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Michael J. Breen
University of Limerick

Hannah McGee
Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

Ciaran O'Boyle
Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

Helen Goode
Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

Eoin Devereux
University of Limerick

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'SUING THE POPE' AND SCANDALISING THE PEOPLE: Irish Attitudes to Sexual Abuse by Clergy Pre- and Post-Screening of a Critical Documentary

Michael J. Breen, Hannah McGee, Ciaran O'Boyle, Helen Goode & Eoin Devereux

Introduction

THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF children became a significant public issue in Ireland in the 1990s, with frequent media reports about the issue. In the main these focused on the issue of abuse of children by members of the clergy and religious orders. Headline cases included the abuse perpetrated by Fr Brendan Smyth, a priest of a religious order who was convicted of multiple counts of sexual abuse of children and subsequently died in prison, and Fr Seán Fortune, a diocesan priest, who committed suicide before his court trial for abuse. While child sexual abuse by clergy was widely exposed in the early 1990s, a subsequent additional scandal was the failure of the institutional Catholic Church to respond adequately to earlier complaints of abuse, and, in particular, to respond adequately to those who experienced abuse.

As part of its response to the problem, the Irish Catholic bishops commissioned an independent research agency – the Health Services Research Centre (HSRC) at the Department of Psychology, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) – to undertake a programme of research on its behalf. Part of the remit to the research group was to examine the effects on the general public of child sex abuse by clergy. This was done by means of a national telephone survey (N=1,081), full details of which are reported elsewhere (Goode, McGee & O'Boyle, 2003). The survey itself took four months to complete. About half-way through the data collection period in 2002, the main UK public service television channel (BBC2) screened a documentary entitled 'Suing the Pope'[1] which dealt in detail with complaints made to Church authorities about Sean Fortune and the alleged subsequent mishandling of those complaints. This programme was reported in some detail in the Irish media before its showing, and had a high number of Irish viewers since UK channels are accessible in Ireland. The documentary was also reported extensively in other media after screening and was subsequently re-shown on Irish public service channel RTÉ.

The first TV screening provided a point of differentiation within the survey, with some 600 participants having responded before the screening and 481 afterwards. It

1 'Suing the Pope', Tuesday 19th March 2002 on BBC2, Producer: Sarah MacDonald, Deputy Editor: Farah Durrani, Editor: Fiona Murch.

also served as a 'natural experiment', defined as a 'naturally occurring instance of observable phenomena that approach or duplicate a scientific experiment' (Mathison, 2005:271). This paper examines the differences that exist between the 'before' and 'after' groups by way of examining the role of such a documentary (and related media coverage) in forming public opinion around the topic of child sexual abuse by clergy.

Theoretical Background

If a society can be compelled or encouraged to hold a particular opinion, then those who hold the power to disseminate such opinions hold real power. In medieval times, such power belonged to the Church and to the social system, effectively the aristocracy. Widespread control of public opinion was exercised by the Church and the legal systems as mechanisms of social control. It is only with the advent of printing that alternative influences to public opinion came into play. Open access to the public became a possibility. The free flow of information allied with critical reasoning became important in political affairs. It is in this open process that public opinion is truly formed.

It is in this role of information provision that the mass media come to the fore with respect to public opinion. But scholarship suggests that the media are not simply neutral or dispassionate observers of the social milieu. The opinions expressed in the mass media about social realities are not necessarily co-extensive with equal public opinion; media opinion can, however, reinforce and direct public opinion. There is a real issue of concern as to whether public opinion is really the product of a public engaged in debate or simply a faithful reflection of an elite viewpoint.

Agenda setting theory states that those issues that receive prominent attention in the media become the problems the reading and listening public regards as the nation's most important issues. Lippmann referred to the 'pictures inside the heads' of individuals which were altered by information and developed the idea that the 'pictures' influenced by the media were not a matter of random chance, but arose directly from media choices (1922:12). McCombs and Shaw's original research on the agenda setting function of the mass media concluded that people 'tend to share the media's composite definition of what is important' (1972:184). Iyengar and Kinder's research reinforced the idea that news content shapes public opinion (1987). Media coverage can not only set the public agenda but can also alter public perceptions of the issues and people involved (Brewer and McCombs, 1996). There is also compelling research evidence of intermedia agenda setting. The news media can also set the agenda for themselves by repeated coverage of events and defining the media industry definition of newsworthiness.

