

Retouching Reality

Essential Question

What are the creative and ethical aspects of digital photo manipulation?

Lesson Overview

Students think critically about the different purposes and contexts of digital image editing. They explore various benefits and drawbacks of photo manipulation with three case studies. The first prompts students to think about photo editing as a fun and artistic activity. The second raises ethical questions about altering photos, specifically within the context of journalism. The third invites students to think about the impacts that digitally manipulated photos have on different audiences. All three case studies highlight various ways that online communities both celebrate and regulate digital photo manipulation.

Note: Though the issue of digital photo manipulation may seem specific, it can be used as an example of the much larger and more general problem of what happens when easy access to user-friendly new technologies outpaces the formation of an ethical roadmap regarding their use.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to ...

- consider both the creative benefits and ethical drawbacks of digital photo manipulation.
- understand the importance of purpose and context in evaluating digitally edited images.
- think critically about how the Internet allows users to both celebrate and regulate our “copy-change-paste” culture.

Materials and Preparation

- Prepare to project the websites used in the activities so that students can view them as a class, or have students view them on shared computers.
- Copy the **Photo Fuss Part I** and **Photo Fuss Part II Student Handouts**, one for each student.

Family Resources

- Some home the **Research and Evaluation Family Tip Sheet (Middle & High School)**

Estimated time: 60 minutes

Standards Alignment –

Common Core:

grades 9-10: RI.4, RI.7, RI.10, W.4, W.6, W.7, W.8, W.10, SL.1a, SL.1b, SL.1c, SL.1d, SL.5

grades 11-12: RI.4, RI.10, RI.4, RI.7, RI.10, W.4, W.6, W.7, W.8, W.10, SL.1a, SL.1b, SL.1c, SL.1d, SL.2, SL.5, L.6

NETS-S: 1a, 1c, 1d, 2a, 3d, 4d, 5b, 6a

Key Vocabulary –

digital photo manipulation: using digital technology to change the content or appearance of a photo

deceive: to mislead someone into believing something that’s not true

retouching: to improve a photo by adding or changing small details

controversy: public disagreement or debate

context: the setting in which something develops or occurs

introduction

Warm-up (5 minutes)

ASK:

Have you ever been fooled by an image online that you thought was real but turned out to be fake?

Invite a few volunteers to share their answers with the class, or ask students to discuss with a partner.

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary terms **digital photo manipulation** and **deceive**.

TELL students that as a class they are going to explore the role that digitally manipulated photos play in our 21st-century world. Students should keep the following questions in mind throughout the lesson:

- *Where do we draw the line between creativity and deception?*
- *How do the purpose and context of photo editing affect how we feel about it?*
- *What role does the Internet play in allowing us to share, inspire, and critique images that have been edited?*

teach 1

Photo Fun (10 minutes)

ASK students if they have ever played around with any photo-editing programs. Invite one or two students to share a personal example. (Note: Many teens use the word *photoshop* as a verb to describe editing a digital image. For example, students may say that they “photoshopped” an image to change its color saturation, or to change the background to something more fun. Others may share their experiences using image-editing programs in simpler ways, such as removing red-eye or cropping a photo.)

EXPLAIN that digital editing can be a fun and creative process – something that people not only do professionally, but also as a hobby.

SHOW students the following webpage from The Pioneer Woman blog (www.thepioneerwoman.com/photography/2011/09/edit-this-4/).

EXPLAIN that The Pioneer Woman is a blog run by a woman in Oklahoma. She sometimes blogs about her passion for photography and shares tips for photo editing. She even hosts photo-editing contests for her readers. In this particular contest, she invited anyone to digitally edit a photo of her family’s dog, Charlie, and submit it online.

INVITE students to read through The Pioneer Woman’s “Edit THIS!” assignment online.

DIRECT students to some samples of people’s submissions to the photo contest, for example:

<http://thepioneerwoman.com/photography/2011/09/your-charlie-edits-group-2/>

<http://thepioneerwoman.com/photography/2011/09/your-charlie-edits-group-3/>

INVITE students to comment on the different submissions.

ASK:

- *What are some different editing techniques that you see?*
- *Which photos are meant to look artistic? Which ones are meant to look funny?*
- *Which photos look real, and which don’t? Why?*

ASK:

Why do you think users would want to submit a photo to this contest – especially since there were no official prizes?

Guide students to recognize that some people digitally edit photos as a hobby or as a form of art. Sharing your work online with other people also may make people feel that they are part of a community. Or, in the words of The Pioneer Woman herself, “It’ll be fun to see everyone’s different take on the same photo!”

teach 2

When Retouching Gets Touchy – Part I (15 minutes)

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary term **retouching**.

EXPLAIN that retouching is a form of digital photo manipulation. For example, you can retouch someone’s eyes in a photo to make them look brighter and bigger. Or you could retouch a photo of a room by adding a door, or editing out cracks in a wall.

DEFINE the Key Vocabulary terms **context** and **controversy**.

