

Case study 14

***Los Angeles Times* photographer fired over altered image**

Los Angeles Times photographer Brian Walski, on assignment covering the war in Iraq, was fired on 1 April 2003, for deliberately altering an image to enhance its impact. The offending photo (of a British soldier and a group of Iraqi civilians, one a male clasping a young child) was submitted from the battlefield on Sunday 30 March. Other members of the *Tribune* group (of which the *LA Times* is part) had access to the photo via Newscom, the company's internal picture distribution service (Irby 2003). Both the *Hartford Courant* and the *Los Angeles Times* used the photograph prominently on Monday 31 March. The *Courant* published it over six columns, taking up about half the front page, and the *LA Times* used it over three columns top left of page 1. A *Courant* employee noticed what appeared to be duplication in the picture and drew it to the attention of senior staff. Walski, by telephone from southern Iraq, acknowledged that he had used his computer to combine elements of two photographs, taken moments apart, in order to improve the composition. In an email to the photography staff of the *Times*, Walski admitted his lapse in judgment and accepted responsibility for it. In part, his apology read: 'This was after an extremely long, hot and stressful day but I offer no excuses here' (cited in Irby 2003). Interviewed by Poynter Online via satellite phone from Kuwait City, *LA Times* staff photographer Don Bartletti recounts seeing Walski after he returned from the desert on 1 April. 'When I saw him, I really did not recognise him. He was sunburned, had not eaten in days, not slept in 36 hours, his clothes were filthy, his beard—all over the place. And he smelled like a goat' (quoted in Irby 2003). On Tuesday 1 April, the *Los Angeles Times* posted an editor's note on its web site notifying readers about the breach of its photographic ethics policy, the investigation, and the subsequent firing of Walski for altering the photo. By way of a belated apology to their readers, the *Times* and the *Courant* published all three photos—the two originals and the altered composite—on 2 April 2003.

Issues and questions raised by case study 14

- 1 What's so wrong with what Walski did?

- 2 Should there be a different set of rules for war coverage?
- 3 Research the case of Paul Walski and put the case in his defence?
- 4 Find the relevant part of the Los Angeles Times's ethical policy and evaluate it.
- 5 Do Australian Codes of Ethics and Practice have similar clauses?

Bibliography;

Irby, Kenny. 2003. *L.A. Times Photographer Fired Over Altered Image*. Poynter Institute 2003 [cited 17 June 2003]. Available from poynteronline.org/content/content_view.asp?id=28082&sid=32.