



HOW DOES DIGITAL MANIPULATION AND APPROPRIATION IMPACT DOCUMENTARY AUTHENTICITY, INTEGRITY AND NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY?

Independent Project – ADAA6000
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Summary of Topic:

This inquiry examines how digital manipulation and appropriation affect contemporary documentary photography's authenticity and narrative construction. It addresses the ethical challenges posed by advancements in digital technology and artificial intelligence, which contest public trust and challenge journalistic standards.

By analysing case studies and theoretical perspectives, the study explores how photographers have shifted from passive observers to active narrative creators in a media landscape where truth and fiction increasingly blur. This exploration highlights the implications of these changes for visual storytelling integrity and the responsibilities of documentary photographers in a rapidly evolving technological environment.

Introduction

Documentary Photography has long stood as a medium for witnessing reality, telling truths, and generating viewer emotions. Stark realities are glimpsed of social injustice, the raw emotions of conflict, and the resilience of those enduring hardship. It has also played a crucial role in shaping public awareness and sparking movements for social change. As Susan Sontag (2003, p. 13) argued, photography serves as a record of events and acts as a powerful emotional trigger that helps form social consciousness.

However, the rise of digital technology has introduced significant challenges that threaten the integrity of documentary photography as we know it.

In today's digital world, the convenience of images being altered, manipulated and shared has significantly questioned that once-defined truth. This shift raises important questions regarding authenticity, ethics, and the moral responsibilities of photographers (Azoulay, 2008). The role of documentary photographers has transformed from that of passive observers into active creators of visual narratives, influencing public perception. The ethical limits of image manipulation in photojournalism is a debated issue. With the rise of advanced and easily accessible digital tools, concerns about their effect on visual credibility have increased. According to Newton (1998), photojournalism holds a “burden of visual truth,” as the public looks to images not just as supplementary illustrations but as truthful representations of reality. Even minor edits like adjusting saturation, contrast, or cropping can significantly

affect how viewers interpret a scene. These alterations, often viewed as standard post processing, can inadvertently change the emotional tone or factual implications of an image. Newton insists that the primary expectation of journalistic photography is accuracy over artistry. When images are altered beyond their factual integrity, they lose their function as dependable documents (Newton, 1998). The shift from documentation to visual storytelling pushes the boundaries between reporting and narrative development, posing significant ethical challenges for journalists and their audiences alike. For example, Bendiksen's provocative exploration reflects broader concerns about the ease with which AI-generated imagery can infiltrate documentary photography. In today's media, *The Book of Veles* underscores the growing difficulty in distinguishing between genuine and synthetic imagery and truth, reinforcing the dissertation's argument that digital technology has blurred the once-clear boundaries of photographic authenticity. Through examining influential thinkers and artists, this study aims to highlight what is at stake for documentary photography in this modern age and how photographers can adapt to the challenges posed by new technologies while remaining committed to the core values of their craft.

As visual representation challenges evolve, it is crucial to examine how digital manipulation affects the authenticity of documentary imagery and influences narrative construction in contemporary visual culture. Documentary photography has historically been a powerful witness to truth, shaping public awareness and understanding.

Pioneers like Jacob Riis and Dorothea Lange used their cameras to advocate for social reform, exposing poverty and racial injustice. Their impactful photographs went beyond

artistic expression, stirring audiences into action and solidifying photography's role in journalism and activism.

From its inception, photography has been susceptible to manipulation and bias, shaped by framing, timing, and image selection choices. As Susan Sontag noted (1973), "To photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude." This highlights photography's subjectivity and raises questions about truth in visual representation. While analogue technologies limit historical manipulation, today's digital advancements has expanded the possibilities for distortion, allowing for the creation of images that appear authentically documented.

The digital environment has significantly transformed the relationship between viewers and images. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have accelerated the creation of manipulated visuals, blurring the lines between authentic documentation and staged imagery. Using filters, AI visuals, and misinformation strategies raises concerns about photographic authenticity. This chaotic environment challenges the assumption that photographs accurately reflect reality, raising scepticism about the images we see on our feeds.

This dissertation investigates how technological and cultural shifts impact documentary photography's integrity and narrative development today. By examining

historical contexts and analysing contemporary examples from impactful photojournalism to Visually appealing for Instagram. moments, this study explores the evolving relationship between photography and truth, considering the potential future implications of advanced digital manipulation techniques.

