

# Dan Rather's Lament

*Ahead of a new film about his life, in which he is played by Robert Redford, Dan Rather reveals the true story of his controversial departure from CBS and blasts the media for failing to speak truth to power.*

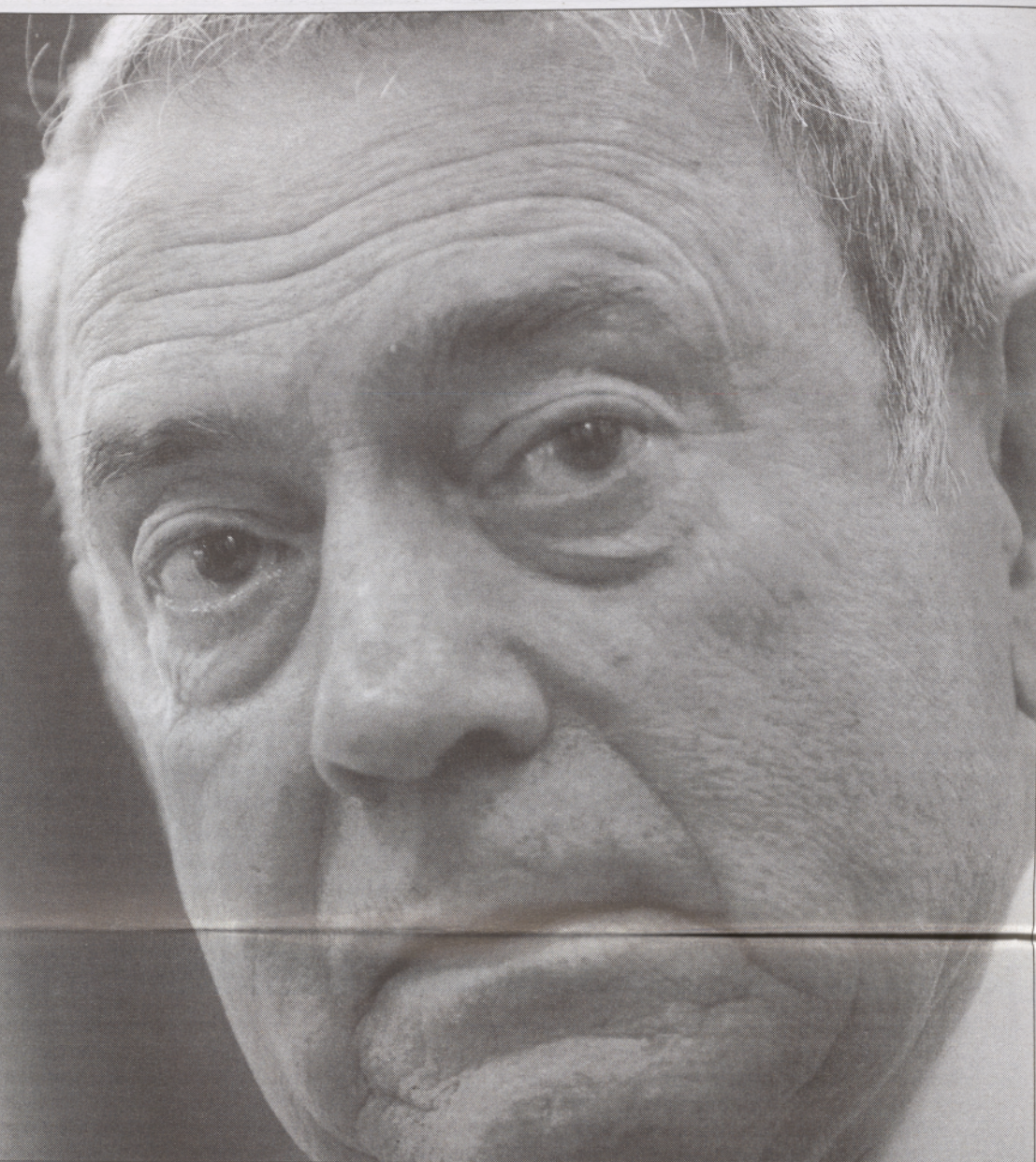


PHOTO BY KEITH BEDFORD/REUTERS

**BY ADAM SENNOTT**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

After more than 60 years in journalism, former CBS News anchor Dan Rather still believes that a free and independent press is the “red beating heart of freedom and democracy.” But news organizations aren’t living up to that standard, he says. Nor are they working hard enough to “give voice to the voiceless.”