The general hypothesis of this study is that public opinion on child sexual abuse, as measured in a national telephone survey, is differentiated by the occurrence of a natural experiment, i.e., the screening a documentary which dealt directly with a specific and dramatic instance of the topic being examined in the survey. No differentiation is made between viewers and non-viewers. What is being measured is the overall post-screening effect.

The Documentary

Suing the Pope was a BBC documentary screened first in the UK on BBC2 and subsequently in Ireland on RTÉ1. It deals with the harsh realities of child sexual abuse

in one Irish diocese and the alleged mishandling and/or cover-up that followed. In the opening 30 seconds, producer Sarah McDonald makes three statements:

> Irish Catholic priest, Father Sean Fortune was a bullying, serial paedophile who preyed on young boys. His boss, Bishop Brendan Comiskey knew children were at risk but failed to protect them. These men have been denied justice.

Later the producer states:

> It now looks like a paedophile ring, whether formally or informally, was operating within the seminary and for years exploiting the boys. Father Donal Collins, the school principal and another priest were both later separately convicted of sexually abusing young children.

The documentary continues with a horrific account of Fortune's abuse of young people, despite it being reported to civil and ecclesial authorities. Colm O'Gorman, one of Fortune's victims, put it very bluntly:

> The only sense that I can make of that is that a bunch of men who had powerful privileged positions were much more interested in protecting their power, their position and their institution than they were in any way in protecting the people that they were due to minister to or the people that they spoke of in terms of love or compassion. There's no love or compassion there. There's an absolute disrespect and disregard for people and it makes me sick.

Tom Doyle, an American canon lawyer interviewed in the documentary, stated that the issue of covering up was institutional:

> There's been very aggressive action taken by the institution against victims and their families when they have initiated law suits. Very aggressive action by the attorneys to try to, in a sense beat the people down. Parents and families who've made disclosures have been threatened, they've been intimidated, they've been.... they've been... they've been put into a very fearful stance to try to coerce them into, into not going public.

Throughout the documentary, the victims' accounts of their rapes, humiliation and suffering by Fortune's actions, are utterly compelling. It is a hurt that has been compounded for them by the apparent inactivity and non-response of Church authorities. As O'Gorman puts it:

> And you have, frankly, bastards like Brendan Comiskey, hiding in his nice palace in Summerhill, behind his alcoholism and his regret and his, you know, his inability to understand or to do anything about it. It's not good enough; it's not good enough. It's not good enough anymore. People have died. People are dying. People are hurting.

As Patsy McGarry, religious affairs correspondent with the *Irish Times*, put it after the screening:

> Printed words cannot compete with impact of victims on camera. Years of excellent investigative print journalism on paedophile priests in Ferns was unable to achieve the same impact as 50 minutes of victims and their families telling their stories to camera (*Irish Times*, 3/04/02, p. 5).

The broadcasting of the documentary, first on British terrestrial television (BBC2) on 19 March 2002 and then two weeks later on Irish television (RTÉ1) on 2 April 2002, was followed by of a wave of revulsion and protest. The Irish broadcast was preceded by a special edition of RTÉ's flagship current affairs television programme *Prime Time*, which typically has a viewership in the region of 475,000 adult viewers (of a total adult population of 2.75 million). It ultimately set in train a series of events which led to a State inquiry into sexual abuse in the Irish church and the resignation of the then bishop. The documentary was widely reported on throughout the English-speaking world, in print, on television news and on the wire services.

Methodology

The screening of this documentary, mid-way through the RCSI national telephone survey on child sexual abuse in the Irish church, provides a natural experiment which allows a comparison between those surveyed prior to screening with those surveyed after. There is, of course, no way of knowing whether individual respondents after the screening had actually seen the documentary, but that does not invalidate the natural experiment comparison.

