

McCARTHY AND THE PRESS

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The U.S. Republican senator of Wisconsin, Joseph Raymond McCarthy, gave the anticommunist crusade of the 1950s its name and as the point man of the anticommunist network, he brought to the cause, as Ellen Schrecker has called it, "a genius for publicity."¹ The Wisconsin senator made headlines on account of his unsubstantiated charges against those who were insufficiently patriotic or downright Communist. The red-baiting campaign of the "Age of Accusation" was driven by the tactic of destroying the reputations of specific individuals, who, in self-defense, could never get the media attention McCarthy did.

In many respects, in McCarthy's early political career the press was his chief collaborator. During the crucial early months of the red-hunting senator's ascent, the press was credulous with regard to his allegations and—due to the prevailing journalistic ethos of objectivity – it chronicled McCarthy's charges without commenting on or undermining them. As years passed, it became obvious that the media had created the monster that grew to become one of the most notorious propagandists in American history. As stated in Jack Anderson and Ronald W. May's *McCarthy – The Man, the Senator, the Ism*, "If Joe McCarthy is a political monster, then the press has been his Dr. Frankenstein."²

Joseph McCarthy's publicity build-up started in his native Wisconsin, where local reporters wrote glowing accounts of the hustling circuit judge. McCarthy's first senatorial campaign was masterminded by an ex-Hearst managing editor, James Colby. When successfully elected, the young senator from Wisconsin became well-liked by the Washington reporters as he was always smiling and willing to spread news. Occasionally, he would call high government officials on his private phone while reporters listened in on an extension, enabling them to get confidential information which the officialdom would never have released knowingly. Also, he was a frequent guest in "The Town Hall Meeting of the Air," a popular radio program of the 1930s and 1940s, where he discussed the most up-to-date burning issues and, in one exceptionally heated debate, took the affirmative on the question "Should the Communist Party Be Outlawed in the United States?"³

The headline that capped all other McCarthy headlines exploded on the morning of February 10, 1950, across the nation's front pages. McCarthy's announcement to the annual Lincoln Day Dinner of the Ohio County Women's Republican Club in Wheeling, West Virginia that he "had in his hand a list of 205 Communists in the State Department" made sensational news and reporters gave McCarthy's wild accu-

¹ E. Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes. McCarthyism in America*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1998, p. 241.

² J. Anderson, R.W. May, *McCarthy. The Man, the Senator, the Ism*, Victor Gollancz Ltd., London 1953, p. 267.

³ The debate was published April 3, 1947 in the magazine "Town Meeting". Excerpts from the magazine are published in A. Fried, *McCarthyism. The Great American Red Scare. A Documentary History*, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford 1997, p. 76.

sations complete and factual coverage. The names and numbers seemed too concrete to be ignored. However, pressed for specifics, McCarthy began to change the numbers and the charges – perhaps it was only fifty-seven Communists, as he told reporters in Utah on February 10, or eighty-one, as he explained to the Senate ten days later. Subsequently, unable to offer any evidence of the alleged conspiracy ring, McCarthy changed “card-carrying Communists” to “loyalty risks” and soon after to “people with loose Communist connections.” In the very first stage of McCarthy’s political stardom the appraisals of the senator’s doubtful accuracy were left for the very few inquisitive journalists. In general terms, the press was susceptible to his glamor that made him irresistible to the readers and the substance of his revelations was hardly ever called for question. Schrecker comments on McCarthy’s exceptional skills in gaining publicity when she writes:

Newspapers were still the nation’s leading source of information and McCarthy knew how to get his message on the front pages. He played for headlines, recognizing the importance of feeding reporters with the 1950s version of sound bites. He knew how to time his public statements to meet the wire services’ constant demand for updated stories and how to provide the concrete details, names, and numbers that made his charges seem fresh. The more sensational his allegations, the better. “McCarthy was a dream story,” the head of the *Chicago Tribune’s* Washington bureau recalled. “I wasn’t off page one for four years.”⁴

