not need any enhancing” (Gelzinis, 2003, p. 12). This assessment suggested that the composite did not enhance the image. Yet the subtle compositional rearrangement gained through the splicing of the two images clearly refocused its figures into an alignment that conveyed...
the sense of danger Walski felt needed to be expressed to communicate pictorially what was happening in Basra. It made a great picture.

It is ironic that Walski, once discovered, faced ostracism while historically charges of fabrication remain “a recurrent characteristic of war photography” (Griffin, 1999, p. 135). Some of war’s most memorable images—Matthew Brady’s Civil War photographs (1999, p. 153), Robert Capa’s “The Death of a Loyalist Militiaman” (1999), p. 138) and Joe Rosenthal’s “Old Glory Goes Up on Mt. Suribachi, Iwo Jima” (1999, p. 43)—carry the specter of their untruthfulness or accusations of being staged. Yet, as these images become iconic, their relationship to the events they depict becomes less important than the image themselves and the general statement about what they convey (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). This is not to suggest normalizing the practice of using composite photographs to better illustrate war. But it does beg for a discussion of news images that articulates the craft element in relation to journalistic principles in a way not possible when analysis takes the defensive form of paradigm repair.

Moving Forward with News Images in the Digital Era

The photojournalism trade press provided a space for internal discussions among photographic professionals to work out norms and standards of their practice. In the Walski case, the place of craft in news photography arose in the ethics column of the photojournalism trade magazine News Photographer following the incident: “There is something about the current state of journalism that creates pressure for photojournalists to produce aesthetically perfect pictures, just as current pressures push text reporters to come up with the perfect quote, one way or another” (Elliott and Lester, 2003, p. 10). The authors then set out to trace the history of “how aesthetic values began to take precedence over news values,” citing the luminary Henri Cartier-Bresson. The artistic lure of photojournalism is so ingrained as to overwhelm efforts at implanting ethics. “But while journalists are learning what counts as ethical journalism, they are also learning a contrasting message: an acceptable ethical piece of journalism is not valued as much as one that is aesthetically excellent.” To address this formal incongruity, Elliott and Lester argue that news managers should “put the value of aesthetic excellence back where it belongs, as important, but secondary to the value of ethical journalism.” This solution should be applauded for addressing style as something that cannot be ignored when setting photojournalistic standards. It acknowledged the contradictions that occur specifically within photojournalistic practice.

Similarly, Poynter’s Kenneth Irby made the following distinction at a roundtable hosted by the Photo District News:

In a journalistic enterprise, photographers are reporters and their primary contribution is journalistic and not artistic—esthetically executed, yes, but not solely art. I discourage the use of the term “art” when referring to journalistic photography. Art is not held to the same values of accuracy, honesty and fairness that are essential qualities of journalism. (quoted in Photo District News, 2004, p. 26)

Irby went further in eschewing art from the vocabulary of photojournalism while still admitting that photos are stylized. In a normative argument for photographic practice, he attempted to establish boundaries based around the foundational underpinnings that separate art from journalism. This conversation is useful as long as it recognizes the
intricacy of the distinction being drawn. After all, since art and journalism operate in the same medium of photography, slippage is bound to occur—especially when the accolades of photojournalism are not related to accuracy but to style.

In his discussion of photojournalistic craft, Irby admitted to “a necessary and permissible amount of Photoshop work needed to prepare the digital image for the publishing environment” (quoted in Photo District News, 2004, p. 26). Rather than reduce this editing to a violation of objective standards, the Online Journalism Review’s Mark Glaser recognized the ubiquity of image editing: “The reality is that photo manipulation happens on a lot of photogs’ laptops, in postproduction in newsrooms, and even the photo shoot is often staged” (Glaser, 2003). In ostracizing Walski, the journalistic community ignored these practices. Yet the persistence of image editing raises questions about the applicability of blanket ethical statements in accounting for all situations: “LA Times policy forbids altering the content of news photographs but doesn’t define precisely what the term ‘content’ means, just what is acceptable and what crosses the line—and who really is qualified to judge?” (Schewe, 2005). These are key questions that must be addressed by the entire journalistic community. On its own, objectivity is insufficient to guide photojournalistic practice. Instead, the question of craft must be invoked. What makes a “good” picture should not be reduced to simply a “true” or “real” picture. Photojournalism has its own formal criteria that must be respected and admired as a way of communicating about the world.

**Conclusion**

The Walski case raises questions about visual representation that strike at the core of the ambiguity enveloping news images in an era of the digital shooting, digital editing, and digital transporting of images. The Los Angeles Times and other journalists quickly rejected Walski’s spliced image as unjournalistic and, therefore, unacceptable. In taking a defensive stance, this response fit with the perspective of paradigm repair with its emphasis on preserving legitimacy and continuity while strategically disregarding the serious challenges the incident posed to established news practices and norms. Instead of acknowledging the subjective practices of photojournalism, the freedom of individual journalists, and the confusion of reporting on war, journalists sensed the threat to their credibility and acted in a protective manner. Yet, even in commentaries taking Walski to task, the incident signaled a rupture with the assumption of photographic objectivity. This is a precarious situation, given that the “kind of truth value . . . attached to photographs remains unaddressed, despite the fact that journalism continues to depend on that truth-value for its ability to account for the world” (Zelizer, 2005, p. 173). In searching for news norms to consider the truth-value of images, newspaper journalists turned to practices relating to the news-value of verbal news texts despite their lack of equivalency. This response did not clarify the functions or norms of news images, but rather moved from any attempt to address these issues.

The aim is not to defend Walski, but to take seriously issues of craft, particularly with regard to images of war. While war has not abated, the battlefields have moved outside or to the margins of the Western world. Because most of us do not have access to war firsthand, we rely on news reportage to understand what is happening. News images, both still and moving, convey to their audiences the unexperienced drama that comes to represent the confusing and terrifying spaces of conflict. By splicing together two images,
Walski better brought into alignment a soldier and a civilian respectively carrying a gun and a child in an attempt to transmit what he witnessed in Basra at the opening of the war. Such a move can only be understood with an appreciation for craft that accounts for this quest for perfection. Newspaper journalists, in reducing their focus to manipulation, failed to acknowledge this side of news images. While fruitful discussions of craft did occur, it needs to be made central in order to come to terms with the power of news images to relay the human drama that enhances our understanding of events and tragedies beyond our own experience.

NOTES

1. Texts were located through searches on the Factiva database. All relevant articles were downloaded and analyzed. Further online searches turned up additional material by journalists and photographers.

2. While visual and verbal modes are unmistakenly intertwined in both print and televisual news content, for analytical purposes I am suggesting a distinction between information relay through words and through images.

3. Following his termination with the Times, Walski began a private photography business, first in California and later in Colorado.

4. For current information and details on journalists killed in Iraq, see the Committee to Protect Journalist’s feature, “Iraq: journalists in danger” at http://www.cpj.org/Briefings/Iraq/Iraq_danger.html.

REFERENCES


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