Deep Throat: Hero or Villain?

BY GEORGE RAMOS

Cal Poly Journalism Department Chair George Ramos is a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper reporter. Here he weighs in on the controversy surrounding W. Mark Felt’s disclosure that he was Deep Throat, the anonymous source who helped Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward uncover the truth about the now-infamous Watergate scandal, effectively ending President Richard Nixon’s administration.

The biggest journalism mystery in my 33 years as a newspaper reporter and a journalism educator has been solved.

There really was a Deep Throat, after all. I was happy to learn that a former No. 2 man at the FBI, W. Mark Felt, admitted that he was the key source for Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward’s stories about the break-in at Democratic National Headquarters at the Watergate hotel complex and the misdeeds committed inside the White House. Felt’s invaluable assistance eventually led to the resignation in 1974 of President Richard Nixon.

I considered Deep Throat a hero. So, imagine my surprise when I walked into my reporting contemporary issues class on the day of Felt’s disclosure and discovered that my students didn’t share my enthusiasm.

Few knew who he was or what he did. After all, I learned later, they had been born well after Watergate.

The kids did seem taken by the news channels’ instant treatment of Deep Throat: Was he a hero or a villain? Rather than lose my temper, a bad habit that I readily admit to, I decided to discuss the real lessons of Deep Throat and the lasting effects he’s had on today’s journalism.

A reporter, I began, is only as good as the sources he or she has. The more sources a reporter can cite, the more reliable the story will be. The bane of any reporter, even one for the Mustang Daily, is to rely on just one source. “Just because one guy talks, doesn’t make it so,” I told the class. “You gotta get backup, more sources.”

Woodward and Post colleague Carl Bernstein certainly did that. They used information supplied by Deep Throat and had it confirmed by multiple sources. That procedure prevented the Post from publishing inaccurate or untrue stories. And the pair drove that point home repeatedly in their book about their Pulitzer Prize-winning exploits, All the President’s Men.

The students were silent when I delivered the bottom line to my impromptu lecture: Reporters nowadays take what Woodward and Bernstein did in their reporting for granted and have gotten lazy in the process.

In today’s 24/7 rush to be first with the news, reporters ignore the need for multiple sources. They trumpet some scoop with only one source. That’s how Newsweek found itself a target for scorn when it cited only one high-ranking Washington source in reporting that the Koran had been flushed down a toilet at a facility for Islamic prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In publishing the item, critics said the magazine was responsible for the deaths of more than a dozen people who died during unrest to protest Newsweek’s reporting.

By the end of class, the students had caught my enthusiasm for Deep Throat.

“Now I get it,” said one student. “But how did he get his name?”

That’s a lecture for another time.