The survey data which are used in this paper were gathered in a national telephone survey conducted by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland between 22 January 2002 and 31 May 2002 (cf Goode, McGee & O'Boyle, 2003). The survey was designed to ascertain the views of the wider Church community on child sexual abuse by clergy and to reflect all levels of faith and commitment to the Catholic Church, from those describing themselves as Catholics, or as 'lapsed' Catholics, to those of other religions or those without a belief or faith. The research protocol was given ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

For prevalence studies of sexual violence, the telephone survey has evolved as the method of choice internationally over the past decade. It has recently been successfully used in a prevalence study of lifetime experiences of abuse: Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland (SAVI).[2] In that study of over 3,000 adults, the response rate was 71% (N=3,120).

It was felt that advance media attention to this study might be counterproductive given the topic under consideration. The telephone calls made to the general public were consequently 'cold calls', i.e. the participant had no advance notice to expect a call or to know the topic of the study. In order to ensure that the sample would be representative of the general population, census quota estimates by gender and age (young, middle, older age) were drawn up. Data collection began on 22 January 2002 and was completed by 31 May 2002.

2 McGee, H., Garavan, R, de Barra, M., Byrne, J. and Conroy, R. (2002). *The SAVI Report: Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland*, Dublin: The Liffey Press in association with Dublin Rape Crisis Centre

Of the 3,722 randomly-generated unique telephone numbers called, 2,048 were valid. Invalid numbers included disconnected numbers, commercial numbers, faxes and numbers where there was no reply after 10 attempts. The valid numbers were categorised into eligible (n =1,415) and ineligible respondents (n= 633). Ineligible respondents were private households where the person contacted was unable to take part in the interview. Reasons for this included language barriers, respondent impairments (e.g. deafness), major life events (e.g. recent bereavement) or temporary absences for the duration of the study. Of the 1,415 eligible respondents, 1,081 completed interviews, 321 refused and there were 13 partially completed interviews. The overall response rate for the study was 76%. This is notably high for a public survey in Ireland. Overall, the high response rate suggests that the results can be considered to represent the views of the general population, within the normal caveats that apply to telephone surveys.

Questionnaire

There were 59 items in the interview schedule. Items 1–10, 12–22, 28–31, 33–39 and item 41 were adapted with permission from a US survey with a similar focus (Rossetti, 1995 and 1997). Rossetti organised these items into several themes based on factor analysis. These themes are: Assessment of/trust in the Church's response, Commitment to Church leadership, Idealisation of priests, Trust in priests, Relationship/ trust in God, Evaluation of the Church, and Tolerance of priest perpetrators.

Items 42 (d), 43 and 44 and item 59 were adapted, with permission, from the Irish Marketing Survey's 1997 *Religious Confidence Survey*. These allowed comparison with previous studies.

Items 1–21 asked about attitudes towards the Catholic Church generally, towards clerical perpetrators of child sexual abuse and towards the management of child sexual abuse by the Catholic Church. All of these items (except item 11) were adapted, with permission, from Rossetti (1995; 1997). Some statements were modified slightly for use with an Irish population (e.g. 'Catholic' was placed before the word 'priest' and 'Church', and 'neighbourhood' was used instead of 'parish') since the questions would also be asked of non-Catholics (the Rossetti study dealt only with Catholic respondents).

Items 22–23, also taken from Rossetti, asked if cases of child sexual abuse by clergy had affected the participant's religious practices. If yes, participants were asked how they had been affected (e.g. time spent praying, attendance at religious services). Items 24–31 sought to ascertain the willingness to allow one's children to participate in Church activities. Items 24–27 asked if the participant had children, if they were of school-going age, the age range and the number of boys and girls. Items 28–31 asked the participant if they would be pleased if their child became an assistant during religious services, if they would permit their child to go to a Catholic summer camp or holiday with a priest and if they would be pleased if their child wanted to be a priest. For participants who did not have children, questions were put hypothetically (i.e. "If you had a child").

