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Hollywood shines a spotlight on real journalism

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THE CONVERSATION

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Hollywood shines a spotlight on real journalism

November 6, 2015 3:43pm EST

The headquarters of The Boston Globe. Brian Snyder/Reuters

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Note: this article may contain spoilers for those unfamiliar with the story.

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In the new movie *Spotlight*, there's a wonderful scene where a reporter is seeking documents in a courthouse. The building is a dreary linoleum monument to *The Way Things Are*. In the scene, a recalcitrant clerk treats the reporter as if he were a nuisance and declines to lift a finger.

The moment perfectly captures an ethos that I remember well from my own adventures as a reporter covering Massachusetts government, courts and politics. In that world, the idea that knowledge is power is intuitively understood by all parties, like an article of faith or an early item in the Catechism.

The feeling is this: *If I know something that you don't know, why should I tell you? If I do, then you'll know as much as I do. So screw off.*

Freedom of information? *Ha! Information's free only if someone is stupid enough to give it away!*

That belief pervades much of the world that the movie *Spotlight* tries to illuminate. The film takes its title from the special investigative unit at the Boston Globe that cracked open the scandal inside the

clergy and hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The Globe team documented the pervasive, long-running practice of high-ranking Church officials covering up for priests who sexually molested, abused and raped children. (During this period, I covered the trials of two of the Church's "bad apples" – Father Porter and Father Geoghan. But like everyone else, I failed to connect the dots of the larger cover-up.)

The film pits two powerful Boston institutions against each other: the Catholic Church and the city's big newspaper. Worthy adversaries, the two sides battled for years in the early 2000s. The paper was trying to pry evidence of the scandal out of court records (which were sealed, naturally, under terms of the many settlements the Church reached with its victims), out of victims, out of lawyers and out of anyone who would talk.

Meanwhile, Church officials – starting with the disgraced former cardinal, Bernard Law – used a variety of classic techniques: stonewalling, threatening, denying and appealing to old friendships. According to the filmmakers, some Church leaders and some lay defenders of the Church tried to demonize the Globe's then-new top editor, Marty Baron, by raising insidious questions about him: *isn't he Jewish? Why isn't he married? He's not from here, is he?*



Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law (pictured on the left) introduces United States Attorney General John Ashcroft to Deacon Tony Rizzutto in a 2001 photograph. Reuters

Ultimately, of course, the journalists triumph in the film – just as they did in real life. In doing so, *Spotlight* sends out a strong and welcome message: journalism ain't dead. For a field that has had more than its share of bad news for more than a decade now, it's nice to be reminded that journalism matters.

Writer-director Tom McCarthy clearly holds journalism in high regard, and gives viewers an inside look at the reporting process. We watch the team of reporters made up of Matt Carroll (played by Brian d'Arcy James), Sacha Pfeiffer (Rachel McAdams) and Mike Rezendes (a twitchy Mark Ruffalo) as they are led by “Robby” Robinson (played with eerie intensity by Michael Keaton) and his boss, Ben Bradlee Jr (John Slattery).

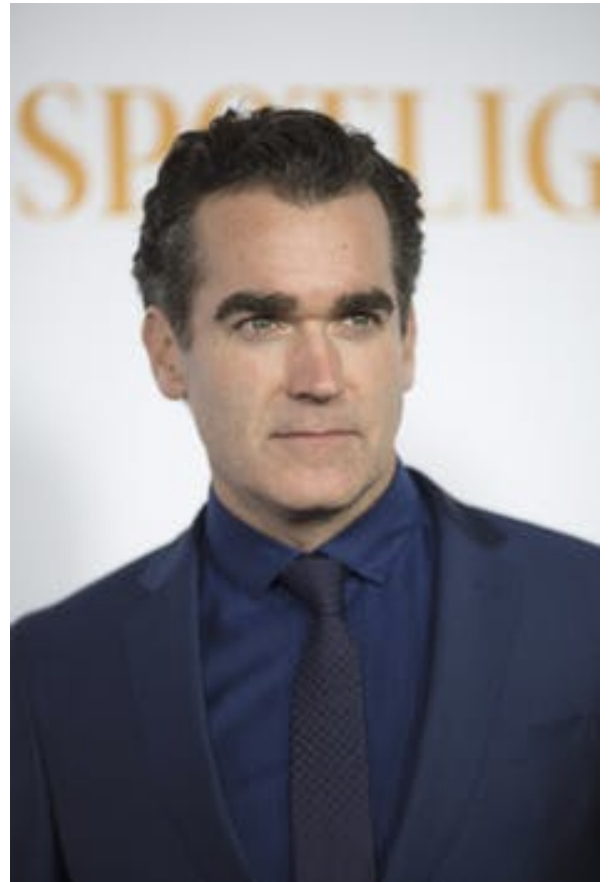
One of the best things about *Spotlight* is the way it portrays the thrill of the chase that fuels reporters when they’re trying to pin down an important story. We see the Globe reporters toiling into the night, wrecking their weekends and actually enjoying their work. We root for them as they match wits with surly clerks, the oily fixers protecting the Church and the dead weight of centuries of Catholic indoctrination and obedience. (“Yes, Father.” “Of course, Father.” “Yes, Your Eminence.”)

In my opinion, the film makes one major misstep: it is unnecessarily harsh in its portrayal of Eric MacLeish, grandson of poet Archibald MacLeish and a Boston attorney who represented many of the Church’s victims. I spoke to MacLeish many times during those years, and he was always straight with me and as forthcoming as his legal duties would allow. In the film, he is depicted as the jerk lawyer who could help the Globe, but won’t. Instead, attorney Mitchell Garabedian (played marvelously by Stanley Tucci) gets to play the only decent lawyer in sight.

I saw *Spotlight* recently at a special screening for Journalism Department faculty and students of Boston University (the alma mater of two real-life *Spotlight* reporters, Sacha Pfeiffer and Mike Rezendes). All the key figures from the Globe investigation were there, except for Baron, who has moved on to be the top editor of *The Washington Post*. Robby acknowledged a point made in the film that I hadn’t been aware of: sources had sent the Globe much of the evidence needed to break the story years earlier, but no one paid much attention the first time.

The film ends just as the Globe breaks the big story, in January 2002. The story rocked the Church, all the way to Rome, by dragging all the foul deeds of priests out of the darkness and into the light (the spotlight, if you will). It won the paper a Pulitzer Prize.

The folks at the Globe (at least, those who still have jobs) are rightly proud of their newspaper. The depiction of reporting that we see in “*Spotlight*” gives all of us who work in journalism a reason to feel proud too, by reminding us that the world would be a pretty crummy place without those driven, impertinent, nosy people who won’t take no for answer.



Actor Brian d'Arcy James plays reporter Matt Carroll in *Spotlight*. David McNew/Reuters

Spotlight TRAILER (HD) Michael Keaton, Mark Ruffalo Thriller Movie 2...



The trailer for Spotlight, which opens in theaters on November 6.



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