The Ethics of Images

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Introduction

Pictures and images peer out at us from newspapers, shout for attention on billboards, scream at us in TV ads, quietly remonstrate with us in documentaries; they pervade our society. We are constantly exposed to pictures. Without consciously analyzing these pictures, information is absorbed without deliberate thought or intention. These images are as persuasive as a written argument or spoken rhetoric, yet people assume that they tell the truth which makes them powerful.

In this paper, we argue that the power of pictures leads to ethical issues. To begin our discussion, we will establish that pictures are highly memorable. Then, due to their memorable nature, pictures can significantly influence viewers’ perceptions of the world. It then follows that because pictures convey a limited and inherently biased view of the world, if they are uncritically accepted as reality, images can warp viewers’ perception of the world.

Images convey information quickly, but this very ability is also a source of concern. If accepted as unbiased, pictures have the potential to gravely alter our views of the world we live in. The power inherent in imagery is an ethical concern that must be considered in a world which uses them constantly. For the people who wield the ability to control images have the ability to change our views of the world. Ethical concerns must be approached twofold; how imagery is manipulated and utilized, and the underlying rationale behind the function these images serve.

Text versus Pictures

We first need to consider whether pictures are indeed fundamentally different than text, for if they are not, a picture has no more impact on our perception of the world than a book or newspaper. We hold that pictures affect people’s views of the world differently than words alone.

“Pictorial material [also referred to as a picture or an illustration] is defined as any two-dimensional representation in which the stimulus array contains at least one element that is not alphabetic, numeric or arithmetic.” (p. 611) Items such as pictures, graphs, symbols and the like all fall within this category. In this paper we will limit our discussion to considering non-fiction photography such as photojournalism, as it purports to accurately portray situations and describe events, which eliminates many forms of bias such as artistic license, deliberate misrepresentation and so forth that are extraneous to our argument.

To explore whether images are indeed different than text, we turn to a well-known psychological theory known as dual-coding theory developed in the late 1960s by Allan Paivio, a psychologist from the University of Western Ontario. He posited that humans store information in the brain in two different ways, depending on the nature of the input. “The most general assumption in dual coding theory is that there are two classes of phenomena handled cognitively by separate subsystems, one specialized for the
representation and processing of information concerning nonverbal objects and events, the other specialized for dealing with language.” (p. 53) He suggested that picture-like objects are processed differently than language-like information and that these differences underlie almost everything we do and think. (pp. 16,17)

Many experiments have been done to test the validity of Paivio’s theory, with two famous experiments demonstrating the difference in how well people can remember words and sentences versus pictures. One, done in the late ‘60s by Roger Shepard, found that subjects were able to accurately identify pictures with incredible accuracy. “Evidently, after 20 or more years of absorbing visual information, [subjects] are still able to take in as many as 612 further pictures without any particular effort and then discriminate these from pictures not previously seen with (median) accuracy of over 98%.” (p. 163)

Shepard’s conclusion was backed by the findings of Standing during the early 1970s. Standing found that his subjects remembered vivid pictures with a 97% accuracy and normal pictures with a 93% accuracy, compared with an accuracy of 92% for words. Unlike Shepard, Standing specifically instructed his subjects to remember the words or pictures that they viewed, as they would be tested on what they had seen. “The importance of maintaining strict concentration even during long sequences of stimuli was strongly emphasized by the experimenter.” (pp. 208, 209) The difference in results between the two studies illustrates the fact that although words can be remembered at roughly the same level as pictures, in order for this to happen subjects needed to deliberately set out to remember the words they saw. Shepard’s results indicate that pictures can be remembered without specifically trying to learn the pictures.

Standing concluded that “pictorial memory is quantitatively superior to verbal memory.” (p. 222) He mentioned one study done by Goldstein and Chance in 1970 that showed truly poor picture memory, but noted that the authors used carefully constructed, extremely confusable pictures in their tests which would explain their results. The overall scientific evidence, however, overwhelmingly supports the idea that pictures differ innately from text in a way that makes them easier to remember.

