



PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM



The Pope Meets the Press: Media Coverage of the Clergy Abuse Scandal

June 11, 2010

Newspaper coverage of the Catholic clergy sexual abuse scandal grew more intense this spring than at any time since 2002, and European newspapers devoted even more ink to the story than American papers did, according to a new study by the Pew Research Center.

The heavy coverage in Europe was a reversal of the pattern in 2002, when a *Boston Globe* series triggered an avalanche of reporting on sexual abuse by priests in the United States but relatively few stories appeared in the European press. In early 2010, by contrast, much of the reporting focused on sexual abuse of children in Europe, and English-language European newspapers published three times as many articles on the scandal as U.S. papers did, the new study finds.

In addition, the media scrutiny this year zeroed in on the pope himself. During the six-week period from March 12 through April 27, Pope Benedict XVI was a major focus of more than half the stories on the scandal in the mainstream U.S. media, including print, radio, network television, cable TV and online news sources.

These are among the key findings of the study, conducted jointly by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, both of which belong to the nonprofit, nonpartisan Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C.

The amount of coverage devoted to the pope may not be unusual, given his role in the church and the media's tendency to focus coverage of scandals on individuals rather than institutions. But the thrust of the recent coverage – dwelling particularly on allegations that the pope abetted the cover-up of abusive priests in his native Germany and elsewhere – has been toxic for Benedict's image.

In a [nationwide poll](#) released by the Pew Research Center in April, for example, just 12% of the public said the pope has done a good or excellent job addressing the scandal, down from 39% two years earlier. About seven-in-ten Americans (71%) said Benedict has done a poor or only fair job, up from about half (48%) who felt that way in 2008.

The new Pew Research Center study examined coverage of the scandal in 52 mainstream U.S. news outlets: 11 newspapers, 12 news websites, seven network TV programs, 15 cable TV programs and seven radio programs and news updates. In addition, the study looked at blogs and social media, relying in part on data from Tweetmeme, a Twitter monitoring service. A Nexis search of English-language newspapers around the world from 2002 through 2010 was used for

historical comparisons. Stories from three Catholic news organizations were analyzed separately, as were religion blogs carried by major U.S. newspapers.

Among the findings of the study:

- From mid-March (when the pope's role in a decades-old abuse case in Germany came under scrutiny) through late April, clergy sexual abuse was the eighth biggest story in the mainstream media, beating out coverage of nuclear weapons policy and the Tea Party movement. The biggest week of coverage was March 22-28, when news organizations reported on the failure of Vatican officials years ago, including the future pope, to defrock an American priest who had abused nearly 200 deaf boys. The church scandal was the fourth biggest topic in the mainstream news that week.
- Benedict was by far the biggest newsmaker, featured in 51.6% of the stories about the scandal in the mainstream media during the six-week period studied. All other individual figures combined, including cardinals, bishops and priests, appeared as lead newsmakers in just 12% of the stories.
- The level of coverage this year came very close to that of 2002, when the news erupted that Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston and other bishops across the United States had shuffled accused abusers from parish to parish without informing the police or public. A Nexis keyword search of 90 media outlets found 1,559 stories mentioning the scandal in the first four months of 2010, just 77 fewer articles than in a similar four-month period in mid-2002 (May 1-Aug. 31). No other developments in the scandal during the intervening eight years even came close to generating that level of coverage.
- An examination of three Catholic news outlets reveals wide differences in their approaches. The *National Catholic Reporter*, an independent weekly, devoted fully two-thirds (66.7%) of its Vatican coverage to the scandal. Two Catholic news services, on the other hand, devoted considerably less of their Vatican coverage to the story. Catholic News Service gave it 44.8%, and the Catholic News Agency gave it 33.3%.
- The scandal found little traction in new media, however. Across the millions of blogs and Twitter posts tracked in PEJ's [weekly monitoring](#), the clergy abuse scandal registered as a leading topic in only one of the six weeks analyzed. During the week of March 29-April 2, when new information emerged about the Milwaukee archdiocese's handling of an abusive priest, the scandal was the second-largest story, making up 9% of all Twitter links to news reports. But it did not rank in the top five most blogged-about news stories at all.
- Among the religion blogs published by high-circulation U.S. newspapers, those operated by *USA Today* and *The Washington Post* contained the most entries on the clergy abuse scandal – a total of 12 each during the six weeks studied.

Context of the Coverage

When news about sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy re-emerged in Europe in early 2010, there was a crowded news field in the United States. The federal health care overhaul and the sputtering global economy dominated headlines. Still, the sexual abuse story drew attention and became one of the 10 most-covered stories in the following weeks.

In the six-week period from March 12 to April 27, the scandal was the No. 8 story overall, filling 2.1% of the newshole – the total space and time devoted to news coverage – in the 52 mainstream media outlets analyzed in the study.

The scandal generated more press attention than news about the U.S. education system (2.0% of coverage) or national and international debates about nuclear weapons policy (1.9%). The story was only slightly less prominent than the war in Afghanistan (2.3%) and the volcanic eruption in Iceland that grounded flights across Europe (2.7%).

The 2.1% of the newshole devoted to the sex abuse scandal during this six-week period is also about twice the level of attention that all coverage of religion – not just the Catholic Church or the sex abuse scandal – typically receives over the course of a year in the mainstream media (see the Pew Research Center’s reports on religion in the news in [2009](#) and [2008](#)).

