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ARTS | PHOTOGRAPHY

Do Digitally Altered Photos Represent Fact or Fiction?

Social media and new editing tools are recasting the digital landscape—and its rules—for photojournalism

Freelance journalist Veerender Jubbal was falsely described as a terrorist after an anonymous person doctored a photo of him so it appeared he was wearing a suicide vest and holding the Quran. *PHOTO: VEERENDER JUBBAL*

By **ELLEN GAMERMAN**

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Tamina-Florentine Zuch had just won an international photography contest with an arresting image of a young woman in the open door of a Mumbai train when online critics began descending on her: The picture was a composite. The colors were doctored. The photo couldn't be trusted.

Officials of the 2016 contest named for Zeiss camera lenses stood by Ms. Zuch, who nabbed the top prize on the strength of a series of India photographs. Earlier this year, when the same train photo won a category in a Smithsonian magazine contest, officials went a step further, authenticating the image after an in-depth review.

“I couldn’t believe how much time and effort people spent talking about this one picture,” said Ms. Zuch, a 25-year-old German photographer who counted more than 200 comments dissecting the image she shot in the fading daylight. “Today, everybody questions everything.”

A new wave of digital manipulation—and the blood sport of hunting for it—is roiling the world of photojournalism. Some of the industry’s biggest names and most established contests have been tarnished recently by accusations of tampering. Just as doping in sports has sullied a pursuit where no one is supposed to cheat, editing tools like Photoshop are increasingly casting suspicion over an industry where no picture is supposed to lie.

Photographer Tamina-Florentine Zuch won awards for her India series, which includes contrast

News organizations are grappling with the issue. Reuters late last year required freelancers to send photos in an original format that’s harder to alter, partly in an effort to avoid manipulation. Photographers entering the World Press Photo contest this year were issued new rules warning that adding or removing even minor content or making certain color adjustments were grounds for elimination. Several months ago, National Geographic sent updated ethics guidelines to its photographers to guard against digital manipulation and make sure the rules were clear to new contributors.

Photo-industry veteran David Walker described “manipulation creep” as news outlets allow more aggressive changes to slide through. “I often see news images with pronounced post-processing—heightened contrast and color saturation—in mainstream print and online new media,” said Mr. Walker, executive editor of the industry publication Photo District News. “I think—but of course cannot prove—some of it would have failed the smell test a few years ago.”

There’s little consensus on when editing has gone too far, especially since a limited amount of digital touching up is standard in the industry. National Geographic recently published an image that it deemed acceptable—but the same picture was eliminated from a photo contest as overly processed. In a letter to readers last month, magazine editor-in-chief Susan Goldberg said it was up for debate which organization made the correct call. “Reasonable people can disagree,” she wrote.

The Associated Press said it severed ties with freelance photographer Narciso Contreras after learning that he had digitally removed a video camera from this 2013 photo of a Syrian opposition fighter. *PHOTO: NARCISO CONTRERAS/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Photo manipulation has been an issue in journalism even before the doctored portrait of a darkened O.J. Simpson on the cover of Time magazine sparked outrage more than two decades ago. With digital editing tools so easy and ubiquitous, and sophisticated photo manipulation far tougher to detect, the debate is reaching a new pitch.

The central question is whether altered photos represent fact or fiction: Is a finished photo a depiction of actual events or is it an engaging setup? The rise of Instagram and other social-media platforms has blurred the line between advertising, art and photojournalism, which all adhere to different editing standards. As smartphones allow amateurs to alter their photos with a few quick moves, viewers now expect picture-perfect images everywhere. Many news outlets have pared their staffs, robbing photo departments of gatekeepers and leaving novices to navigate the industry without mentors. News outlets are distributing more images from bystanders, shots that ricochet around the internet even if they can't be verified.

This year, 16% of images entering the final round of the prestigious World Press Photo contest were eliminated due to digital manipulation after an independent jury examined a forensics report on dozens of pictures, said Lars Boering, managing director

of the World Press Photo Foundation. The unacceptable changes included erasing a window, removing a stain from a wall and altering colors so that the photo diverged from its original in-camera file, according to a person familiar with the entries.