In Items 32–35, participants were asked if they believed in 'a God' and if so, what was the nature of their relationship with God. Items 36–37 evaluated respondent estimates of the prevalence of child sexual abuse by clergy. They were asked to estimate

Table 1: Outline of questionnaire items and topics

Item #	*Topic*
1–21	Attitudes towards/trust in the Catholic Church
	Attitudes towards/trust in Catholic priests
	Assessment of/trust in Church's response to child sexual abuse
22–23	Effect of child sexual abuse by clergy on religious practices
24–31	Willingness for children to participate in Church activities/associate with clergy and choose religious life
32–35	Belief in God;
	Relationship/trust in God
36–37	Estimates of the prevalence of child sexual abuse by clergy
38–39	Quality of clergy (past and present)
	Quality of Catholic Church (past and present)
40–42	Origin of knowledge about child sexual abuse
	Origin of knowledge about child sexual abuse by clergy
	Assessment of media coverage of child sexual abuse
	Assessment of media coverage of child sexual abuse by clergy
43–44	Effect of child sexual abuse by clergy on how clergy are judged
	Effect of child sexual abuse by clergy on the Catholic Church
	Estimation of the number of clergy convicted of sexual offences against children
45–49	Awareness of actions taken by the Catholic Church to address the problem of child sexual abuse by clergy
	Awareness of Church guidelines on child sexual abuse
	Opinions on who is responsible for the occurrence and management of child sexual abuse by clergy
	Suggestions for ways the Catholic Church could help those who have been abused
50–57	General demographic characteristics of participant
58–59	Religious denomination of participant
	Attendance at religious services by participant

the percentage of clergy involved in the sexual abuse of children and to estimate the percentage of children sexually abused by clergy. They were also asked to compare clergy to other men in society and to estimate whether they abused children more, less or the same as other men.

Items 38–39 asked participants to judge the quality of Catholic clergy and the quality of the Catholic Church today, compared to the past. Items 40–42 focused on the source of the public's knowledge about child sexual abuse in general and child sexual abuse by clergy. Participants were also asked to judge whether media coverage of child sexual abuse by clergy was damaging or beneficial (and for whom) and if it was fair. In items 43–44, participants were asked if they thought that clergy, as a result of child sexual abuse by clergy, had been unfairly judged and if the Church

had been damaged. If they answered yes, they were asked if they thought this damage was permanent. They were also asked to estimate the number of clergy convicted of sex offences against children in Ireland in the last 10 years.

Items 45–49 examined awareness of actions taken by the Church to address the problem of child sexual abuse by clergy, evaluated perceived responsibility for the occurrence and management of child sexual abuse by clergy and sought opinions on what the Church should be doing to help those who have been abused. Items 50-57 determined participant gender, age, occupation and marital status, were obtained. The last survey items, 58 and 59, asked participants about their own religious denomination (if any) and if they had always been a member of this identified religion or if they had changed. The participants were also asked about frequency of attendance at religious services.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted on items which dealt with attitudes towards, or trust in, the Catholic church; attitudes towards, or trust in, Catholic priests; and assessment of, or trust in, the Catholic church's response to child sexual abuse (N=22 items). Independent t-tests, with the 99% confidence level set as the level of significance since multiple tests were run. The pre- and post-TV screening variable was used as the independent variable. Results are given in Table 2.

Of these twenty-two attitudinal variables, fourteen showed a statistically significant difference between pre-screening and post-screening participants. The mean increase in disagreement is greatest in terms of overall satisfaction with the Church, satisfaction with priests and trust in the Church to take care of its problems.

Post-screening participants were less likely to be satisfied with the Church and with priests, less likely to trust the Church to take care of its own problems, less likely to look to priests for moral leadership, less likely to believe the Church would safeguard children entrusted to its care, less likely to accept abuser priests to work in their communities under supervision and less likely to see the Church's response as adequate.

They were also more likely to want a ban on abuser priests returning to ministry (except where there is supervision and no child contact). They were also more likely to wonder about the trustworthiness of new priests when they arrive in a parish, more likely to agree with the publication of clerical abuse, more likely to agree that clergy abuse had impacted on their faith lives, more likely to support the ordination of homosexual men, and more likely to wonder about the sexual problems of aspirants to the priesthood.

