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A REPORT TO OUR READERS

A basic rule: Newspaper photos must tell the truth

Allan Detrich, an award winning Blade photographer, resigned from the staff April 7 after admitting he digitally altered the content of a photograph that was published on The Blade's front page.

The incident was reported in this newspaper and in the national media and in online journalism publications. We conducted an internal investigation and found that since January dozens of digitally altered photographs of his were published either in the newspaper or on our Web site.

Readers have asked us why this was such a big deal. What's wrong with changing the content of a photograph that is published in a newspaper?

The answer is simple: It is dishonest.

Journalism, whether by using words or pictures, must be an accurate representation of the truth.

Details of the incident unfolded gradually in the days after Mr. Detrich's digitally altered picture was published on March 31. The dramatic photograph showed members of the Bluffton University baseball team kneeling in prayer before playing their first game since five of their players died in a March 2 bus crash in Atlanta.

We did not know at the time of publication that the photographer, using a computerized photo-editing tool called Photoshop, had removed the legs of a person wearing blue jeans and standing in the background behind a banner.

The matter was brought to my attention on April 4 by Donald R. Winslow, editor of News Photographer, a publication of the National Press Photographers Association. Mr. Winslow said that on April 2, photographers from the Dayton Daily News were comparing how various Ohio newspapers covered the Bluffton baseball game. Each paper had its own similar Bluffton picture. But The Blade's picture was the only one with the mysterious blue-jean clad legs missing.

After establishing that the photograph was altered, The Blade immediately started its investigation. We published a correction and an apology to our readers on April 6.

When questioned by Blade editors, Mr. Detrich admitted manipulating the photograph, offering the explanation that it was for his personal use and that he mistakenly transmitted it to the newspaper for publication. He was suspended while the investigation continued. The next day he resigned.

An intensive investigation of Mr. Detrich's work, conducted by Nate Parsons, The Blade's director of photography, found that since January of this year, Mr. Detrich submitted 947 photographs for publication, of which 79 had been digitally altered.

Twenty-seven of the altered photographs were published both in the newspaper and on toledoblade.com, and an additional 31 were published only on toledoblade.com. Another 21 altered photographs submitted by Mr. Detrich were not published.

The changes Mr. Detrich made included erasing people, tree limbs, utility poles, electrical wires, electrical outlets,

and other background elements from photographs. In other cases, he added elements such as tree branches and shrubbery.

Mr. Detrich also submitted two sports photographs in which items were inserted. In one he added a hockey puck and in the other he added a basketball, each hanging in mid-air. Neither was published.

The Blade is removing all of Mr. Detrich's photographs from toledoblade.com and blocked access to any of his photographs in the newspaper's archive. Like many other newspapers, The Blade shares its work with the Associated Press, an international news cooperative. On April 6, the AP removed all 50 of Mr. Detrich's photographs from its archives.

Honesty is the fundamental value in journalism.

When a Blade reporter or photographer covers a news event, the newspaper and its readers expect an accurate record of the event.

Reporters and editors are not allowed to change quotes or alter events to make them more dramatic. Photographers and photo editors cannot digitally alter the content in the frame of a photograph to make the image more powerful or artistic.

This principle is widely recognized. In 1991, at the dawn of the digital age, the National Press Photographers Association adopted a "Digital Manipulation Code of Ethics," which all members are required to sign.

That lengthy code makes it very clear that altering the editorial content of a picture is a breach of ethical standards. All Blade photographers are members of the association. All of them have signed the code of ethics, and The Blade follows this code.

This newspaper has a terrific staff of professional journalists. They work hard to bring you the truth in stories and photographs of what is happening in our community, every day of the year. It is especially dismaying to have something like this happen that may cast doubt on our work.

It's impossible to make sense of why this happened, and we are embarrassed by it. But it is important that we are up front and honest with our readers.

Mr. Detrich joined The Blade in 1989 and has won hundreds of newspaper photography awards over the years. He was a Pulitzer finalist in 1998. The work he turned in always appeared to be quality photojournalism, which is why editors had no reason to suspect he was digitally altering photographs.

In this respect, we let our readers down, and we apologize for that and pledge to you that we will do better.

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