TELL students that photo retouching can be viewed as a form of creative self-expression. However, depending on the context, photo retouching can also be viewed as deceptive or unethical, because it might mislead people and violate viewers’ trust.

TELL students that retouching can cause particular controversy in regard to journalism or news reporting, when people expect the information they receive to be factual.

ARRANGE students in groups of three or four.

DISTRIBUTE the **Photo Fuss – Part I Student Handout**, one for each student. Instruct students to read the article together and then write down their answers to the discussion questions that immediately follow.

INVITE students to share their answers to the following questions:

1. *Why did the news service apologize for this digitally manipulated photo? Why was it so controversial?* (Guide students to recognize that people trust major news organizations, such as Reuters, to provide accurate, credible reports on current events. In this case, the digitally edited photo represented an air raid as more damaging than it really was. People may also wonder whether the photographer had personal or political motivations for editing the photo this way.)
2. *Do you think it’s unethical for news articles to use digitally edited photos? Why or why not?* (Student responses may vary. Some may argue that newspapers have a responsibility to present information to the public as accurately as possible. Readers should be able to trust their news sources, and digitally manipulated photos are not factual representations of reality. Other students may argue that editing is not always a bad thing, and that photographers should be able to correct the color and lighting of their photos, to make them visually appealing, for example. Students may also argue that all news is told through a reporter’s perspective anyway, so no news story is truly “real.”)
3. *Who were the first people to notice this photo mishap? What role does the Internet play in allowing us to recognize and judge digitally manipulated images?* (Students should realize that bloggers were the first to notice that the photo was manipulated. This indicates that the Internet pushes digital photo

manipulation to a new level, because online communities can rapidly share images and draw attention to deceptive or controversial ones.)

REMIND students that they have discussed two different contexts for photo manipulation. The Pioneer Woman blog showed the fun, creative side of digital editing. The Reuters article showed why digital manipulation can be viewed as unethical and deceptive, especially when used in journalism.

EXPLAIN to students that they will now consider a third aspect of digital manipulation: audience. (This third case study can be used optionally, or assigned for homework, if there is not enough time for it in class.)

teach 3

When Retouching Gets Touchy — Part II (15 minutes)

DISTRIBUTE the **Photo Fuss – Part II Student Handout**, one for each student. Tell students to discuss the article in their small groups, as directed.

INVITE students to share their answers to the following questions:

1. *Is there a difference between a digitally manipulated image in an advertisement and one in a news article? Do the benefits and drawbacks of photo manipulation depend on the context, which means where and how the photos are used?* (Answers may vary. People often expect advertisements to be creative and catchy, not necessarily factual. Rather than delivering news to an audience, advertisements target certain audiences to sell products. But advertisements do communicate a company's values, and they can certainly offend people.)
2. *Some people wondered if Microsoft changed the photo in order to appeal to a mostly white Polish audience. Would that be a valid reason to manipulate the photo? Do you think what Microsoft did was ethical?* (Answers may vary. Some students may argue that Microsoft had a right to edit the photo as a business strategy to help market the company. Others may argue that purposefully editing something that's as significant as someone's race is offensive and unethical, no matter what the motivations are.)
3. *Do you think we should have rules about how photos are digitally manipulated? Why or why not? If so, what would they be?* (Answers may vary. Students should show some awareness of the ethical challenges involved in digital photo manipulation, but also in policing such alterations. Some students might suggest that photos should be labeled if they have been altered, while other students might believe that the online community should be left to identify and call out controversial instances of digital photo manipulation. Students might conclude that there are no easy answers to these ethical challenges. You may use this opportunity to point out that in this case, as in others, new technologies are developing faster than our ability to form an ethical roadmap for their use.)

closing

Wrap-up (5 minutes)

You can use these questions to assess your students' understanding of the lesson objectives. You may want to ask students to reflect in writing on one of the questions, using a journal or an online blog/wiki.

ASK:

Where do we draw the line between creativity and deception?

Many would argue that manipulating a photo, in and of itself, is not unethical. It depends on context, and how the edited image is presented to other people. For example, some students might argue that news media and entertainment media should be held to different standards. People depend on the news for objective, factual information and rely on unedited photos to learn about current events. Some might argue that advertisements are creative, and advertisers should be allowed to do whatever they want. Others may think that while advertising can be creative, advertisers still should be held responsible for their power to shape people's impressions of gender roles, minority groups, etc.

How do the purpose and context of photo editing affect how we feel about it?

Sometimes it is for fun, creative, and artistic purposes. Sometimes people manipulate photos to alter people's perception of reality, or to reach out to a certain audience. The context changes what we expect when we view a photo, and how we might feel about having it altered without our knowledge.

What role does the Internet play in allowing us to share, inspire, and critique images that have been edited?

Students should point out that bloggers played an important role in each of the three cases. Students should realize that people have been editing photos for a long time, long before digital media was even around. However, the Internet takes digital photo manipulation to a new level because it's very easy to share and discuss edited content online. The Pioneer Woman and TechCrunch are examples of blogs that inspire people to be creative to show off their digital-editing skills. In the Reuters and Microsoft cases, bloggers were the first to notice – and spread the word about – controversial, manipulated photos.

