

Reporting an Explosive Truth: The *Boston Globe* and Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church

Abstract

This case is about the calculus a news organization must make when it uncovers a story that incriminates the most powerful institution in its community. It also describes the personal toll on journalists of covering misdeeds in one's own church. In August 2001, the *Boston Globe*'s new editor, Martin Baron, commissioned the paper's investigative Spotlight Team to look into the case against Father John Geoghan, a Catholic priest charged with sexual abuse of children. Within a month, the team had begun to uncover many other instances of abuse by priests. The story was potentially explosive: Boston had the highest percentage of Catholics of any major US city. The Archdiocese, and Cardinal Bernard Law, were beloved and respected. The *Globe* and Law had a history of tense relations. The team suspended its research to cover the September 11 attacks, but picked it up again in October. As the pieces came together, it had to decide how to play what was a literally unbelievable story, how to manage a potential backlash from the community, and how to deal with the anticipated reaction from the Archdiocese. In November, it acquired a "smoking gun"—a document that implicated Cardinal Law. The *Globe*, which wanted to make certain its blockbuster story was faultless, was not fully ready to publish, but the document was public and rival news organizations could discover it. The team debated what to do.

Students discussing this case will have the opportunity to examine the special challenges of covering religion, especially the dominant religion in one's own community. They will gain insight into how individual reporters process and cope with a horrific story. They can also explore investigative techniques; the *Globe* had to obtain most of its information over the active objections of the Catholic Church. Students will be introduced to Computer Assisted Reporting, as well as to court reporting. They will encounter the pressures of media competition. Finally, students should gain an understanding of the dynamics of team reporting, and how team members work together in the service of a story too large for any one of them.

This case can be used in a class on covering religion, on investigative reporting, or on editorial decisionmaking.

Credits

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