Various studies have been done that question aspects of Paivio’s dual-coding theory. In studies done in 1970 and 1972, Bower “undermined the supposition, central to dual coding theory, that mental imagery gives rise to a qualitatively different form of memory code or representation.” In other studies, psychologists have opposed Paivio’s dual-coding theory and held that “both imaginal and verbal instructions simply encouraged the relational organization of the material to be remembered within a single code or system.” (p. 124, 125) Yet disagreements amongst psychologists about how the brain processes and stores information do not alter Shepard and Standing’s findings that humans can easily remember pictures.

Do Images Influence Our Opinions?

Do images we view influence our opinions and views of the world? Do they do so without our consent? If so, then we need to reevaluate how we think about the images we view.

Over the past 100 years, people have assumed that images have a powerful effect upon those who view them. “In tones of utter certainty, [people] have warned of the deleterious effects persuasive commercial imagery has on the human mind, the collective behavior, and the society’s values. Folk beliefs about the powers of advertisers to
manipulate viewers … have shown remarkable steadfastness since they first appeared on
the scene in the 1950s.” (p. ix)

Society deems wholly appropriate the use of photographic images for a wide
spectrum of public purposes such as entertainment, artistic expression, advertisement or
news. This arises from the general understanding that a photographic image is not the
definition of a reality, much the way a documented account of an event is not a perfect
equivalent to the event, but rather an account of, or approximation to, the reality. Thomas
Wheeler emphasizes the importance of this relationship by stating, “Viewers will believe
in [a photograph’s] truth as long as they believe it corresponds in a meaningful way to
reality.” (p. 5) Wheeler goes on to show how a viewer’s level of acceptance of an image
as truth is largely determined by a common set of assumptions or “qualified expectations
of reality” that allow the viewer to judge how accurately the image reflects reality.

The advertising community questions whether advertising imagery really does have
a profound affect upon its viewers. Scientific studies done by advertisers indicate that
“respondents in these studies are skeptical, culturally situated creatures who cannot be
consistently ‘manipulated’ through mere exposure to visual tricks, but instead respond in
ways so subtle and provisional as to have escaped easy analysis.” (p. xxi) While there may
be some truth in these claims, these subjects are responding to advertising, which may not
be viewed by the subjects as a credible or reliable source. Therefore, we need to explore
whether a person’s view of the world is altered when viewing imagery from credible,
trusted sources such as newspapers and reputable magazines.

Once we have done this, we can determine when image manipulation constitutes a
strong ethical problem. Several factors contribute to viewers’ expectation of reality for an
image. The first is their perception of the medium itself. Much of the long-held faith in
photography’s authenticity can be traced back to pre-digital, mechanical devices and
chemical processes that appeared to display an inherent scientific objectivity. But
photography’s seemingly innate objectivity is refuted by Hartley who states,
“[Photography] was a product of amateur inspiration, artistic flair and commercial
showmanship, and science came limping along behind, trying to work out what was going
on.” (p. 55) Many of the earliest photographers were far more concerned with creating
imaginative images than documenting reality, and the first counterfeit photograph appeared
within a year of the medium’s invention. Photography’s acceptance as a scientific and
objective process contributes to viewers’ expectations of reality and consequently their
willingness to accept what a photograph depicts as truth. It also follows that presenters of
imagery can rely on this assumption of inherent objectivity to misrepresent an image’s
reflection of reality.

While considering an image’s truthfulness, a viewer will also apply assumptions
regarding its categorization and place of appearance. Within mass media, images are
identified and grouped by labels like photojournalism, hard news, feature stories, and
entertainment. These labels, often associated with the publication where the image
appeared, correlate with a level of expectation based upon some property such as
long-standing reputation or identified standards. The grouping also explains how images
with varying levels of accuracy and manipulation of reality are presented to the public in
ways deemed to be appropriate and without ethical dilemma by society.