The dissertation highlights the urgent need to evaluate photographers' ethical responsibilities in today's visual media. This responsibility extends to media organisations, educators, and audiences, who must navigate representation and authenticity in image consumption. The study calls for a renewed commitment to transparency and integrity in visual storytelling, stressing the importance of ethical considerations as truths evolve. By examining digital manipulation's implications, this research aims to enrich the discourse on documentary photography's role in shaping public consciousness and collective memory.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation will research the profound ways digital technology has changed the practice of documentary photography, scrutinising its traditional claims to 'authenticity' and the narratives it has the power to present, by examining the ethical dilemmas associated with digital manipulation and exploring how contemporary artists and theorists grapple with these pressing issues. Additionally, the research will reflect on the photographers' responsibilities as they balance storytelling and the pursuit of truth.

Chapter 2 discusses several examples which have been selected due to how these images have been manipulated to dramatise the narrative and how propaganda techniques have been used as a method of influence. Additionally, the examples selected illustrate digital manipulation, which covers a vast time frame, dating back to when photography began to the current day, to show the range and scope of altered perception.

Chapter 3 will discuss ethical journalism founded on principles that ensure the integrity of news reporting and its commitment to serving the public. The Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) outlines five core principles integral to this pursuit (Gross, 2004)

Chapter 4 provides a thorough exploration of how social media and artificial intelligence significantly influence the rapid creation and spread of altered images. It particularly examines how platforms like Instagram and Twitter tend to amplify emotionally charged content, which is often misleading, thereby shaking the foundations of traditional visual credibility that audiences once trusted.

The chapter touches key concepts such as algorithmic bias, where algorithms tend to yield results that echo the existing biases inherent in the data they analyse, and context collapse, a phenomenon where various social contexts blend together, leading to miscommunication. also, it sheds light on the rise of deepfakes, advanced AI-generated videos that can convincingly depict individuals saying or doing things they never actually did.

By highlighting these technological and cultural elements, the chapter illustrates how they collectively reshape the ways photographic content is created, engaged with, and accepted in our modern digital landscape. Ultimately, it raises crucial questions about authenticity, trust, and the future of visual media.

Chapter 5 presents *The Book of Veles* by Jonas Bendiksen as a pivotal case study that interrogates the boundaries of photographic truth. Initially accepted as authentic, the project's later exposure as a fabricated documentary using CGI and AI-generated text sparked controversy within the photographic community. This chapter considers the ethical and narrative implications of such work and explores how intentional deception can function as both critique and cautionary tale in the era of synthetic media.

Firstly, journalists must carefully strive for truth and accuracy, verifying facts meticulously. Although absolute truth may be elusive, the commitment to factual correctness is essential. Secondly, maintaining independence from political, corporate, or cultural influences is vital. Journalists should avoid actions that could compromise their impartiality and disclose any potential conflicts of interest. Additionally, reporting should provide a balanced perspective by acknowledging multiple viewpoints. While complete objectivity may not always be achievable, fostering impartiality is crucial for building trust and credibility. Furthermore, journalists must be aware of their work's impact on individuals and communities, striving to minimise harm and prevent

unnecessary distress. Finally, taking accountability for one's work is paramount. Journalists should promptly correct errors and engage with audience concerns, exemplifying professionalism and responsibility. Adhering to these principles is essential for maintaining public trust and ensuring journalism fulfils its democratic role by delivering accurate, fair, and reliable information, as supported by Lyons (2012).

Consequently, ethical considerations in written and visual journalism are fundamental in upholding the profession's core purpose and significant contribution to a democratic society. In photojournalism, the authenticity and realism of images are crucial for achieving the core mission of journalism. According to Newton (2001), viewers depend on visual cues to interpret reality, which makes the integrity of photographs essential for maintaining trust in the media. Images are potent instruments for conveying truth and provoking emotional responses, enhancing the public's comprehension of events and issues. Maintaining the integrity of visual reporting is not just a professional duty, but a commitment to preserving public trust and ensuring that the information shared is seen as being accurate and dependable.

The principal aim of journalism is to furnish citizens with accurate and reliable information essential for thriving in a free society. This role incorporates a variety of functions, including defining community, encouraging a shared language and knowledge, highlighting societal goals and challenges, and promoting public

engagement. Additionally, journalism offers entertainment, acts as a watchdog, and amplifies the voices of relegated communities.

Chapter 1 - Defining Authenticity in Documentary Photography

To grasp the profound impact of digital technology on documentary photography, the fundamental question is posed: What does authenticity entail in this ever-changing world?

