



New England Cable News and the Terry Glenn Story

After about an hour of pondering the decision and discussing it with colleagues, News Director Kravetz decided not to run a story. Not immediately, that is. All along, the question had been not so much whether to report the story, but when and how. Not to pursue it at all was never an option, Kravetz said; to do so would have been to protect a public figure. Even to delay broadcast, however, was unusual. "This is a fairly big deal, to decide not to report this," Kravetz says. "So, if we were going to make the decision not to report it, then we had a responsibility to examine the facts ourselves and to find out, if we could, what the truth was."¹ Kravetz assigned a reporter to the story in hopes of assessing the validity of the charge against Glenn. The reporter would at least be able to provide more context and details.

As the NECN producers had anticipated, their competitors ran with the story. The *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Herald*, and all the other local newscasts reported the fact that a lawsuit alleging sexual assault had been filed against Terry Glenn.² Most reported the fax from the plaintiff's attorney; some also included details from the complaint by Felecia Jones, 29. The complaint alleged that on November 24, 1999, Glenn had left the nightclub at 2 a.m., approached Jones' limo and yelled "Get out of my limo, bitches!" He then allegedly urinated on the car. After an interval, he reportedly approached Jones, who was outside the car smoking, grabbed her breast and reached under her dress. Glenn's attorney dismissed the charges: "There's no truth to the charges. It's the most hideous form of celebrity nuisance." The attorney also said Jones' firm had tried to settle for \$150,000 before going to the media.

Before heading home for the night, the NECN news managers saw that their competitors had not just reported the story, but gave it prominent coverage. While the NECN editors did not doubt their decision, they admitted to unease. Sports Director Safran says he had a "sick feeling in

¹ Author's interview with Charles Kravetz, June 5, 2007, in Newton, MA. All further quotes from Kravetz, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

² For example, Nick Cafardo, "Glenn faces suit," *Boston Globe*, December 21, 1999, p. E1. All details in this paragraph from the *Globe* story.

his stomach” when he saw the stories produced by NECN’s competitors.³ Says Kravetz, “Even when we turned on the 6 o’clock news and saw everybody else covering it as their lead story, it didn’t bother me, [the story] still smelled; but of course you question yourself when everybody else is doing something different.”

The report that NECN ended up running four days later was substantially different from what it would have reported on December 20. Citing the testimony of a relative of the plaintiff, it challenged the charge of sexual assault and seemed to exonerate Glenn. However, the case did not fold, and was scheduled to go to trial. Meanwhile, Glenn had other troubles—in late December 1999, the New England Patriots suspended him for a game; and in March 2000 he was fined for reckless driving the previous November (hours after his visit to the nightclub). The lawsuit dragged on, and was finally given a court date of June 25, 2001. On June 21, however, the parties settled for an undisclosed amount.

Kravetz is quick to point out that the apparent fraudulence of the lawsuit did not vindicate NECN any more than a legitimate lawsuit would have indicted them. “Even though we ended up being proven right in our skepticism,” he said, “that doesn’t necessarily mean we were right in our decision.” The NECN producers were, however, proud of the decision to hold off and do a more in-depth piece on December 24. “We put together a four-minute piece,” says Safran. “Show me any other TV station that gives you four minutes.”

Kravetz says their decision provided a “great object lesson to all of us.” What should news outlets learn from NECN’s decision? Kravetz stresses one lesson above all: that the press be more wary of being used. “Is it acceptable for the media to be used as a pawn?” he asks. “It happens so frequently that it’s almost impossible for any of us to be sanctimonious and say we’re above this sort of stuff.” This case, Kravetz says, showed that it is possible and desirable for the press, at least in isolated cases, to refuse to be a conduit for questionable information.

³ Author’s interview with Steven Safran, June 5, 2007, in Newton, MA. All further quotes from Safran, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.