



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on October 21, 2015

“Truth” Nowhere Close to the Truth

Touted as a film showing how hard journalists work to get the story right before putting it on the air, *Truth* is based on [Mary Mapes’ self-justifying view](#) of her role in “Rathergate,” which cost her, and *CBS Evening News* host Dan Rather, their jobs and tarnished their reputations.

For years Mapes had harbored the hope that she could prove that George W. Bush, as a member of the Texas National Guard, had joined the Guard (thanks to help from family friends) as a way to avoid going to Vietnam. As a principal producer for CBS News, primarily for the primetime television program *60 Minutes Wednesday*, hosted by Rather, she was delighted to learn, in August 2004, just months before the presidential election, that the proof existed in documents provided by an insider at the Texas National Guard.

She rushed to get the story on the air, calling in advance a top official of John Kerry’s campaign to tell him the good news.

Those documents were, it was later learned, forgeries. Thanks to the Internet and the Drudge Report, serious challenges to the documents’ authenticity spread to the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today*.

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For two weeks after the story was aired on September 8, 2004, CBS defended itself against charges that they were forgeries, that the documents had been vetted by not just by one expert, but four experts.

Then, however, CBS began backing away from its defense, and on September 20, CBS News President Andrew Hayward very carefully admitted: “Based upon what we now know, CBS cannot prove that the documents are authentic, which is the only journalistic standard to justify using them in the report. We should not have used them. That was a mistake, which we deeply regret.”

That same day Rather said he had made a mistake: “If I knew then what I know now, I would not have gone ahead with the story as it was aired, and I certainly would not have used the documents in question.”

CBS asked Dick Thornburgh, U.S. attorney general under George H. W. Bush, and Louis Boccardi, former executive director of the Associated Press, to review what was being called “Rathergate,” and in January 2005, the pair issued a scathing report on the failures committed by Mapes, Rather, and CBS in the rush to get the segment onto the air.





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Of the 16 serious breaches of usual journalistic protocol listed, these are the key ones:

The failure to obtain clear authentication of any of the ... documents from any document examiner;

The failure of *60 Minutes Wednesday* management of scrutinize the publicly available ... background of the source of the documents...;

The failure to develop adequate corroboration to support the statements in the ... documents...;

The failure to have a vetting process capable of dealing effectively with the production speed, significance and sensitivity of the Segment.

The key breach, however, was this one:

The telephone call prior to the Segment's airing by the producer of the Segment [Mapes] to a senior campaign official of Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry — a clear conflict of interest — that created the appearance of a political bias.

CBS fired Mapes along with *60 Minutes Wednesday* Executive Producer Josh Howard, Senior Broadcast Producer Mary Murphy, as well as Senior Vice President Betsy West. Rather resigned in March, taking a minor position with CBS and then leaving altogether in 2006 to host his own cable news network show, *Dan Rather Reports*.

When the producers of *Truth* requested air time for ads promoting the movie on Stephen Colbert's *Late Show*, the *CBS Evening News*, *CBS This Morning*, and *60 Minutes*, CBS not only turned down the million-dollar ad buy, but did it with gusto. Said CBS spokesman Gil Schwartz:

It's astounding how little truth there is in *Truth*. There are, in fact, too many distortions, evasions and baseless conspiracy theories to enumerate them all. The film tries to turn gross errors of journalism and judgment into acts of heroism and martyrdom.

In her exquisite review of *Truth* for the *Wall Street Journal*, Dorothy Rabinowitz touched new literary highs in describing it:

Combine every speech about the nobility of the journalistic endeavor in every film glorifying reporters intrepidly searching out truth, and you still won't come close to grasping the level of treacle — there are other words — bubbling up out of "Truth."

Compared with which, "All the President's Men" (1976) — the triumphant adventures of Woodward and Bernstein, with Robert Redford portraying Bob Woodward [about the Watergate scandal that brought down President Richard Nixon] — was a veritable model of shrinking modesty....

The creative minds behind "Truth" ... have wrapped Mr. Rather and Ms. Mapes in a glow of heroic martyrdom so impenetrable there's hardly a line not put to its service.

For a more realistic dose of reality of the journalistic trade engaged in by Mapes and Rather, viewers might wish to explore *Rather Dumb*, authored by Mike Walker, for 30 years a gossip columnist for the tabloid *National Enquirer*. From the book's preface at Amazon.com:

Walker rips into the arrogance and presumption of the news media — the elitist, agenda-driven mentality that allows its journalists and editors to ignore basic rules of journalism. Walker uses this short, blisteringly humorous book to personally kick Rather in the shins and also, more importantly, explain how real news is properly gathered and vetted, how it's properly written and reported, and why some journalists and editors think they're above such things.



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For entertainment, the movie appears to be first rate, starring Robert Redford as Rather and Cate Blanchett as Mapes. For understanding of the real truth behind *Truth*, viewers are advised to look elsewhere.

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