

Case study 13

Martin Bryant: 'Wild in the eyes'

Early on the afternoon of Sunday 28 April 1996, a man in his late 20s got up from a table and opened fire in a crowded café. By the end of the day, thirty-five people were dead, dozens more wounded. That day at the site of the historic Port Arthur penal colony in south-east Tasmania, a quiet and 'strange' local, Martin Bryant, became Australia's most deadly mass killer. The suspect, Martin Bryant, was taken into custody after an all-night siege at a farmhouse near the site of the Port Arthur ruins. Bryant is alleged to have set fire to the house in which he was holed up, randomly firing at the surrounding police. Badly burnt, Bryant was taken to a Hobart hospital under a heavy police guard. There was a media-initiated debate over Bryant's 'state of mind'. People who knew Bryant were cross-examined by journalists and several conflicting stories emerged (Paget 1996). Bryant quickly became the 'world's worst killer'.

It wasn't until Tuesday 30 April that the first picture of Martin Bryant was splashed across most front pages around the country (Sutton, Gilmore et al. 1996). The *Australian* 'enhanced' the photograph to emphasise the whiteness of Bryant's eyes. This had the effect of giving him an eerie, 'spaced out', 'mad' look that fitted a favoured media image of the suspect. Once pictures of Martin Bryant began appearing in the papers, it became a flood. In the 6 May 1996 edition of ABC's *Media Watch* it was suggested that the first photographs were taken from Bryant's house by journalists, while the police guard was distracted. However, distant relatives of Martin Bryant provided an album full of photographs. Two of his ex-girlfriends also supplied more recent pictures.

Issues and questions raised by case study 13

- 1 What guidelines should be in place when 'altering' images for production purposes?
- 2 Discuss the ethics of so 'enhancing' a photo that it changes it.

- 3 Did changing the photograph by whitening Bryant's eyes have any emotional impact on the issue and how people may have perceived the tragedy?
- 4 Under what circumstances do you think it is permissible?
- 5 Does the AJA Code of Ethics address this issue?
- 6 Do any of the other Codes or Charters of Independence have anything to say about 'digital' enhancement?
- 7 Haven't daily newspapers had a history of 'touching up' photos to enhance important aspects of the image?
- 8 You have a great picture, but it's at a distance and not very clear. Do you 'enhance' it so your readers can see the critical part(s) of the shot?
- 9 Where do you draw the line? What is acceptable?
- 10 Who makes that decision?

Bibliography:

Paget, Dale. 1996. 'He Was Trying to Beat Dunblane Toll.' *The Daily Telegraph*, 30 April, 2.

Sutton, C., H. Gilmore, et al. 1996. 'Bungling Let World's Worst Killer Go Free: He Could Have Been Stopped.' *The Sun-Herald*, 5 May, 1.