Truth vs. facts vs. journalism: an editorial

I just watched the movie “Truth,” starring Cate Blanchett and Robert Redford, about questionable documents, used by producer Mary Mapes and reported by Dan Rather on *60 Minutes II*, which purported to prove that George W. Bush may not have served his full duty in the National Guard.

The movie came out last year around the same time as “Spotlight,” also a movie about journalists. “Spotlight” (which I saw last year) tells the story of the *Boston Globe* reporters who investigated child abuse by Catholic priests in Boston, and the subsequent Church cover-up. Both movies are based on real stories, and both deal with reporting, but that is where any similarity ends.

“Truth” portrays a major screw-up at CBS. “Spotlight” portrays a major triumph by the *Boston Globe*.

Also, “Truth” is about broadcast journalism and “Spotlight” is about print journalism and the differences are stark. In “Truth,” facts are not properly sourced essentially because of time constraints associated with broadcast deadlines. In “Spotlight,” the reporters are told they have to dig out and track down the sources until the story is right.

The bottom line is that having enough time to fact check and substantiate a story is the deciding factor between getting things right and screwing up.

These movies also show a different understanding of what a journalist’s role is. As the title implies, “Truth” is about getting at a truth, even though the facts may not be right. “Spotlight” is about not only getting the facts right, but getting enough information so that what is being presented can’t be easily challenged.

Facts and truth are not the same.

Facts are provable. The high temperature in Washington, D.C. on February 15th was 29F as recorded by the weather watchers at Reagan National Airport. You can check that.

Truth is a belief, and it is changeable. What is true to someone, such as he/she believes that chocolate is the best flavor may not be true to someone who prefers vanilla. The only facts here are that chocolate and vanilla are flavors.

When we write, and especially when we edit, we have to check the facts. Are names spelled correctly? Are the numbers used accurate? And further, we have to check the sources. Just because many people are saying something on social media does not make it factual. Not being careful with fact-checking leads to a story blowing up as it did in "Truth." It may or may not be true that President Bush skirted his National Guard service, but it will never be proven without checking sources (are they reliable?) and facts carefully and thoroughly.

Is the campaign trail a fact-free zone?

And that brings me to political journalism today. As has been evidenced countless times on the campaign trail, many of the candidates are not dealing in facts, but rather in their own truths or beliefs. And many political journalists are caught up in trying to question the "truth" without knowing or researching or checking the facts. So we hear statements that are not fact-based such as America is "less safe" today because of Barack Obama's policies or that Obamacare is hurting the economy. These are not facts. They are beliefs and they are not provable.

Journalists who are covering the campaign have a duty to find and point out the facts. Sometimes we'll see them do this. For example, on *Fox News Sunday*, Chris Wallace pushed back against Ted Cruz's assertion that Obamacare has been a job killer by

quoting the jobless rate, which is the lowest it's been since 2008. Cruz then punted and blamed the fact checkers, saying they were not impartial. You can read more here.

But not all journalists point to facts. We've seen many debates where the candidates' assertions are not challenged. This is partially because there are so many such assertions, and partially because journalists do not necessarily know the facts. Just this weekend during the Republican debate, most of the candidates said that Obama should not (could not?) appoint a justice to the Supreme Court to replace Antonin Scalia (who died Saturday). Some claimed there was precedent for this. We've since learned of the so-called Thurmond rule, where, according to Senator Strom Thurmond, no appointments would be confirmed in the summer previous to the end of a president's term. However, this is not actually a "rule" but rather a tradition, and one that is not really enforced. But, facts aside, Republican candidates keep insisting there is precedent. We even saw Ted Cruz state that if Obama appoints someone, the Second Amendment would "die." I didn't see any push back, perhaps because this is so belief-based there are no facts to counter the argument with.

And then, if journalists do push back…

Remember when Donald Trump claimed he saw Muslims celebrating the 9-11 attacks in the streets of New Jersey? To him, the truth was United States Muslims celebrated the country being attacked. The facts were that no such outdoor celebration occurred in New Jersey. None. Some journalists pushed back, citing the facts, but Trump doesn't care about facts, especially if they do not substantiate his beliefs. And especially if continuing to refute facts gives him more publicity, but that's another story.

Our democracy is in real danger when beliefs trump facts. Journalists must do their job make sure that they are presenting facts and not beliefs. They should not let the

pressures of the 24-7 news cycle make them into Mary Mapes, seeking some higher truth but not checking the facts. They should not let candidates' questionable assertions go unchallenged. Many people—voters—get all their information from one source, their favored news outlet, and don't fact check or examine the source of the information. They assume the information is reliable and make decisions based on it. Those decisions help elect presidents and do have consequences.

Do you feel that journalists are doing the best they can? Could they do better? What makes a good journalist? Please share your opinions in the comments.