There was no statistical difference in the level of agreement about celibacy, in the level of agreement about the Church's direct response to abuse, about the level of information provided by the Church, on the Church's guidance on issues of human sexuality, on the expectation that priests' moral conduct be better than that of others, nor on the statement that most Catholic priests who abuse children are homosexual. In all of these, there was a marked level of disagreement/dissatisfaction with the Church amongst all participants. The greatest level of disagreement was with the statement 'I have been kept adequately informed by the Catholic Church about child sexual abuse'. There was no statistical difference in the responses about Catholic priests being closer to God than others and the statement that Catholics should do what priests tell them.

Table 2: Mean differences and standard deviations in public attitudes regarding clerical child sexual abuse from pre- and post-screening of a TV documentary on the issue (statistical comparisons by 2-tailed t-tests) *

	pre -TV screening Mean	*pre -TV screening (SD)*	*Post-TV screening Mean*	*Post-TV screening (SD)*	*t-value*	*sig.*
Incidents of Catholic priests sexually abusing children should not be made public.	1.42	0.83	1.70	0.74	-5.87	p<.001
I have been kept adequately informed by the Catholic Church about child sexual abuse.	1.87	1.07	1.81	0.79	0.96	ns.
I would accept a Catholic priest who had abused children into my neighbourhood to work if he had undergone psychological treatment, was being supervised by another priest and his duties did not involve contact with children.	2.05	1.20	2.28	1.09	-2.78	p<0.01
The Catholic Church's current response to the sexual abuse of children by priests is adequate.	2.10	1.07	1.93	0.91	2.75	p<.01
I support the requirement that Catholic priests live a celibate life.	2.13	1.31	2.03	1.02	1.35	ns.
Catholics should do what a Catholic priest tells them to do.	2.16	1.05	2.27	0.84	-1.89	ns.
The Catholic Church is dealing with the problem of sexual abuse directly.	2.21	1.08	2.14	0.94	1.17	ns.
Catholic priests are closer to God than other people.	2.28	1.20	2.35	0.91	-1.12	ns.
When someone wants to be a Catholic priest today I wonder if he has sexual problems.	2.29	1.03	2.71	0.96	-6.69	p<.001
I would accept a Catholic priest who had abused children into my neighbourhood to work if he had undergone psychological treatment and was being supervised by another Catholic priest.	2.38	1.37	2.17	1.07	2.75	p<.01
Cases of Catholic priests sexually abusing children have negatively affected my religious practices (pray less, go to Church less, etc.)	2.42	1.44	2.72	1.23	-3.70	p<.001
I believe that most Catholic priests						

who sexually abuse children are homosexuals.	2.52	1.04	2.65	0.93	-2.13	p<.05
I look to the Catholic Church to provide guidance on issues of human sexuality.	2.63	1.27	2.58	1.09	0.65	ns.
When a new Catholic priest arrives in my neighbourhood, I wonder if he is someone we can trust.	2.83	1.24	3.06	1.02	-3.32	p<.001
Homosexually-oriented men should be allowed to be ordained as Catholic priests.	2.83	1.17	3.15	1.04	-4.59	p<.001
I trust the Catholic Church to take care of problems with its own clergy.	2.96	1.29	2.57	1.07	5.44	p<.001
I believe the Catholic Church will safeguard the children entrusted to its care.	3.06	1.16	2.81	1.04	3.62	p<.001
Overall, I am satisfied with the Catholic Church today.	3.21	1.31	2.73	1.10	6.39	p<.001
Overall, I am satisfied with the priests in the Catholic Church today.	3.45	1.20	3.05	1.12	5.46	p<.001
I look to Catholic priests to provide moral leadership.	3.60	1.19	3.32	1.07	4.04	p<.001
I expect a Catholic priest's moral conduct to be better than other peoples conduct.	4.03	0.99	3.90	0.78	2.37	p<.05
A Catholic priest who abused children should not be allowed to return to Ministry (by that we mean active work in a parish).	4.49	1.03	4.70	0.67	-4.00	p<.001