Authenticity in photography is a complex concept debated across academic, artistic, and journalistic circles. Wells (2021, p. 20) explores these tensions, particularly how digital tools have redefined a truthful image in documentary photography, focusing on truthfulness, originality, and integrity in capturing and presenting images. This discourse impacts the media by challenging traditional ideas of objectivity and truth in visual representation. Authenticity varies based on context, intention, and audience perception (Meron, 2019). Theoretically, it questions whether photographs accurately reflect reality or are manipulated for specific perspectives. In documentary and journalistic photography, authenticity aligns with accuracy and objectivity and seeks truthful representation without staging or misleading elements. Equally, artistic authenticity values personal expression and creativity, where manipulation and editing are integral to the creative process. Historical authenticity emphasises reliability as primary sources documenting events, while cultural and social authenticity stresses

respectful representation of diverse communities, avoiding stereotypes and ensuring consent.

With digital technology's rise, authenticity has become more complex. Ritchin (2009, p. 29) discusses how digital imaging changes our perception of photography, leading to a growing distrust in the authenticity of images and sparking discussions about the implications of digital manipulation. AI-generated images and deepfakes; therefore, exploring metadata and blockchain to verify image authenticity is becoming crucial (Farid, 2009). Authenticity in photography is evolving due to technological advancements and changes in societal views, leading to a greater appreciation of its role in documenting and interpreting the world around us.

Documentary Photography has its roots in capturing genuine events as they unfold in real time. Traditionally, this has been closely linked with principles of truthfulness and transparency, striving to offer viewers an unmediated glimpse into reality. Renowned cultural critic Susan Sontag, in her influential works *On Photography* (1973, p. 3) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003, p.102), articulated the significant role of photographs in forging an emotional connection between the subject and the viewer. Through these images, viewers are invited to experience the depths of human emotion, whether it be the agony, elation, or resilience expressed in the lives of others, often far removed from their own experiences. Sontag argues that the real strength of documentary photography lies in its ability to witness reality. Building on this expanded understanding of authenticity, examining how emerging technologies further

complicate these ethical and representational responsibilities in documentary photography becomes necessary. Along with technical accuracy, the concept of authenticity also includes the interactive and ethical relationships between the photographer, the subject, and the viewer. Ariella Azoulay (2008) introduces the concept of the "civil contract of photography," arguing that photographs are not just visual documents but are part of an ongoing ethical relationship. This suggests that the integrity of an image lies not only in its factual accuracy but also in the responsibilities embedded in its creation and reception. Azoulay's perspective challenges the idea of the photographer as a detached observer and instead emphasises their role as an active participant in shaping visual narratives. In this sense, authenticity becomes less about an image's objective truth, and more about how faithfully it engages with its subjects, avoids exploitation, and invites critical reflection from its audience. This broader definition is particularly significant in today's digital age of increasingly complex and participatory image creation.

Chapter 2 – Manipulation

By exploring the various ways in which images have been manipulated, we can gain insight into how people can be misled by the techniques employed by their creators.

Image manipulation can involve altering the visual content to change the context, enhance certain features, or fabricate new situations (Wells, 2015 pp.126–127).

These techniques can range from simple edits, such as adjusting brightness and contrast, to more complex alterations, like replacing or removing elements within an image. As a result, viewers may not realise they are consuming a distorted reality instead of an authentic representation (Popova, 2015).

Understanding how image manipulation works reveals its deceptive potential.

According to Farid, (2009 pp.16–25), digital forensics can often detect such alterations, although the sophistication of tools like Photoshop makes this increasingly difficult and encourages critical thinking among audiences. Recognising signs of altered imagery helps individuals question the authenticity of what they see, leading to a more informed and discerning public, ultimately, this awareness can reduce the likelihood of being misled by cleverly crafted visual narratives.



Fig. 1 Altered image, Beirut



Fig. 2 Unaltered Image, Beirut

Reuters published the digitally manipulated photograph by freelance photographer Adnan Hajj during the 2006 Lebanon War.

In Figure 2, the original photograph shows smoke rising from bombed buildings in Beirut, Lebanon. The smoke appears relatively natural, though the scene still conveys destruction. In the altered Image in Figure 1, the manipulated version contains darker, denser, and more widespread smoke, artificially added using photo editing software (e.g., Photoshop). The alterations make the damage seem more extreme, providing gravitas through the enhanced drama of the historical context.