The public has lower expectations of material under labels like science fiction or celebrity
gossip, accepting less than authentic images. While there may be clear
expectations at the extremes – comic books at one end and photojournalism at the other – there is often confusion of the public’s expectations and presenters’ standards in the areas in between. For example, even while considering image use on the cover of a magazine, under the more stringent standards of photojournalism, editors often comment that covers are more advertisement in nature and are held to lower standards of accuracy without any necessity to disclose the difference. A prominent example involved the National Geographic cover of the February 1982 magazine cover, which was of the pyramids in Giza. National Geographic, a publication which boasts that the editors “do not alter reality on the finished image”, was criticized for making the image more suitable for the cover by electronically moving one pyramid closer to the other. Illustrating nonfiction text – seen as highly credible – with fictional images is another example of how an image can be presented in a way that alters a viewer’s concept of truth based on a misleading implication of authenticity.

Viewers’ expectations are formed by other assumptions as well, such as the value of any accompanying text or caption, or some obvious test of implausibility regarding the subject matter. Whatever assumptions a viewer uses as a filter to judge the accuracy of an image can also be used by the presenter to deceive.

Therefore, a viewer’s trust in an image is critical to his adoption of it as truth. For photographic journalism in particular, this trust level is quite high. Trust in photography as a scientific medium is still inherent in most people; as the old adage states ‘seeing is believing’. The public feels betrayed when this trust is violated, as the outraged reaction to the inaccurate National Geographic front cover shows. The attitude taken toward pictures seems to be ‘innocent until proven guilty’, but with this trust comes the expectation that pictures will be truthful. When this trust is broken, people feel deceived.

Formal studies of this topic seem to be lacking, as there is no scientific literature on it currently. Further study should be encouraged in this area as its impact on society is profound. While we wait for scientific evidence, a theoretical discussion of photography and its impacts will have to suffice.

**Affective Influence of Photography**

Subjectivity of the photographer, misrepresentation through lack of context, and alteration through modification are some of the ways that photography influences the viewers’ perception of reality. These affective influences can sway the opinions of viewers, which makes them potentially powerful.

Both the creator and the viewer must be considered when discussing subjectivity and bias. Subjectivity within imagery initially lies within the way a photographer chooses to portray the subject matter. Techniques such as choices of lighting, background scenery, coloring, shading and most importantly, context, are some of these conscious choices; choices that help the viewer to arrive at conclusions the photographer desires.

These techniques are often used as propaganda during times of war. An image will be circulated that portrays the war, and thus the government, in a positive light. Perhaps one of the most famous and influential examples of this is a photograph depicting five soldiers raising the American flag atop Mount Suribachi in Iwo Jima, Japan, during World War II. “The teamwork of the picture’s faceless subjects and the victory symbolized by raising the Stars and Stripes served as a visual moral-booster to Americans during the last difficult months of the war.” (p. 64) The photograph’s power
lies not only in its subject matter, but also in the techniques highlighting this victory, including an “unfurled national flag, upraised hands, and strong diagonal lines.” (p. 64)

However, the photographer’s control over the feelings evoked by an image is by no means all-inclusive, as the audience’s opinions will also play a role in how the imagery is received. The photographer of the flag raising described above chose to depict American patriotism and victory; while serving as a morale booster for American troops, the photograph might have disheartened Japanese troops as it would be a reminder of defeat. This example shows that while an image may contain neither bias (from the creator’s standpoint) nor physical manipulation, different audiences will react differently to identical subject matter.