*For each statement, 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree

Attitudinal differences cannot be accounted for on the basis of gender, age cohort or geographic location (urban/rural-dwelling participants) with two exceptions. Using chi-square and Cramer's V measures to control for gender, geographic location and age, the statements that 'the Catholic Church's current response to the sexual abuse of children by priests is adequate' and 'a Catholic priest who abused children should not be allowed to return to Ministry (by that we mean active work in a parish)' were no differences between pre-and post-TV screening responses in urban participants (78.8% and 86.7% respectively disagreed with the first statement) whereas the statistically significant differences indicated above applied to rural dwellers (69.7% and 78.3% respectively disagreed). Similarly, for the statement 'a Catholic priest who abused children should not be allowed to return to Ministry (by that we mean active work in a parish)', the percentage strongly disagreeing/disagreeing rose from 86.3% to 95.8% for rural and from 93.3% to 95.6% post-screening for urban dwellers.

Table 3: Mean differences in public attitudes to children's involvement with the Catholic Church from pre- and post-screening of a TV documentary on the issue (statistical comparisons by 2-tailed t-tests) *

	Pre-Screening Mean	*Pre-Screening (SD)*	*Post-Screening Mean*	*Post-Screening (SD)*	*t*	*sig.*
[If I had a child] I would be pleased if my child became an altar server.	3.98	1.26	3.30	1.10	9.03	p<.001
[If I had a child] I would send my child to a Catholic summer camp.	3.43	1.24	2.98	1.03	6.34	p<.001
[If I had a child] I would allow my child to go on holidays with a Catholic priest.	2.59	1.29	2.40	1.00	2.69	p<.01
[If I had a son] I would be pleased if he wanted to be a priest.	3.62	1.21	3.16	1.10	6.23	p<.001

*For each statement, 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree

Four questions focused on attitudes to the possible involvement of participants' sons (from being altar boys to priesthood), with the Church. Pre- and post-TV screening results are given in Table 3. Data indicate a statistically significant decline in the level of agreement with each of the statements following the TV programme. The decline is greatest in the matter of children becoming altar servers. The documentary had focused specifically on the story of one altar boy who was serially abused by a priest. Examination of age, gender and geographic location as differentiating variables indicated no significant differences between the pre- and post-TV programme views.

A further three questions centred on personal faith (Table 4). For each statement, there was less public agreement after the TV screening. Examination of age, gender and geographic location as differentiating variables indicated no significant differences between the pre- and post-TV programme views.

Participants were also asked their beliefs about percentages of clergy and religious engaged in child sexual abuse (absolute estimates), and the percentage of all child sexual abuse carried out by clergy or religious (relative estimates). There was no statistical difference in the answers or estimates pre- and post- TV screening. In other Irish research, the Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland report (McGee et al., 2002) indicated that clergy were responsible for the sexual abuse of 3.2% of those adults reporting abuse as children. After the screening, the percentage of respondents who

Table 4: Multiple variable t-tests of mean differences based on pre and post 'Suing the Pope' (t value, degrees of freedom, 2-tail significance and mean difference, pre & post mean values).

	Pre-Screening Mean	*Pre-Screening (SD)*	*Post-Screening Mean*	*Post-Screening (SD)*	*t*	*sig.*
I sense that my God is close to me in my daily life.	4.43	0.77	4.04	0.75	7.96	p<.001
I know in my heart that my God loves me.	4.45	0.70	4.10	0.65	8.13	p<.001
I am confident that my God will hear my prayers and respond.	4.40	0.74	4.07	0.69	7.25	p<.001

estimated that most priests and religious sexually abuse children rose from 2.8% to 6.8% (p<.001).

