

## **Lebanon photos: Take a closer look**

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THE controversy this week over Reuters' distribution of digitally manipulated, falsely labeled and — probably — staged photos of the fighting in Lebanon hasn't been nearly as large as it should have been.

Credit for bringing the sordid business to light goes to Charles Johnson, a musician and Los Angeles-based blogger, who operates a hard-edged right wing website unfathomably called Little Green Footballs. Last Saturday, Reuters, which is headquartered in London, transmitted two photographs by one of its regular Lebanese freelance photographers, Adnan Hajj, whose work for the agency has appeared in many American newspapers since 1993. An anonymous tipster reportedly drew Johnson's attention to the photos, and he immediately recognized that one purporting to show the aftermath of an Israeli airstrike on Beirut had been digitally enhanced. It subsequently emerged that another image allegedly showing an Israeli fighter launching multiple air-to-ground missiles also had been altered using the common Photoshop computer program.

Johnson quickly posted a denunciation of the phony photo. Within 18 hours, Reuters killed the manipulated images, fired Hajj and removed 920 of his photos from its digital archives. Paul Holmes, the Reuters editor responsible for standards and ethics, told the New York Times that all the withdrawn images were being reviewed "to see if any others have been improperly altered." He also said the news agency was investigating how the photos slipped by its editors but noted that on the day in question, "we published 2,000 photos. It was handled by someone on a very busy day at a more junior level than we would wish for in ideal circumstances."

The cause of the lapse, Holmes said, simply was "human error."

Fair enough. Unfortunately, these things can happen to conscientious news organizations in precisely the circumstances he cites. Three years ago, for example, the Los Angeles Times immediately fired a staff photographer and apologized to its readers when it discovered he had used similar technology to make a picture he'd shot in Iraq more dramatic. The doctored image had appeared on the paper's front page.

There are, however, two problems here, and they're the reason this controversy shouldn't be allowed to sputter to its inglorious conclusion just yet: One of these has to do with the scope of what strongly appears to be wider fabrication in the photojournalism Reuters and other news agencies are obtaining from their freelancers in Lebanon. The other is the U.S. news media's grudging response to the revelation of Hajj's misconduct and its utter lack of interest in exploring whether his is a unique or representative case.

Thus far, only a handful of relatively brief stories on this affair have appeared in major American papers. The Times picked up one from the Washington Post, which focused mainly on the politics of Johnson's website. The New York Times, which ran one of Hajj's photos on its front page Saturday, reported that it has published eight of his pictures since 2003, but none were altered. It then went on to quote other papers about steps they take to detect fraudulent images. No paper has taken up the challenge of determining whether there's anything dodgy about the flow of freelance photos Reuters and other news agencies — including the Associated Press, which also transmitted images made by Hajj — are sending out of tormented Lebanon.

Look for yourself

Johnson is co-founder with mystery novelist and screenwriter Roger L. Simon of

another online site, [www.pajamasmedia.com](http://www.pajamasmedia.com). It aggregates mostly right wing blogs from around the world and has ambitions as a politically inflected alternative news source. It's worth taking the time to go there and to click on the link giddily labeled "Reutersgate." Make what you will of the analysis, much of which is feverish, sneering and tending toward the mechanistically conspiratorial. What's hard to imagine is how anybody can look at the photos and not conclude that they're riddled with journalistic deceit.

Many, including grisly images from the Qana tragedy, clearly are posed for maximum dramatic effect. There is an entire series of photos of children's stuffed toys poised atop mounds of rubble. All are miraculously pristinely clean and apparently untouched by the devastation they purportedly survived. (Reuters might want to check its freelancers' expenses for unexplained Toys R Us purchases.) In some cases, the bloggers seem to have uncovered the same photographer using more than one identity. There's an improbable photo by Hajj of a Koran burning atop the rubble of a building supposedly destroyed by an Israeli aircraft hours before. Nothing else in sight is alight. (With photos, as in life, when something seems too perfect to be true, it's almost always because it is.) In other photos, the same wrecked building is portrayed multiple times with the same older woman — one supposes she ought to be called a model — either lamenting its destruction or passing by in different costumes.

There's more, and it's worth your time to take a look. That's one of the undeniable strengths of the Internet and of the blogosphere, and the fact that it is being employed to help keep journalism honest ultimately is to everybody's benefit.

What the major news organizations ought to be doing is to make their own analysis of the images coming out of Lebanon and if, as

seems more than likely, they find widespread malfeasance, some hard questions need to be asked about why it occurred. Some of it may stem from the urge every photographer feels to make a photo perfect. Some of it probably flows from a simple economic imperative — a freelancer who produces dramatic images gets picked up more and paid more. Moreover, the obscenely anti-Israeli tenor of most of the European and world press means there's an eager market for pictures of dead Lebanese babies.

It's worth noting in this context that there is no similar flow of propagandistic images coming from the Israeli side of the border. That's because one side — the democratically elected government of Israel — views death as a tragedy and the other — the Iranian financed terrorist organization Hezbollah — sees it as an opportunity. In this case, turning their own dead children into material creates an opportunity to cloud the fact that every Lebanese casualty, tragic as he or she is, was killed or injured as an unavoidable consequence of Israel's pursuit of terrorists who use their own people as human shields. Every Israeli civilian killed or injured was the victim of a terrorist attack intended to harm civilians. That alone ought to wash away any blood-stained suggestion of moral equivalency.

That brings us to the most troubling of the possible explanations for these fraudulent photos, which is that some of the photojournalists involved are either intimidated by or sympathetic to the Hezbollah terrorists. It's a possibility fraught with harsh implications, but it needs to be examined thoroughly and openly.

Johnson and his colleagues have done the serious news media a service. Failure to follow up on it would be worse than churlish; it would be irresponsible.