

The Church in the Spotlight

Peter Bentley

ACC National Director



“There can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the truth and shame the devil.” (Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 1920, p.13).

Spotlight (2015, M) won the Oscar for best film this year. It is interestingly not a film about heroes or super-heroes. In an age of bizarre and distorted reality television programmes and tweeting that can provide 15 seconds of fame or infamy, this is simply a film about people doing their jobs.

The *Spotlight* team are a specialist team at *The Boston Globe*. They combine extensive journalism experience with contemporary research skills and writing ability. Their collaborative work is like a Supreme Court decision - where one person often writes the majority report or article for the ‘team’, though in the *Globe* case they are more united.

As many readers will now know, the film is about the work by the *Spotlight* team in 2001 and 2002 to expose the nature and extent of child sexual abuse by priests in the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. Their work provided an impetus for further work by other reporters and also the development of official investigations not only in the USA, but in other countries including Australia.

The *Spotlight* team won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. You can read their original reports on the *Globe* website. They make illuminating reading, not only for their investigative style but also detailed and lengthy analysis. The different technological era also stands out. This is pre-broadband and there is still a reliance on primary research, analytical skills and interviewing, all elements that are illustrated well in their very ordinariness and yet

integral foundation to the eventual publishing.

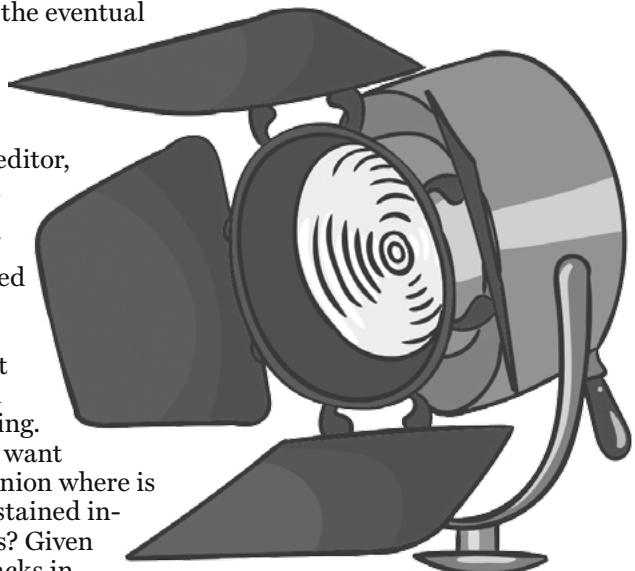
When the idea of *Spotlight* is explained near the start of the film to the new *Globe* editor, it seems almost quaint to our way of thinking today. A small team of experienced and focused journalists consider a subject or area, often spending months if not a year researching and writing before publishing.

At a time when people want instant results and opinion where is the opportunity for sustained investigation such as this? Given the large staffing cutbacks in many newspapers, this form of investigative writing is a prime example of professional journalism that is under threat. The film highlights the continued need today for independent journalism that is able to build on the tradition of asking for and receiving no favours from any quarter, including their own publisher.

At one point in the film when the scale of the abuse is uncovered the question is raised by one of the journalists investigating: Why did we not know? Someone must have known? It was evident that even in the *Globe*, certain stories were known, but they were not connected or followed up in a sustained way.

There was an indifference that was part of a wider culture of ignoring or even suppressing information. As noted, the *Globe* did not follow through on reported cases, and this was not because the *Globe* was substantially staffed by people of Catholic faith, or at least nominal Catholic faith, but rather because the overall culture did not encourage a sustained critique of dominant institutions and authorities.

This is a good film in the newspaper film drama genre. The ensemble cast continue the gritty depiction of real events in the pressured and changing journalistic environment as seen in earlier films like *All the President’s Men* (1976), and the more recently *Nothing by the Truth*



(2008). The director Tom McCarthy is also an actor, having played a significant role as an ethically compromised reporter in the concluding season of the television drama *The Wire* that focused on The Baltimore Sun. McCarthy picked up many helpful pointers in that groundbreaking drama, and it is good to see a film considering ethics and values without unnecessary preaching.

Spotlight is a sobering film for church members and ultimately contemporary even though it is set 15 years ago. We are all led to consider our response and allegiance – is it to the ‘institution’, or to the one holy Catholic and apostolic church? It is also illuminating as to why there has been a wider societal change in terms of the trust of and general perception of priests and ministers. As one of the survivors says:

“They say it’s just physical abuse but it’s more than that, this was spiritual abuse. You know why I went along with everything? Because priests are supposed to be the good guys.”

Spotlight is an example of how good writing and telling a story well can lead to real change. It avoids the self-righteousness that can sometimes come out in films from Hollywood that are too didactic, and in this way helps all viewers to examine their own lives and faith.