Why the Kate Middleton scandal just won’t die

The curious thing about the image that launched a thousand conspiracy theories is not that it was photoshopped. It’s that it was photoshopped *badly.*

The British royal family is like a corporation without an underlying business, a C-suite that is image only. The job is just to be a symbolic representation of the UK. The person who most clearly understood this was Queen Elizabeth II’s now-deceased prince consort, Philip, who sometimes called his family “the Firm”; he was, as an infant, exiled from Greece after a revolution. The royal family must be visible and beloved or else it is in danger of being abolished. The royals need their fandom; if they do not tend to it, there are serious consequences.

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As a result, public relations is a critical skill for any member of the Firm. This has resulted in something of an arms race; as the public has gotten more sophisticated about media consumption, the royal family has had to stay ahead of them. And ever since Diana Spencer, the ex-wife of the current king, tag-teamed with the UK press to tell her story of how her marriage broke down, the royal family has been on the back foot.

Royal watchers know perfectly well that the Firm engages in media manipulation; for instance, as royals reporter Ellie Hall makes clear, royal press offices very rarely go on the

record. “Phrases like ‘this reporter understands’ or ‘this news outlet can confirm’ are very common in stories about the royal family,” Hall notes. For any seasoned watcher, that means that the press office is involved.

I have seen some tech reporters wonder if this is the end of shared reality. With all due respect, boys, this is a misunderstanding of how we got here. I follow the royal family primarily because they are a pack of hilarious nitwits, but they also provide a masterclass in media manipulation.

The royal family has established that official reporting about it is untrustworthy over the course of *decades*. Kitty Kelley’s *The Royals* was regarded by no less than Christopher Hitchens as a serious exposé, and it details, among other things, how the family attempted to hide their German connections during World War II. The very funny *Ninety-Nine Glimpses of Princess Margaret* (or *Ma’am Darling* in the UK) shows how shocking stories of Princess Margaret’s bad behavior served to make her sister, the Queen, look more respectable. In *Spare*, Prince Harry discusses at length the reluctance of the royal press office to defend his wife — and though he has his own motivations, many of his claims ring true. (For instance, King Charles III’s office will leak unflattering stories about other members of the family.) And then, of course, there was the monarchy-shaking event known as Princess Diana.

All hell broke loose

With that context in mind, let’s turn to recent events. The timeline of events is roughly this: in late December, two outlets proclaimed that Prince William and his wife, Kate Middleton, would make a trip to Italy. Then, in January, this trip was abruptly canceled, as Middleton was recovering from surgery. So whatever happened, it was unplanned; Kensington would hardly signal a trip that it knew the princess couldn’t take. Until the bad Mother’s Day Photoshop, the last time an image of Middleton showed up on Kensington Palace’s Instagram

was December 29th, as part of a year-in-review montage.

The official announcement about the surgery said she was "unlikely to return to public events until after Easter," which is March 31st this year. Now, perhaps this wouldn't have mattered as much had television personality Concha Calleja not claimed on a Spanish program called *Fiesta* that Middleton was doing poorly after surgery. (Calleja has also suggested Michael Jackson was murdered.) It is the only follow-up on the announcement. The response from the palace was unusual: it went on the record to deny the report.

That's approximately when all hell broke loose.

Middleton's job is to be seen in public, and she's been gone for months. In the absence of other information, speculation has run rampant from serious surgery complications to divorce (over William's rumored infidelity). So that made the Mother's Day photograph important to get right: it was, at minimum, proof Middleton was not in a coma.

Imagine *a literal princess* hunched over a laptop, trying to figure out the heal tool

Unfortunately, the image released was sloppy. The Photoshop job was so bad that multiple press agencies (*The Associated Press, Reuters*, Getty Images, and *Agence France-Presse*) issued "kill notices" advising people not to use the photo. These types of notices are rare and fueled a renewed interest in Middleton's whereabouts. The furor has also spurred CNN to review all previous photos received from Kensington Palace.

The metadata on the Mother's Day photograph – the one that kicked off the current firestorm – suggests the photo was saved twice in Photoshop. The explanation for the shoddy Photoshop job as given publicly by the official X account belonging to Kensington Palace is that Middleton did it herself.

As funny as this is — imagine *a literal princess* hunched over a laptop, trying to figure out the heal tool — it doesn't seem entirely plausible. Middleton's public presentation is immaculate. She is photographed constantly, and there is hardly ever so much as a wrinkle in her clothes. This woman *gave birth* and then posed for a photo the next day in a dress that referenced a similar photo of Princess Diana. If she *were* using Photoshop, which I very much doubt, I don't think she would have missed a single detail.

It does not seem odd to me that a person whose job is being beautiful in public might use any tool available to make the shot perfect. It is, after all, notoriously difficult to get a photo of three children where no one is making a weird face or has their eyes closed. (I am the oldest of five; our family Christmas photos, where the goal was to get one shot where all of us looked good at the same time, were an ordeal.) I would not be surprised to find out that this is a composite image where the best shot of everyone in it was used. The problem the palace has run into is that, thanks to AI, the public knows where to look for manipulated images: hair, hands, edges.

Given Middleton's conspicuous absence, the image was more loaded than usual

Images, even photographs, are not necessarily accurate depictions of reality, and this is hardly a secret to photographers or documentarians. Famously, though Franklin D. Roosevelt was partially paralyzed, the White House suppressed photos that would have shown his disability. More recently, composite photographs in *Vanity Fair* gave Reese Witherspoon three legs and Oprah Winfrey two left hands. Images of celebrities are commonly photoshopped to remove skin texture, make the celebrity skinnier, or alter the person's outfit.

In most other circumstances, the photoshopped image of Kate Middleton might not have touched off a firestorm. But in this

case, given Middleton’s conspicuous absence, the image was more loaded than usual. After all, Charles has retreated from the public eye since his cancer diagnosis, but he has been, in the meantime, releasing images of himself smiling while reading get-well cards from the public.

All this public speculation is easy enough to settle. Probably a neck-up video of Middleton thanking everyone for their concern and simply saying she’d like to rest would do it. That hasn’t happened. Instead, besides the Mother’s Day photo, we’ve gotten two odd paparazzi photos: one from *TMZ* deemed “unauthorized” and not run in the UK *even by the tabloids*. The other, presumably “authorized,” (whatever that means!) shows Middleton with William, facing away from the camera. This image was released after the photoshopped one. It hasn’t helped.

Remember, this is a family for whom image matters more than most. Middleton, a beautiful commoner who became a princess, has vanished. The longer she remains out of sight, the more danger the Windsors are in. And should she surface with a story other than a surgery with an arduous recovery, the Firm may face an existential threat. Because when you’re in the business of being symbols, images become reality.

https://www.theverge.com/2024/3/13/24099957/kate-middleton-photo-conspiracy-royals