Retouching Reality

Directions

Read the following news article. Then discuss the questions that follow, explaining your answers in the spaces provided. (Note: “Reuters” is the name of an international news agency.)

Reuters Fires Photographer After Alteration

In 2006, Reuters was forced to fire a photographer, remove images from circulation and change policy after finding that a photo of an Israeli air raid on Beirut had been manipulated.

Bloggers were the first to notice that the clouds in an image taken by Adnan Hajj, a Lebanese photographer, had been darkened.

Soon after, Reuters issued an apology and said it withdrew from its database all of the images taken by Hajj. “There is no graver breach of Reuters standards for our photographers than the deliberate manipulation of an image,” Tom Szlukovenyi, Reuters global picture editor, said at the time. “Reuters has zero tolerance for any doctoring of pictures, and constantly reminds its photographers, both staff and freelance, of this strict, unalterable policy.”

HOME PAGE	MY TIMES	TODAY'S PAPER	VIDEO	MOST POPULAR	TIMES TOPICS
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The New York Times **Technology**

WORLD	U.S.	N.Y. / REGION	BUSINESS	TECHNOLOGY	SCIENCE	HEALTH	SPORTS	OPINION
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CAMCORDERS CAMERAS CELLPHONES COMPUTERS HANDHELDS HOME VIDEO MUSIC PERIPHE

Ease of Alteration Creates Woes for Picture Editors



Photographs by Adnan Hajj/Reuters

An authentic photo, left, of smoke from burning buildings in Beirut suburbs during Israeli air raid and photographer's manipulated version, right.

Article:

Heussner, Kai Mae. “11 Photo-Editing Flubs: Digitally Altered Photo Disasters.” ABCNews.com, Oct. 8, 2009. Web. <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/AheadoftheCurve/11-photo-editing-flubs-digitally-altered-photo-disasters/story?id=8780937>.

Photo:

Aspan, Maria. “The Ease of Alteration Creates Woes for Picture Editors.” *New York Times*, Aug. 14, 2006. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/14/technology/14photoshop.html>.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Reuters apologize for this digitally manipulated photo? Why was it so controversial?
2. Do you think that it's unethical for news articles to use digitally edited photos? Why or why not?
3. Who were the first people to notice this photo mishap? What role does the Internet play in allowing us to expose and regulate digitally manipulated images?

Retouching Reality

Directions

Read the following news article. Then discuss the questions that follow, explaining your answers in the spaces provided.

Microsoft Ad Changes Man's Race

In August, the blogosphere went wild over an image in a Microsoft Corp. ad that had been edited to change a man's race from black to white.

In a photo featured on the company's U.S. Web site, three colleagues – one white, one black and one Asian – sit around a conference room table. But in the same photo on the company's Polish site, the face of the black man had been replaced with the face of a white man.

The gaffe sparked quite the discussion online, as bloggers and commenters wondered if the change was racially motivated, the result of poor judgment or both. Some people suspected that the computer technology giant changed the Polish image so that it matched the country's own racial composition.

It even inspired the popular tech blog TechCrunch to launch a contest to see who can manipulate the funniest head onto the Microsoft ad.

“So get Photoshop fired up and make your funniest (and yet not in any way offensive) version of the Polish Microsoft head replacement. No rules. Replace all the heads you want to. Add costumes and

props. Add text bubbles,” it said on its site. The winner gets a Bing (Microsoft's search engine) T-shirt in the mail.

Ultimately, the affair elicited an apology from Microsoft, which said in a statement, “We are looking into the details of this situation. We apologize and have replaced the image with the original photograph.”

Article and Photo:

Heussner, Kai Mae. “11 Photo-Editing Flubs: Digitally Altered Photo Disasters.” ABCNews.com, Oct. 8, 2009. Web.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/AheadoftheCurve/11-photo-editing-flubs-digitally-altered-photo-disasters/story?id=8780937>.



Retouching Reality

1. The word *retouching* means:

- a) To mislead someone into believing something that's not true
- b) To improve a photo by adding or changing small details**
- c) To give a photographer credit for his work

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **b**. When you retouch a photo, you try to “touch up” or improve parts of it.

2. Tyler is editing a photo of the basketball team for the yearbook. Which of the following photo alterations would probably be considered *deceptive*?

- a) Making some of the players look taller**
- b) Cropping the photo to fit on the yearbook page
- c) Adding the team's name at the top of the image

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **a**. People might feel deceived, or tricked, if they find out that someone looks different in a photo than in real life.

3. True or false: Changing an image in any way is always a bad thing to do.

- a) True
- b) False**

Answer feedback

The correct answer is **b**, False. An edited photo can be considered creative or artistic. It all depends on the purpose of an edited photo and how it's shared.

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- a) Making some of the players look taller
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- c) Adding the team's name at the top of the image

3. True or false: Changing an image in any way is always a bad thing to do.

- a) True
- b) False