The manipulation of news images is a serious ethical violation (Alper, 2014). News agencies and journalists are expected to provide factual and unaltered information. This incident damaged Reuters' credibility and raised concerns about the authenticity of war photography (Alper, 2014). By increasing the intensity of smoke, the edited image exaggerated the impact of Israeli airstrikes, potentially shaping public opinion against

Israel. It suggested a more devastating attack than occurred, misleading viewers who rely on the media for accurate information. War images evoke strong emotions, influencing public perception and political conversations. A more dramatic scene can intensify anger, fear, or sympathy, affecting international reactions and policy decisions.

Once exposed, Reuters withdrew 920 of the altered images, terminated its contract with Adnan Hajj, and reinforced policies to prevent similar incidents (Song, 2006). This scandal highlighted the urgent need for rigorous editorial oversight in photojournalism. Campbell emphasises that implementing ethical guidelines is essential for preventing such breaches and restoring trust in digital media practices (Campbell, 2014). This image further serves as a cautionary tale about the power of visual media in shaping narratives. It highlights how manipulated imagery can distort reality, propagate different emotions, and mislead the public. It also reinforces the responsibility of media organisations to uphold truth and transparency, ensuring that journalistic integrity is not compromised.

Image manipulation has a long history, with one notable example being the altered portrait of Abraham Lincoln. In this instance, Lincoln's head was pasted onto the body of John C. Calhoun, a 19th-century U.S. senator known for his advocacy of slavery. This manipulated portrait has circulated as an authentic image of Lincoln for decades, illustrating the enduring potential for images to mislead and distort public perception.

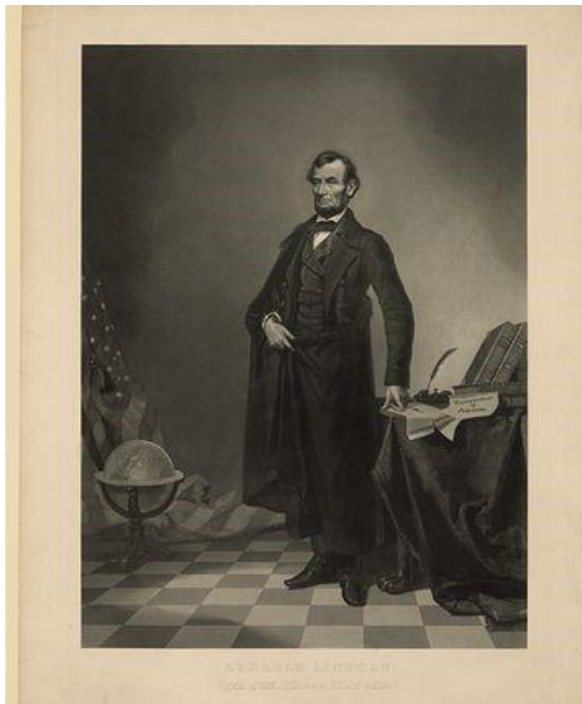


Fig. 3 Abraham Lincoln

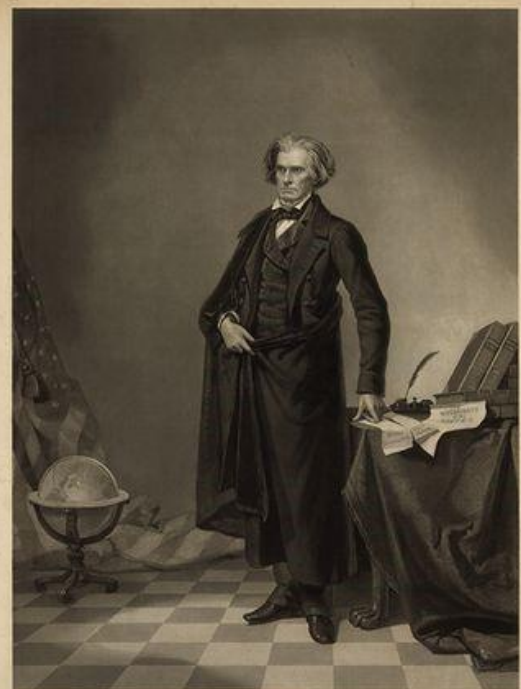


Fig. 4 Original of John Calhoun

In Fig. 4, the authentic portrait of John C. Calhoun with his actual body and stance can be seen. Reviewing both images side by side, the alteration is visible. The right image is a fabricated portrait where Lincoln's head has been placed onto the body of John C Calhoun (Ken, 2019). The background, clothing, and stance belong to Calhoun, but Lincoln's head has been inserted in the Calhoun photograph. This was created to create a more "formal" or imposing stance of Lincoln at a time when his pictures were limited.