In respect of the question 'Compared to other men in our society, would you say that Catholic priests and brothers have sexually abused children more, less or about the same' there was a marked difference between the pre- and post- screening responses (Table 5). There were statistical differences in proportions of participants who thought that clergy or religious were 'more likely' or 'much more likely' to engage in child sexual abuse compared to other men (30.3 vs. 41.8%; Cramer's V=.11, p<.001). Using age as a differentiating variable, there were no statistically significant differences between the pre- and post-TV programme screening. The use of gender and urban/rural dwelling as differentiating variables was significant. In relation to gender, there were no pre-/post- screening differences for women but there were for men. Before the TV programme, 29.1% of women estimated that clergy or religious were 'more likely' or 'much more likely' to engage in child sexual abuse compared to other men (vs. 46.4 % post-screen, p<.001). The corresponding figures for men were 32.5% and 38.6% (ns). Thus more women believed in the increased likelihood of clergy as abusers of children after the documentary. In relation to geographic location there was a similar response. The pre- and post- 'more likely' or 'much more likely' figures were 25.6% and 44.7%% (p<.001) for urban dwellers compared to 34.1% and 36.1% for rural dwellers (ns).

Participants were also asked their opinions about the fairness about how priests were judged, the perception of damage to the Church, and whether such damage was permanent (tables 6 through 8). Only in the case of the question regarding the fairness with which priests have been judged is there a statistically significant difference before and after screening. The mean difference is marginal 0.17 but the t-test outcome is significant (t=2.68, p<.01).

The screening of *Suing the Pope* also increased public awareness of the steps taken by Church authorities to tackle the issue of child sexual abuse but only marginally

Table 5: Estimates of the Likelihood of Clergy Sexually Abusing Children Relative to Other Men Pre/Post-TV Screening of Documentary on Clerical Child Sexual Abuse

Compared to other men in our society, would you say that Catholic priests and brothers have sexually abused children more, less or about the same?

	Pre-Screening		*Post-Screening*		*Total*	
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Much More	29	5.3	23	5.2	52	5.3
More	136	25.0	161	36.6	297	30.2
Equally	263	48.3	198	45.0	461	46.8
Less	97	17.8	58	13.2	155	15.7
Much Less	20	3.7			20	2.0
Total	545	100.0	440	100.0	985	100.0

Table 6: Crosstabulation of Statement Regarding 'Judgment About Clergy' by Pre/Post Screening

The majority of priests and religious in Ireland have been unfairly judged as a result of child sexual abuse by priests and religious?

	Pre-Screening		*Post-Screening*		*Total*	
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Strongly Disagree	23	3.8	8	1.7	31	2.9
Disagree	88	14.7	84	17.5	172	15.9
Don't Know	49	8.2	46	9.6	95	8.8
Agree	280	46.7	293	60.9	573	53.0
Strongly Agree	160	26.7	50	10.4	210	19.4
Total	600	100.0	481	100.0	1081	100.0

so. Prior to the screening, only 28.8% of respondents stated that they were aware of steps taken to address the issue. After the screening that figure rose to 37.4%. Likewise, before the screening only 6.2% of respondents stated that they were aware of the bishops' policy document. Post screening that rose to 13.9%.

The screening also marked a watershed in terms of public understanding of who was responsible for abuse, both in terms of occurrence and management. These data are given in crosstabulated form in Tables 9 and 10. In Table 9 there are two marked differences in the pre- and post-screening data. Prior to the screening, 11.7% of respondents see the hierarchy as responsible for the occurrence of abuse while 76.2% see the abuser as responsible. Post-screening these figures change up to 21.8% for the hierarchy and down to 60.5% for the abuser.

Table 7: Crosstabulation of Statement Regarding 'Damage to Church' by Pre/Post Screening

The Catholic Church in Ireland has been damaged by cases of priests and religious sexually abusing children?

	Pre-Screening		*Post-Screening*		*Total*	
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Strongly Disagree	13	2.2	3	.6	16	1.
Disagree	23	3.8	17	3.5	40	3.7
Don't Know	8	1.3	4	.8	12	1.1
Agree	215	35.8	248	51.7	463	42.9
Strongly Agree	341	43.3	208	56.8	549	50.8
Total	600	100.0	480	100.0	1080	100.0

Table 8: Crosstabulation of Statement Regarding 'Permanence of Damage' by Pre/Post Screening

Do you think that this damage is permanent?

	Pre-Screening		*Post-Screening*		*Total*	
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
No	232	43.4	170	39.9	402	41.9
Yes	302	56.6	256	60.1	558	58.1
Total	534	100.0	426	100.0	960	100.0

Table 9: Crosstabulation of Statement Regarding 'Responsibility for Abuse Occurrence' by Pre/Post Screening

First, who do you see as responsible for the occurrence of abuse [why it happens]?

