

Edward R. Murrow & Character Assassination

Paris, February 21, 2006 – The George Clooney film, “Good Night, and Good Luck,” dramatizing Edward R. Murrow’s televised attack on Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1954, raises what was a professional question then, but is all but unimaginable today.

Broadcast news was a late addition to American radio. It began as a cheap way for a new rival to compete with the dominant National Broadcasting Company, owned by the powerful RCA corporation, which operated two national networks (the Red and the Blue) from studios in “Radio City” in New York’s new Rockefeller Center.

The rival was the (then unabbreviated) Columbia Broadcasting System, put together by a young man, William Paley, who had been impressed with the ability of radio advertising in Philadelphia to sell the products of the family cigar company.

He had brains and taste, as well as money, and an eye for the glamour of New York, but had to manufacture his own radio attractions since NBC already owned the great vaudeville and revue stars of the period.

Against the opposition of newspapers and wire agencies, he started his own news service with bureaus in New York, Washington, Chicago and Los Angeles. He also had the prescience to understand that the drift towards war in Europe concerned Americans, and authorized short-wave broadcasts presenting “talks” by prominent European figures and by American journalists in Europe. Edward R. Murrow was a young man in Europe working in educational exchanges. He was hired first to arrange talks but then to recruit a European news staff, and chose an extraordinary group, vividly remembered by any American of the war and postwar period. An international news operation was created of unequalled (and in today’s American broadcasting climate, unimaginable) sophistication and quality, rivaled only by the BBC.

When the war ended, Murrow came home as the biggest star in American journalism. Radio created stars, as print journalism could not, because it conveyed personality, and Murrow possessed a remarkable instinct for understated drama and articulate improvisation in describing the scenes he witnessed in the war, above all the London Blitz, where he first made his reputation.

Written journalism is largely anonymous and television journalism intrusive, removing the element of mystery and the appeal to imagination that was radio’s unique quality, and even its magic, during the thirty years when it was the most important medium of popular communication in the United States.

It can be said to have made the modern United States, uniting the disparate regions of a still predominantly rural nation in a common experience of the world crisis.

Paley was proud of his news stars but a little afraid of them too. Peacetime political news could confer controversial power, commercially dangerous to a business that depended on the mass audience. It was also, in principle, dangerous because of the demagogic potential of radio.

Paley had from the start insisted on distinguishing between “analysis” and “commentary” on CBS. This distinction between interpretation and advocacy was hard to maintain in practice, but set CBS broadcasts apart from rival networks, many of whose commentators were popular exactly because of the extravagance of their opinions.

Murrow was not a commentator. In peacetime, he was actually at a loss. He could not just read the news. He was not interested in everyday reporting, which any journalist could do. Paley made him an executive.

Television solved the problem. It offered documentary journalism, informative but “analytical,”

produced by his colleague Fred Friendly. These were the "See It Now" broadcasts, which dramatically culminated in the 1954 political assassination of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

It's not that McCarthy did not deserve assassination. He was a political menace, although not as much of one as sometimes is made out. He was a character assassin, and ruined individuals. Nationally, he mainly was a threat to intelligent and responsible government.

In March 1954 he was at the peak of his success as chairman of the Permanent Investigations Subcommittee of the Republican-controlled Senate. He was also on dangerous ground, approaching confrontation with the U.S. Army concerning an army dentist whom McCarthy claimed was a dangerous subversive.

Murrow and Friendly's television attack presented him at his most sinister and absurd. It was broadcast when television was still a national novelty. It was at a moment when public opinion was ready to be told why it was fed up with McCarthy.

In April, McCarthy's attacked the army, against an indignant defense by the secretary of the army: at last a government official who stood up! The army's attorney, Joseph Welch, eloquently and scornfully condemned the senator. Attacking the army in the aftermath of the Korean War was not a smart move. McCarthy was also demanding favoritism for a young conscript and protégé; there was an air of corruption. The bubble burst.

Eight months later the Senate voted censure of McCarthy. It was all over. Three years later he was dead of alcoholism.

Was Murrow fair? Was this Paley's "analysis"? Of course not. Was it necessary? Probably not.

McCarthy had nowhere to go, and was on the brink of self-destruction. Did it ennoble journalism? At the time it was grimly gratifying to watch.

It seems impossible even to ask about enobling journalism, or "objective analysis," in the context of American television today, amidst the manipulation and demagoguery that sustain the present American government. We are in the 21st century now. Edward R. Murrow is a dead white male.

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