Still, not all of the mainstream outlets gave the scandal the same degree of prominence. The network TV newscasts devoted the greatest portion of their available time to the story. On NBC’s *Today Show* on March 29, for example, correspondent Stephanie Gosk reported live from Vatican City on hundreds of new allegations against Catholic clergy that had emerged in Europe:

“The dark cloud of sexual abuse has hung over the Vatican ever since victims started coming forward a decade ago. You’ll remember U.S. Cardinal Bernard Law had to resign over the scandal. These allegations have come right to the front steps of the Vatican [as well as] Ireland, the Netherlands, even the pope’s birthplace, Germany.”

Newspapers and news websites also produced heavy coverage. But cable TV and talk radio – platforms that often emphasize opinion programs and political debates – produced less. On cable, the scandal filled about 1% of the newshole, and on talk radio, not a single story appeared during the six weeks of programming studied. [Past analyses](#) have found that these sectors typically cover religion stories to about the same extent as do other media sectors. During the course of 2009, for example, cable television and talk radio devoted about 1% of their total news coverage to religion, as did each of the other media sectors.

So what was behind the relatively sparse coverage of the Catholic sexual abuse story on cable TV and talk radio? Other events may simply have crowded it out of the news. Across all

Top Stories in the News, Spring 2010

Percent share of total coverage for each story

Health care legislation	16.0 %
Economic crisis	14.5
West Virginia coal mine accident	3.4
Iceland volcanic eruption	2.7
2010 elections	2.4
U.S./NATO mission in Afghanistan	2.3
Obama administration	2.3
Clergy abuse scandal	2.1
Education system/debate	2.0
Nuclear policy issues	1.9

Dates covered are March 12, 2010–April 27, 2010, a six-week period.

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Scandal Coverage by Media Sector

Sector	Rank in sector's top stories	Share of sector's newshole
Network TV	5	3.7%
Online	5	3.3
Newspapers	10	1.9
News radio	19	1.5
Cable TV	22	0.9
Talk radio	N/A	0.0

Dates covered are March 12, 2010–April 27, 2010, a six-week period.

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mainstream media, the health care bill and political reaction to it led the news at 16% of the coverage during the six-week period studied. That story accounted for even more of the coverage on cable (23%) and talk radio (34%). In addition, these sectors spent time on other political topics, such as the 2010 midterm elections.

Coverage Over the Last Decade

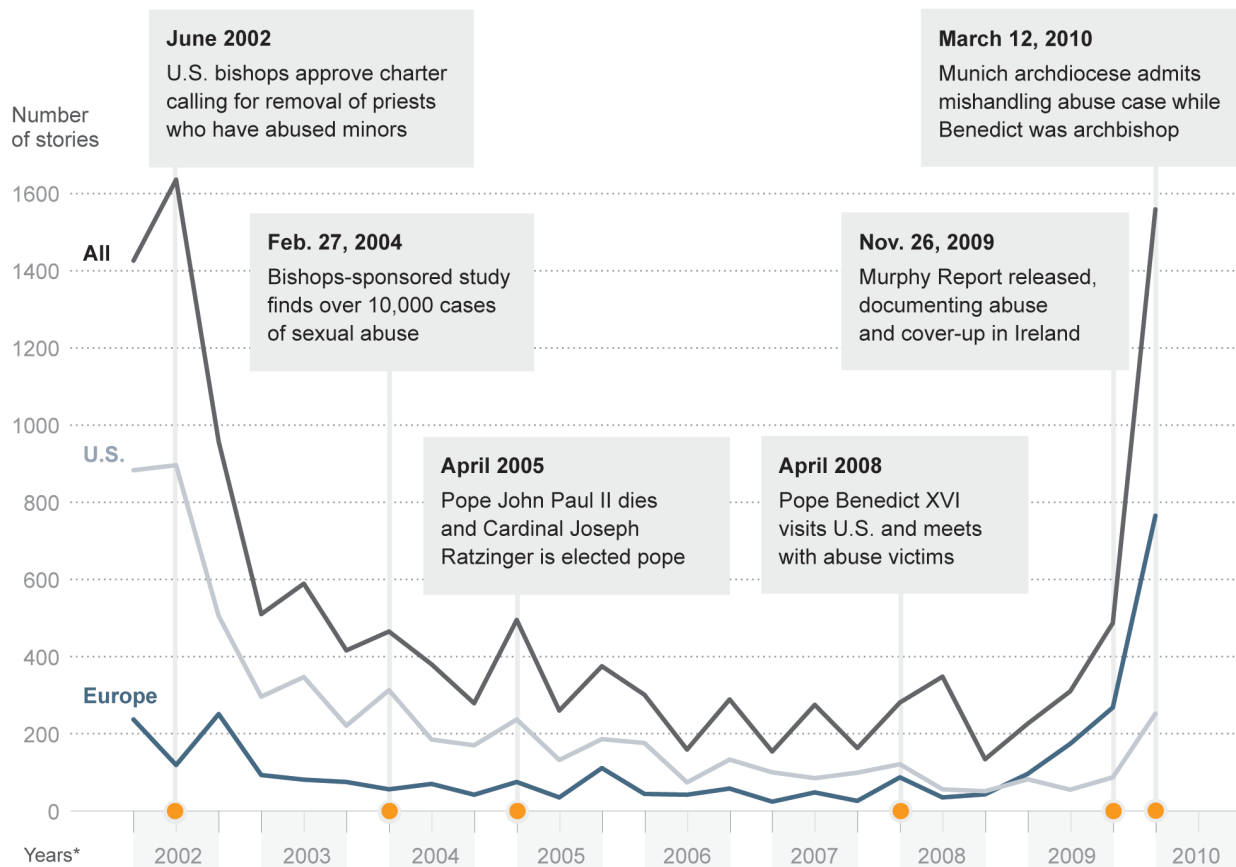
How does the overall volume of attention to the sexual abuse scandal compare with other moments when the church came under heavy scrutiny? The Project for Excellence in Journalism has data reaching back to 2007. To go back further, the new study included a search of major English-language newspapers using the Nexis database. The entire time period analyzed was from the beginning of 2002, when the scandal erupted in Boston, through the first four months of 2010. (News stories about instances of clergy sexual abuse had been trickling out for decades, but not until 2002 did the abuse scandal become a major national story.)

