

Delete a background? Easy. Smooth out a face? Seamless. Digital photo manipulation is now mainstream

March 12 2024, by Deepti Hajela



Kate, Princess of Wales, departs Westminster Abbey after the coronation ceremony in London, May 6, 2023. The scandal over Kate, Princess of Wales' family snapshot — dubbed “photogate” — is a new chapter in the thorny relationship between the media and Britain's royal family. Credit: AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino, File

It's been a common refrain when seeking proof that someone's story or some event actually took place: "Pics, or it didn't happen."

But in a world where the spread of technology makes photo manipulation as easy as a tap on your phone, the idea that a visual image is an absolute truth is as outdated as the daguerreotype. And a photo can sometimes raise as many questions as it was meant to answer.

That was seen in recent days when controversy descended upon an image of Kate, Princess of Wales, and her three children. News agencies including The Associated Press published, then retracted, the image given out by Kensington Palace over concerns it had been manipulated, leading to Kate saying on social media that she occasionally "experimented" with photo editing.

In that, she's hardly alone.

From something that was time-consuming and required a great deal of technical expertise in the days of actual film and darkrooms, digital editing has become something practically anyone can do, from adding filters to cropping images and much more. Apps abound, offering the easiest of experiences in creating and retouching photos and videos which can then be easily transmitted online and through social media.

"Cover blemishes and let the real you shine through," says an ad for the smartphone app Facetune. "Remove and change backgrounds instantly," the [Fotor](#) app's website enthuses. "Our AI object remover is ready to assist you in getting rid of unwanted objects."

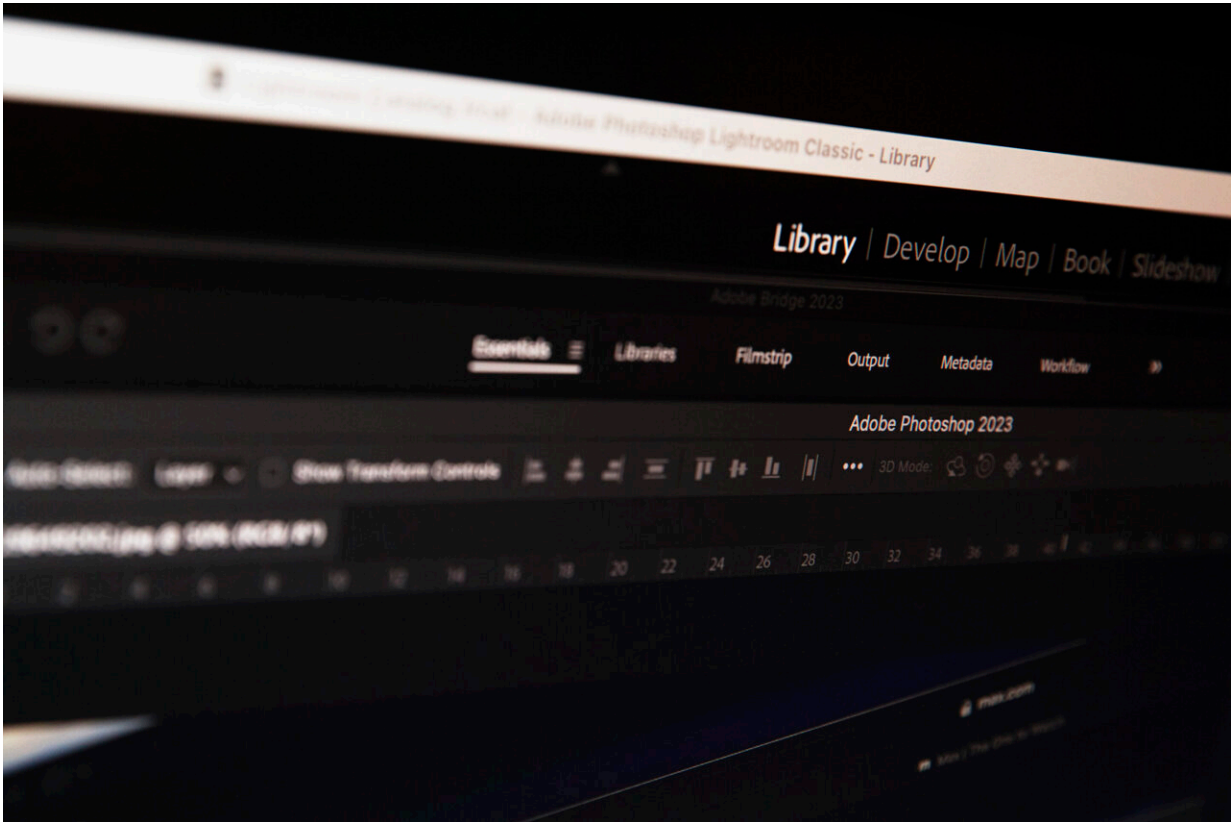
This Wild West of image-altering abilities is opening new frontiers for everyday people — and creating headaches for those who expect photos to be a documentary representation of reality.