This is one of the earliest recorded instances of photographic manipulation. It showcases how, even in the 19th century, images were altered to shape historical

narratives and perceptions of figures (Macdonald, 2024). Many people viewed this image as an authentic depiction of Lincoln, unaware that his body had been replaced. This highlights the power of imagery in shaping how historical figures are remembered. Gunning (2004) refers to these manipulations as 'rhetorical fictions', where the photograph functions more like a persuasive image than a factual record. By placing Lincoln's head on a more "statesman-like" body, the altered image attempts to project an idealised version, making him appear more authoritative and composed.

The irony of using John C. Calhoun's body for Lincoln is profound. Calhoun was a staunch supporter of slavery, while Lincoln was known for the Emancipation Proclamation. The manipulation creates an unintended contrast between their legacies. The Lincoln-Calhoun image and the Adnan Hajj manipulated photograph share a common theme: both deceived viewers and altered historical narratives through manipulation, whether digital in the case of Hajj or analogue in the case of Lincoln. While the Lincoln manipulation was misleading, it was relatively harmless compared to the fallout from the Hajj case. Once the Hajj manipulation was exposed, it significantly damaged media credibility and fuelled scepticism regarding war reporting and trust in photography.

The Lincoln image was likely altered to create a more polished and authoritative portrait of the president, reflecting the limited availability of high-quality photographs at that time. In contrast, the Adnan Hajj photo was deliberately modified to exaggerate the devastation of war, aimed explicitly at swaying public opinion.

The Lincoln image represents a form of historical photo manipulation that predates our modern digital era, illustrating that the practice of altering images for influence has long existed. On the other hand, the Hajj image showcases the ethical challenges of modern digital manipulation, highlighting the increasing need for transparency in journalism.

These images underscore photographic manipulation's profound impact on shaping public perception. Whether for political propaganda, historical revisionism, or media bias, altered images distort reality and influence how we interpret significant events and figures. The Lincoln image serves as a historical foundation for the Hajj manipulation, demonstrating that even before the age of Photoshop, images were modified to influence narratives, create illusions, and shape opinions.



Fig. 5 Cottingley Fairies fabricated image.

The famous Cottingley Fairies photographs were taken in 1917 by Frances Griffiths and Elsie Wright in Cottingley, England. The photograph shows a young girl, believed to be Frances, surrounded by small fairy-like figures with wings, dancing and playing instruments. The scene appears magical and otherworldly, seemingly capturing real fairies interacting with the girl. The background is lush greenery, giving the illusion of a hidden fairy world. The Cottingley Fairies photographs became one of the most infamous hoaxes in photographic history. They were widely believed to be authentic in the early 20th century. They fooled the general public and respected figures, including the renowned writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (creator of Sherlock Holmes), who firmly believed in spiritualism (Tompkins, 2022).

At a time when photography was still a relatively new and mysterious medium, people had great trust in photographs as factual evidence, as it was seen as a recording method. As editing was unavailable, a few questions were asked about whether photographs or content could be fabricated using physical cut-outs and creative staging. These images convinced many that fairies existed, fuelling interest in the supernatural and spiritualism. Only decades later (in the 1980s) did Frances and Elsie confess that the fairies were paper cut-outs, proving the entire series was an elaborate hoax (Harding, 2005).

The hoax demonstrated the power of belief; even logical minds like Conan Doyle were deceived because they wanted to believe in something more significant as supported by Rose (2016). This example showcased how photography can be manipulated to create

illusions that shape cultural myths.

Like the Lincoln-Calhoun manipulation and the Adnan Hajj doctored war photograph, the Cottingley Fairies hoax reveals a pattern of photographic deception used to influence belief, perception, and historical narratives and expresses people's desire to believe in magic and the supernatural, using photography as a form of "proof" and evidence of truth. Cottingley Fairies hoax demonstrated that photographs alone should not be taken as truth.

Many people were drawn to the Cottingley Fairies because they wished to believe in their reality. Similarly, the Hajj image was readily accepted, as it fitted a narrative that resonated with existing beliefs. The Lincoln image experienced a similar fate, gaining popularity due to its portrayal of a more dignified and powerful historical figure.