The next affective influence revolves around the intentional misrepresentation of reality through imagery, and its results and effect upon the audience. Misrepresentation of imagery is more invidious than subjectivity or bias. It represents a conscious choice by the creator to portray subject matter so that it does not entirely reflect the truth. Motives for misrepresentation abound as advertisers, governments, corporations, politicians and individuals actively utilize imagery to achieve their own objectives. Misrepresentation due to political motivation can be found in Nick Ut’s photograph taken during the Vietnam War. His photograph depicts a group of children running down an empty road with what appears to be a cloud of napalm smoke in the background. As described by Michael Anderegg, “the children’s mouths are open in screams of pain; the central figure runs naked towards the camera. Looking at this photograph, we feel complete helplessness at the horror of war. The road, Route 1, continues to the horizon following the lines of perspective as the victims rush forward towards us, creating an apocalyptic feeling.” (p. 135)

The photograph was distributed throughout the Western world by the anti-war movement in order to depict in vivid, unflinching detail the horrors of that war. It was utilized to depict war, but was misrepresented as the photograph lends the audience to believe that American troops were involved. What the picture does not relay is the fact that Nick Ut, the photographer, rushed the young girl in the photo, Kim Phuc, to a nearby hospital where she was saved. The picture highlights Vietnamese children and soldiers running from the napalm, but fails to indicate that a South Vietnamese pilot mistook the group of women and children as a threat and diverted to attack them. This additional information can only be communicated through accompanying text, and without these explanations, the truth inadvertently becomes blurred. This deliberate misuse of imagery to intentionally deceive an audience is a prime example of how imagery, without sufficient explanation, can lead to misinterpretation, be it purposeful or not.

Manipulation of imagery is the physical alteration of the image which may change its subject matter. However, alteration of an image does not necessarily involve changes that take away from the creator’s original intent. Examples of this type of modification are prevalent in modern society, with images in magazines, newspapers and other media formats modified or changed in ways that do not actively alter their content but will make the image more attractive. This type of modification is extensively utilized throughout mass media productions, including the thousands of magazines distributed each month throughout America and the rest of the world. In particular, the use of ‘touch-up’ techniques to improve an image without altering context are widespread, such as the removal of red-eye, the creation of smoother looking skin by removing wrinkles and
blemishes to changes in lighting and focus. These techniques, while not altering context, are still important to note as they result in an image that does not entirely represent the truth.

Sometimes, however a modification or alteration is designed to alter the context in order to shape the audience’s understanding. Examples of this can be readily found in the media, with one of the most famous examples appearing on the front cover of TIME magazine’s June 27th, 1994 edition. The cover showed the mug-shot of O. J. Simpson after being arrested for the murder of his ex-wife Nicole Brown and former friend Ronald Goldman. Unbeknownst to the casual reader, his photo was carefully altered by the editors of the magazine to reflect their view of Mr. Simpson’s obvious guilt. The picture was darkened, with shading added to make his profile appear less human. The background was also changed, with shading added to the edges of the image to make his profile appear more sinister. These changes, though not dramatic, would affect how an audience viewed Mr. Simpson throughout his trial.

We have shown that images can easily be remembered and potentially have a significant impact on those viewing them. Problems with imagery are built in, as a photographer’s choice of subject material inherently lends bias to the picture. Further, the intentional misrepresentation or manipulation of imagery leads to greater ethical concerns, as a conscious decision is made to intentionally alter the subject matter. With these principles in mind, the paper will now move towards a discussion focused upon how these factors contribute to the ethics surrounding images.

**Ethical Discussion**

The following discussion will consider potential ethical problems in the use of images in light of various ethical theories including utilitarianism, duty-based theories of rights and fairness to individuals and groups, and virtue-based principles of achieving the highest human potential. After examining our cases using these theories, it will be clear that these uses of imagery constitute strong ethical problems for society, and that any solution must redefine societal and individual assumptions used to critically analyze images that are displayed as truth.

