



New England Cable News and the Terry Glenn Story Teaching Note

Introduction

Whether or not to report allegations that one person makes against another presents news managers with a series of complex legal, ethical and practical decisions. If one party is a public figure, judgments can be even harder to make. For example, should a news organization report the mere fact that an allegation has been made? Must there be conclusive evidence before the story runs? When is an allegation news, and when is it only an unsubstantiated anecdote? Accusations of sexual misconduct pose special challenges. Should such stories be treated differently than assertions of money-laundering, philandering or other transgressions?

This case is an account of one news organization, New England Cable News (NECN), and how it handled sexual misconduct charges leveled against Terry Glenn, a member of the much-celebrated New England Patriots football team. The case begins with a fax, which arrived at NECN's newsroom at 2:40 p.m. on December 20, 1999. The document appeared to have come from a law firm—although no one in the newsroom had heard of the company—and stated that a client was suing Glenn for sexual assault.

The case unfolds in real time in the classroom, replicating the pressure of a newsroom deadline. NECN, a local cable news station, had some two hours before local affiliates of the Big Three (ABC, NBC, CBS) TV networks would air their evening news shows; it was confident its competitors would run the story. Students must make decisions during the 90 minutes of class as if they were themselves at NECN, and consider what to do with the potentially explosive contents of the fax. Should they treat the fax as a scoop, rush to air its contents, and then start researching the claims? Should they hold off airing the accusation, and do some reporting beforehand? What issues should they consider, and what are the implications—for their organization, their viewers, Glenn and his accuser—of choosing one path over another?

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Before class, students should read the background history on NECN, its competitive position within Boston's media market, and the often troubled place the Patriots occupied within the city's sports-obsessed culture. Students are expected to apply this knowledge as the case unfolds in class through video clips of members of NECN's news team, who recount their thought processes as they tackled the situation in 1999.

Instructors may find it helpful to think of the case study as comprised of three parts: the pre-class "New England Cable News and the Terry Glenn story" reading, the video package, and in-class discussion.

Teaching Objectives

This case was designed to simulate newsroom deadline pressures and to recreate some of the dilemmas and disputes that can arise in that situation. Students are able to experience the all-too-common newsroom challenge of making tough editorial decisions under deadline pressure, in the absence of full information, and with the sure knowledge that the competition is pursuing the same story with equal vigor.

Among the numerous themes the case raises for potential debate is that of news judgment, and the way this can be influenced by factors such as time, culture, personal sympathies, and professional and economic imperatives. For example, NECN clearly risks being beaten by the competition if it does not rush to air. But at the same time, it could jeopardize its reputation as a reliable news source if it is overly hasty in reporting a story that is ultimately found to be untrue.

Class participants are encouraged to take a broad view of the case, and see it within the context of competitive pressures within journalism in general, and within broadcast journalism in particular. These include the voracious appetite of the 24-hour news cycle, as well as competition for advertising and viewers.

NECN's dilemma as to whether to put some, or all, of the information directly on air can also generate debate about the role—both real and theoretical—of the press. "Let us not be precious here," NECN news director Charles Kravetz states.

Let's think about this on a legitimate level of whether or not we have the facts and stick with that as a basis for making a decision. Otherwise the decision becomes, I think, potentially, pretentious. It's about whether we're smarter, better, more important, that we should know this information but that the public shouldn't actually have the right to this information until we sort it out.

His comment raises a larger point: Should the press be a filter? Or should it be a pipeline? Should it be a gatekeeper, or more of a watchdog? What, in short, are the press' responsibilities, and to

whom (or what) should they be accountable? Answers may well differ according to whether students believe, for example, that responsibility is to “The Truth,” to viewers, or to remaining economically viable.

Other potential issues for students to discuss are sourcing and attribution. NECN has numerous options when it comes to the Terry Glenn story. First, it could feasibly broadcast the allegations sourced to the fax it received from an apparently credible law firm. But would this be adequate—morally or journalistically—especially given the nature of the allegations? Second, the news team could hold the story, report further, and ultimately run a piece balancing the accuser’s claims with responses from Glenn’s side. Such a “he said, she said” approach, common to many news stories, would lend the piece an air of objectivity and seem to conform to journalistic ideals of balance. But is this in fact so? Students are encouraged to question the “he said, she said” style of attribution, and of sourcing in general, and to query whether publishing contrasting views would have been sufficient justification for running the Glenn story in the absence of hard information on the merits of the charge.

