Learning from Dan Rather

by Henry Oliner

When Katie Couric interviewed Sarah Palin she asked the VP candidate about meeting with Ahmadinejad without preconditions. Palin said she would not. Couric replied that Henry Kissinger said that he would. Palin said that she did not think that he would. After the interview in what appeared to be a final dig, Katie Couric said to the camera (without Sarah being able to refute) that they checked their sources and claimed that Kissinger did say he would meet without preconditions.

On the first debate, Obama repeated the Couric claim with confidence that Kissinger said he would meet without preconditions. McCain disagreed, claiming that he knew Kissinger well enough to refuse to believe that statement.

Apparently bad information gets repeated rather than verified. Kissinger came out and agreed with McCain that it would be foolish to meet without preconditions at the presidential level. As I suspected, both Couric and Obama had probably used an unverified source that took a comment from Kissinger out of context.

Is it too much to ask that a news professional like Katie Couric, making millions of dollars, get her facts correct or is she so blinded by her bias, like Dan Rather, that she simply abandons her professionalism to believe what she wants to believe. Will she correct herself to the public? Will Obama?

Similarly, when Charles Gibson asked Palin about her support of the Bush Doctrine, Palin responded “which part?” which is a perfectly legitimate question. Gibson explained that the Bush Doctrine meant preemptive strikes, in what some considered a condescending manner. And the talking heads acted like Palin

was a ditz who did not know what the Bush Doctrine was.

Yet it was more likely that Gibson did not know. The Bush Doctrine has many legs and the least significant is the preemptive strike. The Bush Doctrine changed the concepts of supporting tyrants in the name of stability and peace, claiming such policies had failed to bring either stability or peace. The Bush Doctrine held nations responsible for supporting terror groups even if the nation itself did not commit an act of war. The Bush Doctrine recognized acts of terror as acts of war, rather than criminal acts. This was distinctly different from Clinton's approach, when the first attack on the World Trade Center was treated as a crime. For the first time we faced an act of war that was not waged by a nation state.

Right or wrong these were distinct policy changes. Palin was correct to ask Gibbons to clarify his understanding of the Bush Doctrine, and he did it poorly.

Yet Palin was made to look the fool, even in Tina Fey's parody.

What is the objective of the Gibsons and Courics of the media? Is it to help the voters understand the candidates, or to try and get them in some gaffe? Are we seeking truth and clarity or trying to generate a "gotcha"?

The debates may serve to find who is the best debater, the best speaker, the most articulate, or who has the greatest command of facts. While effective communication is important to the job, and it is certainly a weakness of our current president, it is not the main criteria for the job.

Principles, philosophy and judgment are far more important. The media would do well to control their own egos, subdue their own judgments and certainty, and be a bit more curious about the important matters.

They would also do well to get their own facts straight.