To aid us in our ethical analysis, we will use two hypothetical cases. In the first case, we will assume that the presenter of an image clearly identifies how accurately the image reflects reality. We will assume he either includes in the text the decisions he made in taking the picture, explains what alterations or manipulations he made and why, or the publication the picture is published in has clearly defined standards for its pictures. In the first case, an ideal case, we will assume that the viewer has expectations of the image’s reality equal to the clearly identified level; the viewer will understand what the presenter has identified. This may include understanding the subjective nature of the medium, referencing any additional text or information, and understanding the standards of the publication category. This is usually unrealistic.

In our second case, however, either the presenter or the viewer will not responsibly maintain their side of the process. The presenter may make decisions while taking the picture that are not clearly explained, may manipulate the picture after taking it or may crop it in such a way that the message of the picture is materially altered. On the other hand, the viewer’s opinions of the world may color the message presented by the picture in such a way that the viewer never really understands what the picture is saying.
In the following three sections, we will evaluate three ethical theories using the same process. First, we will explain the basic ethical theory and explain its weakness when considered on its own. Second, we will apply our ideal case presented above to image examples and consider both the presenter and viewer’s responsibilities using that ethical theory. Third, we will apply the less than ideal case, our second case, to the image examples and consider what may happen when either the presenter or viewer does not uphold their responsibilities. Ultimately, we aim to show that the decisions made by the presenter or viewer in the image examples were unethical in our case two for all three theories.

**Teleological Ethics**

Consequence-based approaches to ethics such as utilitarianism or common good theories have become widely used in modern Western societies. Both approaches rely on the belief that an ethical decision is one that maximizes good and minimizes harm. The Greek-oriented notion of common good goes further to define an ethically good action as one that contributes to the interlocking relationships of the community. Evaluating the subject of images under these standards provides helpful insight; however, teleological (act-based) ethics are ineffective by themselves as decision criteria. This ineffectiveness stems from the inability to agree upon what good is and the best way to seek it. The argument follows that, “At the extreme, any means can be rationalized if the intended end is judged to maximize the overall good,” and that, “an act is okay, if people can agree it is okay.” Nevertheless, examining the consequences of decisions made by both the presenter and viewer of an image provides a useful starting point for determining an ethical standard.

In our first case, any of the images discussed previously could add to the greatest good and contribute to the interlocking relationships of society. But to do so, those pictures would need to be presented in a way that clearly documents how the picture has been taken and what decisions were made in taking and presenting it. In the picture of the flag raising at Iwo Jima, the presenter would have needed to make his pro-American bias known so that the viewer could clearly understand the affect on the image and could decide whether to agree with the bias presented. The common good of society dictates that the misrepresentation of Nick Ut’s Vietnam picture and the lighting manipulations of TIME’s O. J. Simpson cover need to be made perfectly clear to the viewer in order for the greatest good to be realized as the viewer makes up his own mind about the truthfulness of the picture. As this ideal is so rarely realized, our second case – that of the viewer’s expectation of reality for a picture being different than that of the presenter – will provide a more useful tool in determining an ethical standard.

In our second case, these image examples can potentially cause great harm, especially to the societal relationships that shape the common good. The manipulation of the O. J. Simpson image on the TIME cover contributed to society’s condemnation of a man before his trial had even begun. And images of napalm being dropped on children helped shape the world’s negative perception of American soldiers in the Vietnam War because the picture was misrepresented by the presenter. However, responsibility does not rest solely upon the presenter, as the viewers’ opinions of what the picture was saying in many cases differed from what was intended by the photographer. As discussed above, many viewers considered the picture to be showing the results of American bombings instead of the inadvertent bombing by a South Vietnamese plane that it was.
Another consequence of our second case is the harm to society that comes from erosion of trust. Manipulated images in mass media may lead to skepticism or outright rejection of photojournalism. Andy Grunberg of the New York Times states that, “In the future, readers of newspapers and magazines will probably view news pictures more as illustrations than reportage, since they can no longer distinguish between a genuine image and one that has been manipulated.” (p. 41) Furthermore, Brungioni has stated, “Photography shouldn’t be accepted as prima facie evidence in court any longer - digital cameras can erase the evidence.” (p. 51) Whether or not these predictions come to pass, manipulated images erode the trust of the public in one another, the media and the government. The erosion of trust hurts society because the greater good is being ignored, and can be seen to be wrong under utilitarianism.