Currently anchoring AXS TV’s, “The Big Interview,” Rather is also about to come to a movie theatre near you. Or at least the story of his contentious breakup with CBS News in 2006 will be. Slated for a peak awards-season slot in October, “Truth” will star Robert Redford as Rather and Cate Blanchett as his CBS producer Mary Mapes. The movie examines CBS’s controversial report alleging that President Bush, running for reelection at the time, had relied on preferential treatment to avoid fighting in the Vietnam War.

The ensuing scandal saw Rather step down and Mapes fired. The veteran reporter — who has stared down Nixon, Fidel Castro, Saddam Hussein, and Yasser Arafat — blames the rise of corporate interests in journalism for a slip in standards at his old employer.

Rather believes that news organizations need to provide better coverage of “the

hungry, the homeless, the heartsick, the masses of people that are voiceless.”

Providing that voice has “been a constant motivator” throughout his career. But even from his position of power, he has not always been successful in increasing coverage of the homeless and impoverished.

“There’s not nearly enough of it, and what there is, is not nearly of high enough quality,” Rather says. “I think it’s important to note that I do not exclude myself from that criticism.”

Most reporters today lack the courage and the determination needed to provide high quality coverage, Rather says. News organizations are frequently unwilling to invest in the high degree of investigative reporting that is necessary for such coverage.

“The business structure of journalism works strongly against it,” Rather says. “Finding the financing for deep-digging investigative reporting, and first-class international reporting... it’s very difficult. And even if you are able to get the financing for it (it’s difficult) to find anybody who will distribute it.

“Much of that has just evaporated.”

While the media looks away from issues of poverty and homelessness, entertainment coverage is booming. “You could find financing very easily to do something on the

Kardashians or anything having to do with Hollywood and celebrity coverage,” Rather says. “And you could find widespread distribution for it.”

The shift in news from serious issues to fluff is, Rather believes, a threat to the very foundation of American life. When journalists and news organizations feel more pressure to make money than provide a public service, he says, “It’s is very dangerous in a society such as ours, which is a constitutional republic based on the principles of freedom and democracy... it can be lethal.

“Journalism at its best matters; journalism at its best is important,” Rather continues. “But to do that kind of journalism consistently on a (regular) basis requires an ethos that journalism is a public service, not in the service of powerful corporations, and not in the service of government.”

One of the results of news organizations’ unwillingness to invest in high quality investigative journalism has been a greater reliance on freelance journalists to cover international events and wars.

“Even the best of news organizations have become far too much news packagers, rather than news gatherers,” Rather says. “It’s much less expensive to say, ‘look we’ll close those bureaus and we’ll buy freelance coverage... it’s less expensive, and you stay

out of trouble.”

Increasing corporate interests in journalism have also played a large part in the diminishing of quality news coverage. “Very big business is in bed with very big government, for *their* mutual benefit, not to the benefit of news consumers, and not as a public service.

“The sense of public service is what’s been drained out of a bunch of journalism of the last 25 to 30 years.”

Rather looks back to his days filing reports from the frontline in Vietnam and is disappointed that news organizations have become a lot less willing to challenge those in power.

“There’s more reluctance to question the powerful, to speak truth to power. There’s less of that now than there was, say, a quarter of a century or more ago,” he says.

“So much of what is called news now is: put four people in a room and get them to shout at one another,” Rather adds. “Instead of sending reporters to Afghanistan, or to Yemen, or to Somalia... it’s much easier to just put four people in a room to shout at one another about what’s happening.

“And by the way, all too often those people in the room shouting at one another have never been to those places.”

See **RATHER**, page 5