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Using at least 3 examples, consider how image makers have utilised the impact of conflict digital technology

In this essay I will be writing on the conflict impact of digital technology and how image makers have utilized the subject. Upon reading various articles on the subject I have found that there are many examples of how image makers have utilized digital technology for several reasons, with one being exaggerating conflict. Throughout the years image makers have used images to always utilize wars through the years using propagandas and heartfelt images including the impact the war has had on civilians and Environmental damage. Image makers have influenced the public perception of conflict throughout time, with past image making took time, money, developing involving significant time and logistic effort whereas nowadays digital technology allows image makers to capture high quality with a click of a finger with ease and flexibility.

Photographs have been manipulated since the 19th century with only a handful of Photographers deciding to spend endless hours in the dark room slowly changing their images to get a better one in hoping they would get more publicity. Photographers such as Richard Avedon is one of those who spent hours manipulating his images, he used dodging and burning to achieve the desired contrast and depth for most of his images and continued to do so from 1944-1992. Another photographer that manipulated their images was William H. Mumler from 1862-1870, William H. Mumler took images that were known as

spirit portraits, he created the images by using technique called double exposure. He lasted for 8 years before he was put on trial for fraud and even though the charges dropped, he lost a lot of customers due to the trial, so he stopped taking images overall.



Hurley F. (1918) An episode after the Battle of Zonnebeke.

Photo manipulation has also been used in war images making them seem a lot worse and more impactful to what they actually were to the human eye. For example, Australian photographer Frank Hurley created this image from three original negatives that he took of World War I in Belgium. No one knows entirely why he decided to put three images together, but the image has become a famous photograph in Australian war history as it shows the bravery of Australian soldiers in 1917 what they had to face in the trenches on the front line.

The issue with photo manipulation is that it proves that we cannot believe everything we see and that in fact an image can lie. It then

makes us question the whole authenticity for all image and whether to believe everything we see.

‘The question of photography’s truth-value has been tossed without regret into the dustbin of history. Even worse are the ways that these ideas have seeped into the general public, encouraging a careless contempt toward documentary photographs. Since such images are cesspools of manipulation and exploitation: why look? It has become all too easy to avert one’s eyes; indeed, to do so is considered a virtue’ Linfield S, (2010) *The cruel radiance: photography and political* p.12



Wall J. (1992) *Dead Troops Talk*

An example of fake images is this image, the whole image was staged and manipulated by a Canadian photographer named Jeff Wall. Jeff Wall created the image in a photo studio only using one or two models in the 1990s and then manipulated the other men into the image digitally to create the final image to look like a real-life war. The scene that is being portrayed is one of what you could see on battlefield, and if you did not know the image was fake you could have easily believed it to be real.

Photo manipulation is still popular to this day and is still being used in conflict images even though sometimes the changes are more subtle and hardly noticeable unless of course the images are AI generated then the images become more conversational and, in our day, and age they have a wide range of publicity meaning a lot of different personal views.

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and deep fakes have introduced new methods of creating, manipulating, and distributing conflict-related content. AI algorithms can generate realistic images, videos, and sounds based on input data, allowing for the creation of hyper-realistic portrayals of conflict. While these technologies are often used to create fake or manipulated content, they also open new avenues for exploring the psychological and emotional impacts of conflict through digital art. Deep fake technology, which uses AI to create hyper-realistic videos of people saying or doing things they never actually did, is one of the most controversial developments in digital conflict representation.

Deep fakes can be used to manipulate political narratives or create fake evidence in the context of warfare and propaganda. However, they also challenge traditional notions of truth and reality, prompting viewers to question the authenticity of images and videos they encounter in the media. In this way, deep fakes, and AI-generated content not only present new tools for representing conflict but also complicate our relationship with visual media, raising important questions about the intersection of technology, truth, and power. AI can generate realistic images, videos, and sounds based on input data, allowing for the creation of realistic portrayals of conflict.

While these technologies are often used to create fake or manipulated content, they also open new avenues for exploring the psychological and emotional impacts of conflict through digital art. Artists have begun using AI to create representations of conflict that may not directly show war scenes but exaggerate the feelings and implications

of conflict. AI algorithms can be trained to generate emotional representations of war and violence, reflecting the psychological toll of conflict.



Unknown artist

For example, in this image you can see a little boy with a stuffed teddy bear standing opposite what seem to be his house in total ruins, this image makes the viewer feel sad and helpless, yet that is what the artist wants us to feel when we see this image they want us to feel emotion even though it is not a real image. And that is why most conflict AI images are made is so that the images full of feelings. Speaking in a Guardian article Renee DiResta a technical research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory said 'One of the real challenges is that people are going to believe what they see if it conforms to what they want to believe. In a world of unreality in which you can create that content that fulfils that need, one of the real challenges is whether media literacy efforts actually solve any of the problems. Or will we move further into divergent realities – where people are going to continue to hold the belief in something that they have seen on the internet as long as it tells them what they want.

' DiResta R, The Guardian (2023)



Unknown artist

AI images such like this one are being created every day on both sides of the Gaza war, the images show children being victims of war, they are created as a source of retaliation to show the public that are not living in the warzones that there is always one side worse off than the other. In an article for AP news David Klepper wrote on the deep fakes of the Gaza war he mentions how 'in many cases, the fakes seem designed to evoke a strong emotional reaction by including the bodies of babies, children, or families. In the bloody first days of the war, supporters of both Israel and Hamas alleged the other side had victimized children and babies; deep fake images of wailing infants offered photographic 'evidence' that was quickly held up as proof.' Klepper D, the deep fakes *from the Gaza war increase fears about AI's power to mislead*. (2023)

While AI offers many opportunities for understanding, representing, and addressing conflict, it also introduces significant ethical challenges,

including concerns about accountability in military actions, the spread of misinformation, and the potential dehumanization of conflict. As AI technology continues to advance, it will undoubtedly play an even greater role in how we engage with and understand the complex and often painful realities of conflict in the 21st century.