This expanded analysis finds that the recent flare-up is the most intense period of coverage since the revelations that roiled the church in the United States in 2002. (For more details on how the searches were conducted, see the Methodology.)

In the first four months of 2010, 1,559 stories were published that in some way addressed the scandal. That is only 4.7% less than in a similar period in 2002 (May-August), during which the U.S. bishops met in Dallas to adopt a charter calling for the permanent removal from ministry of any priest credibly accused of sexually abusing a minor. At the time of the Dallas charter, Vatican officials portrayed the scandal as largely an American problem.

Clergy Abuse Coverage in Europe and the U.S.

This chart shows English-language newspapers' coverage of the Catholic clergy sexual abuse scandal since 2002, along with key events that prompted increases in news coverage. In 2002, U.S. newspapers published more stories on the scandal than European papers did. But since late 2008, coverage has spiked in European papers.



Data points represent number of stories that mention the clergy abuse scandal.

The data is derived from a Nexis keyword search of major world newspapers. All papers in the sample are English-language only.

*Years have been divided into trimesters: January-April, May-August and September-December.

But a lot changed between 2002 and 2010. Eight years ago, U.S. newspapers covered the scandal in much greater volume than European papers did. The U.S. papers – including national circulation publications like *The New York Times* as well as metro dailies like *The Philadelphia Inquirer* – published 896 stories about the scandal in May-August 2002, at the height of the story, while English-language papers in Europe published only 119.

But in the first four months of 2010, European papers published roughly three times more articles on the scandal (765) than U.S. papers did (252). By early this year, waves of revelations about new abuse allegations and cover-ups had emerged from Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

Focus on the Pope

This latest chapter in the clergy abuse scandal includes allegations that Pope Benedict, when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, assisted in the cover-up of abuse incidents in Germany and failed to defrock some sexually abusive American priests whose cases came under his purview as head of the Vatican's doctrinal office. As new reports of abuse began appearing in the press on a nearly daily basis, the names of numerous priests, bishops and cardinals emerged. But no other figure received nearly as much attention as Benedict. During the six-week period studied, the mainstream media focused on the pope in over half its stories (51.6%) about the clergy abuse scandal.

Moreover, Benedict has received considerably more attention in media coverage of the scandal this year than his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, did eight years ago. A Nexis keyword analysis of major world English-language newspapers found that John Paul was mentioned in only 15.5% of stories about abuse in May-August 2002, the period when newspaper coverage of the crisis peaked.

While Benedict is in many ways the public face of the Catholic Church, that alone does not explain why he suddenly came under intense scrutiny this spring. The reason may be a combination of direct accusations in Europe and the boomerang effect of what were widely perceived as clumsy Vatican efforts at damage control, which ranged from highly defensive to apologetic.

Much of the reporting on Benedict had to do with his past actions as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, the office that oversees the discipline of child-molesting priests, among other duties. In one of the more notable reports, *The New York Times* on March 24 charged that Vatican officials, among them the future pope, failed to remove a priest who had sexually abused up to 200 deaf boys in Wisconsin many years ago.

The Vatican's public response to such reports only added to the negative attention on the pope. On March 13, the Vatican denounced what it called aggressive attempts to drag Benedict into the scandal. On April 2, senior Vatican priest Raniero Cantalamessa caused a stir with a sermon comparing criticism of the church to the persecution of Jews. Then, on March 20, the pope wrote an open letter to victims of abuse, and on April 18 he met with victims of abuse on Malta, where he was reportedly tearful and expressed "shame and sorrow" over their suffering. These and other public statements by Vatican officials and the pope himself became fodder for still more media attention.

Compared with the media coverage of nine other recent scandals, the focus on the pope does not appear unusual. The nature of the other scandals varies enormously, and some are intrinsically more personal than others. But they help to illustrate the media's penchant for personalizing big stories. Following the marital infidelity of golfer Tiger Woods and the arrest of filmmaker Roman Polanski, for example, nearly 90% of the coverage focused on Woods and Polanski personally, rather than on, say, moral standards among professional athletes or Hollywood celebrities in general. At the other end of the spectrum, coverage of steroid abuse in Major League Baseball did not zero in on any one player; the biggest single newsmaker was Roger

Clemens, who figured prominently in less than a quarter of all stories on the subject.