Together, the Cottingley Fairies, Adnan Hajj's altered war photo, and Lincoln's edited portrait highlight the significant impact images can have on shaping our beliefs and narratives. Each case illustrates how photographs can be manipulated or misrepresented to serve various agendas, whether they be personal convictions, political messaging, or revising history. These examples underscore the importance of media literacy today (Arnheim, 1997). In a time filled with deepfakes and digital alterations, it is crucial to critically evaluate the authenticity of visual evidence before accepting it as fact.

Chapter 3 - Image Manipulation Techniques

The rise of image manipulation has significantly changed how photographers approach their craft. Before the advent of digital SLR cameras, image manipulation was done physically in darkrooms using techniques such as dodging and burning to alter prints. Digital imaging introduced software like Adobe Photoshop, which revolutionised the editing process (Manovich, 2001). This shift from physical to digital techniques provides valuable insight into the history of our craft and the tools we utilise today. With the introduction of RAW file formats, which “is the image as the sensor captures it. It is unprocessed and ... retains maximum quality and data” (EOS magazine, 2025). This capability allows photographers to capture all data from a camera's sensor in its RAW state, providing greater flexibility in post processing. This advancement enables significant adjustments in exposure, colour balance, and sharpness without degrading image quality.

The rise of social media platforms, such as Instagram, along with powerful editing apps like Lightroom Mobile, has significantly transformed how images are edited and shared. As Frosh (2001) critiques the industrialised production of ‘authenticity’ in commercial image libraries, this evolution also influences documentary aesthetics. Users now have access to advanced editing tools directly on their smartphones or tablets, allowing

them to edit and manipulate images on the go with ease. This shift has further changed photography's dynamic in the digital age (Farid, 2009).

Photography is on the brink of thrilling developments, especially with the incorporation of AI technology. As artificial intelligence becomes more integral, it is set to improve the photography experience by streamlining intricate editing processes like skin retouching and colour grading and facilitating real time adjustments, for example, BBC News (Lyons, 2012). Tools such as Adobe Firefly are leading the way in generating images from the ground up, marking a transition toward more creative methods in image creation (Macdonald, 2024).

As advanced image editing tools evolve, they increasingly redefine the boundaries of photographic editing. It is essential to explore real world case studies that highlight how these techniques blur the lines between artistic expression and journalistic responsibility. With the constant advancement of editing software, the challenge of distinguishing between ethical enhancement and deceptive manipulation becomes ever more complex. New automated tools driven by artificial intelligence, like content aware fill, neural filters, and generative inpainting, allow users to effortlessly remove, add, or rearrange elements in an image without needing extensive expertise. These capabilities are no longer exclusive to professional editors; they are now integrated into consumer grade platforms, leading to more widespread and less detectable manipulation (Rathgeb, 2022). These techniques often operate subtly, resulting in what

Paglen (2019) refers to as "invisible images" altered through machine learning methods that leave no obvious signs of alteration.

The use of invisible manipulation in imaging brings to light significant ethical issues, especially in documentary filmmaking and journalism. Rathgeb (2022) emphasises that as AI technologies take over tasks like facial retouching, background changes, and the alteration of emotional expressions, the responsibility and control that photographers traditionally held may increasingly shift to algorithms. The rapid nature of these changes complicates conventional methods of verifying images, making it more challenging for editors, viewers, or forensic experts to assess the authenticity of a photograph.

Additionally, the use of AI-driven enhancement tools complicates the distinction between genuine creative expression and deceptive representation. Features like auto-retouching that smooth skin, enhance eye brightness, or alter body shapes might appear insignificant, but they contribute to unrealistic beauty standards and distort true appearances. In documentary photography, even slight modifications can jeopardise the credibility of images. As AI continues to play a larger role in the editing process, it is crucial for photographers to be open about their techniques and for organisations to establish clear ethical guidelines that uphold the authenticity of images.

With substantial advancements in camera sensor technology, we can anticipate significant improvements in image quality, particularly in low-light conditions. The ongoing miniaturisation of technology is likely to lead to more compact and portable devices that deliver high-end performance. This evolution will make high-quality photography accessible to a wider audience, inspiring more individuals to explore their creative potential.

We can also examine the work of Jonas Bendiksen and *The Book of Veles* (Bendiksen, 2022), as it is a captivating case study that fundamentally challenges traditional notions of authenticity in documentary photography. Initially framed as an earnest documentary exploration of life in Veles, North Macedonia, an area infamous for its prolific generation of fake news, Bendiksen ultimately unveils his entire endeavour as an elaborate fabrication Chao, (2021). Employing a skilful blend of computer-generated imagery (CGI) and AI-generated text, he intentionally misleads his audience, aiming to highlight the inherent fragility of perceived photographic truth.

