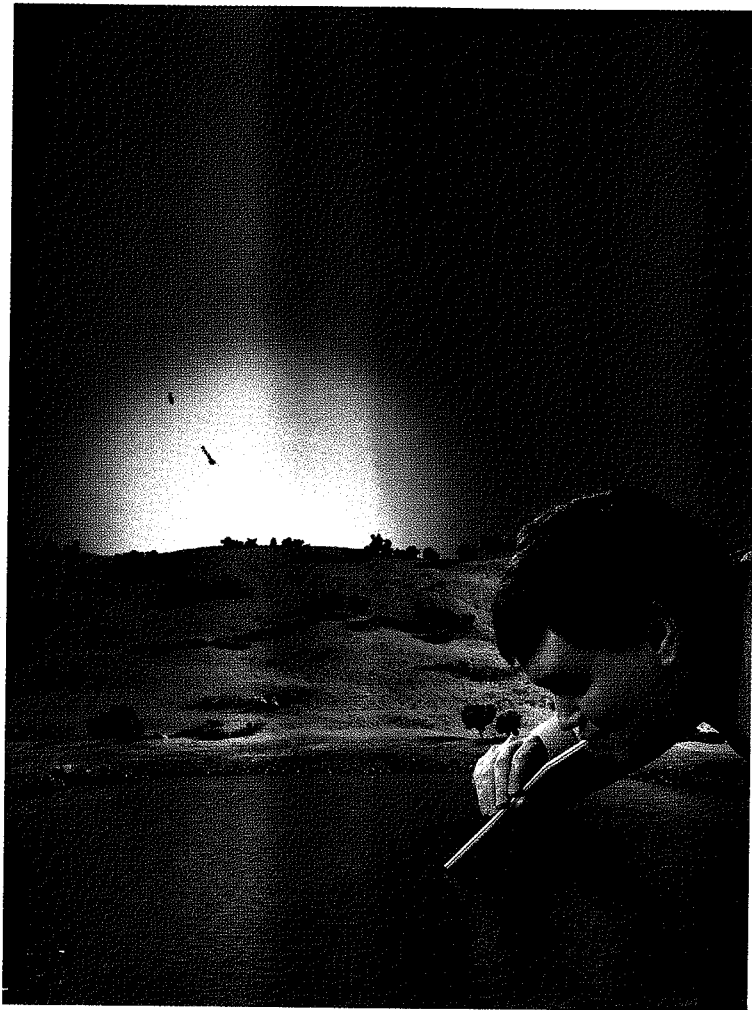


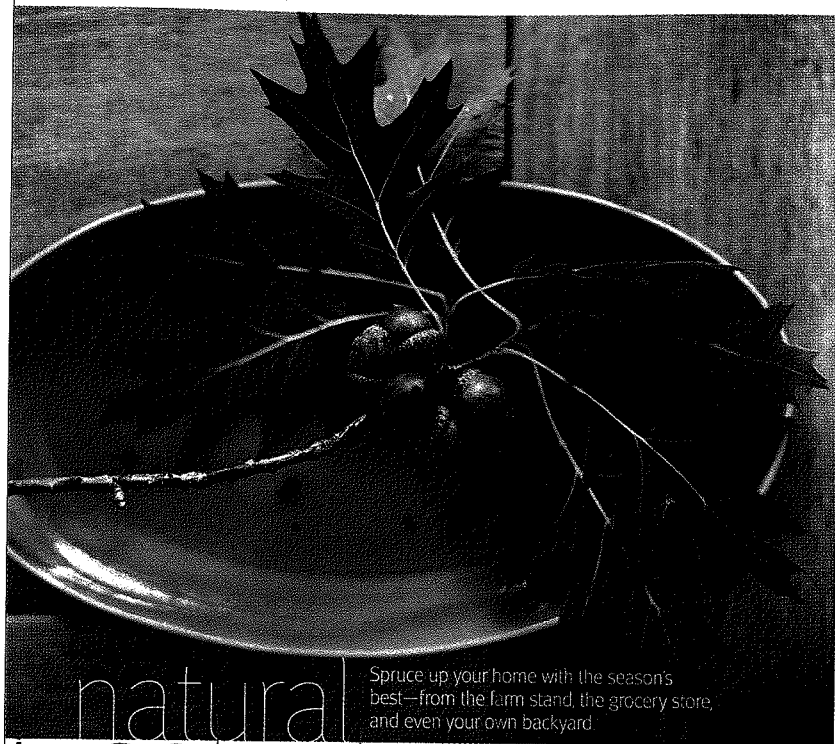
CREATE



BOTH © PHIL TOLEDANO

# DIGITAL CONFUSION

There are still no standard procedures for paying for digital processing costs. And that frustrates both photo editors and photographers.  
By Sarah Coleman



# natura selection

Spruce up your home with the season's best—from the farm stand, the grocery store, and even your own backyard.