The mainstreaming of manipulation

Photojournalists and major news organizations follow standards and ethics codes around photos. These organizations typically place an absolute premium on image authenticity and reject photographs that have been altered in any way. But efforts to identify altered imagery can be impeded by the increasingly easy-to-use apps for phones and computers that allow anyone to chip away, piece by piece, at what a camera actually recorded.

The mainstreaming of manipulation, placing such abilities at people's fingertips, has made for some interesting and viral moments — like the one in March 2023 when an artificially generated image of Pope Francis wearing a puffy white coat took in many people who thought it was real.

But there are risks and dangers to a world where just because you see something doesn't mean you can absolutely believe it, said Ken Light, a photojournalism professor at the University of California Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism.



Adobe Photoshop, Lightroom and Bridge program windows are seen on a computer screen, Tuesday, March 12, 2024, in New York. In a world where the spread of technology makes photo manipulation easy, a photo can sometimes raise as many questions as it was meant to answer. That was seen in recent days when controversy swirled around an image of Kate, Princess of Wales, and her three children. Credit: AP Photo/Sydney Schaefer

"The role of photography has been to witness and to record for the moment, but also for history. And I don't think any of us know where it's going," he said. The rise of visual manipulation that casts doubt on whether something is real or not "frays the fabric of the culture tremendously in the moment but also for the future."

Fred Ritchin, dean emeritus of the school at the [International Center of](#)

[Photography](#) and a former picture editor at The New York Times Magazine, agreed. "'The camera never lies' is a 20th-century idea. It's not a 21st-century idea," he said. "These are all mythologies that we're still hiding behind and we have not really confronted."

People have long known that some images are manipulated, like cover models on magazines, and some have raised concerns about that impact that artificial and manipulated standards of beauty can have on girls and women.

But they haven't really come to terms with how widespread digital manipulation is in other areas like social media, done by a wide variety of everyday people, said Lexie Kite, who with her sister Lindsay has done research into body image and media and wrote "More Than A Body: Your Body Is an Instrument, Not an Ornament."

"It is important for all of us to anchor ourselves in the truth that digital manipulation is our reality," she said.

How can fakery be identified?

People can take steps to deal with the creeping effects of photo manipulation, said Hany Farid, a professor at UC Berkeley whose research examines digital forensics and image analysis.

Viewers need "to just slow down a little bit, be a little bit more careful, be a little more thoughtful" about what they're looking at instead of just assuming any image they see is fact, he said.

On the technology side, he said there are ways being developed to track visual images and to make it clear if they've been altered after the photos were taken.

But while such steps may mitigate some of the issues, he said, it won't eliminate the problem or take us back to where we could have abiding faith in an image, as previous generations did with photos we now consider unforgettable.

"Almost every major incident in our history, wars, conflicts, disasters, there's this iconic photo," he said. "They're so powerful because they capture this incredibly complex set of facts and emotions and history in one photo. And I don't know that we can have that anymore. It's a very different world going forward now."

Or, if the adage was modified: "Pics, and maybe it still didn't quite happen."

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