Related to this is the broader issue of framing and narrative structure. The Glenn story would arguably take on a decidedly different hue depending on whether NECN chose to run the accusation followed by a rebuttal, a rebuttal followed by the allegation, or simply presented the situation in terms of “accusations flying.” While attention is often paid to story content, students are urged to consider narrative structure and technique as important, value-laden elements of storytelling in their own right.

The urgency and inherent interest of the Glenn story are inextricably linked to his celebrity status. Instructors may find the case a useful springboard for generating general discussion about sensationalism in media, and fascination with celebrity. More specifically, students may want to consider how, or whether, Glenn’s fame should have affected NECN’s approach to the story.

Finally, in the “All We Have Here” video segment, Executive Producer Tom Melville says, in reference to Glenn’s accuser: “We need to ask questions. Why? Not just what’s happening here, but why this person?” The Terry Glenn story is well suited for thinking about such questions—in particular, the origins of, and motivations behind, information that is given to journalists. Students are encouraged to look beyond the material to the interests that fuel it, and to ask whether motive (of a leaker, for example) should influence whether or not to use the information.

Class Plan

The case study can be used in a class on editorial decision-making, on broadcast news, or cable news. It also lends itself to a class on deadline reporting, or editorial ethics.

Study questions. The instructor could help students prepare for discussion by assigning the following questions in advance:

Is the proper role of the press to be a filter for news, or to provide what it knows to the public as soon as possible?

Is the fact that an event has occurred (e.g. an allegation is made) enough to justify the publication of a story, or does additional reporting need to be done?

Using the Video Package. The text section of “New England Cable News and the Terry Glenn Story” is preparation for the case but does not constitute the case study itself, which instead takes the form of a video package that students watch together during class. This comprises brief video segments (generally less than two minutes long) in which members of NECN’s news team discuss elements of the Glenn story and their decision-making process. The clips relate key events and issues according to a roughly linear timeline, beginning with News Director Charles Kravetz recalling the arrival of the fax in the newsroom office.

In the clips that follow, he and two other key members of the newsroom—Executive Producer Tom Melville and Sports Director Steve Safran—recount ensuing events, highlight the pros and cons of airing the story immediately, and relay information that they learned from additional reporting along the way. In the final segment, Kravetz raises the issue of press manipulation, leaving the case deliberately open for further discussion of this important question.

Clips and slides can be used in the roughly chronological order listed below (see Appendix A for the full video transcript), with questions (in bold) that instructors could ask students interspersed at the relevant point. Students will not see the slide titles—they are for the benefit of the instructor. The three slides include brief text, and are intended to advance the narrative by letting students know what happened next. For each clip, the speaker(s) is identified and his observation summarized (except where the clip title is self-explanatory).

NECN VIDEO CLIPS & SLIDES

1. A Fax Came In
Kravetz
2. The Choice
Kravetz
3. Complementary Reactions
Kravetz

Q: Should NECN air the fact that a fax has arrived in the newsroom? What are the pros and cons? List on classroom board.

Slide #1: Kravetz canvasses newsroom

4. A Juicy Story

- a) Safran—"titillating"
- b) Safran—big potential story in sports-mad town

5. The Competition

- a) Kravetz—assumption competition would use story
- b) Kravetz—"we're a competitive news organization"
- c) Kravetz—breaking a story builds your reputation

Q: Should NECN air the piece at or before 5 p.m., when the network affiliates broadcast their evening news programs? What are the pros and con? List on classroom board.

6. "All We Have Here"

- a) Kravetz—fax from an unknown law firm
- b) Kravetz—anyone can file a civil suit
- c) Melville—why did someone give us this story?

Q: What are the possible motives of people involved in the story? Are these significant? Does the fact that someone has filed a civil suit constitute news regardless of potential self-interest?

Slide #2: hold off, call Patriots, police

7. What the Phone Calls Revealed

- a) Kravetz—no police report. Why not?
- b) Kravetz—plaintiff threatened blackmail

Q: What does NECN need to consider in deciding whether to run the piece after doing some reporting? List on classroom board.

Slide #3: run a story with both sides, or hold off again?

8. The Risk of Not Going With the Story

- a) Kravetz—audience loses faith in NECN
- b) Safran—competitive pressure; "you'll look stupid"

Q: Do the risks of not going with the story at this stage outweigh the risks of airing it?

