

ALMIGHTY IMAGES

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Public trust amid the rise of AI-based images



© 2018 George Steinmetz. Artisanal fishing boats offloading their catch on the beach of Nouakchott, Global Fisheries series. www.georgesteinmetz.com/gallery/Global-Fisheries/G0000gaIqCOWoGT0

Reality is the new fiction.

Reality is described as the state of things as they exist, while fiction is described as invented or untrue. A University of Waterloo experiment revealed that only 61% of participants could differentiate between AI-generated and authentic images, despite expectations of 85%. This underscores a growing confusion between reality and fiction. What is real and fiction seems to be blurry. I recently asked my keynote audiences if they could identify real photographs from generated ones. A stunning photo by George Steinmetz from his "Global Fisheries" series was often mistaken as AI-generated, highlighting how spectacular reality can sometimes be mistaken for fiction.

With the rise of visual-driven platforms like Instagram and TikTok, communicating through images seems to have become the norm. The shift of legacy media from paper to digital has made the visualisation of journalism and stories more compelling and layered. However, the question that arises is whether we understand images. Unlike reading and writing, we have never been formally trained to interpret visuals.

While global literacy has improved dramatically since the 19th century, visual literacy remains an uncharted territory.

The use of imagery is deeply ingrained in human-kind. The first cave paintings were made 45,000 years ago, and ever since, visuals have played a role in understanding the world and communicating with others. It was not until 1826 that Niepce managed to fix an image captured with a camera. Still, photography did not become more accessible until 1888 when George Eastman's Kodak camera, using film, started to become famous: 'You press the button, we do the rest'.

Fast-forward to now, and almost all of us create images without giving them any thought and effortlessly share them online. We forget, or maybe most do not know, that the first image was not published on the web by its inventor until 1992.

Even without the formal training we undergo when it comes to reading texts, our brains are wired for visuals, processing them in split seconds. Yet, as we navigate an era of sophisticated image manipulation, the need for visual literacy has never been greater.

In 1984, when photographers were still using film and digital imaging was in its infancy, Fred Ritchin predicted in an article for the *New York Times Magazine* that “in the not-too-distant future, realistic-looking images will probably have to be labelled, like words, as either fiction or nonfiction, because it may be impossible to tell them apart. We may have to rely on the image maker, not the image, to tell us which category certain pictures fall.”

Forty years later, his words ring true. AI models have made it nearly impossible to distinguish between camera-captured and AI-generated images. Michael Christopher Brown, a well-respected and experienced conflict photographer, caused confusion with his story “90 Miles”, which he dubbed “a post-photography, A.I. reportage illustration experiment”. Despite him being clear and outspoken about the nature of this work, it was met with great concern by the photojournalistic community.



© Michael Christopher Brown. Image from *90 Miles*, an AI reporting illustration experiment exploring the decades long story of Cuban’s crossing the “90 Miles” of ocean separating Havana from Florida. michaelchristopherbrown.com/90miles

The rise of AI has further eroded our trust in photographs. Midjourney v5, released earlier this year, received much attention, particularly after Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins used it to create images prior to Donald Trump’s arrest this summer. The images spread like wildfire across social and traditional media.

As manipulation techniques become more sophisticated and accessible, we must prepare for a new normal where scrutinising online images is second nature. Fred Ritchin advocates for new standards to distinguish between photographs and synthetic images.

The initiative “Writing with Light” aims to create a community of photographers committed to fair and accurate representation. The point is to establish trust in the photographer as an author rather than in what appears to be a photograph.

Similarly, the Content Authenticity Initiative (CAI) seeks to ensure the provenance of digital content through open-source tools and content credentials, akin to nutrition labels for digital media.

Future transparency in content creation will likely rely on digital signatures, content credentials, and AI labels.

Building media wisdom is crucial, teaching the public to critically and consciously participate in our media society. Transparency in image editing should be emphasized, ensuring that any modifications are clear and honest.

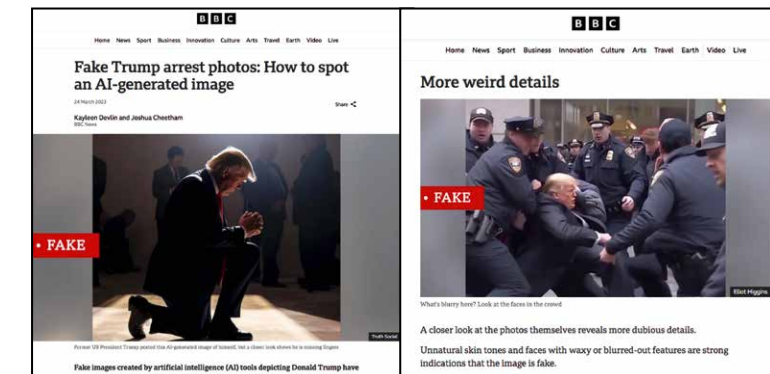
The best conditions for generating trustworthy images will come from those with visual competence. As we continue to paint with light, we must ensure that what we create can be trusted by our audience.

»Diminishing trust in information, particularly in images, is deeply problematic in a world where the fight against misinformation and disinformation is a significant challenge. Losing confidence in photographs is part of that.«



Screenshots from the X Page of Eliot Higgins, founder and creative director of Bellingcat, “Making pictures of Trump getting arrested while waiting for Trump’s arrest”, 20 March 2023.

x.com/EliotHiggins/status/163792768173498777



Screenshot from the BBC News Article “Fake Trump arrest photos: How to spot an AI-generated image” by Kayleen Devlin and Joshua Cheetham, 24 March 2023, showing AI generated images made by Eliot Higgins. www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65069316



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