WRITTEN BY KIM WALLER  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DITTE ISAGER  
STYLING BY SIBELLA COURT

REAL SIMPLE / PHOTOGRAPHY

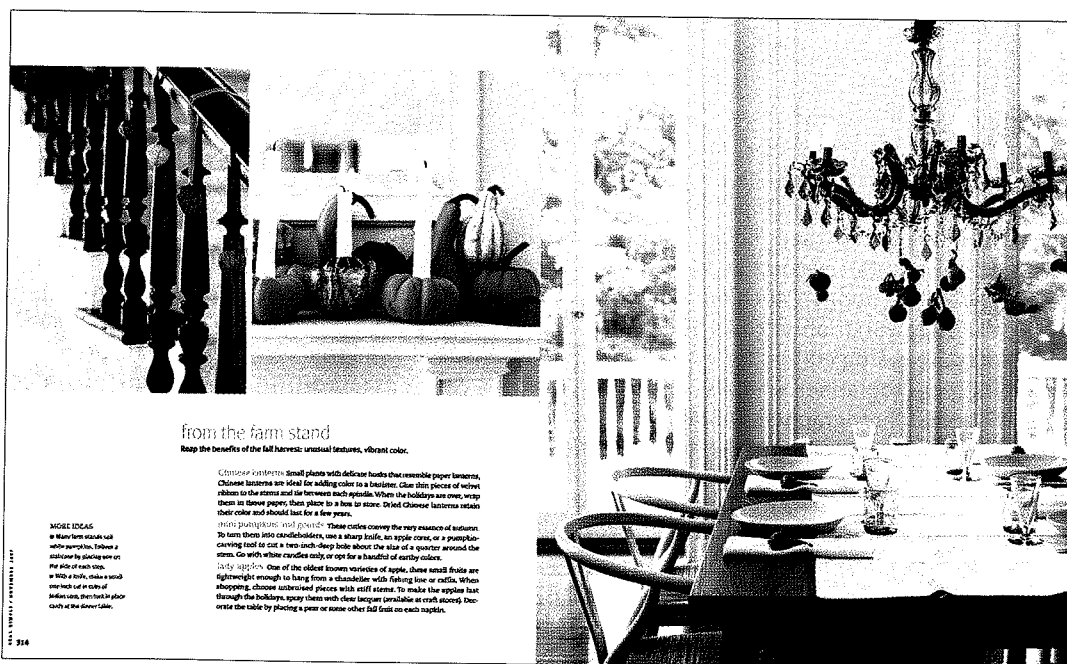
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In 2002, *National Geographic* magazine got a special visit from some representatives from Nikon. Known for its sumptuous imagery, *Geographic* had resisted allowing its photographers to transition from film to digital capture; but now, shooter Joe McNally was pressuring his editors to let him work digitally. Nikon sent some ambassadors to make the case. "They said to us, one thing you mustn't expect is for digital to be cheaper," remembers Dan Westergren, photo editor at *Geographic's* sister publication, *National Geographic Traveler*. "We were impressed by the quality. But everyone left that session with a strong impression that we weren't going to save any money."

In the years that have passed since then, Nikon's prediction seems to have come true. Magazines that are commissioning photo shoots in both film and digital formats report that they're not saving money on digital imagery. "Convenience is the number one benefit of working digitally. Cost-wise, it's the same," says Rebecca Horn, photo editor at *Maxim* magazine. On top of that, the costs for digital imaging are often unpredictable. "The pricing of digital varies so much, and that's definitely one of the negatives about it," says Michele Hadlow, se-



## from the farm stand

Reap the benefits of the fall harvest: seasonal textures, vibrant color.

### MORE IDEAS

• Many farm markets sell whole pumpkins. Before a pumpkin is sliced, use on the side of each step.

• With a knife, make a small one-inch cut in the side of a pumpkin. Then use a sharp knife to slice out the seeds.

