

[Style](#)

**I'm in 'Spotlight', but it's not really about me. It's about the power of journalism.**



[Oscars 2016: Red carpet fashion](#)



“You're damn right Hollywood is racist. Hollywood is sorority racist. It's like, ‘We like you, Rhonda, but you're not a Kappa.’”

Chris Rock during his Oscars monologue

By [Martin Baron](#) February 24



Martin Baron, then-editor of the Boston Globe, toasts reporters after the newspaper was honored as a recipient of a Pulitzer Prize on April 7, 2003. The Globe was awarded a Pulitzer for public service for its coverage of the church abuse scandal that rocked the Boston archdiocese. (Charles Krupa/Associated Press)

Most years I try to stay attentive, or at least awake, through the Academy Awards. Most years I fail.

On Sunday, however, fatigue has an overwhelming counterweight — obvious self-interest. Plus, I will be sitting inside the Dolby Theatre.

“Spotlight” brought to the big screen the first six months of a Boston Globe investigation that in 2002 revealed a decades-long coverup of serial sexual abuse by priests within the Boston Archdiocese.

Liev Schreiber portrays me as the newly arrived top editor who launched that investigation, and his depiction has me as a stoic, humorless, somewhat dour character that many professional colleagues instantly recognize (“He nailed you”) and that my closest friends find not entirely familiar.

The scandal disclosed by the Globe’s Spotlight investigative team ultimately took on worldwide dimensions. Fourteen years later, the Catholic Church continues to answer for how it concealed grave wrongdoing on a massive scale and for the adequacy of its reforms, as it should.

The movie has been nominated for six Oscars, including best picture. And, journalistic objectivity be damned, I’m hoping it wins the entire lot. I feel indebted to everyone who made a film that captures, with uncanny authenticity, how journalism is practiced and, with understated force, why it’s needed.

[\*\[Review: ‘Spotlight’ joins ‘All the President’s Men’ in the pantheon of great journalism\]\*](#)

The awards take the form of a statuette, recognition for outstanding moviemaking. The rewards of this film matter more to me, and they will take longer to judge.

The rewards will come if this movie has impact: On journalism, because owners, publishers and editors rededicate themselves to investigative reporting. On a skeptical public, because citizens come to recognize the necessity of vigorous local coverage and strong journalistic institutions. And on all of us, through a greater willingness to listen to the powerless and too-often voiceless, including those who have suffered sexual and other abuse.

Aside from the acclaim of critics, “Spotlight” already has delivered one gratifying result. In emails, tweets and Facebook posts, journalists have declared themselves inspired, buoyed and affirmed. That is no small matter in this badly bruised profession. We have felt the traumatizing financial effect of the Internet and been berated by just about everyone, especially politicians in a campaign season that has seen us cynically labeled “scum.”

One journalist wrote me that “the story that inspired the movie serves as a wonderful, wonderful reminder why so many of us got into this business in the first place and why so many stayed despite all the gloom and doom and all the left hooks that landed squarely on our chins along the way.”

A reporter for a major national publication said he had gone to the movie with his entire family. “My kids suddenly think I’m cool,” he said.

Especially heartening has been the reaction of some publishers. One in California rented a theater to show the movie to the paper’s entire staff. Another wrote me on Facebook: “You and the Spotlight team . . . have reenergized me to find a business model to support this critical work.”

And most gratifying of all were expressions of support from the public. “Just saw Spotlight,” one moviegoer wrote on Twitter, “and was reminded again what astounding good can come from dogged journalism.”

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A movie will not erase either the pressures on my profession or the hostility we so often experience. Nor is that, in all honesty, why I joined with five former colleagues — Walter Robinson, Michael Rezendes, Sacha Pfeiffer, Matt Carroll and Ben Bradlee Jr. — in agreeing to cooperate in the making of this film. We thought only that it was a good story, worth telling — and, well, why not.

I was surprised that we were approached at all, and at first we were wary when two young producers, Nicole Rocklin and Blye Faust, came to the Globe's newsroom seven years ago to broach the idea. When they optioned our "life rights" — giving filmmakers the right to our story and securing our cooperation — I had little expectation it would be produced, notwithstanding their earnest commitment. Two years of silence and apparent inactivity that followed seemed to justify those doubts.

Ultimately, in 2011, the production company Anonymous Content signed on, bringing the enthusiasm of executives Steve Golin and Michael Sugar. Tom McCarthy was enlisted as director and paired up with Josh Singer as writer. Confidence that a movie might be made went up a notch.

