

Shining the Spotlight on Matt Carroll

HOW IS MATT ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT WITHOUT BEING ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT?

“Journalists on film are usually portrayed as idealists or cynics, crusaders or parasites. The reality is much grayer, and more than just about any other film I can think of, “Spotlight” gets it right.”

It’s the night of the premier of *Spotlight* at Kendall Square Cinemas, and there’s Matt Carroll, one of the six reporters in the original Pulitzer prize-winning Spotlight team. He is, true to form, running in the opposite direction of everyone else, with his spectacles around his neck and a coffee cup in hand. MIT students queue up to buy popcorn; in the whole theatre, he must be the only person to drink coffee instead. One of them asks him, “Fifth time?” and Carroll replies that no, it’s only been the fourth time he’s seen himself on screen.

Since its release on November 6th, *Spotlight*, a movie about the press, has gathered significant acclaim from the press, with its star-studded cast and hints of an Oscar nomination. But for all the media attention, Carroll keeps a low profile. “I’m just a geek,” he says at the premiere and again in an interview, tugging on his hoodie, which has a rainbow Nyan cat dancing across the back.

Whereas other members of the former Spotlight team at the Boston Globe have been constantly en route from one press release to the other, Carroll has been laying low, reaffirming his onscreen depiction as a homebody. His voice is also missing from a recent feature in the Globe sharing the other reporters’ experiences. “[A] quiet family man with a

mournful mustache,” the New Yorker review says. In Vogue, he’s simply “reliable”.

In real life Carroll does have a signature mustache, but his demeanor is far from mournful. He’s wry and humorous, with a Boston accent that emphasizes his no-nonsense speech. Carroll is, in many ways, the quintessential Bostonian: He loves the local coffee, honors his father’s work ethic, and draws out the long “a” in Park Street, where the church he attends every week is located. Raised in the Boston area, he went to school at Northeastern University, worked for the Boston Globe for 26 years, and is now settled in West Roxbury with his wife of 32 years.

Religion was a large part of his large family growing up (Carroll was the oldest of 18 siblings). In addition to attending the local church every Sunday, the children went to Catholic elementary and high schools. His aunt was a nun. “It’s a very common story for Irish kids my age.”

Still, most “Irish kids” don’t grow up to expose major corruption in the Church, win a Pulitzer Prize for the investigation, and leave the institution subject to ongoing global scrutiny. Although Carroll is a local and a family man, he’s also a persistent reporter. He began writing for the local paper in high school, and temporarily dropped out of Northeastern to start his own paper, the Post. Together with his friend, and funded by his friend’s brother, the two lasted almost a year running every aspect of the paper. “It was good,” Carroll said. “We just ran out of money.” He jokes that if he’d invested in a house then, he’d be retired by now. “But instead I wasted it all on a newspaper.”

Carroll’s reporting tact extends to his personality. There’s a dogged curiosity about him, and in conversation, he’s constantly directing sentences into to the next question, the bigger finding. His savvy with

numbers and spreadsheets led him to become the “database reporter” for the Globe, extracting stories out of records and statistics long before the era of Nate Silver and “Big Data”. It was this ability to extract patterns from data that eventually revealed the systematic coverup of clerical sex abuse cases in Boston.

In 2001, prompted by the arrival of the Globe’s new editor, Marty Baron, the Spotlight team began to dig through court records on child sex abuse cases which the Catholic Church had sealed. Baron was an outsider from Miami, which allowed him to recognize the anomaly of the Church’s legal behaviors. “He’s Jewish, he’s not Catholic, he doesn’t like baseball and people are obsessed with baseball.” Carroll hesitates. “Which is *fine* he’s the editor, he’s just a guy...”

Lead by Carroll’s initial research, the team discovered a tactic to uncover potential suspects by looking through the Church’s own annual directories. Priests that were frequently labeled on “sick leave” and then relocated turned out to be a very strong signal for abuse coverup. Carroll and his colleagues went through 20 years worth of books, circling names, and typing them into spreadsheets. “[I]t was unbelievably boring, incredibly laborious, and there were a lot of false positives,” said Carroll.