Bendiksen's innovative work challenges traditional notions of documentary art, pushing the boundaries of authenticity and representation. By presenting a carefully constructed narrative that mimics the style of genuine documentary filmmaking, he invites viewers to question the reliability of visual media in an age increasingly dominated by digital manipulation (Chesney and Citron, 2019). This thought-provoking approach not only engages audiences on a deeper intellectual level but also explores

significant themes such as the ethical implications of artificial intelligence in storytelling and the quest for truth in a world saturated with misinformation.

Throughout the project, the stark contrasts between reality and deception enhance the viewer's awareness of how easily perceptions can be distorted. Bendiksen's portrayal of Veles serves as a version of the broader global crisis of trust in media, ultimately encouraging audiences to remain vigilant and discerning in their information consumption. By blurring the lines between truth and fabrication, his work resonates powerfully in today's landscape, where the integrity of documentary art is constantly challenged and redefined (Paglen, 2016).

In contrast to previous examples of manipulated imagery, such as the infamous doctored war photograph by Adnan Hajj and the creative Cottingley Fairies hoax, Bendiksen's project is intentionally designed to reveal its own deception. His goal extends beyond propaganda; he seeks to challenge whether audiences, institutions, and even his fellow professionals can truly distinguish between fact and fiction.

Similarly, the Cottingley Fairies hoax, consisting of meticulously staged photographs from the early 20th century, successfully deceived not only the public but also notable figures like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. These images thrived on society's willingness to

accept photographic evidence without rigorous scrutiny, mirroring the intricate complexities present in Bendiksen's work.

While these instances illustrate how imagery can be manipulated to mislead, *The Book of Veles* elevates this conversation by embedding deception within an artistic experiment. This makes it one of the most interesting challenges to authenticity in contemporary photography. The Ethical Journalism Network's five core principles, which include truth and accuracy, independence, and accountability, are particularly relevant in this context. Traditional journalism relies heavily on verifiable facts, while Bendiksen's work demonstrates that, with the help of AI and digital tools, one can create entirely artificial narratives that still maintain an air of credibility.

The rapidly changing media underscores the urgent need for advanced verification technologies, such as metadata tracking, blockchain authentication, and advanced AI systems to detect synthetic media (Farid, 2009). The responsibilities of documentary photographers are undergoing significant transformation, and the rise of digital manipulation imposes on photographers, journalists, and audiences the cultivation of more media literacy skills.

The Book of Veles reinforces the dissertation's central thesis that authenticity in documentary photography is not an essential quality but must be consistently

scrutinised. Bendiksen's work is both a cautionary tale and an intellectual exploration of the new frontier of photographic deception. It compels us to reassess the definitions of truth in an increasingly digital age (Burgoyne, 2021).

Chapter 4 - Social Media and Instant Deception

In today's social media, images can be manipulated and shared almost instantly. Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok allow professionals and everyday users to create and distribute edited visuals widely. A prime example is Pope Francis's viral, AI-generated image in a white puffer jacket, which fooled millions (Chesney and Citron, 2019). The rapid spread of such images often outpaces fact-checking efforts, highlighting concerns about the fragility of visual truth in the digital public sphere.

Social media platforms prioritise emotional impact over factual accuracy, with algorithms boosting engaging content like shocking visuals. As a result, manipulated images, whether deepfakes or subtly altered photos, often receive more exposure than genuine content, complicating the public's ability to distinguish between real and fake visual stories.

The concept of "algorithmic bias" complicates the situation further. Platforms are not neutral; they shape user experiences through predictive models of behavior. Marwick and boyd (2011) discuss "context collapse," where images lose their original meaning as they are widely shared and reinterpreted. A photo intended for documentation can

quickly morph into a meme, be used for political propaganda, or spread misinformation in viral contexts.

The rise of deepfake technology challenges the authenticity of documentaries. Using generative adversarial networks (GANs), deepfakes create realistic yet fabricated videos and images. Originally intended for entertainment, they now pose risks to journalism, politics, and public trust. Chesney and Citron (2019) warn that deepfakes can undermine democracy by generating misleading evidence and damaging visual credibility.



