



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

**Case Summary**

Challenging authority is part of journalism's role in a democracy. But doing so can be difficult and daunting, especially when the power in question—whether an individual, group or institution—is one of the most influential players in the community.

This case focuses on the *Boston Globe* newspaper as it tackled one such story in 2001: alleged sexual abuse by Catholic priests. As its reporting developed, the paper's investigative Spotlight Team began to unravel a damning picture of widespread child abuse and a cover-up that went to the church's highest levels. The paper knew the piece would be a bombshell in Catholic-dominated Boston, where the church was both respected and deeply rooted, with a history extending back some 200 years. That put the *Globe* on a direct collision course with one of the city's most venerated institutions, with which it already had a tense relationship. It also embroiled its reporters in a story that simultaneously disturbed them personally and compelled them professionally—recognizing, as they did, its potential to be among the most important of their careers.

The *Globe* wanted to develop a deeply researched and carefully crafted story to coincide with the January 2002 pedophilia trial of former priest John Geoghan. But in November 2001, the team uncovered a “smoking gun” document suggesting that Cardinal Bernard Law had reassigned Geoghan to a new parish despite knowing about his history of abuse. The newspaper needed more time to produce an airtight investigative piece, but knew that sitting on the information was problematic: Rival publications could come across the same publicly available document and ruin the *Globe's* scoop.

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Students trace the evolution of the story from conception through execution, following Spotlight Team members as they research angles and pursue leads. Class members step into the shoes of reporters as they confront church leaders, track down documents, and interview victims, witnesses, and lawyers in an effort to shape an unassailable story out of a welter of accusations by alleged victims and obfuscations by the Church. Confronted by a host of practical, ethical, and legal conundrums, students must ultimately decide how and when to run the piece, and the possible implications of their choices for the story's subjects, the *Globe*, and the paper's already frayed relationship with the Church and Catholic community.

## Teaching Objectives

This case highlights various aspects of the investigative reporting process, and the challenges involved in covering a controversial issue within a community already sensitive to its portrayal in the media. Use the case as a vehicle for discussing the challenges of covering sensational stories, and as a platform for debating the potential impact of an article on its subjects, as well as the journalists who cover it.

Journalists traditionally tie their stories to particular events, or news 'pegs,' in order to give the content immediate relevance in readers' minds. The *Boston Globe* wants to 'peg' its piece to the start of Geoghan's trial. But at the same time, the paper knows that tying the story to this event isn't the only consideration. It must also factor in the value of an exclusive—which it has with its "smoking gun" documents—and the importance of the article to readers, subjects, and sources alike. Students should debate the issue as part of a broader discussion about how and when to publish an item, especially one bound to provoke controversy. When is it valid to run a story to beat the competition? When should a publication wait until its reporting is bulletproof? And when does the public interest outweigh both of these considerations?

An essential element of the story is the testimony of the Catholic clergy's alleged sex abuse victims. Interviewing such victims, and relying on their testimony, poses special challenges for reporters. Students should consider the issue within the broader context of reporting on trauma, and the various considerations and techniques that journalists can use when doing so.

Many of Boston's Catholic residents already see the *Globe* as biased against the city's Catholic archdiocese. Combined with the fact that the paper's new editor is Jewish, this exposes the publication to further claims that it is biased against the Church. Discuss the challenges and strategies for media outlets operating in areas where they already have a difficult relationship with a segment of the community.

Reporting on sexual abuse is a delicate task for any reporter. That Catholic priests, trusted and beloved in the community, are the perpetrators complicates it even further. Discuss how religion affected this story of sexual abuse in particular, and the more general challenges of writing

about faith, spirituality, and religions, which are often freighted with contentious history, preconceptions, stereotypes, and prejudice.

Investigative units such as the Spotlight Team, which enjoy considerable autonomy and relatively long periods of time to work on their stories, are expensive for newspapers. The *Globe's* team is comprised of four veteran reporters who would otherwise produce hundreds of stories a year. On the other hand, their investigations are what make news organizations the “watchdogs of democracy.” Are such investigative squads, and the rich work they produce, exactly the direction in which news outlets should be heading in order to differentiate themselves from bloggers, aggregator sites, and other less in-depth media? Or do they constitute an impractical drain on already limited human and financial resources?