(When director Tom McCarthy first contacted him about making a movie of the investigation, Carroll was skeptical. “They said, we think it’s an awesome movie. And I’m like... a movie about people sittin’ around and making phone calls does not strike me as real interesting.”)

But the tedious work paid off. Upon publication, the story rapidly reached global importance. Eventually XX priests were accused of sex abuse in Boston, and by the following year, the Archbishop, former Cardinal Law, was forced to resign. “This one, it was like riding the back of

a tiger, it just took off so fast and so hard, and did not stop for a long, long time.”

He notes that the rise of the internet in the early 2000s was key to its success, and regrets not scanning and posting every court case online. At the time, the team was too focused on reporting. Although the documents are still available, it’s difficult to retrieve them all. Over time, cases start to disappear. “Court systems [are] remarkably open, so you walk in a court and they’ll just give you a case file... and people take stuff. It’s horrible.”

By the time Carroll began reporting, he’d already drifted away from Catholicism. But he was and is the only regular church-goer among the team. He speaks candidly about his Catholic upbringing, and doesn’t fixate on the psychology of individuals, only on the failings of the system. Growing up, “everyone knew that there were bad priests, because there’s bad people everywhere, that’s just how it is.” (He never uses the words “child molester,” always “bad priest”.)

Still, Carroll is frank about the emotional toll of reporting so close to home. During the investigation, he discovered that one of the accused priests, John Geoghan, lived around the corner from his home. In the movie, this detail is altered. “They thought it wasn’t believable if it was his picture I put on my fridge,” said Carroll, to warn his children, who were ages 6-12 at the time. It became so stressful that Carroll found outlet in an alter ego— Sean Patrix— under whose name he wrote two novels.

Last year, Carroll left the newspaper industry after more than 30 years of service, seeking new challenges. “I wasn’t satisfied with the pace of change in a lot of places,” he said. “I thought more could be done.” In many ways, he believes that the work he did in 2002 was “the last great enterprise newspaper story,” but it was also “the first great internet newspaper story,” which used the adolescent web to launch itself from local to global importance.

Now, at MIT, he runs the Future of News, an initiative that seeks to use creative technologies to push newsrooms “ahead aggressively” in this era of information overload and unstable income streams. These days, instead of hunting for stories, Carroll hunts for technologies that could make stories, and make them big. Alexis Hope is a former student at the Center for Civic Media who is currently advised by Carroll for her storytelling start-up, FOLD. The publishing platform seeks to make complex ideas easy to understand with virtual, linked index cards.

“He brings decades and decades of hard earned expertise from being on the ground,” said Hope. “He just *cares* so much about journalism.” She adds that Carroll also provides business insight on how to navigate the news industry in a shifting, virtual landscape. He’s been a keen observer of how the internet impacts storytelling since the early 90s.

So many of Carroll’s concerns boil down to business— specifically, the business of making money. His hopes for *Spotlight* are that it gives a new emphasis to investigative journalism, particularly that it’s worth paying for.

He estimates that team of four, working on the story for five months, cost the Globe a million dollars at the time.

Ultimately, that's what he wants to come out of his time at MIT, now that he's made his mark in the field. What's the next big project for Matt Carroll, now that he's earned his Pulitzer and likeness on the silver screen? At this question, he finally parts with his coffee cup and pounds his fist on the table. "I'd like to be part of the project that saves the news industry across the world by finding a way of minting gold coins for newsrooms."

- "Yea i guess... but because it was my everyday work, I was like, **this is boring as anything, boring as mud**

also, the role of the internet —> transition to MIT

go into detail about story

go into reporting comes close to home, but he's nonchalant, and not
opposed to the church

go to future of news, back to nerds/numbers

"They really did a good job. They really made spreadsheets seem sexy." [get
exact quote]

and I'm like... a movie about people sitting' around and making phone calls
does not strike me as real interesting

But for all the attention, carroll has laid low;
it's a wink that he hides underneath the nerd label, escaping press tours
under the convenient portrayal of family man