Online sleuths said Steve McCurry erased two individuals and other details, left, from a 1983 photo of men aboard a rickshaw in Varanasi, India, right.

The numbers paint a conflicting picture. The World Press Photo jury eliminated 29 out of 174 entries in the penultimate round in 2016 and 20 out of 100 entries in 2015. By contrast, officials with the Pictures of the Year International photojournalism contest reviewed all 58,000 entries this year and held back about a dozen. “We really don’t wish to embarrass or diminish any photographer because what is standard processing for one person or news organization could be completely different for another,” said Rick Shaw, who oversees the competition.

Other contests don’t authenticate images at all. The Sony World Photography awards overseen by the London-based World Photography Organisation does not compare pictures in its documentary photography categories to the original unedited photo files but instead relies on the photographer’s word that the shot has not been manipulated.

A questionable news photo can heighten mistrust of the media and fuel conspiracy theorists. “If people start to think that news photographs are anything but truthful, then the value of those images is significantly diminished and the credibility of the photographer and the news organization is severely undermined,” said Mickey Osterreicher, general counsel for the National Press Photographers Association, adding that various industry forces have created a “perfect storm of manipulated images.”

The Wall Street Journal bars the alteration of news images beyond retouching to eliminate dust and scratches, small adjustments of color, tone, brightness or contrast needed for accurate reproduction and cropping for space in a way that doesn’t materially change the message conveyed by the photo.

Online, self-styled photo police are ready to expose photographers they believe have significantly altered their images. The effort carries a whiff of both public service and witch hunt: where the crowd goes, scandals, humiliations and firings sometimes follow. “Even small examples of a journalist overstepping bounds can get blown to huge proportions,” said Michael Zhang, editor of the photo news site PetaPixel.

Spanish photographer Harry Fisch won and lost a top prize in a National Geographic contest after

Tensions escalated in recent months as esteemed photographer Steve McCurry, best known for his iconic "Afghan Girl" photo on the cover of National Geographic magazine in 1985, was accused of digital manipulation. In the spring, a visitor to a show of Mr. McCurry's work in Italy spotted a traffic pole floating near a man's foot in one of the prints —an obvious Photoshop error.

Since then, online sleuths have alleged problems in other images. PetaPixel, which has been out front in chronicling the McCurry case and other Photoshop controversies, reported on the deletion of a boy from Mr. McCurry's 1983 photo of children kicking a soccer ball through water in Bangladesh and the removal of two rickshaw passengers and other details from a 1983 shot in Varanasi, India. An independent photographer originally discovered the conflicting soccer pictures on Mr. McCurry's website; another photographer found the two rickshaw images online but could not recall the source.

A National Geographic spokeswoman said the magazine removed two different McCurry images from its Instagram account after asking a representative for Mr. McCurry if any of the photos on the publication's feed had been manipulated.

Mr. McCurry told Time magazine in May that he now considers himself a "visual storyteller," not a photojournalist, adding that he shoots a variety of projects for clients that allow greater creative leeway than news assignments. Mr. McCurry, 66, was traveling and unavailable for comment. Bonnie McCurry V'Soske, his older sister and president of Steve McCurry Studios, LLC, said over his long career Mr. McCurry's images have migrated into the fine-art field. "Just because people call him a photojournalist doesn't make it so," she said.

Given Mr. McCurry's influence on photography's global stage—he has 1.5 million Instagram followers—the episode has caused some splintering. "Photojournalism is dead, so now we are 'visual storytellers'? I'm sorry, it doesn't mean anything to me," said Jean-François Leroy, longtime organizer of the international photojournalism festival Visa pour L'Image in Perpignan, France. He accused Mr. McCurry of "pretending to be a photojournalist."