According to Editor Martin Baron, the paper needs to address two main questions: Did the Catholic Church hierarchy know about Geoghan's pattern of abuse and reassign him anyway; and if so, did the same thing happen in other cases and how often? The ability of *Globe* reporters to answer these two questions relies on extensive and effective research and reporting. Ask students to analyze their approach and techniques. Were they effective? Were there alternative approaches they might have pursued? Use the team's strategy as a basis for discussing investigative techniques such as navigating a bureaucracy, mining data, cultivating sources, and obtaining documents.

Several positions that the *Globe* has taken in the past, including support of birth control law reform in the 1960s and busing to integrate schools in the 1970s, has led critics to see it as liberal, elitist, and out of touch with Boston's Irish Catholics. This means that the paper is “inclined to tread carefully” in the case of Father Geoghan. Is it a good thing that the paper is sensitive to its audience's complaints, and cautious about its next steps? Or has it capitulated to a powerful sector of the city's population, and compromised the paper's standards? Think about these issues in relation to the wider question of editorial positions, and whether media outlets should aim for neutrality, or take overt stands on particular subjects, even if that could compromise their ability to investigate other stories later on.

Access—both to people and documents—is a theme that runs through the case. Knowing how to approach relevant parties, and to identify and retrieve supporting material is crucial for reporters, especially when they face reluctance or even refusal to participate. Consider the strategies and sources that the investigative team used, including computer assisted reporting, court reporting, and church directories, and discuss their efficacy, limitations, and potential alternatives.

## Class Plan

Use this case in a course about covering religion, investigative reporting, or editorial decision-making.

*Pre-class.* Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

- 1) The *Globe* has a choice to make, according to Spotlight Team member Rezendes: go with the story straight away or hold off until the team can get its “arms completely around” the subject. What should they do?

We found it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The posts also highlight talking points ahead of the class, and identify specific students to call upon during the discussion.

*In-class questions.* The online blog posts are a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

Start the class by taking a vote on the pre-class question.

a) Ask those who support publishing immediately to justify their position. List pros on the board.

For example:

- i) You already have enough proof to run a story
- ii) You don't want to get scooped
- iii) Publishing now does not prohibit following up later
- iv) Publishing now might encourage the judge in the Geoghan case to lift the confidentiality order
- v) You may encourage other victims/lawyers to come forward
- vi) Those who may accuse the *Globe* of anti-Catholicism for publishing the story are likely to perceive the paper as anti-Catholic regardless of what the paper publishes, or when

b) Ask those in favor of publishing later to explain their view. List on the board.

For example:

- i) Holding the story allows for more voices, texture, and research
- ii) The Spotlight Team publishes its comprehensive investigative reports when the story is ready, not to meet an artificial deadline or beat the competition
- iii) The story is bigger than Geoghan, and it is your job to expand the story beyond a single priest by investigating the extent of abuse in the church
- iv) The competition may begin its own investigation after you publish your initial story

- v) You may cause the church to lock down and make further reporting more difficult
  - vi) The judge may bar reporters from the courtroom in the Geoghan case
  - vii) The *Globe* could be perceived as anti-Catholic, especially with a new editor who happens to be Jewish
- c) Identify and evaluate the investigative techniques that the team used, such as reading church directories, turning to the national SNAP organization, talking to lawyers, and interviewing victims. Could it have explored other avenues?
- d) The terror attacks of September 11, 2001 temporarily divert the Spotlight Team from the story. Assuming the paper has the resources to continue reporting the abuse story at the same time, should it have continued to do so?
- e) The *Globe* in general does not give the Geoghan story prominent coverage for several years. Instead, it is columnist Eileen McNamara who writes about the case, first in 1997 and again in 2001. Why do you think editors did not follow her columns with more aggressive news reporting?
- f) To what extent is this a story about religion, and to what extent is it a story about sexual abuse? How does the religious context influence how the sexual abuse is approached and reported?
- g) Broaden the case beyond the Catholic Church by asking students to examine stories of clergy abuse in other faiths. How was media coverage similar or different to that of the *Boston Globe*?

