

The Ethics of News Photography

by Gerry Chudleigh



People once assumed that photos told the truth, unless proven otherwise. On those unusual occasions when the photo did lie -- for example, when it showed a Texas farmer bringing one 15-foot watermelon in from the fields behind his tractor -- the trick was usually visible with a magnifying glass.

Today the situation is reversed, with most people assuming that every moving or still picture has been altered — or might have been. In fact, a very high percentage of photos have been altered. Most of us expect advertising photos to be altered to make them more interesting, we expect portraits to be altered to flatter the subject, and we expect photos in institutional brochures and publications to be altered to make the organization or the publication more exciting and attractive.

But there is one place where alterations are not allowed: news photography.

Photojournalists are, perhaps, the last defenders of honest photographs. They have to. Credibility is the only thing respected newspapers and news magazines have to offer. If the stories and pictures printed in newspapers and news magazines do not tell the truth then the whole news enterprise collapses.

For that reason, news journals and news photographers themselves have adopted a "zero tolerance" code of ethics that to most people seems extreme. The main points are these:

1. No news photos are altered in any way.
2. No news photos are set-up. If the photo shows a person or group of people posing, the caption must say they are posing for the photo.

These rules do not just apply to important information in the news photo, but to any detail, no matter how minor. Photojournalists are fired for removing utility lines, pop cans, and shrubs.

If any photographer violates one of these rules he or she is usually fired (it happens in one city or another several times a year), all their photos are deleted from the news association files, and they are unlikely to be hired by anyone else as a news journalist. For a 2007 example, Google "Allan Detrich" or read the story "In Ohio, A News Photograph Is Digitally Altered," at the website of the National Press Photographers Association at www.nppa.org/news_and_events/news/2007/04/toledo01.html

Church publications and websites have been slow to follow these ethical standards, probably because there are very few professional photojournalists in church employment. When it comes to events, our publications and websites mostly take what we can get. And, while we don't intentionally lie, we often "fix" the picture to make it more attractive.

It is my belief that church website and print editors and photographers should become more interested in this issue and should adopt the standards of secular news organizations. I suggest the following steps:

1. **Statements of Ethics** -- Our websites and printed journals should state publicly that all the news photos on the site or in the publication represent the truth, that to the best knowledge of the editors, the photos have not been altered or set-up. Obviously, that will not apply to photos used in advertisements or used as design elements.

2. **Changing News Photos** -- We should adopt the guidelines stated in the Associated Press Statement of News Values and Principles:

“AP pictures must always tell the truth. We do not alter or manipulate the content of a photograph in any way.

“The content of a photograph must not be altered in PhotoShop or by any other means. No element should be digitally added to or subtracted from any photograph. The faces or identities of individuals must not be obscured by PhotoShop or any other editing tool. Only retouching or the use of the cloning tool to eliminate dust and scratches are acceptable.

“Minor adjustments in PhotoShop are acceptable. These include cropping, dodging and burning, conversion into grayscale, and normal toning and color adjustments that should be limited to those minimally necessary for clear and accurate reproduction (analogous to the burning and dodging often used in darkroom processing of images) and that restore the authentic nature of the photograph. Changes in density, contrast, color and saturation levels that substantially alter the original scene are not acceptable. Backgrounds should not be digitally blurred or eliminated by burning down or by aggressive toning.”

3. **Setting Up Photos** -- For church photographers, this is probably the more difficult of the two rules. The photographer often has only a few minutes to get a great photo and has several other duties at the event. Often the photographer arrives too late or too early to catch some special function, or there is something wrong with his camera or with the setting when it occurs, so he or she asks the subjects to "stand over here where the light will shine on your face and that banner is in the background and act like you are" Avoiding this is very difficult because the alternative is often to print no picture or to print a poor quality picture.

Sometimes even professional news photographers must settle for a posed picture. When they do, according to the ethical standards of the Associated Press and most news journals, the caption must state that the picture is posed.

It is important to note here that reporting news is not the only function of church communication professionals. We are often acting more as directors or coordinators of corporate communication. That is, we are making news, not reporting it. Naturally, if you are producing a video statement from your president, or a public relations video or brochure, you will set it up with the best possible lighting and background, and you will direct the action. That is not news, so setting up is fine.

4. **Photo Credits** -- A credit on a photo is like a signature on a check -- it makes it valid. When I submit a photo with a caption that says "Eleven year old Evan Jones, of Smalltown, Illinois, plays his violin at the 2006 ASI Convention," my name says I stand behind these facts. Without a credit a photo has no credibility because there is no accountability. For that reason, no news photo is ever published in any public medium without a credit -- someone to verify the truthfulness of the photo and to be held responsible if the information is not correct.

So why do most church publications and websites have few or no credits? Perhaps it is because most of us think of credits as a way to "glorify" the photographer. We know Christians are to be humble, so we contribute our pictures and print them without taking credit. Our correspondents and contributors follow our example. A second reason might be that some photographers are not confident that their photo is

very good. They don't want to appear to be bragging about something they think others might be criticizing. The result is that we have whole magazines and websites with nothing but "orphan" pictures for whom no one accepts any responsibility.

If we get serious about photographic credibility we can do several things.

1. We editors can set a good example by adding our name to all our photos. This can be done as unobtrusively as possible. In a collection of photos from an event we might say, "Unless credited otherwise, all photos by Gerry Chudleigh/Recorder staff."
2. We can educate our contributors about the purpose of photo credits.
3. We can add credits to all photos. We might follow the example of major newspapers. When the photographer's name is not supplied, or is someone they don't know, they say something like "Photo supplied by The American Red Cross." At the Pacific Union Recorder we are considering a policy that for every picture that does not come to us with a credit, we will say "Photo supplied by Southern California Conference," or whatever conference sent the photo. We suppose if we begin doing this, the conferences will either find the names of the photographers or they will add their own credits, "Photo supplied by the Glendale Spanish Church."
4. Mug shots do not require photo credits. If a story reporting that Michele Walters is the new associate pastor includes a photo of Michele's face, or even a posed photo of Michele with her spouse and two children, the editor is responsible for the truthfulness of the photo. In such a photo, time, place and event or action are not important; the photo is only for identification, so it is not a news photo.

5. Captions

1. The editors of the church papers in the North American Division follow this rule: no caption equals no photo. When photographing an event I always carry a small notebook in my pocket. After every photo or group of photos I look at the camera to see the actual photo number -- the one that will appear as part of the photo name - write that number in my notebook, then write a caption to go with it. At many events, such as a camporee, that involves talking to the people in the photo, and getting all their names and hometowns, correctly spelled. One church photographer I know carries a small tape recorder. For each photo, he speaks the photo number into the microphone, then asks each person in the photo to say their name, then spell their name.
2. Captions should include the full name of everyone who is plainly visible in a photo, unless there are a large number. And the caption should clearly identify which person goes with each name.
3. The caption must tell what the people in the news photo are doing. Many people will only look at the photos and read the captions. Those people should be able to get most of the story from those two sources.
4. The first sentence of a caption is normally written in the present tense: "Dr. Jan Paulsen speaks at San Pasqual Academy's 100th anniversary celebration." The second sentence, if there is one, is usually a statement of fact and may be in any tense: Paulsen graduated from SPA in 1927 and has two grandchildren in the school this year."

Unaltered, un-posed news photos with proper credits and good captions will do much to preserve and enhance the credibility of church websites and printed publications.