Fig 4 Pope in a puffer jacket

The 2023 "Pope in a puffer jacket" as seen in the Fig 6 photograph highlights misinformation through AI-generated images (Dolan, 2023). Created with a tool like Midjourney, the viral photo showed the Pope in a trendy white coat, blending realism with absurdity. Many initially believed it was real despite minor flaws until fact-checkers revealed the truth. This event emphasised the power of AI visuals and the public's tendency to accept convincing but fake images as authentic.

The real threat extends beyond just the production of synthetic images; it involves a broader decline in public trust. As noted by Paglen (2019), if audiences struggle to differentiate between genuine and manipulated images, they may start to lose faith in all forms of visual media. This widespread scepticism presents a significant challenge for documentary photographers and journalists, whose ability to deliver honest narratives relies heavily on public confidence.

To address these challenges, initiatives like BBC Verify and various fact-checking organizations are working on strategies to detect manipulated media. They are looking into technological solutions such as blockchain certification and metadata tracking to verify images right at the time they are captured. According to Rathgeb, (2022) incorporating tamper-proof authentication mechanisms into camera hardware could serve as a future defence against the rise of deepfakes and digitally altered images.

Technological solutions alone are not enough to address the challenges facing documentary photography and journalism. It is crucial for photographers and journalists to adhere to high ethical standards and maintain transparency in their work. Frosh (2001) critiques the “industrial production of authenticity” prevalent in commercial stock photography. The process of making reality visually appealing often prioritises economic motives over genuine documentary representation. In today’s social media, the drive for fame, revenue, or influence creates a significant temptation to alter images for greater emotional impact. To maintain authenticity, it is essential to adhere to ethical guidelines that avoid exaggeration.

Chapter 5 - The Book of Veles

Social media has expanded visual storytelling for specific voices, but it has also heightened vulnerability to misinformation. Photographers and visual activists must navigate this dynamic by balancing new opportunities with a commitment to integrity, accountability, and audience engagement. As instant image manipulation becomes prevalent, there is a need for both technological advancements and a cultural shift towards critical awareness. Authenticity in documentary photography must be actively constructed and constantly evaluated. This dissertation argues that preserving fragile trust is essential to visual storytelling, which relies on the collective efforts of image makers, institutions, and audiences.

The issues of authenticity and manipulation have become especially significant in projects such as Jonas Bendiksen's *The Book of Veles*. In this work, the intentional creation of a synthetic documentary prompts a more profound examination of truth, trust, and the changing role of photographers in the digital age.

Jonas Bendiksen's *The Book of Veles* deliberately examines photographic deception, contrasting with the often unintended spread of misinformation on social media. Bendiksen's work was originally framed as a genuine documentary project set in Veles, North Macedonia, a city notorious for generating fake news. The project intentionally blurred the lines between reality and fabrication. Berger (1972) noted that our knowledge and beliefs shape our perception, which is evident in how audiences initially accepted *The Book of Veles* without questioning its constructed nature. Utilising characters generated by CGI and text produced through artificial intelligence, the project developed a wholly imaginary story, keeping this fact hidden from viewers until it received significant praise from critics. This intentional approach not only challenged the fundamental expectations surrounding truth in documentary photography but also ignited a crucial ethical dialogue within the photographic community regarding the responsibilities of image makers in a time when trust is increasingly precarious.

Conclusion

This research has explored how digital manipulation and appropriation impact documentary photography's authenticity, integrity, and narrative construction. Once seen as a mirror of reality, photography's relationship with truth has become increasingly complex in the digital era.

Through historical examples and contemporary case studies, image manipulation is not a new phenomenon. However, today's technologies, from Photoshop to AI, have heightened the scale and subtlety of visual deception. Social media platforms further amplify manipulated imagery through algorithmic bias and emotional engagement, challenging traditional assumptions of photographic credibility. The rise of deepfakes and AI-generated imagery signals an urgent need for technical verification methods and a renewed ethical commitment within documentary practices. The case study of Jonas Bendiksen's *The Book of Veles* demonstrates how convincingly fabricated narratives can be presented as truth, raising important ethical and professional questions for visual storytellers.

In an era where visual misinformation spreads rapidly, the responsibilities of photographers, journalists, and audiences are evolving. It's important to stay committed to honesty, accuracy, and being open with each other! Technologies such as

blockchain verification and AI-detection tools offer potential safeguards, but critical media literacy among the public remains equally vital.

Documentary photography must evolve by proactively building trust instead of taking it for granted. With technology blurring the lines between reality and illusion, the future of visual storytelling relies on a continuous dedication to ethical standards, transparency, and thoughtful response to new challenges.

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