### Suggested Readings

Jason Berry & Andrew M. Greeley, *Lead Us Not Into Temptation: Catholic Priests and the Sexual Abuse of Children*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

SYNOPSIS: This book, originally published in 1992 and reprinted in 2000, lacks extensive recent examples and contemporary discussion of the topic, although it does provide an updated introduction to the first edition. It nonetheless provides a fascinating examination of some of the victims of clergy abuse, and the “political anatomy of clerical culture” where “sexual secrecy is honeycombed through the rungs of ecclesiastical governance.” It also offers a glimpse into changing attitudes within journalism towards the subject since the 1980s, when “convincing editors that there was a national story about sexual crimes in priestly life required a major time investment,” and the challenges of undertaking such reporting in a pre-Internet era, when fax machines were a “cutting edge tool.”

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Carl M. Cannon, “The Priest Scandal: How Old News At Last Became a Dominant National Story... And Why It Took So Long,” *American Journalism Review*, May 2002.

SYNOPSIS: This article provides background and context for the *Boston Globe's* story, and highlights the changing attitude and approach to clergy abuse stories. The author—a *National Journal* White House reporter—covered the issue of Catholic clergy sexual abuse in the 1980s. Noting how the story received considerable attention in 2002 with the Geoghan case, Cannon concedes the story “did not explode full-blown into the public consciousness” as journalists thought it might in the 1980s, a fact that “perplex, even haunt” reporters who covered the issue. He considers reasons for this, including whether they “gave up” too early, thereby letting victims down; if they naïvely concluded the church had addressed its institutional problems; and whether they hurried to other stories “when our real obligation was to keep turning over rocks on the better, albeit more unpleasant, story.” He notes his own reporting experience in the 1980s, and puts forward reasons for why the story took so long to gain traction.

<http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=2516>

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Philip F. Lawler, *The Faithful Departed: The Collapse of Boston's Catholic Culture*, New York: Encounter Books, 2008.

SYNOPSIS: The book contextualizes the Father Geoghan case by tracing the rise and fall of the Catholic Church in Boston, and the wider culture of the American Catholic Church. It views the sex scandals as symptomatic, not just of errant priests, but of a church that has let down the faithful by losing sight of its core mission, as well as misguided Catholic bishops who failed to address the abuses taking place on their watch. It also examines the influence of media, including the *Boston Globe*, within the city.

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Stephen O' Leary, “A Tangled Web: New Media and the Catholic Scandals,” *Online Journalism Review*, August 6, 2002.

SYNOPSIS: Like Carl M. Cannon, the author notes the recent explosion in media coverage of Catholic clergy sex abuse, and notes that such allegations stretch back decades. He questions whether the shift reflects a greater interest in the subject, or changing news judgment, and ultimately concludes “there is more to the story than a newfound zeal among traditional journalists.” The key factor, he says, is the Internet, which “has fundamentally altered the balance that governed the relationship between media institutions and more traditional powers such as the Church. Journalists and bishops alike are now struggling with the new realities of covering religion in the wired world.”

<http://www.ojr.org/ojr/ethics/1028655580.php>

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Clay Shirky, "Chapter 6: Collective Action and Institutional Challenges," in *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, New York: Penguin Press, 2002.

SYNOPSIS: In this chapter, Shirky, who writes about the social and economic effects of internet technologies, discusses what made the Geoghan case—covered as an example of systematic abuse—different from the Porter case in 1993, which was covered as an isolated incident. He suggests that the key factor was the Internet, which helped organize victims and outrage Catholics.

### **Other Resources**

Dart Center For Journalism and Trauma

This Columbia University-affiliated "resource center, think tank and platform for coverage of violence, conflict and tragedy the world over" includes a number of elements useful for any discussion of covering victims of trauma, including "Tips and Tools" for interviewing victims, self-care and reporting on sexual assault.

<http://dartcenter.org/>

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*Deliver Us From Evil* (2006)

This fascinating documentary provides a relevant counterpoint to the Geoghan case. It focuses on Father Oliver O'Grady, a Catholic priest who the Catholic Church relocated to various parishes around the United States during the 1970s in an attempt to cover up his sexual abuse of dozens of children. The film includes victims' stories, and a disturbing interview with O'Grady himself.

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National Public Radio: The Catholic Church and Sex Abuse: NPR Coverage and Commentary on the Church in Crisis.

The site provides a range of contemporary coverage from 2002 relating to the sex abuse scandal, including commentary discussing the future of the Church, its hierarchy, and the sex scandal's impact on priests.

<http://www.npr.org/news/specials/priests/>