

# Edited Images Shape the Narrative: How Fabricated Imagery Redefines Public Perception and Socio-Political Bias

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## Abstract

Abstract: A picture is worth a thousand words; nonetheless, it can also write a thousand lies. We routinely accept what we see visually without critical query, rendering digital edits extraordinarily dangerous in shaping public consensus. This paper explores how edited imagery fuels socio-political prejudice. Moving beyond dry discussions of 'fake news', we analyze how subtle graphical manipulations—such as darkening skin color, accentuating aggressive facial expressions, or cluttering physical backgrounds—unconsciously cue deeply rooted cognitive stereotypes. By tracing impact across reportages on crime, social protest, and political campaigning, this study demonstrates that photographic changes are far from benign technical tweaks. Rather, they serve as vehicles for sustaining systematic marginalization. There is a psychological urgency to dismantle the baseline presumption of literal photographic truth in news coverage to prevent misleading imagery from cementing structural disparities.

**Keywords:** Edited Images, Cognitive Bias, Social Representation, Media Framing, Generative AI, Psychological Priming, Digital Ethics of Care

## Introduction

Sociobehavioral psychology indicates that humans instinctually process visual inputs as literal evidence of reality. This default epistemological trust—the deeply ingrained belief that a photograph offers an unmediated window to truth—has underpinned honest news reportage and democratic narrative building for generations. However, in our modern digitized ecosystem, this cognitive reflex has been weaponized. Inexpensive software, ubiquitous smartphones, and generative artificial intelligence tools now permit an unprecedented democratization of manipulation, allowing anyone to modify visual reality in seconds. Crucially, the immediate societal danger does not solely rest upon whether a news visual is entirely 'real' or 'synthetic' on a technical plane; the core hazard is psychological. When editorial channels marginally alter visual compositions, they quietly trigger deep-seated cognitive biases. These minor visual adaptations provoke immediate affective responses, coaxing individuals to adopt polarized positions well before conscious objective reason can review the underlying facts. This system of graphic shaping ensures the perpetuation of existing configurations of power, continuing to unfairly target and isolate historically marginalized demographics.

### **The Ideas Behind the Images**

Visual framing functions as a primary mechanism of narrative construction. Media scholar Robert Entman once pointed out that "framing" is simply about choosing specific pieces of a story and highlighting them to stand out more<sup>1</sup>. Within contemporary photojournalism, framing is no longer restricted to the moment a photographer trains their lens on a physical scene; rather, it manifests post-facto via digital darkrooms. When editorial rooms artificially intensify the saturation of a protest bonfire to denote dangerous volatility, or darken a criminal suspect's skin in a digital report, they engage in visual boosting. These subtle optical adjustments enforce a pre-interpreted reading of the event, prompting the observer's mind to prioritize threat indicators.

### **How We Build Shared Stereotypes**

In conceptualizing social representations, psychologist Serge Moscovici introduced the idea that communities create shared, "common sense" shortcuts to understand complicated social issues.<sup>2</sup> These representational frameworks anchor abstract public phenomena to concrete, highly relatable everyday mental imagery. Danger arises when digital editing practices repeatedly manipulate portraits of specific social cohorts—such as racial minorities or political dissenters—to match a hostile caricature (e.g., rendering them darker, more physically aggressive, or embedded in chaotic setups). Cumulatively, these systematically exaggerated archetypes supplant objective truth, ultimately serving as the cognitive defaults that shape mass perception.

### **How Visual Tricks Shape Our Thinking**

Socio-visual mechanics often operate covertly. For instance, in visual communications, editors frequently alter models' skin tones towards darker values.<sup>3</sup> Because persistent cultural hegemonies prime public audiences to associate darker complexions with deviance, threat, or violent behavior, these skin tone alterations fundamentally warp character assessments.<sup>4</sup> By presenting an audience with a photo in which a subject's skin has been artificially darkened, media outlets prime viewer judgements of guilt or latent criminality. The literal facts of the written report are discarded; the manipulated visual alone convicts the subject in the court of public opinion.

Advancements in consumer software facilitate the direct alteration of human micro-expressions inside photos. Algorithms can subtly turn down the corners of a political opponent's mouth to amplify a hostile frown<sup>5</sup>, or manipulate protestors' visual cues to denote intense aggression. Humans are evolutionarily hardwired to decode faces instantly to evaluate external danger. Making micro-adjustments to a face triggers rapid affective judgments, priming the reader's view well before higher cortical processes evaluate the actual article.

