

## Bloggers drive inquiry on how altered images saw print

Written by Katharine Q. Seelye and Julie Bosman

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The last August, 8th., Adnan Hajj was the most-searched term on the Technorati Web site, which tracks what is being discussed in the blogosphere. And a rendering of his work was one of the most viewed videos on YouTube.



Adnan Hajj/Reuters

A photographer has been accused of doctoring a photo of an Israeli air raid on Beirut. The manipulated image, left, and the original picture, right.

Mr. Hajj, a Lebanese photographer based in the Middle East, may not be familiar to many newspaper readers. But thanks to the swift justice of the Internet, he has been charged, tried and convicted of improperly altering photographs he took for Reuters. The pictures ran on the Reuters news service on Saturday, and were discovered almost instantly by bloggers to have been manipulated. Reuters then announced on Sunday that it had fired the freelancer. Executives said yesterday that they were still investigating why they had not discovered the manipulation before the pictures were disseminated to newspapers.

The matter has created an uproar on the Internet, where many bloggers see an anti-Israel bias in Mr. Hajj's manipulations, which made the damage from Israeli strikes into Beirut appear worse than the original pictures had. One intensified and replicated plumes of smoke from smoldering debris. In another, he changed an image of an Israeli plane to make it look as if it had dropped three flares instead of one.

Still, Reuters officials said they were unaware that any American newspapers had run the two pictures in question, although dozens of papers, including The New York Times, have printed his pictures over the years.

The Times, which ran a picture of his as recently as Saturday on its front page, has published eight of Mr. Hajj's Associated Press and Reuters photographs since March 2005. Times editors said a review of those pictures found none that appeared to have been changed improperly.

Still, his activities have heightened the anxiety photo editors are already experiencing in the age of digital photography, when pictures can be so easily manipulated by computer.

These advances, made broadly available to the public and professional photographers alike through Photoshop or similar software, may have made readers more skeptical of what they see in newspapers.

“They doubt the media because they understand what digital photography is,” said Torry Bruno, the associate managing editor for photography at The Chicago Tribune. “Everyone who plays with that knows what can be done.”

As a safeguard, he said, any pictures that The Tribune considers for its front page are printed out in color, 8-by-10 hard copies and displayed on the wall of the Page 1 conference room so that editors can review them throughout the day.

“I really think editors have to be diligent at looking carefully,” Mr. Bruno said. “Sometimes you can miss it on the first glance.”

But even as technology makes it easier to manipulate photographs, the blogosphere is making it easier to catch the manipulators.

Mr. Hajj’s picture ran on the news service on Saturday. The first inkling of a problem came in the form of a tip that morning to Charles Johnson, who runs a Web site called Little Green

Football. Mr. Johnson had been among the first in 2004 to question the authenticity of documents that CBS News used to suggest that President Bush had received favorable treatment in the National Guard.

It is not clear where the tipster first saw the photos, but they were available on the Internet. Mr. Johnson, who has a background in graphic design, said that as soon as he saw the pictures, he could tell they were fake. He posted the news on his Web site on Saturday at 3:41 p.m. California time (he is based in Los Angeles), which was early Sunday morning in Beirut.

The post was spotted by a Reuters photographer in Canada, who quickly notified the editors on duty, and they began an investigation.

Paul Holmes, a senior Reuters editor who is also responsible for the agency's standards and ethics, said the agency dealt with the matter within 18 hours.

"By the time I checked my e-mail at 10 Sunday morning, we had killed the doctored photo and suspended the photographer," he said. The agency subsequently stopped using the photographer and has removed the 920 digital photographs of his in its archives. It is reviewing them to see if any others have been improperly altered.

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The agency is also investigating how the photo slipped through its editing process.

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