

Separating the forest from the trees in the age of Trump

by Aaron S. Veenstra

Last year's Academy Award-winner for best picture, *Spotlight*, received justifiably widespread acclaim for its portrayal of the indelible role of enterprise journalism in maintaining a society in which the weak may confront the strong.

Specific to its dramatization of journalism, there are two key insights that are easy to lose track of in the film's narrative. The first is that, while presented and celebrated as a story of heroic journalism challenging and taking down a corrupt institution, it's more a story of journalistic failure than anything else. The story of systemic abuse of children by Catholic priests wasn't just something that "everybody" knew about, which tends to be the short version of the backstory. Rather, it's something the *Boston Globe* knew about years before the early 21st century reporting that ultimately became "the story."

This is a key plot point that occurs more than once in the film – victims and their advocates hesitant or unwilling to trust the news organization that dismissed them in the past.

That lack of trust is intimately related to *Spotlight*'s second big hidden element: the link between individual units and systems. This comes up in two important ways. Most directly connected to the trust question, the sources being interviewed by the reporters don't see those reporters as being an almost entirely different group from the people who failed to follow up on their tips in the past. The only member of the *Spotlight* reporting team to have seen that previous information was Walter Robinson (played by Michael Keaton), who had been the *Globe*'s city editor.

And yet, all the reporters are told, “you” were sent this information years ago. The “you” in question here isn’t the individual journalists; it’s the *Globe* as an institution, from which they are inseparable and for which they are responsible. From inside the institution, it’s easy to object and say that was somebody else’s mistake; from outside, the institution is a forest, and the trees indistinguishable.

But if the public is too likely to see only the system, reporters’ bias pulls them the other way, toward episodic stories that too often don’t link together to tell the bigger story beyond the individual events. In *Spotlight*, the one person who sees this is the *Globe*’s new editor, Marty Baron (played by Liev Schreiber), now at the Washington Post.

What makes this more than just an interesting story note is seeing Baron’s name pop up in a piece about Post reporter David Fahrenthold’s tenacious pursuit of Donald Trump’s bogus foundation. Fahrenthold had begun reporting on Trump’s promised donation to veterans groups (this fundraiser was the reason he gave for skipping a debate right before the Iowa caucuses), which had not materialized, and which, like most of Trump’s promises, the rest of the campaign press corps had completely forgotten about.

This is a story worth digging into on its own, but Baron suggested going further: “The logic was that Trump had just tried to wiggle out of a charitable promise he’d made on national TV. What, Marty wondered, had he been doing before the campaign, when nobody was looking?”

These different reporting styles map reasonably well to the concepts of episodic and thematic framing in the scholarly literature. Too, an over-reliance on episodic reporting is probably as much to blame for the *Globe*’s failure as are the social biases that would keep Boston reporters from seeing systemic corruption in the Catholic Church.

Episodic reporting and the thought processes that lead to it allow an event to be a one-off, with baseline assumptions reset the next time the reporter encounters a similar pattern. It means presuming good faith on the part of those being reported on.

More systematic story-framing needed

The potential trouble here is obvious. Unscrupulous actors can and frequently do game this type of reporting. It is happening right now with coverage of Trump's tweets. Coverage that simply repeats what he tweets, and makes the story the fact of him saying something, does not allow for examination of broader patterns in his statements that have slowly been picked up by fact-checkers, for example. This sort of thinking also permeates campaign coverage, and especially post-election coverage, that uses candidate characteristics to explain outcomes, rather than the broader, macro-level fundamentals that political scientists use to model elections. Many fundamental-based models suggested a narrow Trump win this year.

Although some of the individual stories in the Globe's and Post's respective reporting might be written in thematic frames that highlight general concepts over specific instances, this type of framing doesn't fit the conflict as well as episodic framing fits the other side. Instead, this may be considered systematic framing, occurring across stories and manifesting through linkages used to explain truths that can't be found in a single event.

As Farenthold put it regarding his systematic pursuit of Trump Foundation information: "The point of my stories was not to defeat Trump. The point was to tell readers the facts about this man running for president. How reliable was he at keeping promises? How much moral responsibility did he feel to help those less fortunate than he?"

Any individual story about Trump stiffing a charity doesn't and can't answer those questions, in the same way that any individual story about a pedophile priest doesn't and can't answer questions about the extent of the problem or the systematic cover-up being run by the Church. These are complicated stories that are, by nature, not reportable in disconnected, single articles. More than that, they're stories that can't be expected to emerge simply from an amalgamation of one-offs pieces.

They need context and connection, a tie consciously made by the reporter, and used to illuminate the bigger truth for the public – that is, they must understand that the forest is made of trees.