Similarly, a peaceful public assembly can be framed as an unruly riot through minor contextual alterations.<sup>6</sup> An editor can digitally darken the sky to imply brooding dread, or clone cluttered, chaotic visual elements into the background. This visual framing alters the public narrative, converting peaceful demonstrators into a dangerous security threat that supposedly warrants militaristic police intervention. Under the protest paradigm, editing shifts focus from social causes to perceived criminality. Users must cultivate critical visual literacy to recognize these visual ploys, as the prime objective of these modifications is to orchestrate mass emotions, distort socio-political realities, and manufacture popular consent for state action.

### **Shifting the Public Narrative: How Images Twist the Truth**

In judicial reporting, biased imagery operates as an unofficial judge and jury. When Suspect cards are darkened or edited to highlight hostile expressions, they invoke immediate, implicit pre-trial prejudice in the minds of prospective jurors.<sup>7</sup> Such visual manipulation erodes the cornerstone legal doctrine of the presumption of innocence. By circulating these modified portraits on television screens and social feeds, media outlets effectively establish public convictions. This psychological priming is profoundly unjust, denying the accused their fundamental right to a neutral, unbiased court proceeding.

When citizens mobilize to advocate for socio-environmental protection, media selections become highly consequential. Newsrooms possess tremendous narrative control in curating and editing visuals. By focusing exclusively on isolated fires, or broadcasting close-ups of angry, shouting demonstrators, media reports construct a narrative of unbridled lawlessness.<sup>8</sup> This visual bias obscures the underlying socio-political rationale of the demonstration. Rather than educating the public, the edited coverage triggers primitive survival fears, fostering domestic polarization and dismissing the merit of the environmental or social advocacy.

### **Inside Our Brains: Why We Fall for Fake Images**

Neurological processing schedules explain our high vulnerability to visual deception. Human evolutionary biology prioritizes rapid pictorial decoding, routing visual signals directly to the amygdala—the brain's emotional threat-assessment center—for immediate subcortical affective response.<sup>9</sup> This response triggers instantly, completed well before the slower prefrontal cortex can engage in conscious logic, cognitive control, or fact-checking.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, exposing an individual to a frightening or provocative edited image establishes a persistent emotional anchor. This primary visceral feeling (fear, disgust, anger) acts as an interpretative filter, skewing subsequent processing of even remarkably balanced, text-based arguments.

This vulnerability is magnified by the Illusory Truth Effect, a cognitive phenomenon where repetition increases the subjective truthfulness of information.<sup>11</sup> In contemporary networks, a synthetic image can easily accumulate millions of rapid impressions before audit checks flag it. By the time a text-based retraction is published, the visual lie has already embedded itself into the cultural consciousness, establishing a lasting cognitive bias.

Furthermore, the 'dual-coding' model of memory suggests we retain visual symbols far longer than symbolic text. Under the 'continued influence' effect, even if a user consciously registers that a visual has been debunked, the emotional core remains intact in memory.<sup>12</sup> The amygdalic trace outlasts prefrontal cognitive corrections, illustrating that visual disinformation permanently shifts our long-term baseline opinions about target communities.

### **The Cost to Society: Division and Broken Empathy**

Societally, this distortion undermines civic cohesion and damages interpersonal empathy. Rather than debating foundational policy problems, citizens react to artificially exaggerated threats, casting political outgroups as cartoonish villains rather than fellow citizens. Dehumanization processes, driven by biased visual feeds, gradually erode normal moral restraints [13]. When public channels systemically depict specific communities (e.g., immigrants, minoritized racial demographics, or activists) in hostile, shadowy, or threatening contexts, they progressively de-individuate those groups. By stripping these communities

of their human representation, digital alteration facilitates public compliance with systemic inequality, daily discrimination, and state-sanctioned injustice.

## Conclusion

The collapse of visual integrity constitutes a major crisis of social psychology. As we advance deeper into an era dominated by Generative AI, where systemic prejudice is directly baked into the pixels of synthetic images [14], the threat of a completely 'manufactured reality' becomes absolute. Overcoming this requires scaling beyond basic technical file verification toward intensive visual media literacy. General audiences must be trained to recognize the covert psychological priming of visual colorism and structural caricature. Concurrently, journalistic bodies are obligated to establish a 'Digital Ethics of Care,' redefining the purpose of images around 'representational justice' rather than mere engagement-driven impact. Vigilance in safeguarding visual truth is no longer just a craft standard for photojournalists—it is a cognitive necessity for the sustenance of a democratic society.

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