

Ethical Concerns Surround Tape of Mother Striking Her Child

The shocking video footage of Madelyn Toogood striking her four-year-old daughter Martha in a department store parking lot has sparked a debate about a variety of media ethics issues. The video, taken by store surveillance cameras on Sept. 13, 2002 in Mishawaka, Ind., was released about a week later by police in the hopes that the mother could be found. Toogood turned herself in eight days after the video aired on news broadcasts throughout the world, according to CNN.

The story has raised questions about privacy and the use of video cameras. As the media followed the events, some media observers questioned the newsworthiness of the video and the media's portrayal of Toogood.

In *Newsday*, Clay Calvert, author of *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture*, and a professor at Pennsylvania State University, wrote in an op-ed column that the media "heaped on the incident" after the tape became public. Although he does not excuse Toogood's conduct in the video, he questioned the newsworthiness of the event.

Calvert said the video "is a call for caution on the part of journalists when they sacrifice the lives of a troubled mother and her child for, when viewed cynically, ratings, or when seen more charitably, the public's right to know." He added that the event passed as news because American society is conditioned by infotainment programs such as the "World's Wildest Police Videos" and "Real TV."

"Such video clips shows blur the line between news and entertainment, while they suggest that news is simple whatever drama a camera captures," Calvert wrote in the column.

Calvert also said the video appealed to a sense of video justice found in "Cops." The Toogood tape exposed wrongdoing and provided evidence leading to Toogood's battery charge, which he called "instant guilt-by-media." Calvert declared the videotape "a decontextualized collection of continuous images that masquerade as the truth." The videotape could not capture the whole story, he contended.

Even the additional information about her nomadic gypsy lifestyle as an Irish Traveler and her daughter's possible misbehavior before Toogood struck

her will not change how she will be remembered because of the images in the videotape, Calvert said.

Chicago Sun-Times columnist Mary Mitchell has also evaluated how the media have portrayed Toogood. A doctor who examined Martha Toogood found the child showed no medical problems or signs of long-term abuse. But when Toogood turned herself in, she was charged with battery to a child and her daughter was placed with foster parents, Mitchell wrote. The media did not give much coverage of the findings, but rather concentrated on the videotape.

As the story unfolded, the news media continued to reveal Toogood's alleged criminal background. A Dateline NBC transcript on October 11 described the Irish Travelers as "a secret society, a clannish group with a bad reputation." The report went on to say they are "families that cross the country doing house repairs, roofs, driveways and too often, not doing them well; they're often flat-out scams." The report stated that Toogood supposedly had multiple IDs in different states with different names.

In a CNN interview with Toogood on September 22, CNN national correspondent Gary Tuchman, cast some doubt about her character when introducing the videotaped interview. "She's done a couple news conferences and she was very blunt. You'll have to decide at his point if you think she's being honest while she's talking to us," Tuchman said. During the interview, Toogood apologized and admitted to hitting her daughter, adding how it had changed her life, "Don't raise your hand to a child, it ain't worth it . . . worth what it does to the family."

Calvert questioned whether the media have damaged Toogood's reputation as a private citizen. He said the media transformed Toogood into the "national poster mother for poor parenting." Additionally, the media could have damaged her daughter's reputation by revealing Martha's name. Calvert leaves his readers with a final question, "Do the general benefits of this story to the media and the public outweigh the specific harm to Madelyne and Martha Toogood?"

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