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Media covered clergy abuse more than Tea Party

by Mark Pattison by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- Pope Benedict XVI figured in more than half of all of the stories published in print or carried by broadcast news earlier this year regarding the clergy sexual abuse scandal, according to a study by the Pew Research Center.

Unlike the 2002 spate of coverage on clergy sex abuse, which had its epicenter in the Archdiocese of Boston, coverage in the six weeks during March and April examined by the study was greater in Europe than in the United States, as newspaper and broadcast stories focused principally on incidents in Ireland and the pope's native Germany.

An April poll by the Pew Research Center found that just 12 percent of those polled said Pope Benedict had done a good or excellent job in addressing the scandal, down from 39 percent in 2008, when the pope visited the United States and had an unscheduled meeting in Washington with victims of clergy sexual abuse. Those who said the pope had done a poor or fair job went up from 48 percent in 2008 to 71 percent in 2010.

The findings were part of a report, "The Pope Meets the Press: Media Coverage of the Clergy Abuse Scandal," published June 11 by Pew.

Coverage of clergy sexual abuse placed eighth in total coverage, accounting for 2.1 percent of all news coverage during the March 12-April 27 period studied, more than nuclear weapons policy coverage and that of the Tea Party movement.

It peaked the week of March 22-28 as the fourth biggest topic in news coverage, when reports surfaced that in the 1990s former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger chose not to proceed with a church trial and possible laicization of an elderly Wisconsin priest who had abused scores of deaf boys in the church's care decades before. The Vatican had said by the time it learned of the case that the priest was old and in poor health.

During the six-week period examined by Pew, health care legislation accounted for 16 percent of total news coverage, and the economy took second place with 14.5 percent. The West Virginia coal mine accident finished third with 3.4 percent. Other topics -- the Iceland volcanic eruption, the 2010 elections, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, and the Obama administration, garnered 2.3 percent to 2.7 percent of coverage.

The scandal got a proportionately higher share of coverage on network TV, with 3.7 percent of all coverage, and online news sources, with 3.3 percent. Abuse coverage ranked fifth in each medium.

Pope Benedict was far and away the lead newsmaker during the six-week period, appearing in 51.6 percent of abuse scandal stories. Placing second was his successor as head of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada, with 2.4 percent. No other figure garnered more than 1.6 percent of the lead newsmaker status.

By comparison, Pope John Paul II was the lead newsmaker in only 15.5 percent of stories at the peak of coverage of the 2002 clergy sexual abuse scandal in the United States.

The degree to which the pope was tied by the media to the scandal and the church's handling of it ranked sixth among all scandals tracked since 2007, behind golfer Tiger Woods' affairs, the arrest of film director Roman Polanski, the scandals surrounding New York Gov. David Paterson, the Ponzi scheme fashioned by financier Bernie Madoff, and the extramarital affair of former presidential aspirant John Edwards.

It ranked ahead, though, of Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele's links to misuse of GOP funds, impeached Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich's backroom deals, Richard Heene's concoction of the "balloon boy" hoax, and pitcher Roger Clemens' ties to steroid use in baseball.

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In assessing the news coverage, the Pew study also examined Catholic media coverage. It said the National Catholic Reporter, an independent Catholic weekly newspaper, devoted two-thirds of its Vatican coverage to the scandal during the time examined. Catholic News Service's coverage accounted for 44.8 percent of its Vatican coverage. Catholic News Agency, which Pew said was "funded predominantly by donations from Catholics," allotted 29.8 percent of its Vatican coverage to the scandal.

Pew researchers only had access to CNS coverage on the news agency's public website; the majority of CNS stories are accessible only to publishing clients.

The study monitored 52 different news outlets Monday-Friday each week as well Sunday newspapers. In addition to papers with national reach and local newspapers, the study tracked coverage on morning and evening news programs on broadcast network television, daytime and evening cable news, radio news headlines, talk radio, and online news sources.

Additional examination was given not only to Catholic news sources, but also to European newspaper reportage and new-media coverage.

The report was a joint effort between the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life and its Project on Excellence in Journalism.

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