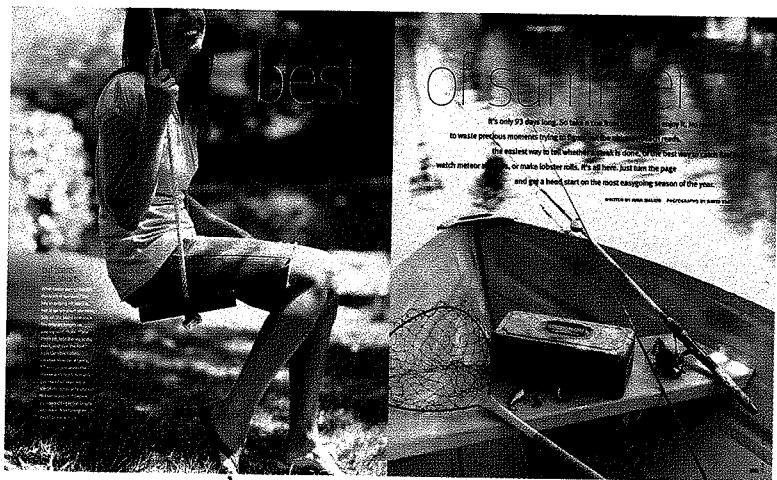
Chinese lanterns: Small plants with delicate heads that resemble paper lanterns. Chinese lanterns are ideal for adding color to a centerpiece. Use thin pieces of white ribbon to tie them and tie between each sprig. When the holidays are over, wrap them in tissue paper, then place in a box to store. Dried Chinese lanterns retain their color and should last for a few years.

Apple pumpkins: Not pumpkins! These cukes convey the very essence of autumn. To turn them into candleholders, use a sharp knife, an apple corer, or a pumpkin-carving tool to cut a two-inch-deep hole about the size of a quarter around the stem. Go with white candles only, or opt for a handful of earthy colors.

Apple lanterns: One of the oldest known varieties of apple, these small fruits are lightweight enough to hang from a chandelier with fishing line or twine. When shopping, choose unblemished pieces with stiff stems. To make the apples last through the holidays, spray them with clear lacquer (available at craft stores). Decorate the table by placing a pear or some other fall fruit on each taglit.

Opposite: Phil Toledano shot this conceptual image for *Vanity Fair's* Environmental Issue. The post production was handled by Samantha Moranville who owns the retouching studio Pixel Perfect. The image on the right is the retouched image. Above: Spreads from *Real Simple* magazine, photographed by Mikkel Vang. The photo director of the publication says that she asks all her photographers for an estimate for retouching, and lets them know how much of the budget she can dedicate to it.

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© REAL SIMPLE/PHOTOS BY DAVID TSAI

Above: A summer fashion story for *Real Simple* photographed by David Tsai. Below: R&B singer Keyshia Cole on the cover of *Vibe* magazine. The magazine's photo director Robyn Forest says that digital shoots require careful budgeting.

nior photo editor at *Forbes* magazine. She poses a question that is on many photo editors' lips: "Why is there so much variation in the market?"

## DIGITAL PROCESSING

These days, instead of the costs they used to see for film and lab fees, photo editors are being billed for "digital processing." It's a catch-all term that includes some or all of the following: converting images from RAW to JPEG; color correcting; embedding metadata (including keywords and captions); transmitting images electronically or posting them on a Web page or FTP site where editors can make selections; and possibly hiring a digital technician to do the above tasks.

Hidden within "digital processing" is another significant cost: the price of updating equipment. Since digital equipment becomes obsolete far sooner than its film equivalent, photographers have had to pass extra costs onto clients, which can offset any savings that might have been made by not using film, paper and chemicals. "In the old days, you could have a Pentax 6 x 7 that lasted for years. Now, everyone has to update their cameras and computers every year or so," laments Casey Tierney, photo director at *Real Simple* magazine.

Editors who are unfamiliar with the new technology and processes are often unsure whether the charges they're seeing are fair. "If a photographer says he needs an expensive digital person on set, I'm going to believe it because I don't know any better," says Robyn Forest, photo director of *Vibe* magazine. "With digital shoots, the costs and technology are changing so quickly that I have to guard the budget much more carefully. That's not something I enjoy."