*[How 'Spotlight' is a master class in the art of visual nuance]*

Tom and Josh made an impressive duo. Tom had directed "The Station Agent," "Win Win," and "The Visitor," all deservedly admired films. Josh had studied mathematics and economics at Yale, earned his law degree at Harvard, received a Harvard MBA and worked as a business analyst at McKinsey & Co. So, naturally, he chose to become a screenwriter ("The West Wing" and "The Fifth Estate").

In short order, Tom was collaborating with Josh as co-writer, and the two of them embarked on an inquiry into our work unlike any I've experienced. Their research was impressive, with a seemingly endless series of interviews with journalists, lawyers, survivors, individuals in the Boston community and experts on the subject of clergy sex abuse. They explored the Globe's archive of stories, studied emails that had been saved, reviewed thousands of court documents. They tapped me for everything I knew.

Josh and Tom knew more about what happened at the Globe than I did. Reading the screenplay, I learned a few things. I had been clueless about reservations or recalcitrance among the staff about pursuing the investigation. When I started as the Globe's editor, I had no sources in that newsroom. No one filled me in later, either.

For all their work, the project seemed a long shot.

It was easy to be pessimistic: (1) Sexual assault on children and adolescents is a tough subject for anyone. (2) This movie risked offending Catholics and their Church. (3) The film relied solely on dialogue and characters — no action, no special effects; in short, not the formula for Hollywood's favor. (4) Journalists are widely disliked, and movies about journalism have often strained to find an audience.

And the final reason, I concluded, was sure to be fatal: Catholics had a new and popular pope. How could this be the time for a movie that pointed an accusatory finger at the Church?

As if to prove that I knew nothing about the movie business, that is when everything came together. Mark Ruffalo, who has been nominated for best supporting actor for playing Michael Rezendes, was the first to sign on, clearing time for "Spotlight" in a schedule packed with big-budget films. His enthusiasm for the project, according to what I've heard and read, helped attract other big-name actors — and ultimately lock down the money needed for production.

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From left, Michael Keaton as Walter “Robby” Robinson, Liev Schreiber as Marty Baron, Mark Ruffalo as Michael Rezendes, Rachel McAdams as Sacha Pfeiffer, John Slattery as Ben Bradlee Jr., and Brian d’Arcy James as Matt Carroll in “Spotlight.” (Kerry Hayes/Open Road Films)



Baron, center, congratulates reporter Stephen Kurkjian, second from left, after the newspaper was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. From left, Kevin Cullen, Kurkjian, Baron, Ben Bradlee Jr., Thomas Farragher, Walter Robinson and Sacha Pfeiffer look on. (Charles Krupa/Associated Press)

After years of waiting, suddenly things were moving fast. Tom asked if I could meet Liev on the afternoon of Sept. 12, 2014, and Liev followed up with an email of his own. He has since said he was prepared to meet someone not only reserved but also “totally inscrutable.” Such is my reputation.

We met for less than two hours, and as we talked it occurred to me that this was not quite an interview. This was an observation session, much like a psychiatrist's. Only these observations would not remain confidential. They would be revealed to millions.

Tom and I later exchanged emails:

Tom: how'd it go? Impressions?

Me: The important question is, how'd he think it went? . . . I sense he finds me frustrating to fully understand. He wouldn't be the first to feel that.

Tom: He thought it went very well. And he was frustrated to not fully understand you. But Liev can be perpetually frustrated. It's part of his charm.

Liev later offered a different explanation. He was struggling to understand the role.

It was not until the premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival on Sept. 14, 2015, at the immense Princess of Wales Theatre that I saw "Spotlight" on a big screen, along with 2,000 others.

The movie had a powerful effect. The Los Angeles Times noted that five days into the Toronto festival, "Spotlight" stood "as the only movie to generate applause during the film and afterward, when the credits roll." The audience applauded, too, as Tom called the actors to the stage. And then he called the journalists to the stage, one by one. And something happened that's rare for journalists: We received a protracted standing ovation.

It was an emotional moment. I thought about the long-ago work that led to the movie, and how its impact would now be magnified. I thought about how the public might now see why journalism is necessary. And I thought about the oddity of this whole scene in which I had a part: how the saddening subject of sexual abuse had arrived at this bizarre intersection with celebrity, paparazzi and red-carpet interviews.



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Marty Baron has been executive editor of The Washington Post since 2013. (Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post)

As work on the movie was nearing completion, Tom asked me whether there was anything that might come across to journalists as inauthentic. I saw nothing. “Why?” I asked. “Is that important?”