Peter Fetterman, an art dealer in Santa Monica, Calif., who has represented Mr. McCurry for roughly 25 years, called criticism of the photographer "a storm in a teacup propagated by people who are incredibly jealous of his success." He considers Mr. McCurry an artist and a documentary photographer with high ethics and deep empathy for the subjects of his pictures. Mr. Fetterman, who is staging a solo show of Mr. McCurry's India photographs in September, doesn't expect the dispute to hurt sales of the gallery's $75,000 limited-edition portfolios each featuring 20 McCurry prints.

In May 2011, the White House released a digitally altered photo of officials including President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton being briefed on the mission against Osama bin Laden. A classified document in the image was deliberately blurred. *PHOTO: PETE SOUZA/THE WHITE HOUSE/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Inthis changing environment, old and new standards can sometimes clash. In 2012, Spanish travel photographer Harry Fisch won and lost a first-place prize in a National Geographic photo contest after organizers checked his original image against his edited entry and saw he had digitally erased a plastic bag in the background. Had he simply cropped it out of his nighttime shot along the Ganges River, the photographer could have kept his prize. But the contest didn't allow digitally removing content.

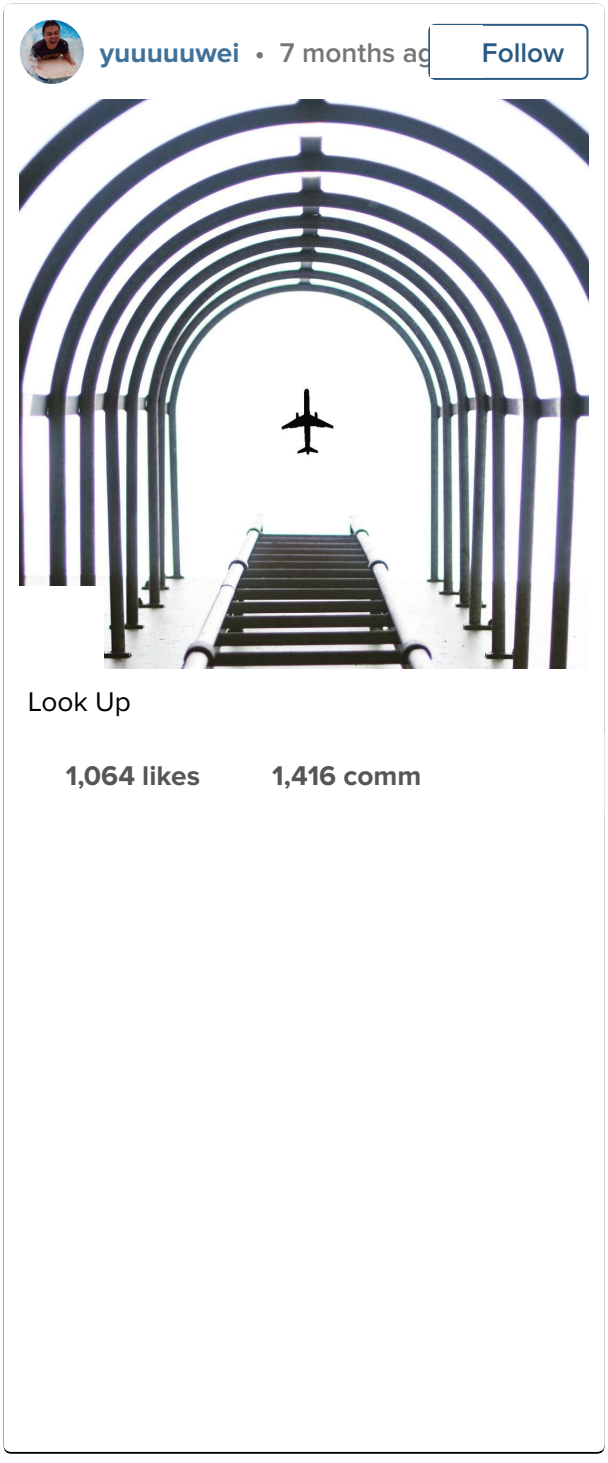
"This is what every photographer does—you find a spot, you take it away, especially when it doesn't alter reality, so that's exactly what I did," said Mr. Fisch, 64, who does not consider himself a photojournalist. A picture he'd changed just as much was shortlisted in the Sony World Photography Awards three months later, he added.