But the wide variation in costs doesn't necessarily mean that some photographers are taking editors for a ride, says Judy Herrmann, an editorial and advertising photographer who also serves as president of the American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP). "These days, some photographers are really digitally savvy, and they're taking images to a level of finesse that wasn't practical in film-based days," she says. "They're looking at tonality and colors, doing very sophisticated adjustments. They're making sure the image is totally faithful to their and their client's vision."

Herrmann says it's only fair that more knowledgeable and experienced photographers are compensated for their skills—which is why she doesn't mind that professional organizations like ASMP aren't allowed to recommend a standard pricing structure for services. "It's very difficult to make an apples-to-apples comparison," she says. "Let's say everyone charges \$50 for optimizing a file. Is the client going to get the same thing for that \$50 from different photographers? Probably not. And shouldn't the photographer who really knows about color management get more than the one who just converts from RGB to CMYK?"

"AS AN INDUSTRY I THINK WE'VE DONE A POOR JOB OF EXPLAINING WHAT WE'RE PROVIDING TO CLIENTS,"

says editorial photographer Seth Resnick. Resnick says photographers doing post-processing should not charge by the hour, but rather should document the number of layers or steps they used.

Editorial photographer Seth Resnick agrees. "As an industry, I think we've done a poor job of explaining what we're providing to clients," he says. In order to show clients that they're getting value for money, Resnick says, photographers doing post-processing should not charge by the hour, but rather should document the number of layers or steps they used, and output a history log or a "before" and "after" image for the client. "We really have to feed our clients the information about where the value is in the work that they're getting," he says.

## RETOUCHING

Another cost that gets added on to digital assignments is for retouching and postproduction. For some photo editors, the reliance on retouching is a weakness of digital imagery. "With digital, skin tones and colors in the initial capture are not very natural, then there's all this expensive retouching work done to make it look like film—so why don't we just use film?" says *Real Simple*'s Tierney.

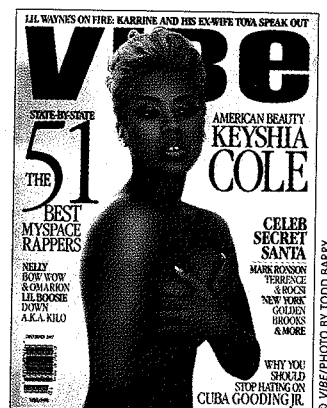
In fact, retouching skin tones—which often get flattened by digital capture—has become a mini-industry in itself, with many books and seminars on the topic. More advanced retouching goes further—from fixing

facial flaws and blemishes, to adding fantastic elements to a shot. "The public is getting more used to seeing retouched images, and wanting them," says Samantha Moranville, who owns the retouching studio Pixel Perfect. "Our work is becoming more and more intertwined with photographers' creative work."

Like editorial photographers, retouchers report that photo editors sometimes don't understand their financial constraints. "My monitors cost about \$6,000 each, and I'm spending \$15,000 a month just on material for my printer," says Jason Tuchman, the owner and head retoucher of Pistol Studios. "Everybody has a budget, but I'll be honest—I feel that since the dawn of the digital age, budgets have gotten lower and people are expecting more."

Moranville—who frequently works on editorial projects—says she earns significantly more as a retoucher than she did as an editorial photographer. Recently, she worked on a project with photographer Phillip Toledano for *Vanity Fair*'s environmental issue, in which images showed a man sucking up a lake through a straw and devouring trees in a forest. "It's always a pleasure to work with beautiful images," she says.

Of course, though, costs for this kind of work add another line item to editorial budgets that are already stretched to the breaking point. Often, re-



© VIBE/PHOTO BY TODD BARRY

touchers find themselves caught between photographers with sky-high standards and editors with low budgets. "It's tricky because you're being brought onto the job by the photographer, but the magazine is paying the bill," says Moranville. "There have definitely been times when I've had to explain to an editor just how labor-intensive something is going to be."

Tierney says she always asks photographers for an estimate for retouching, and lets them know how much of the budget she can dedicate to it. "If it's a high-end photographer and it's important for them that the story looks amazing, they might end up using part of their creative fee on the retouching," she says, adding, "I don't want to know about that, because it makes me feel too guilty."

Moranville predicts that in the future, top retouchers will be viewed as creatives in their own right. Moving toward that ideal, she recently inked a deal for representation with agent Susanne Bransch, who represents photographers and illustrators. Though not unprecedented, it's unusual for a retoucher to be represented by an agency.