“Very,” he answered.

Journalists worldwide have now seen the movie, and they’ve reacted the same: This movie is stunningly accurate in how it portrays the practice of journalism, investigative reporting in particular.

As for my own portrayal, I would have to be quite the grouch to complain. The screenplay honors me, as does the restrained, nuanced performance of Liev Schreiber, an exceptional talent.

The movie has been occasion to see myself through other people’s eyes. Early this year, Sacha asked Liev how he had been able to capture me so accurately, given the little time he’d spent with someone so “emotionally distant” and “remote.”

Close friends have argued that the movie omitted some of my more redeeming qualities. I was amused and appreciative that one felt motivated to make a case on my behalf, turning to Facebook to cite my “easy companionability and humor.” She added, “Marty’s character barely cracks a smile in the movie, but in real life he’s an easy audience for a joke.”

The truth is that those early months at the Boston Globe were not an easy period for me. No doubt my demeanor betrayed that, so much so that one Globe reporter at the time anonymously described the newsroom atmosphere as the “joyless pursuit of excellence.”

I came to the paper knowing no one there beyond two casual acquaintances. I knew no one in Boston beyond one couple I had not seen in years. I had been labeled an “outsider” in the city, not a “newcomer.” And four highly skilled people reporting to me had sought the top editing position I was given.

The journalism itself quickly took a serious turn, too, starting with the Church investigation. Six weeks after I arrived came 9/11, and it was followed within days by the anthrax scare. It was a tense time for all, and for me a lonely one.

Happily, things improved. I treasure my 11 1/2 years at the Globe, my colleagues, and the friends I made in Boston.

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For all that it gets right, it’s worth remembering that “Spotlight” is a movie, not a documentary. It is faithful to the broad outline of how the Globe’s investigation unfolded. But it is not a stenographic account of every conversation or encounter. Life doesn’t unspool neatly in the service of a two-hour movie that must coherently introduce characters and issues and important themes.

To answer a question I’m most often asked, yes, I was given the Catechism by Cardinal Bernard Law as I left his residence. The book in the film is the very book he handed me. But the scene in the movie comes with some flourishes. Mostly, our conversation danced around a subject we both seemed determined to avoid — the Globe’s investigation.

Occasionally I have been asked what I would have liked to see in the movie that was not portrayed. One answer, I confess, is a product of my own anger that the years have yet to extinguish.

I’m referring to a Nov. 4, 2002, speech given by Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard law professor who would later become U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. “All I can say,” she declared before a conference of

Catholics, “is that if fairness and accuracy have anything to do with it, awarding the Pulitzer Prize to the Boston Globe would be like giving the Nobel Peace Prize to Osama bin Laden.”

A brief glimpse of the speech might have said volumes about the culture of denial and defiance that afflicted the Church before, and for long after, our investigation.

The Globe’s work proved to be fair and accurate. Overdue, too. And in 2003 it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. The Pulitzer Board cited its “courageous, comprehensive coverage of sexual abuse by priests, an effort that pierced secrecy, stirred local, national and international reaction and produced changes in the Roman Catholic Church.”

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From left, Rachel McAdams as Sacha Pfeiffer, Mark Ruffalo as Michael Rezendes and Brian d’Arcy James as Matt Carroll in “Spotlight.” (Kerry Hayes/Open Road Films)

Thirteen years ago, I received a letter from Father Thomas P. Doyle, who had long waged a lonely battle within the Church on behalf of abuse victims.

“The sexual abuse of children and young adults by Catholic clergy and its cover-up,” he wrote, “has been the worst thing that has happened to the Catholic church in many centuries. It has also been the greatest betrayal by churchmen of those whom they are charged to protect. Catholic children have been betrayed, and their parents and friends betrayed. Priests have been betrayed and the general public has been betrayed. This nightmare would have gone on and on were it not for you and the Globe staff.

“As one who has been deeply involved in fighting for justice for the victims and survivors for many years, I thank you with every part of my being. I assure you that what you and the Globe have done for the victims, the church and society cannot be adequately measured. It is momentous and its good effects will reverberate for decades.”

I kept Father Doyle’s letter on my desk in Boston until the day, three years ago, that I left to join The Washington Post. Through some very trying times for the Globe and for me, it served as a reminder of what brought me to journalism and what kept me in it.

There had been no movie then. There had been no awards.

I had felt the rewards, however, and they would last forever.





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