

Anna Denucci
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Media Law and Regulation
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Spotlight Film Review

In today's culture, media has become a very controversial topic and source of information. It has been deemed untrustworthy and unreliable by some of the most powerful people in our nation, which in turn makes the common citizen suspicious and weary about the stories and facts they are hearing and reading. The film *Spotlight* portrays a deeper look into the inner workings of investigative reporting, legal ethics, and the morals of a community leading to the article put out by the *Boston Globe* about the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal.

Spotlight, the movie centering around the *Boston Globe's* investigation into the sexual abuse covered up by the Catholic Church, takes place in a time when people are not as critical of news outlets and media, but still cautious about what is printed. The importance of good reporting, which includes extensive research, sources, and fact checking, is presented well in this movie and seen to be poignant in informing an audience that may not be as accepting or informed as they should be. To be accurate and honest should be a priority of the media and, though it still may be for some news outlets, the public does not trust their information sources anymore. In *Spotlight*, a brief time before the mistrust of the media started, the reporting team is shown doing extensive research and interviews, striving to cover the story fully and double check its accuracy so that any denials and dismissals could be met by cold hard facts. The reporting was thorough, the descriptions grotesquely blunt, and the sources' stories, both from the victims and the

lawyers who had defended the church in backroom deals, aligned to provide a damning new story in the eyes of everyone who read through the article. Watching the grueling process of the investigation and lengths the reporters were willing to go to find answers and bring about justice made the story even more compelling. *Spotlight* showed what good news reporting looks like and how integrity and accuracy makes the public more comfortable with being fed information from a media source. Today, the media seems to have lost the accuracy and factual style of writing that it used to have, at least in the eyes of the public. No one knows where the information is coming from, if the article or reporting is opinion or fact based and events reported by different social media outlets and news stations always seem to have differing accounts of large scale events. People have become cynical of the news stories spread to the public, but then when good reporting, such as that done in *Spotlight*, occurs and tries to impact the public to make a change, it could get lost in the dissonance of media criticism.

This movie clearly shows the deliberation and worries expressed by the *Boston Globe* and the *Spotlight* team as they uncover more and more damning evidence against the Catholic Church and their systemized cover ups. They are not only worried about the effect this information will have on their readers and their commitment to the paper, but also to the actual faith of a community that was heavily religious. They accurately assessed the ripples the accusations would cause throughout the community and treated them appropriately, balancing the right of the public to know what was going on and the impact and sensitivity of faith. With the victim numbers multiplying constantly, the sheer amount of abusive priests in the Boston area and the extremity of the sins and scandals being

covered up by a supposedly holy institution, it was too much to ignore and needed to be shared with the public. It was between keeping people comfortable and ignorant versus keeping people safe and knowledgeable about who they were following in their faith. The *Globe*, as it was portrayed in the movie, was just in their handling of the information and the way by which the developments were entered into the marketplace.

Also, the lawyers, who eventually worked with the *Globe* as sources to corroborate the stories of the victims, needed to make ethical calls personally and professionally. The struggle is seen in the movie through the reluctance of attorney Eric Macleish to give up names to the *Globe* after they had buried the story previously, and the deliberation of Jim Sullivan to verify the names of the sexually abusive priests he had defended. They had to decide if the protection of the church and their professional profile as lawyers was worth the life of a child. Though hard to make and controversial in its ethicality, the lawyers' contribution made the evidence of the scandals and wrongs done by the church more reliable in the eyes of the public. The discoveries were damaging to the faith community as well as the victims, but written purposefully to provide knowledge and provoke change. There are always going to be ethical dilemmas revolving around controversial news stories, but mass media was created, was needed, to put information out in the open for the public to see and do something about. In *Spotlight*, though the investigation did bring up painful times and wounds, it also gave voice to those that felt voiceless and shut out as victims of sexual abuse committed by supposedly holy men.

The thoroughness of the research, interviews, and details were done to make the article have both an unforgettable and unforgiveable impact to promote change.

Technically, the sexual abuse by priests had been covered before and then “buried,” considered insignificant. When investigating and interviewing the victims, the team took precautions and meticulously wrote down exactly how the victims were assaulted and harassed sexually. First and foremost, it would make a larger impact on the reader to have specifics and know that it was not just the priest’s stray hand accidentally touching a child somewhere. Secondly, the detail catered to the validity of the reports and experiences of the victims, as most people would not go to the trouble of making up things as obscene as some of the stories were. When it comes to people’s faith, there is a lot of anger, disbelief, and immediate dismissal if outsiders try to show followers what could be wrong with their beliefs, or improved upon. For that reason, the expected volatility of people’s responses to the accusations of the *Boston Globe*, every word and detail mattered. When writing for mass media, one needs to know their audience. The *Globe* knew their audience very well and prepared for the outcome as best they could.

This film shows a lot about the necessity for the media as well as where the media is currently going wrong. *Spotlight* provided a lot of insight into the ethical dilemmas of mass media as well as its goal to unveil knowledge to the public and not coddle a community when something is wrong. There needs to be more trusted investigative reporting teams like the ones shown in *Spotlight*, willing to provide sources, write factually and be as detailed as possible in order to gain back the public’s trust. Every station, story, and source is bias in one way or another, but there are facts within those biases, that should be easily found and used to fix problem and address issues, not discounted right away.