The coverage of the pope is most closely comparable to the level of attention that the media focused on Republican Party Chairman Michael Steele after the GOP came under fire for its spending practices, including nearly \$2,000 spent in a Los Angeles strip club. Steele was featured in 50% of those stories, which, like the clergy scandal, was seized on by many news

organizations as an opportunity to question the leadership of an organization allegedly facing endemic problems.

Degree to Which Recent Scandals Have Been Tied to Individuals

Scandal	Start of media monitoring	Newsmaker	% of stories tied to a newsmaker
Tiger Woods affairs	Nov. 27, 2009	Tiger Woods	90.0%
Roman Polanski arrest	Sept. 28, 2009	Roman Polanski	87.5
New York governor scandals	March 1, 2010	David Patterson	82.1
Bernie Madoff ponzi scheme	Dec. 16, 2008	Bernie Madoff	71.7
John Edwards affair	July 22, 2008	John Edwards	66.7
Clergy abuse scandal	March 12, 2010	Pope Benedict	51.6
Misuse of GOP funds	March 30, 2010	Michael Steele	50.0
IL senate seat backroom deals	Dec. 9, 2008	Rod Blagojevich	44.9
"Balloon Boy" hoax	Oct. 15, 2009	Richard Heene	33.6
MLB steroid use	Jan. 9, 2007	Roger Clemens	21.7

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From another perspective, what is striking about the clergy abuse scandal story is not that Benedict received so much press attention, but that other individuals received so little. In all, 10 people besides the pope featured prominently in mainstream coverage of the abuse scandal this spring. Together, these other individuals were lead newsmakers in 12% of the stories. (To be a lead newsmaker, a person must be the subject of at least 50% of the content of a particular news story.) The pope, though not accused of abusing anyone himself, attracted more coverage than all the other key figures combined. Irish Cardinal Sean Brady, for instance, was found in March to have been involved in a church effort to silence the sexual abuse victims of an Irish priest. Yet Brady was a lead newsmaker in only 1.6% of the stories during the period studied. The Legion of Christ, a Catholic organization founded in Mexico but with schools and seminaries around the world, acknowledged in March that its founder, the late Marcial Maciel Degollado, had fathered a daughter and committed other "grave acts." Yet Maciel, an influential figure who has been accused of abusing numerous seminarians, also was the focus of less than 2% of the scandal coverage during the six-week period.

Even cable television news, in its slimmer amount of total coverage, focused primarily on the pope's involvement. The politically liberal Rachel Maddow, on her MSNBC prime-time program April 23, reminded viewers of Irish pop singer Sinead O'Connor's controversial protest against Pope John Paul II in 1992. That led into a story summarizing the current developments.

"The Catholic church is in the middle of a massive worldwide scandal, involving not just sexual abuse of children by priests, but also revelations of deliberate, coordinated efforts within the church hierarchy to keep abuse secret," Maddow said. "Pope Benedict himself [is] now at the center of what's become an enormous second wave in the abuse and cover-up scandal."

Religious Media's Reaction

While the mainstream media focused intensely on Benedict's role in the scandal, did those who got their information from the Catholic media get a different story? How much attention did the Catholic press give to the pope's role and to the scandal overall?

To answer these questions, the Pew Research Center study looked at coverage in three Catholic media outlets:

- The *National Catholic Reporter*, an independent weekly that says it has about 100,000 regular readers. It calls itself "one of the few, if not the only, truly independent journalistic outlet for Catholics" and describes itself as "a religious news source with worldly interests."
- The Catholic News Agency, a news service that distributes its content through diocesan newspapers, parish newsletters and the Web. The CNA is a nonprofit organization funded predominantly by donations from Catholics. It says it was founded in 2004 in "response to Pope John Paul II's call for a 'New Evangelization,' " and that it gives

Abuse Scandal Lead Newsmakers, March 12–April 27

Lead newsmaker	% of abuse scandal stories
Pope Benedict XVI	51.6%
William Levada (succeeded Benedict as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith)	2.4
Sean Brady (head of Catholic Church in Ireland)	1.6
Marcial Maciel Degollado (founder of Legion of Christ, later removed from ministry by Benedict)	1.6
John Magee (Irish bishop, resigned in 2010 amid scandal)	1.6
David Clohessy (director of Survivor's Network of those Abused by Priests)	0.8
José Gómez (Coadjutor Archbishop of Los Angeles)	0.8
Dario Castrillon Hoyos (Colombian cardinal who once praised a French bishop for not reporting a pedophile priest)	0.8
Werner Huth (psychiatrist who treated sexually abusive German priest Peter Hullermann)	0.8
Stephen Kiesle (defrocked California pedophile priest)	0.8
Jim Moriarty (Irish bishop who resigned in late 2009 amidst fallout from the handling of abuse cases)	0.8

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because some stories do not have a lead newsmaker.

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“particular emphasis to the words of the Holy Father and the happenings of the Holy See.”