9. Let the Public Know

- a) Kravetz—"let's not be too precious"; press as gatekeeper?
- b) Kravetz—story interesting, not so important; public's right to know
- c) Kravetz—let public decide legitimacy over time

Q: Is it the role of the press to filter news for viewers/readers? Or should the press be a pass-through for news, allowing the public to decide for itself the merits of the story?

Q: How did NECN's decisions accord or conflict with these two models?

10. Seek the Truth

- a) Kravetz—drip info and audience will assemble
- b) Melville—this will damage Glenn's reputation; investigate
- c) Kravetz—do we use "he said/she said" as an excuse for balance?

Q: Is the he said/she said model of reporting to which Kravetz refers an adequate way of balancing a story or is it an "excuse," as he suggests?

11. Worth Investigating

Safran—ring of truth from Glenn's attorney

12. Being Used?

Kravetz

Q: To what extent, if any, do you think NECN was manipulated and used in the Terry Glenn case, and if so, by whom or by what?

Q: What other steps could NECN have taken that it did not?

Q: What were the primary factors driving their actual decisions at each juncture?

Instructors can choose to show the video clips in a linear fashion, or in a sequence of their own choosing. The segments can be used to introduce a new point, shift directions, or reinforce issues that have already been raised in class.

For example, the clip "What the Phone Calls Revealed" recounts the reaction from police and Glenn's attorney, adds additional material and further complicates the case. A clip such as "All We Have Here" provides an alternative point of view. So, for example, if students are leaning towards airing the story immediately, showing the segment could generate debate along new lines by accentuating the flimsiness of the information against Glenn. Finally, if students have raised the issue of "he said, she said" reporting, the teacher may find it useful to pick up on this by playing the "Seek the Truth" slice of video that relates to this point.

Suggested Readings:

Rodney Benson, "Normative Theories of Journalism," forthcoming in *International Encyclopedia of Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.

SYNOPSIS: Implicit in judgments of how NECN should handle the Terry Glenn story are normative ideas of the press: i.e. the press's ideal role in society and what it *should* do. These ideas traditionally include the notion that the press should act as a watchdog, as an organ of social responsibility, and as impartial judge. This article by NYU sociology professor Rodney Benson offers students a clear and helpful overview of many of these theories, and how they relate to different political systems.

"Reporting on Celebrities: The Ethics of News Coverage." Poynter Online. 2004

SYNOPSIS: The Poynter Institute provides students with a series of useful articles that probe issues raised at "Reporting on Celebrities: The Ethics of News Coverage," a conference held at the USC Annenberg School for Communication in 2004. Articles written by different authors focus on themes that include "Celebrity Journalism," "Why Do We Cover Celebrities" and "Does the Public Really Want Massive Doses of Celebrity News?"

http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=59603

http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=59585

<http://dwb.sacbee.com/content/politics/story/8104345p-9036648c.html>

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. New York, Crown Publishers, 2001.

SYNOPSIS: In this classic book, Kovach and Rosenstiel make several strong claims about the duties and nature of journalism. Among these assertions are: journalism's first obligation is to the truth, its first loyalty is to citizens, its essence is a discipline of verification, and it must keep the news comprehensive and proportional. They also claim that a "journalism of assertion" is crowding out a "journalism of verification." These are amongst many points raised in the slim volume for students to consider in terms of the Terry Glenn story, and the degree to which NECN veered or adhered to these central journalistic tenets.

Charles Ponce de Leon. *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America 1890-1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

SYNOPSIS: The urgency, dilemmas and interest in the "Terry Glenn story" were inextricably linked to Glenn's status as a celebrity. Modern technology has increased the intensity

and possibilities of “celebrity journalism.” But as the book’s title indicates, de Leon does not see the phenomenon as new, but rather as rooted in the late 19th century when “journalists began crafting new techniques and rhetorical strategies for depicting celebrities.” The author also seeks to contextualize the culture of celebrity, which he does not see as some “grotesque mutation afflicting an otherwise healthy organism, but one of its features, a condition arising directly from the encouragement that modern societies provide for social mobility and self-invention.” He also argues that new forms of press coverage gradually encouraged the public to see public figures as interesting and even flawed rather than great, and as people into whose true selves they were offering glimpses. *Self-Exposure* provides students with a good overview of celebrity, while chapters on “Fame and celebrity in the Modern Age” and “Athletic Celebrity and the Commercialization of Sports” may be especially useful when considering the Terry Glenn story.