**Deontological Ethics**

Now that the teleological theories of utilitarianism and the common good approach have been examined, we will apply theories of deontological (duty-based) ethics such as rights and justice and fairness approaches to image use. The rights approach values the rights of others based on the dignity of their human nature whereas the justice and fairness approach relies on a duty or obligation to treat all human beings equally or fairly based on some standard. Like utilitarian ethics, deontological ethics suffer from limitations. As explained by Whetstone, using principals, rules, and codes as a primary form of ethics may lead to legalism where actions are justified because these actions adhere to the “rules of the game.” (p. 108) Despite these limitations, examining the duties of presenters and viewers of imagery employing deontology is helpful when considering ethical standards related to images.

As with utilitarianism, deontological principles will be applied to the same image examples as before. Using our first case, the duties of both the presenter and the viewer are reasonably fulfilled. By making the level of an image’s accuracy completely known and easy to discern for an audience, the presenter respects the rights of the viewer to be given the truth in a way that gives each person the ability to make informed decisions about how to view the image. If the desire to portray O. J. Simpson as guilty caused the manipulation of the *TIME* cover image, then every viewer should be informed of the shading applied to the image and the bias that caused that shading to be applied, allowing the viewer to make up his own mind about Simpson’s guilt. In the same way, the decision by National Geographic to manipulate the cover image would need to be disclosed, allowing each person to decide whether to let these choices influence their decision to purchase the magazine. Although this example seems a little ridiculous, the duties of the viewer would then be fulfilled as each seeks to interpret the information correctly and make more informed decisions. These obligations can be seen as civic duties: obligations to participate in the community based on informed and freely chosen decisions. However, the circumstances for our first hypothetical case rarely exist. It is therefore valuable to consider the second case when determining an ethical standard.

In our second case, when the presenter of an image fails to make its level of accuracy known, or the viewer fails to apply the correct expectation of reality to interpreting the image, a duty is unfulfilled. In the case of the Simpson cover, the manipulation by the presenter was not made known to viewers and so they were not given the opportunity to make an accurately informed decision. Instead, the decision regarding the presumed guilt or innocence of the man was made for the viewers by the
presenter without the viewers’ knowledge or consent. Decisions like these are made in several of the other image examples; they deny the audience the right to make decisions for themselves and do so in a way that is unequal or unfair. The decisions are unfair because they deny the rights of those who do not have access to the entire information and deliberately withhold it from the viewers. Viewers of the TIME cover were not given access to Simpson’s unaltered photo elsewhere. Furthermore, when viewers misinterpret an image based on their own false assumptions or lack of willingness to be accurately informed, they reject a duty to themselves and their society. And if no attempt is made to critically analyze what is put in front of them, viewers will allow others to make decisions for them and choose not to participate in their society, which also is a rejection of their societal duty.

**Virtue Ethics**

In order to apply the most balanced and efficient ethical framework to the subject of image use, teleological and deontological theories can be combined with the considerations for character found in virtue ethics to form what is known as a balanced tripartite approach. The Aristotelian concept of virtue emphasizes personal moral development by striving to achieve one’s highest potential. A person is to ask in any situation “Is this action consistent with my acting at my best?” which will develop virtues such as honesty, integrity, fairness, or compassion. Virtue ethics do have problems with cultural relativism, as different people and cultures qualifying different character traits as virtues, but despite this Whetstone insists that, “For a more balanced ethic, all three ethics perspectives are needed.” (p. 110)

Applying this final theory to the individual decisions made by the presenter and the viewer of an image will help fully clarify which situations constitute a strong ethical problem.