- The Catholic News Service, which describes itself as an “editorially independent and a financially self-sustaining division of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.” The news service says its mission “is the mission of the Church itself – to spread the Gospel through contemporary means of communication.” Yet it also emphasizes independent reporting: “Our mission is to report fully, fairly and freely about the involvement of the Church in the world today.” CNS states on its website that “almost every English-language Catholic newspaper in the world uses” its content; it claims to reach 8 million people around the world.

Overall, the three Catholic media outlets devoted about a third of their Vatican coverage to the clergy abuse scandal. But each outlet differed in its approach to the unfolding events and to the pope’s involvement.

The *National Catholic Reporter*, which has a smaller newshole than the news services, published the

smallest number of articles on the scandal but devoted the highest percentage of its Vatican reporting (66.7%) to the story. For example, a March 22 piece by NCR’s Thomas Fox, reporting from Munich, Germany, said: “German reform Catholics said Sunday the pope’s pastoral letter, written to Irish Catholics in response to sexual abuse by the clergy, is merely a starting point in a long process of change, and called for the church to overhaul its stance on celibacy.”

Catholic News Service focused about half of its Vatican coverage on the scandal. An April 9 story, for example, reported on the Vatican’s defense of Benedict’s response to the sex abuse issue. Reporter John Thavis quoted the Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, as saying, “He is a pastor well capable of facing – with great rectitude and confidence – this difficult time in which there is no lack of criticism and unfounded insinuations.”

The Catholic News Agency, whose Vatican coverage was much more prolific than that of its counterparts, devoted a smaller share to the clergy scandal (29.8%). The tone of this coverage seemed to emphasize the defense of the Vatican’s actions, as well as to critique the mainstream media for its version of events. Many of the CNA’s stories focused on rebutting the reporting in mainstream media outlets, such as in this March 31 story:

“In a statement released on the Vatican website, Cardinal William J. Levada charged that the recent media attacks on the Holy Father by *The New York Times* concerning sex abuse within the Church are ‘deficient by any reasonable standards of fairness’ that American readers have come to expect from major media outlets.”

Catholic Media Coverage of Clergy Abuse Scandal, Spring 2010

Outlet	Total Vatican stories	Vatican stories about abuse scandal	% of Vatican stories about scandal
National Catholic Reporter	15	10	66.7%
Catholic News Service	58	26	44.8
Catholic News Agency	329	98	29.8
All three combined	402	134	33.3

Dates covered are March 12, 2010-April 27, 2010, a six-week period.

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The Response by New Media

A growing sector of the media today – blogs and social media – gave much less prominence to the clergy abuse story than mainstream media did. This is according to PEJ’s New Media Index, which analyzes trends culled from millions of blogs and Twitter posts each week, coupled with additional analysis of religion-based blogs in major daily newspapers.

The New Media Index, by counting and cataloging the number of links to a specific story in the news, measures the top five news topics in the blogging community and on Twitter each week. During the six weeks following reports of Pope Benedict’s alleged involvement in the scandal, the abuse story did not make the top five even once. Among the stories that dominated the blogosphere during that time were the health care debate, global warming and the volcanic eruption in Iceland.

There is no reason to believe that bloggers in general are uninterested in, or shy away from, religion-related issues or events. There is even some evidence to suggest that the blogosphere is *more* inclined than the mainstream media to address religion. For example, an [analysis of 2009 religion coverage](#) found that some religion stories, such as the return of Catholic indulgences and the ban on minarets in Switzerland, were more popular in blogs than in the mainstream press. But in the spring of 2010, the attention of the blogging community, like talk radio and cable TV, was elsewhere – including on domestic political debates, such as the health care overhaul.

On Twitter, the clergy abuse scandal did make the top five, but just for one week. That was March 29-April 2, when it was the second most-common news story linked to by Twitter users. The No. 1 subject that week, with 22% of Twitter links, was a scientific breakthrough by the Large Hadron Collider, the world’s largest energy particle accelerator, located on the border of France and Switzerland. The topic of sexual misconduct by priests was second, at 9%.

The study also looked separately at religion-oriented newspaper blogs because their approach to the news often falls in between the mainstream national media and the Catholic press. They focus heavily on religion but generally not from the perspective of any one faith.

An important finding is that among the biggest U.S. newspapers, there are not a lot of religion blogs to begin with. Of the top 25 dailies in circulation, only seven carry blogs specifically about religion and related issues. And just four outlets routinely address more than local topics: *The Washington Post*’s “God in Government” and “Under God,” *USA Today*’s “Faith and Reason,” the *Chicago Tribune*’s “The Seeker” and *The Houston Chronicle*’s “Believe it or Not.”

When looked at together, these four – *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, the *Chicago Tribune* and *The Houston Chronicle* – devoted 18.1% of their religion blog posts to the clergy abuse scandal during the six-week period studied. The rest of their blog posts during that time covered an array of topics, including religious influences in pop culture and the role of religion in American politics.

Of the four blogs that covered the scandal, some gave more importance to the story than others, and each had a slightly different take. *USA Today*'s blog, "Faith and Reason," was one of the most active, with 49 total posts on various religion topics during the six-week period. Of these, 12 addressed the clergy scandal.

