

▶ CASE 4-4

Digital Photography and the Manipulation of Reality

It was a classic confrontation in the abortion wars. The Reverend Joshua Saint Clare, the national leader of the Lifeline Coalition, had rallied his anti-abortion legions for another skirmish in front of the Maplewood Women's Pavilion, one of only two abortion clinics in Lewiston. Carla Alvarez was just as determined to defend the women of Lewiston against the moral onslaught of the Reverend Saint Clare. As a prominent attorney committed to rekindling the feminist liberation movement of the 1970s, Alvarez was uncompromising in her view that the right for a woman to control her own body was precedent to all other rights.

The drama that was unfolding at the Maplewood Women's Pavilion was a reenactment of similar confrontations between Saint Clare and Alvarez in five other cities, three of which had sparked sporadic violence but no serious injuries. And each time, local and national media descended on the scene with an unquenchable thirst for conflict, emotional impact, and undeniable visual appeal. The fanaticism displayed on both sides had resulted in a cult of personalities that virtually silenced the more moderate voices on the abortion issue. The high-decibel verbal sparring between the charismatic Saint Clare and the combative Alvarez was irresistible in the competitive journalistic marketplace. The characters had overshadowed the plot on the nation's front pages and the evening newscasts.

As usual, correspondents from the TV networks, several large newspapers, and the news magazines were on hand in Lewiston to chronicle the next chapter in this morality play. The *Lewiston Gazette* was on hand too. This story was made to order for chief photographer Brian Fogle.

Fogle had joined the *Gazette* ten years ago after serving a three-year apprenticeship on a small-town weekly just seventy-five miles from Lewiston. He had thrived at a paper that was becoming increasingly more visual in its coverage and where color was often featured conspicuously on both the front page and the metro page. The *Gazette's* impressive list of awards for photojournalism since Fogle's arrival at the paper bore testament to the photographer's talent as both journalist and artisan. Fogle prided himself on his journalistic instincts in ferreting out the "real" story and then packaging it in the most vivid and dramatic way possible.

The abortion story was no exception. Fogle, along with reporter Mickey Chambers, had arrived early at the Pavilion, and with the police standing by in case of violence, the two groups of demonstrators soon began to exchange insults. And once again, the Reverend St. Clare and Carla Alvarez squared off in their all too familiar public exhibition of mutual disdain. Fogle moved quickly through the mob, capturing the growing hostility in color and preserving this dramatic confrontation for posterity. Most of his pictures, Fogle knew, would simply wind up in the newspaper's morgue. But not the profile shot of St. Clare and Alvarez standing toe-to-toe engaged in their verbal duel in front of the abortion clinic, while their supporters, armed with placards bearing a variety of messages, cheered them on. Fogle was confident that this photo had captured the very essence of the story that was unfolding at the Maplewood Women's Pavilion and that it would be featured prominently in color on the *Gazette's* front page.

Editor Samuel Gates wasn't so confident. In reviewing the front-page layout for the next day's edition, Gates was immediately impressed by the hostility that radiated from the photo. This was certain to convey the electric atmosphere surrounding the confrontation to the reader. But it was not the profile shot of the two combatants that concerned Gates. Although it was clear from the photo that St. Clare and Alvarez were surrounded by demonstrators, one was featured more prominently than others. In the center of the photo, in the background but clearly visible, was a placard with an aborted fetus in a jar.

With the deadline approaching, Gates quickly summoned Fogle and photo editor Bill McBride to his office and expressed his concern. "This is a fantastic shot, Brian," Gates declared sincerely, "but there is a problem. Quite frankly, I feel uneasy with running this photo on the front page with the aborted fetus. This could offend some of our readers, especially if we run it in color. Do you have another shot without any signs?"

"Not really," Fogle responded somewhat defensively. "I had to move in a hurry, and the crowd was making it difficult to get near enough for any kind of close-ups. I was lucky to get this. Besides, Saint Clare and Alvarez were surrounded by demonstrators carrying signs. This is part of the story."

"If there's a problem with the sign, we can take it out or smear the message on the sign," McBride volunteered. Gates knew that McBride was referring to the paper's multimillion-dollar investment in digital technology that allowed technicians, among other things, to reconstruct or alter photographs without the faintest hint of hand retouching.