The discussion of a virtue ethic as it applies to the presenters and viewers of an image will rely on the same set of assumptions for the two cases used in the teleological and deontological sections. In the first case, the goals of a virtue ethic are reasonably achieved by both the presenter and the viewer. Whether an image reflects a highly accurate level of reality by adhering to rigorous standards, or underwent extreme manipulations to present a completely fabricated illusion, the presenter strives for the virtues of honesty, integrity, and fairness by making the process known to the audience and identifying that level of accuracy. The viewers then strive for the virtues of honesty, wisdom, and prudence as they seek to interpret the image correctly and make decisions based on accurate information. What actual decisions are made based on the information must take into context the environment of the situation and are beyond the scope of this discussion, but the presenting and viewing of the image is done in a way that follows a virtuous ethic. This is the result when an image’s level of accuracy is presented in a way that matches the viewer’s expectations, and the viewer then makes the appropriate interpretation. However, as discussed before, it is more valuable to consider the problems that arise in our second case.

It is important to note that in our second case non-virtuous, and therefore unethical, behaviors exist not within the actions themselves but according to their motivations. In the example of TIME’s Simpson cover, the presenter altered the photo in
way that is difficult to detect in order to change the audience’s perception of the man in a dishonest way. The alteration was difficult to detect, not only because of the subtlety of shading and blurring, but also because the presenter relied on the integrity and reputation of the publication to suggest that the image was accurate. Although it may seem trivial in motivation, the same problems came from the example of the pyramids on the National Geographic cover. The publication later claimed that the image was altered only to make the cover more appealing and therefore marketable. But by placing the image on the front of a magazine with such a long standing reputation for presenting accurate depictions of nature, the presenters took advantage of their own integrity to advertise the magazine issue based on the notion that this view of the pyramids exists somewhere in reality. The virtuous use of an image is not dependent on what specific process of development is used or whether its presentation was motivated by a desire to inform, entertain, or advertise. Rather, a virtuous use of an image depends on how the presenter attempts to achieve his highest potential during his decisions, based on values such as honesty and integrity.

It is also necessary to examine the motivations of the audience. Consider the earlier described depiction of children photographed by Nick Ut during the Vietnam War. During that era, many viewers falsely interpreted the image as showing American soldiers intentionally dropping napalm on an unarmed village because they allowed their own feelings toward the war and the soldiers to supercede their desire to understand other views or opinions. The reoccurring trend of misinterpreting war images during this period contributed heavily to the public’s negative perception of, and often aggression toward, American soldiers returning home. The ethical problem in this example, according to a virtue ethic, is the audience’s lack of diligence toward truth while interpreting the image. To strive for the virtue of making well-informed and prudent decisions, an individual must at least make some effort to critically analyze an image with the same scrutiny that is applied to other forms of information. Viewers must not allow biases or long-held faith in the medium of photography to undermine a desire to seek truth and to make decisions based on accurate information.

**Conclusion**

As we have shown in this paper, images have an enormous potential to convey information to us in such a way that we accept it as the truth without conscious critical analysis. Instead, because we accept it as ‘scientific’, we will readily accept pictures as representational of reality without questioning the truth or validity of the image being shown us. The ethical implications of this statement are grave, as images are used pervasively throughout our society. Both presenters and viewers must uphold their responsibilities for imagery to continue to be a viable, trusted means of communication. To be able to mold some person or whole society’s view of the world is one of the greatest forms of power. Because people trust pictures to tell the truth, they may be open to the gravest forms of manipulation. Ultimately, the responsibility for facing this grave issue lies with both parties. However, without conscious and deliberate thought and action on the part of the viewers of these images, our very views of the world could be radically altered and changed by people we should be able to trust.
Appendix 1: Time Magazine and O.J Simpson.

Appendix 2: Napalm in Vietnam.
Appendix 3: Flag Raising at Iowa Jima.

Work Cited


3. Ibid.


6. Ibid.


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