U.S. Top Newspaper Religion Blogs, Coverage of Clergy Abuse Scandal

Outlet	Total stories	Stories about abuse scandal	% of blog posts about scandal
Washington Post	33	12	36.4%
USA Today	49	12	24.5
Chicago Tribune	18	2	11.1
Houston Chronicle	49	1	2.0
Combined	149	27	18.1

Dates covered are March 12, 2010-April 27, 2010, a six-week period.

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An April 21 "Faith and Reason" post, for example, led with a bit of straight news: "A controversial Vatican official – now caught in the ash cloud of anger over the global sexual abuse scandal – will not celebrate high Latin Mass at the nation's largest Catholic shrine after all." Only later in the post did the author, Cathy Lynn Grossman, switch to more casual prose and offer a personal aside: "Something about reaction to the news coverage reminds me of how the American public just loved seeing the alleged bad boys of that financial scandal arrested and led off in handcuffs."

The Washington Post's website contains a robust religion section called "On Faith," which is curated by Jon Meacham and Sally Quinn. The site, which is in part a discussion forum, contains 12 different religion-themed blogs. Of those, three are by *Post* journalists: "God in Government" (Michelle Boorstein and William Wan), "Praying Fields" (Kathy Orton) and "Under God" (Boorstein and Wan, with Elizabeth Tenety and David Waters).

Between "God in Government" and "Under God" ("Praying Fields" was not updated during the six-week period), there were 33 total posts, mostly about religion, politics and government. Of the 33, 12 focused on the clergy abuse scandal (36.4%). This was a greater percentage dedicated to the scandal than on any of the other blogs studied.

Many of these postings were in a reportorial style, sometimes quoting heavily from other news accounts. On March 25, for example, David Waters wrote in "Under God" about *The New York Times* story on the Vatican declining in the 1990s to defrock an abusive Wisconsin priest: "The *Times* posted 25 internal Church documents, including a 1996 letter about Rev. Lawrence Murphy to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then the Vatican's top doctrinal official and now Pope Benedict, showing he was informed of his case." The lengthy post went on to quote from *The New York Times*, *National Catholic Reporter*, *Politics Daily*, Catholic News Service, The Associated Press and WLS-TV (Chicago).

The other two blogs, belonging to *The Houston Chronicle* and *Chicago Tribune*, devoted less attention to the church's problems in Europe. The *Tribune*'s blog, "The Seeker," gave the story a local angle in an April 1 post: "When the Archdiocese of Chicago as well as dioceses in Rockford and Joliet launched an ad campaign before Lent calling on lapsed Catholics to return home, some parishioners were irked by the ads because they failed to mention the pain inflicted

by priests who molested children and bishops who covered it up. Given recent media reports during Lent alleging negligence by the Vatican, what should Pope Benedict XVI do or say now?”

The Houston Chronicle's blog, “Believe it or Not,” was the least likely of the four to address the clergy scandal. It did so only once in the six weeks studied, a period in which “Believe It or Not” offered a total of 49 posts on various religious topics. The one post was on the occasion of Pope Benedict's fifth anniversary in office, raising the question of how he would be judged in light of the scandal.

Blog readers were quick to voice strong comments on posts dealing with the Vatican. Most often, they were critical of the church. Commenting on *The Houston Chronicle*'s April 18 blog post about Benedict's fifth anniversary, for example, a reader using the online moniker Everyone's Child wrote, “There is not one thing he can do to make amends for his role in the abuse scandal. Pope Benedict ... is the worst thing to happen to the Catholic Church in a long time. I personally have not attended, nor will I attend a Mass as long as this former Hitler Youth is Pope.”

Not every reader comment was an attack on the Vatican. Some represented an attempt to counteract perceived misinformation spread by the media. On March 23, a user named Paulleddy responded to a “God in Government” post by Michelle Boorstein, who had written that “many people argue that the church [in Europe], like the church in the United States, has no credibility in being able to thoroughly investigate itself.”

“Michelle,” wrote Paulleddy, “who are these ‘many people argue’ you’re quoting? Is this journalism, or a flight of fancy on your part? Just between years 2008 and 2009, in the USA, allegations of abuse dropped by 36%; in 2009 50 allegations were unsubstantiated or false; 98% of those allegations were between clergy and adults, not children; all the allegations were filed against clergy who have either died of old age by now, or had been removed from ministry years ago. i.e. these are not new cases of abuse, but old cases now brought to the courts system.”

In sum, the latest developments in this long-running international story did not light up the blogosphere like some religious controversies have in the past. But a number of blogs did jump on the story, and they also provided an outlet for readers to vent their feelings.

Methodology

This analysis examined media coverage from 2002 to 2010 of the clergy sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, with a special emphasis on coverage in March and April 2010.

The analysis looked at media coverage from several different angles, each of which is discussed in detail below.

Mainstream media coverage: The brief – but intense – period of media attention on Pope Benedict XVI's role in dealing with the clergy abuse issue was studied using content analysis data derived from the Project for Excellence in Journalism's News Coverage Index (NCI).

PEJ researchers studied a six-week period from March 12, 2010, when the Munich archdiocese admitted it mishandled an abuse case in Germany while Benedict was archbishop, through April 27, at which point the coverage had subsided.

During this period, PEJ researchers coded 5,442 stories as a part of the NCI. Of these, 124 were about the clergy abuse scandal. These stories come from five media sectors: newspapers, online, network TV, cable TV and radio. The universe of stories was coded by a team made up of 16 trained coders, a coding administrator and a senior research methodologist. Read the [complete methodology of the NCI](#).