The use of digital technology in conflict imagery has raised several ethical considerations which range from concerns on manipulation of images which have risen controversy in conflict reporting. Software such as Adobe Photoshop enables photographers and digital artists to manipulate images for artistic effect, creating surreal or symbolic representations of conflict. For example, an artist may de-saturate colours, add digital layers of texture, or modify the composition of an image to convey the psychological trauma associated with war. In this way, digital photography becomes a tool not just for documenting, but for interpreting and communicating the emotional and human impact of conflict.



Adnan H, (2006) The aftermath of an IDF attack on Beirut

An example of photo editing would be this image which was taken by a freelance photographer Adnan Haji in 2006, Adnan digitally altered his images he took from the Lebanon Israel war, the image on the left is the altered image and the image on the right is the original image. The image was altered to exaggerate the smoke from the bombed building creating a more dramatic visual impact, this caused some consequences with being accused of creating a false narrative.



Contreras, N. (2013) A Syrian opposition fighter takes cover during an exchange of fire with government forces in Telata village.

This is another example of photo editing, A documentary photographer named Narciso Contreras took this image while he was photographing the war in Syria. The image on the left is the original images where you can see a film camera in the bottom left corner Contreras did not like that camera being there so he cloned the background and placed it on top of the camera so it just look like some bushes and also played around with the contrast of the image, which you can see the edit version on the right.

Editing conflict images can cause major upset and even some anger from the public as we can no longer trust in what we see. In an article published by light rocket the author Katya Mulvaney wrote how through the different years we have started to doubt the truth of the image we see, she mentions how 'our trust in the veracity of the photographic image has declined. In the traditional days of film photography, we tended to believe that 'the camera never lies. Photographic images recorded on celluloid film, though edited and selective in their framing, were generally considered to be authentic records. In the current digital era, our confidence in the truthfulness of images has been eroded by our knowledge that digital pictures are relatively easy to manipulate.' Mulvaney, K., (2022). *How Photography Has Shifted Our Perspective of War*.

Another reason I have found for this subject is that how social media has reported conflict, social media platforms are a strong tool for disseminating images about conflict, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Tick Tok enables users to simply upload and broadcast images to the entire world. The images created by image makers play a crucial role in shaping public opinion about the current conflicts happening worldwide, conflict images have the power to influence how people perceive distant wars but also how they engage with issues such as foreign policy and international law. The emotional power of conflict imagery on social media creates a sense of urgency and empathy prompting governments to act; by using an image of a person in distress upon conflict such as a victim of refugee or violence may be dehumanizing for the individual with sometimes the individual not giving consent.

The role of social media in conflict representation has also raised ethical and political questions. The ease with which images can be manipulated or misinterpreted poses challenges to truth and authenticity, as well as concerns over privacy and safety for those involved in documenting conflict. However, the ubiquity of digital platforms ensures that conflicts around the world can be witnessed and acted upon by global audiences, amplifying the voices of those who may otherwise be silenced.

In the current era we live in everybody has a smartphone and can take and share the images themselves. Just like Susan Trangmar writes 'As smartphone cameras produce images for continuous circulation and consumption, modification and exchanges, the image gains significance by its sharing power and multiplication in widely differing contexts.' Trangmar S, *The photographic image in digital culture*. p. 48, Martin Lister, (2019)

Due to everybody owning a smartphone that can take perfectly good images, we no longer need photojournalist covering the conflict in different countries, as we see all conflict being posted on all the social media platforms by the victims that are living directly in the centre of conflict. The issue with the online platforms is that the images being posted and shared around the world don't always show the whole truth of the

matter and some images are fabricated to show a whole different side to the truth, they only show what the user believes the media would want to see and react too such like the destruction of towns or city's, the family's being left homeless and torn apart, the blood and gore of civilians and the death and carnage left behind. What we see posted online is only the worst side of the conflict, we get no backstory to the images only anger and blame towards the people that caused the conflict.

'In professional and amateur images alike, the generic character of war photography asserts itself, and the vast and rapid flow of photographic images is used to bolster the political viewpoint of the US and its fellow NATO countries, which of course say that the only legitimate use of forces their own. The agency of the individuals who take photographs and appear in them weak, subservient to these larger structures of the power and propaganda.' Stallabrass J, (2022) The look of War p.9

Summary

Overall image makers have used digital technology to utilize conflict in many ways creators can not only capture the immediacy of conflict but also challenge its traditional depictions, offering new ways to experience, reflect on, and respond to the complexities of human conflict. As digital technologies continue to evolve, the possibilities for exploring conflict in innovative ways are bound to expand, raising both new opportunities for engagement and ethical questions about the manipulation of visual media in times of crisis. digital technologies have revolutionized how image makers explore and represent conflict, providing new tools for capturing, manipulating, and experiencing the emotional, psychological, and societal dimensions of violence and war.

List of resources

Articles

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<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jul/20/artificial-intelligence-us-elections>.

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Mulvaney, K. (2022). *How Photography Has Shifted Our Perspective of War*. [online]

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Books

Linfield S, (2010) *The cruel radiance: photography and political violence*

Lister M, (2019) *The photographic image in digital culture*

Stallabrass J, (2022) *The look of War*