In the political milieu of Washington, D.C. McCarthy understood the theater of politics and quickly learned how to humiliate vulnerable witnesses, attacking them with charges with no evidence whatsoever. Perhaps the best epitaph for the senator and his crusaders came during the Eisenhower years, when he made his fateful and fatal assault on the United States Army (the so-called *Army-McCarthy Hearings*), coming up in the end with one left-wing dentist, Major Irving Peress, who had been promoted by mistake. Up to that point, the press which had fed on McCarthy’s sensational news grew impatient with his unsubstantiated attacks and began to challenge him. David Halberstam in his *The Fifties*, a synthesized account of the decade, brings up a press conference in Madison during which Miles McMillin, a columnist and editorial writer for the *Journal*, asked McCarthy to name names: “You’ve charged that there are Communists at the *Journal*. Name one.”⁵

The former practice of an objective coverage of McCarthy’s “facts” was subjected to re-examination by the press. Editors were searching for a way to present something more than the naked, doubtful facts and a dangerous political game began as McCarthy, too, started to turn on his creator – the press. By May 18, 1952, the senator’s critics had grown so numerous that he felt constrained to speak of a “vast number of Communists in press and radio.”⁶ In the McCarthy jargon, a Communist was now any person who opposed the Senator’s views. A long list of political adversaries included the editors of such magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier’s*, and of such newspapers as the *Washington Post*, the *Milwaukee Journal*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. In a September 1951 interview with *Newsweek*, McCarthy spread his propaganda:

⁴ E. Schrecker, pp. 242–243.

⁵ D. Halberstam, *The Fifties*, Fawcett Columbine, New York 1993, p. 55.

⁶ J. Anderson, p. 271.

The task of these individuals [people who are depended upon by the Communist Party – K.H.] is to try and locate themselves on the so-called respectable newspapers and magazines (...) The prime aim of the Communist Party, as you know, is to get control of the medium of communication. That they are having some success is obvious.⁷

In 1950, when *Time* and *Life* magazines were non-committal, McCarthy found no sinister evidence of Communism in Henry Luce's magazines. Yet, when the magazines grew increasingly critical of the junior senator from Wisconsin, not only did McCarthy inform editor Luce about the Communist slant of his magazines, but also threatened to put the magazines out of business. The senator's accusations made the press entrepreneurs realize that McCarthy was a threat to their individual security unless they wrote about his Communist cause favorably. As a result of his anti-newspaper campaign, McCarthy – with rare exception – was soon condemned by America's leading newspapers. Anderson and May quote a few commentaries:

The New York *Times*:

In making a political career out of mud-slinging and Red-baiting, Senator McCarthy has launched irresponsible, unprovable, and ridiculous charges against so many respected citizens that his attacks have become almost an accolade.

The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*:

McCarthyism...comes from the name of Senator McCarthy of Wisconsin, who has used the device of unproved but frequently repeated assertion, as has no one else before him in American politics.

The Louisville *Courier-Journal*:

Senator McCarthy is campaigning on an issue calculated to offend no Wisconsin voter. That campaign, based upon the current popular and headline-producing issue of Communists in high places, rests upon shifting fabric of misstatements, innuendo, and just plain lies.⁸

While print journalists had taken a strong public stand against McCarthy for a long time, Edward Murrow in his broadcast on McCarthyism, *See It Now*, which was aired March 9, 1954, was the first TV spokesman to discredit McCarthy on prime time television. Statistics of the early 1950s provide a startling indication of how the early TV audience grew and how television became a powerful medium. The 3,875,000 TV families in America as of 1950 had increased to 26,000,000 by 1954 when the McCarthy broadcast was aired. By 1956 it had risen to 34,000,000 viewers, representing 67 percent of the population.⁹ The film *See It Now: Report on Senator*

⁷ J. Anderson, p. 271.