As part of the NCI, PEJ monitors 52 different news outlets Monday through Friday each week as well as Sunday newspapers, including:

- Newspapers: The coding team examined a rotating group of five to six newspapers a day, ranging from local papers such as *Rome News-Tribune* and *Ventura News* to national papers such as *The Washington Post*, *USA Today* and *The New York Times*. All stories on the front page with a national or international focus were captured and coded.
- Broadcast network television evening news shows: Every day, the team coded two of the three network news shows (ABC's *World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News* and NBC's *Nightly News*) in their entirety and a half-hour of *PBS NewsHour*, alternating between the first and the second half-hour of the show.
- Broadcast network television morning news shows: Every Monday through Friday, the team coded a half-hour of two of the three network morning news shows (ABC's *Good Morning America*, CBS's *The Early Show* and NBC's *Today Show*).
- Daytime cable news: Every weekday, a half-hour of news between 2 and 2:30 p.m. EST from two of the following channels was recorded and coded: CNN, Fox News and MSNBC.
- Evening cable news: Every weekday, the first half-hour of a rotating schedule of six news programs from the CNN, Fox and MSNBC prime-time lineup were recorded and coded. They ranged from CNN's *The Situation Room* and *Anderson Cooper 360*, to Fox News's *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Hannity* to MSNBC's *Hardball* and *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*.
- Radio news headlines: The team rotated ABC and CBS headlines so that one set of 9 a.m. and one set of 5 p.m. headlines were coded every day. Additionally, the team rotated between the first 30 minutes of the first hour of NPR's *Morning Edition*, its second hour, the first hour of *All Things Considered* and that show's second hour.

- Talk radio: Every day, the first half-hour of a rotating selection of one or two different talk shows was recorded and coded. These included Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity and Ed Schultz.
- Online news: Once a day Monday to Friday, alternating between 9 a.m and 4 p.m., the top five stories on a rotating schedule of the following news sites were captured and coded: CNN.com, Yahoo News, MSNBC.com, Google News, Foxnews.com, USAToday.com, NYTimes.com, AOL News, Washingtonpost.com, ABCNews.com, the online *Wall Street Journal* and The Huffington Post.

Longitudinal newspaper coverage: A separate analysis examined newspaper references to the clergy abuse scandal over time using the Nexis database.

The time period studied was January 2002, when reports of systemic abuse and cover-up emerged with heavy frequency in the United States, through April 2010.

The selection criteria for newspapers began with Nexis' selection of major world newspapers, a category that includes the top-circulating English-language newspapers from around the world. According to Nexis, "the Major World Newspapers group file, MWN, contains over 40 full-text newspapers from around the world. These newspapers are generally regarded by the reading public as those giving the most comprehensive and reliable coverage of any topic, whether local, national, or international." Among the papers studied were *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times* and *The Jerusalem Post*.

To identify stories that addressed the clergy abuse scandal, keyword searches were conducted using Boolean search logic: BODY(Catholic w/p "sex abuse" OR "sexual abuse" OR "pedophile" OR "pedophilia" OR "child abuse" OR "clergy abuse"). The number of abuse stories referencing Pope John Paul II was calculated by adding an additional search term: and BODY(John Paul).

In total, these search terms rendered 12,431 stories that in some way addressed the clergy abuse scandal between January 2002 and April 2010.

New media coverage: The new media content was analyzed separately by aggregating and coding a sample of blogs, tweets and other sources monitored by Technorati, Icerocket and Tweetmeme, which track millions of blogs and social media entries. For details, see the full [New Media Index methodology](#).

In addition, the study examined blogs operated by major U.S. newspapers. Blogs were chosen by searching the top 25 U.S. daily newspapers in circulation for the presence of a religion-themed blog that is operated by a newspaper staff member. Out of these 25, seven outlets were found to have a religion blog. Of these seven, only four were found that covered non-local religion matters. These four were *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Chicago Tribune* and *The Houston Chronicle*.

Next, religion blog posts from the four outlets were analyzed for the six-week period from March

12 to April 27 for content related to the clergy abuse scandal. If the clergy abuse scandal received the greatest percentage of text in a particular blog post, it was coded for that topic or overall focus.

In sum, among the blogs studied, there were a total of 149 blog posts during the period studied. Of these, 27 were focused on the clergy abuse scandal.

Religious press: Finally, an analysis of distinctly Catholic media was conducted to reveal the ways in which the clergy abuse scandal and the pope were portrayed from a religious-media angle. Three outlets were chosen based on high volume of content distribution, name recognition and diversity of individual missions. These were the *National Catholic Reporter*, Catholic News Service and Catholic News Agency.

The time period studied was March 12 through April 27, 2010. All stories that were labeled as “Vatican coverage” by the news organization were counted, totaling 402 during the period studied. Of these, stories that were focused on the clergy abuse scandal were isolated, totaling 134.