"But that's deceptive to the readers," Fogle responded indignantly. "The photo should run as it is, or it shouldn't be used at all. But I'm opposed to just killing it because it's essential to give our readers a feel for the hostility that I felt at the clinic." At this point Gates wasn't sure whether his chief photographer was taking the ethical high road or just reacting from a sense of artistic pride.

"We have other pictures," Gates said. "Of course, they are mostly crowd scenes, and they aren't as personal or dramatic. But there are some where the messages on the signs are not as visible."

But Fogle persisted. "This story is no longer just about abortion. It's about the personal animosity between Saint Clare and Alvarez. And this photo captures this hostility. This picture *is* the story." "Then if that's the case," Gates responded, "why not remove or smear the sign? It detracts from the focus of the story. This sign might be offensive to our readers without adding anything to the photo. Why take a chance?"

The photo editor had to concede the validity of this argument. "If you're concerned about offend-

ing the readers," McBride said, "then what's the difference between altering this photo and deleting foul language from quotes in news copy? This is common practice at this paper."

As the deadline approached, Gates began to feel the tug of competing ethical loyalties. As a journalist and editor, he was usually opposed to deleting substantive content that contributed to an understanding of the story. The sign may not have been essential to the photo, but it did provide context. And he did not believe that this background sign necessarily detracted from the dramatic face-to-face encounter of the two antagonists. And even if it did, the paper might still be accused of altering reality just for the sake of dramatic effect. Would removing or smearing the sign through digital manipulation be deceptive to the readers? Would they really care?

But editors often edit stories for length, tastes, and even superfluous content. Was this offensive visual message really important to the story? If the story was no longer abortion itself but the repeated and increasingly vociferous confrontations between Saint Clare and Alvarez, then perhaps the background sign in the photo *was* superfluous. Besides, the *Gazette* was a family newspaper and owed a duty to its readers to treat them with civility, while providing them with an accurate account of the day's events. This could be accomplished in the narrative part of the coverage without such a morally challenging photograph. On a couple of occasions, the paper had "cleaned up" the background and composition of feature photos. Was this any different?

As Gates pondered his decision, he realized that the temptation to take advantage of his technology's capabilities was almost irresistible. But he had to remember that his computers and software were only tools and that machines were incapable of making ethical judgments. Digital technology, he knew, should be the servant, not the master, of practicing journalists.

THE CASE STUDY

This case does not involve digital manipulation just to delete extraneous material or to adjust a photo

for space considerations. The editor is concerned about the potential reaction of readers to this offensive sign between the profile shots of the two abortion combatants. On the one hand, the alteration of any photo might be considered deceptive unless the readers are informed as to how and why the photo was altered. On the other hand, if one accepts McBride's argument, then deleting material from photos is really no different from editing news stories for content for overriding ethical reasons (for example, deleting offensive language or cleaning up the grammar in a quote).

Under time pressures, such ethical dilemmas are often subjected to ad hoc decision making, without concern for long-range consequences. But as editor, Gates must protect the integrity of his enterprise. If the *Gazette* acquires a reputation, for example, of doctoring photos, even if the readers are informed of such manipulation, then the paper has sacrificed its only stock in trade: the truth. Nevertheless, there are those rare exceptions when journalists must deviate from standard ethical practice for other overriding considerations. Is this such a situation? If so, what are the overriding considerations?

Gates has four choices. First, he could publish the photo in color on the front page. He would then run the risk of offending some readers.

Gates's second option is to alter the photo, either removing or smearing the sign. In this case, the paper will avoid offending its readers. But, on the other hand, if the *Gazette* readers learn of this manipulation the paper's credibility could suffer.

Third, Gates could decide to omit the photo from the paper's coverage entirely. This would avoid his ethical quandary. But would this decision be journalistically sound, especially because the photo is important to the overall story? In addition, the omission of this dramatic photo would certainly undermine the *Gazette's* goal of improving its visual coverage to enhance the paper's marketing potential.

Finally, the paper could publish the photo in black and white or perhaps move it to an inside page to lessen its impact. Would this lessen the chance that it might offend some readers?

As the deadline approaches, assume the position of editor Samuel Gates and, using the SAD

Formula for moral reasoning, decide how you would handle this ethical dilemma.