ETHICS IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Our credibility is damaged every time a reputable news organization is caught lying to the public and one of the most blatant and widely recognized cases was the computer enhancement of the TIME Magazine cover photo of O. J. Simpson. TIME took the mug shot of Simpson when he was arrested and changed it before using it on their cover. They would not have been caught if NEWSWEEK had not used the same photo on their cover photo just as it had come from the police. The two covers showed up on the news stands next to each other and the public could see something was wrong.

TIME darkened the handout photo creating a five o'clock shadow and a more sinister look. They darkened the top of the photo and made the police lineup numbers smaller. They decided Simpson was guilty so they made him look guilty. (There are two issues here: one is a question of photographic ethics and the other is a question of racial insensitivity by TIME in deciding that blacker means guiltier. The black community raised this issue when the story broke and needs to be the subject of another article. My concern is with the issue of photographic ethics).

In an editorial the next week, TIME's managing editor wrote, "The harshness of the mug shot - the merciless bright light, the stubble on Simpson's face, the cold specificity of the picture - had been subtly smoothed and shaped into an icon of tragedy." In other words, they changed the photo from what it was (a document) into what they wanted it to be. TIME was making an editorial statement, not reporting the news. They presented what looked like a real photograph and it turned out not to be real; the public felt deceived, and rightly so. By doing this, TIME damaged their credibility and the credibility of all journalists.