⁸ All quotes from Anderson, pp. 287–288. Besides numerous adversaries McCarthy had a few powerful supporters in the media. The Hearst public opinion system consisted of eighteen newspapers, nine magazines, three radio stations as well as such widely distributed services as International News Service and the *American Weekly*. The Hearst adopted McCarthy's crusade and provided the services of its reporters. The collaboration ran in both directions, with columnists such as George Sokolsky, Westbrook Pegler, and Fulton Lewis, Jr. supplying information and publicizing McCarthy's use of it.

⁹ J.E. O'Connor, *The Moving Image as Historical Document: Analysing Edward R. Murrow's Report on Senator McCarthy* [in:] *History on/and/in Film*, (eds) T.O'Regan and B. Shoemith, History & Film Association of Australia, Perth 1987, p. 11.

McCarthy has been credited with being a major factor in the encouragement of the opposition to McCarthy's politics, dramatizing how vulnerable McCarthy really was.¹⁰ In addition to designing the rhetorical structure of the program to create an atmosphere in which the viewers could be particularly critical of McCarthy, the visual images *per se* seem to have been manipulated to influence the audience to react unconsciously against the senator. The graphic illustration the viewers were provided with, particularly the sequences of McCarthy's "insane little laugh"¹¹ and the sound of it, are claimed to be "more damaging to McCarthy than the intellectual substance of what Murrow had to say."¹² The statements taken out of context, visual information, great care given to editing and timing sequences, along with Murrow's poignant comments all contributed to a highly effective use of the TV medium. McCarthy's tactics were to speak out against allegedly pro-Communist newspapers and columnists and he did not spare the broadcast media, either. The anti-Communist, and for that matter pro-McCarthy, *Red Channels* and *Counterattack* were publications which blacklisted individuals in radio and television for their often loosely defined political associations. CBS went so far as to require its employees, including Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly – later president of CBS News – to sign loyalty oaths, but, as O'Connor points out, "there were still those who dubbed it the 'Communist Broadcasting System.'¹³ Yet, despite all allegations, the *See It Now* episode of March 9, 1954, which in New York and San Francisco caused a flood of phone calls to CBS supporting Murrow's presentation, is often credited with having significantly contributed to McCarthy's downfall. The press that had promoted McCarthyism disposed of its leader once and for all.

Long after McCarthy was gone from the political scene, historians started to revisit the era of red-hunting and made the point that McCarthyism and anti-Communism were not the same thing. Liberal journalist Nicholas von Hoffman wrote in the *Washington Post* that "point by point Joe McCarthy got it all wrong yet was closer to the truth than those who ridiculed him."¹⁴ Arthur Herman's book, *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy of America's Most Hated Senator*, was an attempt to spell out what von Hoffman only hinted at. Senator McCarthy's assumption that all Communists were spies was by all means wrong. However, as we know it now, a large number of spies, indeed, came from the Communist ranks. Only in 1995 did the U.S. government officially reveal the existence of the secret Venona Project. It has been nearly fifty years since American intelligence agents first began decoding numerous Soviet messages, uncovering an enormous range of espionage activities carried out against the United States during and after World War II.

As the years pass, new documents produce new revelations and the McCarthy rehabilitation literature attempts to whitewash the senator and his politics. Several

¹⁰ The reception of the report should also be understood in the context of the *Army-McCarthy Hearings* which followed in April and May of 1954 and brought on many controversies in regards to the senator's sinister tactics and intentions.

¹¹ J.E. O'Connor, p. 6.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 6.

¹³ J.E. O'Connor, p. 12

¹⁴ R. Radosh, *The Persistence of Anti-Anti-Communism*, FrontPageMagazine.com, July 11, 2001.

decades later, McCarthy continues to draw journalists' attention. In 1996, *The Observer of London* stated: "McCarthy has gone down as one of the most reviled men in U.S. history, but historians are now facing the unpleasant truth that he was right."¹⁵ The press still feeds on the subject, exhuming and rethinking McCarthy.

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¹⁵ E. Bronner, *Rethinking McCarthyism, if Not McCarthy*, "The New York Times", October 18, 1998.

