CASE IX-C
Faking Photos: Is It Ever Justified?
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Chris Jones, a reporter with a large, metropolitan daily newspaper, is told by a source that a computer software corporation is considering his city as a plant site. Jones calls to confirm the tip, and the corporation’s public relations representative reads him the following statement:

Our corporation is interested in purchasing the two-block area between Third and Maple Streets on Washington Avenue. The corporation believes the site would be to its advantage, with easy access from the interstate and the airport and adequate parking space. The plant would produce software material and offer jobs to trained applicants. We are preparing to make a more than substantial offer to the landowner, Joe Sullivan. The corporation hopes to begin production on the plant three months from now, in March.

Jones notes in his story that the proposed site, commonly known as skid row, houses several run-down hotels, bars, and a homeless shelter.

One week later, Jones talks to Sullivan and the corporate representative again. He learns an offer was made to purchase the land, and although Sullivan is eager to accept, he will wait three days to give his response.

Jones’s city editor makes a photo assignment, asking for shots of the homeless people who live in the two blocks. The city editor tells veteran photographer Steve Stone he needs strong, emotional pictures to run with a story about how the homeless shelter cannot afford to move to another location. The city editor also wants the photographs to run before Sullivan responds to the corporation’s offer.

Stone spends an entire day walking up and down Washington Avenue, trying to get close enough to the people sleeping and eating on the streets. Yet they either cover their faces, walk away, or plead with him not to take their pictures.

During the morning of the second day, Stone manages to take some photographs, but after he develops them he discovers that his images did not capture the pain he felt when seeing firsthand how these people struggle to survive.

Under deadline pressure, Stone calls some of his friends and asks them to pose for him as homeless people. He takes his friends, dressed in torn clothes with black greasepaint smeared on their faces, into an alley near, but not on, skid row. Stone takes some created photographs and turns them into his editor minutes before deadline.

The city editor is so impressed with Stone’s work that he decides to run one of the photographs on the front page the next day, with photo essays on two inside pages.

The day the photographs are printed, both the newspaper and the computer software corporation are flooded with phone calls protesting the plant site. Later that day, the corporate executives hold a press conference, saying they believe it would be best to look into other plant locations in the city.
Is it likely that such deception would work? Examine closely the photo of the man sleeping in the doorway of the church building that accompanies this case. He is a college student who volunteered to pose for the photographer. He is neither poor nor homeless.

**Micro Issues:**

1. Should Stone have told his editor that he was having problems getting the right photographs before he set up the shots?
2. If you were Stone, would you have gone ahead and taken pictures of the homeless people despite their protests?
3. After letting the editors see the photographs, should Stone have told them how he took the photographs? Justify your answer.
4. What is the editor’s obligation in framing the assignment?

**Mid-range Issues:**

1. Because the photographs were an obvious factor in the corporation’s decision to find another location for the plant, did the end justify the means?
2. Do you think the photographer allowed his personal feelings about the issue of the homeless to interfere with his professional judgment?
3. Does the fact that the photos closely mirrored reality make a difference in whether the deception was ethically justified?
4. What do you see as the difference between asking a friend to help you fake the photo and directing a cooperative homeless person to pose for you? Is one any more truthful than the other?
5. What is the distinction between the faked photo and a print journalist who writes about a composite character?

**Macro Issues:**

1. Does a photographer create a pseudo-event just by showing up with his camera?
2. Should a news photographer voice his personal opinion through his photographs? Explain your answer.
3. In this case, the photographer recreated a likely news scenario—a homeless man lying in a church entry. In 1992, NBC’s Dateline recreated a fiery truck collision on camera by rigging the truck with incendiary devices before it was rammed by another vehicle. It is a fact that some homeless people sleep in doorways and some trucks explode on impact. Is there a difference in NBC’s efforts to ensure good video of a crash and this photographer’s efforts to ensure good photos of the homeless? If so, what are the differences? Are both equally culpable activities?