“State of the News Media, 2004 An Annual Report on American Journalism,” Project for Excellence in Journalism.

SYNOPSIS: The “local TV” section of this accessible and comprehensive annual report offers students an excellent overview and broader context for understanding NECN, the market in which it operates, industry trends, and the techniques by which NECN and other local cable channels are making their mark. Instructors may want to use the inaugural State of the News Media Report from 2004 since it most closely reflects industry trends in 1999, when the Terry Glenn case occurred. Or they may prefer to use a more recent report in order that students have a more recent picture of local news.

http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.com/2004/narrative_localtv_intro.asp?cat=1&media=6

Appendix 1

Transcript of Video

1. Nov 20, 1999, 2:40 p.m.: A Fax Came In

Charles Kravetz, News Director:

"A fax came into our news desk, our assignment desk, in the afternoon, mid-afternoon. It was a fax from a law firm that said that one of the New England Patriots' players, a very well known player named Terry Glenn, was being sued for sexual assault, and obviously this was a story of real interest to us."

2. The Choice

Charles Kravetz, News Director:

"My initial reaction was this is a legitimate story, let's go with it, this is a story of a, you know, significant public figure, well known, very serious charge, this is something that we have to look into. The question then became, do we look into it first, set a reporter on it, a photographer, you know, producers, look into this as much as we can, and then put it on the air? Or do we report the very fact that we had received a fax and there has been a lawsuit, a civil law suit, filed against Terry Glenn, and should we do that immediately? As a 24-hour news channel, that is something that we can and do do often, which is that we quickly respond to the news we don't have to wait for, you know, a prime time program to be over, Oprah Winfrey doesn't have to be, you know, we're not worried about those things, we're doing news all the times, so it's very easy for us to put it into the news pipeline and get it on the air very quickly."

3. Complementary Reactions

Charles Kravetz, News Director:

"When we first got this fax there were two kind of complementary reactions we had: one, yeah that makes sense, I could see that given this guy's history this is clearly a plausible case that this actually did happen. The flip side of it is, don't know who this person is making the charge, depending upon who it is, this guy is a perfectly easy mark, you know this is a multi-millionaire super-star, nationally recognized athlete. If you wanted to go after someone, this is a perfect mark."

Slide #1: Kravetz canvasses newsroom

"Kravetz walked into the newsroom and solicited opinions, sparking an intense discussion among the producers. They considered a range of ethical, journalistic, and commercial questions."

4. A Juicy Story

a) Steve Safran, Sports Director:

"My initial reaction on hearing the story was I raised an eyebrow. I mean, you know, frankly, when you hear a good story, there's a certain amount of you as a journalist that goes, "This is kind of juicy, the same in the audience when you hear a story that's quite frankly titillating, you say, "Mmm , interesting.""

b) Steve Safran, Sports Director:

"This is potentially an enormous story. First of all Boston, and New England in general, are huge sports communities: the Patriots, an exceptionally popular team in town, second only to the Red Sox, at the time had been through a couple of sex scandals, misbehavior scandals, drug scandals. This was a potentially very big story. Terry Glenn was a very popular and controversial figure on the team. This was a lead story, if it were true."

5. The Competition

a) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

"Our assumption was that most other media outlets would go with this story, that there is a, you know, reasonable history of civil suits being reported on a variety of different levels, different issues, and some of them are connected with criminal cases, some of them are not. But there's enough of a history of this to know that probably most people are going to go with a story like this."

b) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

"We're a competitive news organization as every other one is, and we want to get up with the news first, we want to be known as a source where people can come to get breaking news, and so that is one of the calling cards of a good 24-hour news channel is that you can get on the air quickly, you can be first with important news, and that was certainly one of our considerations."

c) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

"I think breaking a story like this is, you know, one more story in a collection of stories that if you break them you develop a reputation for being a place where people can come for breaking news."

6. All We Have Here

a) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

"All we have here is a fax, a single fax, from a law firm that we'd never heard of, and a person that we'd never heard of, charging a public figure with sexual assault, which is a very serious crime."

b) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

"Anybody can file a law suit against anybody. There doesn't have to be one shred of legitimacy. If you're able to find a lawyer, and you're willing to spend the money, you can file a lawsuit. It doesn't, by itself, mean anything."

c) Tom Melville, Executive Producer:

"We didn't come upon this on our own. Someone brought it to us. Every time, if someone picks up the phone, or sends an email, or sends a fax, or comes through the front door of the television station with a story, we need to ask the question, "Why?" Not just, "What's happening here?" but "Why's this person bringing it to us?"