If more of her peers follow Moranville's example, it could shake up the industry even more, as photographers and retouchers compete for the same dwindling editorial budgets. But Moranville doesn't see it that way. "If I'm more of a partner in the process, the client will benefit because I can work with the photographer to develop more exciting visual ideas," she says. "Everyone wins."

## A NEW MODEL

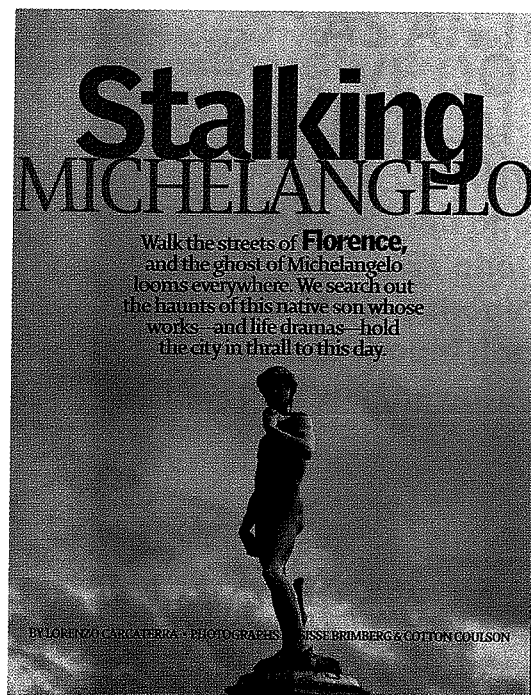
Ironically, *National Geographic Traveler* is one of the few magazines that has seen huge savings since it switched to using digital imagery, says Westergren.



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It's done so by taking a radical move: instituting a flat rate for digital processing.

In 2006, the magazine decided to add \$100 per day to its photographer's day rate to cover digital processing. The impetus to add the flat fee came from *Traveler's* sister magazine, *National Geographic*



*ic*. "They had enough cachet to do it," Westergren says. "They told photographers, this is more than we want to pay and less than you want to receive, but we think it's fair for both of us."

Before *Geographic* instituted the \$100-per-day rate, Westergren says, the magazine was seeing a wide spectrum of digital processing charges: "Some photographers were charging nothing, and others who'd been to one of Seth Resnick's seminars were doing a lot of post-processing and charging a lot for it." Introducing the flat fee, he says, was "a way to keep charges under control," and so far, he hasn't heard any significant complaints from photographers. "Everyone's sure to bill for it. It seems to be working out fine."

The flat fee has undoubtedly saved *Traveler* a lot of money. To illustrate how much, Westergren cites a recent digital assignment in France in which a photographer came back with 9,500 images from a ten-day assignment. If shot on film, the magazine's processing department would have billed Westergren \$18 to purchase and develop a roll of 36 exposures, for a total cost of \$4,750. "Instead of that, we paid the photographer \$1,000 for ten days' worth of digital processing—so we saved \$3,750," says Westergren. Even given the fact that photographers tend to shoot more when they're working digitally, he says, the magazine is looking at around \$100,000 of savings per year.



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**Above and left: Two stories for the *National Geographic Traveler*. The magazine offers a flat rate of \$100 for digital processing.**

The savings have meant that *Traveler* can still afford to print on high-priced paper ("Paper prices have been going crazy," Westergren says) and hasn't had to cut back on sending photographers out in the field. "If we were still paying what we used to for processing, I'm sure someone would be knocking on my door saying, We're out of money, don't send anyone out in the field for a few months," says Westergren.

*Geographic's* \$100-per-day fee for digital processing is a radical move, and one that, so far, other magazines are reluctant to follow. "We might need to look into having some sort of guidelines at some point in the near future," says Hadlow, "but I'd really rather not. I'd like to say that all of this new pricing could be worked out on the honor system."

"This is a burgeoning market, and I'm hoping that, as with every other technical medium, costs will come down in a few years," says Horn. Forest agrees, saying, "In the future, I think it'll be upon all of us to be more digitally savvy and figure out ways to do things more cheaply." Asked if *Vibe* would contemplate moving to a flat rate, Forest laughs. "Definitely not," she says. "Everything's changing too fast for that."

*Attention photo editors: PDN wants to hear from you. We're conducting a survey on PDNOnline about how you budget for and pay for digital processing costs, retouching, post production and other costs associated with digital imaging. Take our survey, and help your colleagues by providing valuable information about this issue.*