Topline
The Pope Meets the Press: Media coverage of the Clergy Abuse Scandal

Top stories in the news, Spring 2010			
Rank	Story	Number of stories	Percent of newshole
1	Health care legislation	854	16.0
2	Economic crisis	873	14.5
3	West Virginia coal mine accident	206	3.4
4	Iceland volcanic eruption	170	2.7
5	2010 elections	151	2.4
6	U.S./NATO mission in Afghanistan	135	2.3
7	Obama administration	139	2.3
8	Catholic priest abuse scandal	124	2.1
9	Education system/debate	103	2.0
10	Nuclear policy issues	133	1.9

Note: Dates covered are March 12, 2010-April 27, 2010.

Scandal coverage by media sector			
Rank among sector's top stories	Sector	Number of stories	Percent of sector's newshole
5	Network TV	51	3.7
5	Online	29	3.3
10	Newspapers	11	1.9
19	News Radio	10	1.5
22	Cable TV	23	0.9
N/A	Talk Radio	0	0.0

Note: Dates covered are March 12, 2010-April 27, 2010.

English-language newspapers' coverage of clergy abuse since 2002 (number of stories)						
<i>Region</i>	Jan-Apr '02	May-Aug '02	Sep-Dec '02	Jan-Apr '03	May-Aug '03	Sep-Dec '03
All papers	1426	1636	957	510	589	416
U.S.	883	896	505	296	347	221
Europe	237	119	251	93	81	75
<i>Region</i>	Jan-Apr '04	May-Aug '04	Sep-Dec '04	Jan-Apr '05	May-Aug '05	Sep-Dec '05
All papers	465	380	279	452	260	375
U.S.	313	185	170	237	132	186
Europe	56	70	42	75	35	111
<i>Region</i>	Jan-Apr '06	May-Aug '06	Sep-Dec '06	Jan-Apr '07	May-Aug '07	Sep-Dec '07
All papers	301	159	289	154	275	163
U.S.	176	74	133	100	85	99
Europe	44	42	58	24	48	26
<i>Region</i>	Jan-Apr '08	May-Aug '08	Sep-Dec '08	Jan-Apr '09	May-Aug '09	Sep-Dec '09
All papers	281	348	134	226	310	487
U.S.	121	56	51	82	55	87
Europe	87	35	43	96	174	268
<i>Region</i>	Jan-Apr '10					
All papers	1559					
U.S.	252					
Europe	765					

Note: Stories are included that contained a reference to the clergy abuse scandal. "All papers" are major world newspapers, English-language, as defined by Nexis. U.S. and European papers were drawn from the larger universe of major world newspapers.

Degree to which recent scandals have been tied to individuals				
Scandal	Start of media monitoring	Newsmaker	Total number of stories	Percent of stories tied to newsmaker
Tiger Woods affairs	11/27/09	Tiger Woods	329	90.0
Roman Polanski arrest	9/28/09	Roman Polanski	72	87.5
New York governor scandals	3/01/01	David Patterson	28	82.1
Bernie Madoff ponzi scheme	12/16/08	Bernie Madoff	593	71.7
John Edwards affair	7/22/08	John Edwards	174	66.7
Clergy abuse scandal	3/12/10	Pope Benedict	124	51.6
Misuse of GOP funds	3/30/10	Michael Steele	32	50.0
Illinois Senate seat backroom deals	12/09/08	Rod Blagojevich	1114	44.9
"Balloon Boy" hoax	10/15/09	Richard Heene	143	33.6
MLB steroid use	1/09/07	Roger Clemens	379	21.7

Abuse scandal lead newsmakers, March 12-April 27, 2010		
Lead Newsmaker	Number of stories	Percent of abuse scandal stories
Pope Benedict	64	51.6
William Levada (succeeded Benedict as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith)	3	2.4
Sean Brady (head of Catholic Church in Ireland)	2	1.6
Marcial Maciel Degollado (founder of Legion of Christ, later removed from ministry by Pope Benedict)	2	1.6
John Magee (Irish bishop, resigned in 2010 amid scandal)	2	1.6
David Clohessy (director of Survivor's Network of those Abused by Priests)	1	0.8
José Gómez (Coadjutor Archbishop of Los Angeles)	1	0.8
Dario Castrillon Hoyos (Colombian cardinal who once praised a French bishop for not reporting a pedophile priest)	1	0.8
Werner Huth (psychiatrist who treated sexually abusive German priest Peter Hullermann)	1	0.8
Stephen Kiesle (defrocked California pedophile priest)	1	0.8
Jim Moriarty (Irish bishop who resigned in late 2009 amidst fallout from the handling of abuse cases)	1	0.8

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because some stories do not have a lead newsmaker.

Catholic media coverage of clergy abuse scandal, Spring 2010			
Outlet	Total Vatican stories	Vatican stories about abuse scandal	Percent of Vatican stories about scandal
National Catholic Reporter	15	10	66.7
Catholic News Service	58	26	44.8
Catholic News Agency	329	98	29.8
All three combined	402	134	33.3

Note: Dates covered are March 12, 2010-April 27, 2010.

Top U.S. newspaper religion blogs, coverage of clergy scandal, Spring 2010			
Blog	Total stories	Total stories about abuse scandal	Percent of blog posts about clergy scandal
Washington Post	33	12	36.4
USA Today	49	12	24.5
Chicago Tribune	18	2	11.1
Houston Chronicle	49	27	2.0
Combined	149	27	18.1

Note: Dates covered are March 12, 2010-April 27, 2010.