

Newspapers' photo-finish sanctions

Newspaper photographs should be accurate. Readers know that. So do photographers, photo editors and managing editors.

But what should a news organization do when a photojournalist's work is less than accurate – or not completely truthful? When the Sacramento (Calif.) Bee discovered earlier this year that Bryan Patrick's page one nature photo was actually a compilation of two photos, the newspaper suspended the award-winning [photojournalist](#). Patrick was fired Feb. 4 when it was discovered he had altered two more [photos](#).

Was his original suspension the right response? Was the Los Angeles Times correct when it fired Brian Walski in 2003 when he also merged to war-front photos to [create](#) a more dramatic image?

(Not that photojournalists haven't been altering photos for decades, whether it be by darkroom dodging-and-burning or use of color enhancement or use of filters or cropping. But that's a story for another time.)

Such suspend-or-fire decisions are not limited to published photos. The Detroit Free Press' popular sports columnist, Mitch Albom (author of "Tuesdays with Morrie"), filed a basketball story in 2005 where he talked about two NBA players attending an NCAA final-four college game, even mentioning the clothes they wore. The only problem was, the two professional players didn't attend the game. Albom was suspended, leaving readers to wonder whether his popular book should more accurately have been titled "Mondays With Fred."

And then there's the relatively recent definition of "composite image," where high dynamic range technology can

combine multiple-exposures into a single [image](#). A recent Washington Post photograph used such HDR technology on a photo, that it captioned a “composite,” which likely confused readers and angered members of the National Press Photographers Association, which considers such a process little different from any other digital [manipulation](#).

All of which leads us back to the question of appropriate sanctions in a world of Photoshop and HDR and whatever the next alteration technique might be before GJR publishes this blog. If suspensions for offending photojournalists are appropriate, what sins of commission or omission should result in what suspensions? Should readers know the duration of the suspensions and be informed when the suspended shooter returns to the newsroom? How might a newspaper best check previous photos to see if such manipulation was a pattern? And which ethical photojournalism violations should raise the bar to outright firings?

And will any newspaper be able to craft such a comprehensive sanctions addendum to its ethics code before the next fabricated photo hits the front pages?