	Pre-Screening		*Post-Screening*		*Total*	
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
			1	.2	1	.1
Church hierarchy	70	11.7	105	21.8	175	16.2
Other	37	6.2	60	12.5	97	9.0
Priests and religious in general	15	2.5	10	2.1	25	2.3
The actual abuser	457	76.2	291	60.5	748	69.2
The entire Church community	21	3.5	14	2.9	35	3.2
Total	600	100.0	481	100.0	1081	100.0

Table 10: Crosstabulation of Statement Regarding 'Responsibility for Abuse Management' by Pre/Post Screening

Secondly, Who do you see as responsible for the management of child sexual abuse by priests and religious

	Pre-Screening		*Post-Screening*		*Total*	
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Much More	29	5.3	23	5.2	52	5.3
			1	.2	1	.1
Church hierarchy	251	41.8	174	36.2	425	39.3
Other	187	31.2	254	52.8	441	40.8
The actual abuser	55	9.2	7	1.5	62	5.7
The entire Church community	107	17.8	45	9.4	152	14.1
Total	600	100.0	481	100.0	1081	100.0

A somewhat similar and important change takes place in relation to public perceptions of the responsibility for abuse management. Prior to the screening, 41.8% of respondents see it as the hierarchy's role. This falls to 36.2% after the screening while the perception that it is the responsibility of 'Other' rises from 31.2% to 52.8%. It is probably no great leap to suggest that this represents a view that statutory authorities such as the Gardai (police) and Health Authorities should be the primary persons responsible for abuse management. Such a theoretical position is readily underpinned by the content of the documentary which painstakingly details the abject failure of then Bishop of Ferns in responding to large numbers of complaints about a specific priest in his diocese who abused many boys with whom he had come into contact. Shortly after the screening of the documentary, the bishop offered his resignation and stood down from the diocese.

Discussion

The above data provide compelling evidence of major differences in participants' attitudes to various statements about the issue of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church between the time of the launch of the survey and its completion. The watershed event was the screening of the BBC documentary *Suing the Pope*. It is clear that the screening is a point at which attitudes changed significantly, becoming generally more negative towards the Catholic Church, priests and religious faith. It is important to note that there are no indications whatsoever as to the permanence or otherwise of the public opinion shift on this issue. It may be that it is a temporary shift and that the pre-screening values reflect the enduring and persistent attitudes of the public but there is nothing in the data to substantiate this point of view.

What can be said, and with strongly supporting evidence, is that the screening of a documentary on a particular topic, particularly a topic as repulsive as child sexual abuse by clergy, along with the concomitant public discussions that followed, has a

significant impact on a wide range of variables, both those related directly to the topic of the documentary and those tangential to it.

Of no small significance is the shift in public attitudes about responsibility for the occurrence and management of child sexual abuse. Based on the empirical evidence provided in these data, it is abundantly clear that the public airing of the mishandling of abuse complaints, albeit in only one context, was sufficient to marshal public opinion on the issue such that the public recognises clearly that no organisation can be a law unto itself, and that in the matter of child sexual abuse there is no place for self-regulation.

The core finding of this paper is that media coverage of child sexual abuse has a very significant part to play in terms of effects on public opinion and attitudes. The degree of effect has yet to be determined but the immediate effect of a change in public opinion, in this case at least, has already been sufficient to bring about a statutory investigation by the authorities. While much remains to be done in the tackling and minimisation of child sexual abuse, there is clear evidence that information and analysis provided by media outlets has a critical role to play. Further research is warranted in terms of the extent to which public opinions and attitudes have become formed and hardened. This paper, however, provides us with sufficient understanding of temporary change in response to immediate coverage.

AUTHORS

Michael J. Breen, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick.
Hannah McGee, Department of Psychology, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.
Ciaran O'Boyle, Department of Psychology, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland,
Helen Goode, Department of Psychology, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland & University of Limerick
Eoin Devereux, Department of Sociology, University of Limerick

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