

Fuzzy and headless children

Marc Armitage

Some months ago I was half-watching the midday edition of the news on BBC television when a story came on about a school issue. The story itself was not particularly significant, certainly not to this tale anyway. No, what was significant were the images of the children on screen in support of the story.

They were what I call 'fuzzy and headless children' – shots of children's legs only or images of children that are so fuzzy that individuals cannot be identified. Fair enough you might say, child protection and all that, except that the same story was repeated on the evening edition of the news on the same day using the same film footage – without the fuzziness.

Was this a mistake, I wondered? I have written and lectured about the 'fuzzy and headless' issue before but this was the first time I had seen the same piece of film used both fuzzied and un-fuzzied. Curious, I called the BBC, as you do (more on that later).

These fuzzy and headless images on TV are only one part of a broader issue on the use of images of children in general. It now seems routine that not only is TV news footage of children altered to disguise identity but so are images of children gathered for other reasons too. Failing that, the taking of images is banned out-right.

Parents have been prevented from taking photographs and video of their own children at naivety plays, concerts, graduation ceremonies and sporting events, often on the grounds of child protection, with schools and childcare settings citing legislation as the justification.¹

David Smith, the UK Director of Data Protection at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), calls this "The data protection duck-out". He goes on, "If there is something people don't want to do, but they can't explain it easily, they say it's because of the Data Protection Act."² In this respect it sounds similar to health and safety regulations being wrongly invoked to push through unpopular decisions. The ICO produce guidance that says,

"The Data Protection Act is unlikely to apply in many cases where photographs are taken in schools and other educational institutions. Fear of breaching the provisions of the Act should not be wrongly used to stop people taking photographs or videos which provide many with much pleasure."³

Nor is the issue restricted to schools and childcare settings. A father, Chris White, was approached by a security guard after taking a photo of his own daughter eating an ice cream in a Glasgow shopping centre in 2011.⁴ The guard told him it was illegal to take such photos in a shopping mall (something which is not true) and that he, the security guard, had the power to demand that the images be deleted (also not true). When Mr. White refused the police were called.

"I explained I had taken two photos of my daughter eating ice cream and that she was the only person in the photo so didn't see any problem. I also said that I wasn't that willing to delete the photo's and there seemed little point as I had actually uploaded them to facebook."⁵

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/jun/23/photos-children-school-ban>

² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/contents>

³ ICO (2010) *Data Protection Good Practice Note: Taking Photographs in Schools*

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-15236758>

⁵ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2047655/Father-calls-shopping-centre-boycott-quizzed-police-taking-photos-daughter.html>

The police officer, by now on the scene, told him that he had the power to demand that the photos be deleted under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (once again not true). Mr. White stood his ground and he was allowed to leave the shopping centre, photos intact, with his daughter who by this point was in tears. A successful Facebook campaign forced the shopping centre to re-examine its policy.⁶

And what about the BBC example we opened with: I spoke to and asked the BBC picture library about why the same film clip might be shown fuzzy at one point and not fuzzy at another and was told that clips are requested by editors and are sent by the library unfuzzy. It is the editor, following BBC Policy, that decides if an image should be disguised or not. That decision comes down to whether there is a perceived risk to those involved, and clearly that decision seems to be a subjective one.⁷

It would be wrong, however, to believe that those that cover the images of children in the news, at school or kindergarten with opaque blobs or black lines over the eyes (which always reminds me of comedy villains), or who enact photo policies that call for all images held to be destroyed after a period of time (sometimes as little as two years) are part of some massive conspiracy to make the world's children bland and anonymous. No, they are almost always well-meaning and have nothing but the protection of their young charges in mind. After all, pedophiles are everywhere.

Or are they, because the pedophile concern seems not to be a strong one.

Stephen Balkam, chief executive of the US Family Online Safety Institute, says "Research shows that there is virtually no risk of pedophiles coming to get kids because they found them online," and he calls the fears most people have over this issue "techno-panic."⁸ In writing this Blog I asked a serving child-protection officer with the Humberside Police about this issue and his first reaction was puzzlement over why I should ask such a question in the first place. In eleven years of service he said he had never come across a case in which a random photo of a fully clothed child taken at such an event had been an issue.

However, there are times when children that we work with genuinely need their identities, personal details and location kept quiet – children who are currently housed in family refuge centres or places of safety, for example. But a blanket ban on the use of images of children in most circumstances, particular children playing, is counter-productive.

My policy on using such images in training, conference speaking, Blogging, Facebooking, webbing, etc. is this: if I don't have permission to freely use an image unaltered in a public forum then I don't use the image. Full stop. There are exceptions – there are always exceptions – and I have sometimes used images in which the identity of the individual concerned has been disguised. But the point is that they are exceptions not the norm. To do anything other does more harm than good.

Failure to apply a modicum of realism to this issue confuses and upsets children in the present who do not understand why they cannot have their photo taken while playing Shepherd Number 4; it also runs the risk of families and individuals being denied access to valuable childhood memories at some point in the future. And by insisting that images held to be destroyed after a period of time we are also depriving ourselves of a valuable future source of social history.

⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-15251848>

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/page/guidelines-children-introduction/>

⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/fashion/25facebook.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

Of most concern though is that it does not lead to children living safer lives. If anything, its effect is to build and maintain an atmosphere of suspicion and fear that ALL images of children are dangerous – as are the people that take them.

Marc Armitage
Independent Children's Play Consultant

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marc@marc-armitage.eu

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