

Opinion: Questioning if it's ever OK to manipulate photos

By Margaret Sullivan, New York Times

A powerful picture taken by the Swedish photographer Paul Hansen last year, of men carrying the bodies of dead children through the streets of Gaza City, was artfully composed and filled with anguish.

But was it authentic? After it won a prestigious award, selected photo of the year by World Press Photo, questions arose about whether it was a digitally altered composite. Hansen denied that, and last week, World Press Photo confirmed that the image was genuine.

The challenge to the photo, called "Gaza Burial," illustrates a point: In news photography, manipulation of images is strictly forbidden. At the Times, such rules have been stated and vigorously enforced for many years. Whether from the South Bronx or Syria, news photos must represent unaltered reality.

That hasn't changed, but in one corner of the *Times*, different rules prevail.

I stumbled across this last week when I wrote a blog post about readers' objections to a fashion photo spread in *T*, the monthly style magazine. I asked its editor, Deborah Needleman, about one objection: that the cover model was too skinny. She responded that she, too, felt that many models were too thin, and with this one she had considered "adding some fat to her with Photoshop."

John Schwartz, a *Times* reporter, was among the first to react. On Twitter, he called her comment "jaw-dropping." That reflected how deeply most journalists feel about the integrity of photographs.

“That is inviolate, and the standards are very clear,” Michele McNally, assistant managing editor for photography, told me. The *Times* does not stage news photographs, or alter them digitally.

But *Times* editors see the fashion photography in *T* as an exception. “Fashion is fantasy,” McNally said. “Readers understand this. It’s totally manipulated, with everything done for aesthetics.”

Philip B. Corbett, the associate managing editor for standards, agreed. “This is a different genre of photography,” he said. “It has different goals, different tools and techniques, and there is a different expectation on the part of the reader.”

When I followed up with Needleman, she too said that fashion magazines abided by different standards than news organizations do. In *T*’s fashion photography, she confirmed, “images are sometimes retouched,” she said. “Red taken out of someone’s eye, a wrinkle in a skirt smoothed, a model’s tattoo removed.” But even within *T*, various standards prevail. Only with “fashion/glamour photography” is manipulation allowable, she said. A travel article or personality profile would be subject to traditional rules.

These *Times* editors agree that readers’ expectations are important here. After all, no one opens *Vogue* with the expectation that they’re seeing Gisele Bündchen looking like she does when she wakes up. In a 2009 article in the *Times*, the style writer Eric Wilson noted how pervasive photo alteration was at fashion magazines: “It now seems fresh, even exclamation-worthy, when a magazine presents an unvarnished image.”

The editors are confident that readers know the difference.

But here’s the catch: *T* magazine is still a *New York Times* editorial product. Although it generates (and is intended to

generate) plenty of advertising revenue, its content is not “advertorial,” that strange hybrid that looks like journalism but is actually advertising copy. *T* is produced by journalists who are part of the newsroom structure, and readers might reasonably have the expectations that standards are the same across the board.

I asked Stuart Emmrich, editor of the Styles section, about fashion photography there. He responded that Styles adheres to traditional rules: “We strictly forbid any altering or manipulation of photos that have been shot for Styles, including fashion shoots.” I heard the same from Kathy Ryan, director of photography for the *Times* magazine, which also allows no manipulation. (In all cases, minor color-toning and brightening for production purposes are acceptable.)

Photos from outside sources may have been altered before they reach the *Times*, Emmrich said. “We can’t control everything, but our photo editor does look closely to see if she can spot any heavy retouching,” he said.

And sometimes, in various parts of the *Times*, the label “photo illustration” on what Ryan calls a “high-concept” picture makes it clear that this is not a rendering of reality. It is all part of making sure readers know that what they are looking at is authentic.

Granted, a dramatic news photo from the streets of Gaza is a far cry from a magazine’s fashion spread. Maybe readers intuitively get the difference. But they may not. In the words of one surprised reader, Fred Zimmerman, “Is such doctoring allowed at the *Times*?”

Newspaper people sometimes assume too much about what readers know – for example, the difference between the opinions expressed in editorials and those expressed by a news-page columnist, or even the difference between a staff-written obituary and a paid death notice.

It would be best if all the photography produced by the *Times* newsroom could be held to the same standard. If that is deemed unrealistic for some parts of a fashion magazine, some transparency (and not the kind that has to do with gossamer fabrics) is needed. For example, a brief statement in each issue of *T* stating its photo practices would help.

Being forthcoming with readers is the answer to many of journalism's trickiest questions. The world of fashion photography – where a waistline may shrink or a tattoo may disappear at the tweak of a few pixels – is distinctive in many ways, but not in that one.