Slide #2:

"Kravetz decided to hold off and asked producers to look into the story. They called the Patriots, who said they had not heard about the suit. They also called the Saugus police department and Terry Glenn's attorney."

7. What the Phone Calls Revealed

a) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

"The Saugus police said that there had been, there was no arrest, or criminal charges in this incident. That alone prompted us to say, "Whoa, wait a minute here. That's interesting." I mean, if there's a civil case regarding a criminal act and there is the government officials, prosecutors, law enforcement officials have not interceded in that case, it immediately prompts one to question, "Why not?" "Why didn't the person who is the alleged victim go to the police and make a charge?"

b) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

"The plaintiff in the civil case had threatened Glenn and Glenn's legal counsel, saying if they did not pay a very large six figure sum, to this woman, that they would go to the media and destroy his reputation."

Slide #3:

“Now Kravetz had to make another choice: to produce a story—one that cited both the charge against Glenn and the response from his attorney—or to hold off again. If they were going to get a story into their evening newscast, Kravetz had less than an hour to make a decision.”

8. The Risk of Not Going With the Story

a) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

“ I think the risk of not covering a story that everybody else is doing and is in the core news hole is that people come to believe that they are not going to be able to get the core news, the central news of the day from you, and it undermines, perhaps, your reputation as a legitimate news source.”

b) Steve Safran, Sports Director:

“There is enormous pressure when there is a breaking story, when you see the other guys reporting it, or know that the other guys are going to report it, to go up with it. Whether or not you are 100 percent comfortable, you’re afraid you’re going to look stupid if you’re not up with it.”

9. Let the Public Know

a) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

“Let’s not be precious here. Let’s think about this on a legitimate level of whether or not we have the facts and stick with that as a basis for making a decision. Otherwise the decision becomes, I think, potentially, pretentious. It’s about whether we’re smarter, better, more important, then we should know this information but that the public shouldn’t actually have the right to this information until we sort it out.”

b) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

“In the category of interesting or important, it’s interesting. I’m not that it was hugely important, but it was very interesting to a city and a community and a region that’s very interested in sports, very interested in the Patriots, major public figure in that sense, and they have the right to know that someone’s filed a sexual assault civil case against Terry Glenn.”

c) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

“We have information. It’s our job to share that information, if it is legitimate, with the public. And the truthfulness of this story is not the facts of the case but the truthfulness of the fact that a civil suit has been filed, and we received a legitimate fax from a law firm saying that that happened. The argument is, let the public know what has happened, and give them as much information as you can, and let them over time determine whether there is legitimacy to the story.”

10. Seek the Truth

a) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

“Are we just using that as an excuse? That kind of notion that you can kind of drip, drip, drip information to people and that they will put it all together. Or is it our responsibility as journalists to truly seek out the truth before we report something?”

b) Tom Melville, Executive Producer:

“We’re gonna damage this guy’s reputation for ever. We’re going to allow someone to allege a sex crime based on one person’s story that hasn’t been investigated by a police agency, hasn’t been reported to a police agency. Let’s do some investigation before we go with the story. Let’s try to find out if it’s true.”

c) Charles Kravetz, News Director:

“This notion that journalists do their job by reporting one person’s charge and another person’s response to it—he said, she said. I think the reality is that in most cases we kind of use that as a kind of excuse. We act as somehow or other, if you’ve got, quote “Both sides of the story,” when you really don’t have actually any legitimate side of the story because you haven’t had the time to go and examine it yourself and find out who’s legitimate and who isn’t.”

11. Worth Investigating

Steve Safran, Sports Director:

“Frankly it mattered to me that Terry Glenn’s attorney reputation had a strong reputation. And again, it came to that ring of truth matter, that what he was explaining seemed...even if it wasn’t up to us to decide whether or not it was right, it just seemed to us a possibility that this was a case of blackmail, and therefore worth investigating.”

12. Are We Being Used?

Charles Kravetz, News Director:

“We are perhaps not as an industry, as a craft, as a profession, not willing to look with enough frequency at the possibility that we’re being manipulated, that we’re being used, that we’re a party to the story and not just reporting the story.”