Photography's history is filled with technological advances that improve the quality of images, from now-obsolete darkroom techniques that enhanced a picture's vibrancy to camera flashes that light up the dark. More recently, there are signs certain digital liberties also are working their way into respectability: When the White House released the situation room photo after the 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden, it noted in the caption that the photo had been altered to obscure a classified document.

Photos that are digitally enhanced, staged or entirely phony have frightening power. At 3 a.m. last November 14, a day after the terrorist attacks in Paris, Veerender Jubbal logged

onto Twitter. There, the Toronto freelance journalist found his account overwhelmed: an anonymous person had doctored his image to make Mr. Jubbal look as if he were wearing a suicide vest and holding the Quran. A caption falsely described him as one of the Paris terrorists. “Never been to Paris,” Mr. Jubbal wrote helplessly on Twitter. “Am a Sikh dude with a turban.” The photo went viral.

The Spanish newspaper La Razón posted the image of Mr. Jubbal on its front page next to the words “one of the terrorists,” and an Italian Sky News outlet reported the news on air and reposted the image on its website and on Twitter. Soon after, Mr. Jubbal said, he received a death threat and didn’t leave his home for four months.



The 22-year-old Canadian added that the fake photo has circulated in social media at least seven times since then, including after the terrorist attacks in Brussels and Nice. La Razón tweeted an apology to Mr. Jubbal and the Sky News outlet explained its mistake on air and removed the web photo and tweet.

Earlier this year, online observers pounced on the winning image in a Nikon Singapore photo contest—what turned out to be a fake shot of an airplane inside a set of arches. After commenters vilified winner Chay Yu Wei of Singapore, he withdrew his entry, writing on Instagram that he made “a playful edit” for his social-media account but “crossed the line” by entering the photo in the contest. Nikon apologized on Facebook and vowed to tighten its review process. On Instagram, the contestant posted an image that read: “Dear fellow photographers, I’m sorry.”

Write to Ellen Gamerman at ellen.gamerman@wsj.com

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Hello everyone, This goes out to everyone who has seen my Chinatown plane post. I'm sorry! This is going to be quite a read so that's the first thing I would like you to read if you don't have time to read below; I would like to apologize for the mistake I have done. I've been quiet so far because I've been trying to contact Nikon and have been waiting for them to contact me back to discuss about this. I understand that what I would say might affect Nikon's brand hence I decided to wait for their advice. However, since more than 24 hours have passed and I have not managed to have discussions with Nikon, I think I shouldn't wait and it's important for me to come out to address this issue. Like one user commented, I was on a photo walk in Chinatown and I chanced upon that set of ladders. I snapped a picture of it, and subsequently felt that a plane at that spot would make for an interesting point of view. Hence, I inserted the plane with PicsArt and uploaded it to Instagram. That's how I use Instagram, sometime it's to showcase the work I'm proud of, sometimes just to have fun. This case, that small plane was just for fun and it was not meant to bluff anyone. I would have done it with photoshop if I really meant to lie about it, but no, it was a playful edit using the PicsArt app and uploaded to Instagram. When my friends commented with some questions, I also answered it jokingly, saying it's the last flight of the day and saying it was my lucky day that I did not wait too long. At that time, of course everyone who read it took it as a joke, before this issue arrived and it is taken seriously. However, I made a mistake by not keeping it to Instagram as a casual social media platform. I crossed the line by submitting the photo for a competition. I

submitting the photo for a competition. I meant it as a joke and I'm really sorry to Nikon for disrespecting the competition. It is a mistake and I shouldn't have done that. I also shouldn't have jokingly answered Nikon