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# The Murrow Legend as Metaphor: The Creation, Appropriation, and Usefulness of Edward R. Murrow's Life Story

Gary Edgerton

## *Edward R. Murrow Revisited*

This...is London. I'm standing again tonight on a rooftop looking out over London, feeling rather large and lonesome. (Edward R. Murrow from a CBS radio broadcast during the 1940 Battle of Britain)

Celebrations abounded throughout the United Kingdom on September 15, 1990 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Britain. On June 18, 1940, Winston Churchill had challenged the British people to make the impending conflict their "finest hour," and they responded by repelling a four-month onslaught by the German Luftwaffe which resulted in Hitler indefinitely postponing his plans to invade the embattled island. In America, the memory of the Battle of Britain is inextricably linked with the image of Edward R. Murrow relaying his hard-boiled commentaries back to the United States from a blacked-out London during his frequent rooftop vigils. His entire life story, in fact, is a vivid example of contemporary legend-making in an era when heroes in the classical sense have become anachronisms and have supposedly outlived their purposes. The rigors of modern historiography seemingly guard against the present-day creation of such fanciful narrative facsimiles as legends when recasting the actions of real people in specific historical events. The case of Edward R. Murrow does resemble the traditional "legenda" formula which dates back to Roman times, however, meaning literally "things to be read" in reference to stories about Christian saints that were once circulated amongst the faithful for reasons of admiration, emulation, and moral uplift. Murrow, the newsman, may represent more earthbound aspirations than did the virtuous paragons of centuries ago; nevertheless, the Murrow legend and its hero personify the shared values of both the people who authored this historical rendition, as well as we, the readers, who repeatedly take part in its telling and retelling.

Edward R. Murrow is arguably the figure most written about and referred to in the history of American broadcasting. In terms of sheer volume, scholarship on Murrow shares center stage in the history of radio and television in the United States with writing about some of broadcasting's key technologists and industrialists—such as Marconi, Sarnoff, and Paley. Murrow's place is of a different kind however; his elevation to "founding father" status within the cultural dialogue that has become "the history of American broadcasting" results from a much different impulse than do the stories that have been erected around the inventors and entrepreneurs. He is not merely one of the first, nor the most powerful, nor the most innovative, though he shares some of these qualities with the other elders of the media. He is a standard bearer of another sort—a moral barometer—where the very mentioning of Edward R. Murrow and his tradition typically signals that the respective media critics and historians are about to address the ethos of the broadcasting industry by the way they have fashioned Murrow's historical portrayal.

The TV critic John Crosby once equated Murrow to that symbol of Athenian democracy, Pericles, while longtime associate Fred Friendly has called his former partner and colleague "the Polaris, the true North Star" (Crosby 8; Friendly, "Edward R. Murrow's Legacy and Today's Media" 19). Probably the most representative metaphor, however, dates back to the mid-1950s and asserts that Murrow is "the patron saint of American broadcasting." The originator of this frequently utilized beatifier is no longer known, although all three of Murrow's most thorough biographers, Alexander Kendrick, Ann Sperber, and Joseph Persico, mention that a good-natured backlash among his colleagues resulted from this "swirl of hero worship" in the formation of the "'We Don't Think Murrow Is God' Club" at CBS News in 1957 (Kendrick 421; Sperber 515; Persico 282).

contours. This discourse is an idealized version of Murrow's life story invented by special interests in response to actual events and their perceived significance. Edward R. Murrow, in this sense, is a reified version of the historical man, the "patron saint of broadcasting" who embodies commonly held attitudes that have as much to do with certain assumptions that we harbor as they have to do with Murrow himself. The paradox of this (as well as any) act of reification is that we are typically unaware of how we are reflected in what we reify. My goal, then, is to first review the assemblage of the Murrow discourse, next disclose the meaning of the heroic model which resides within its ideological framework; and finally specify the notions that we are enunciating about our moral preoccupations, our aspirations of democratic liberalism, and the role of the electronic news media in American society through the way we have recirculated the Murrow legend amongst ourselves over the past two generations.

#### *Composing the Murrow Discourse*

They [Murrow and *See It Now*] were on the side of history, perhaps of the angels. (Kendrick 3)

The first vestiges of any historical discourse typically take the form of popular storytelling, and the existing rendition of Edward R. Murrow's life and career is no exception to this general rule. Historical storytelling is an act of communication. The Murrow historians are narrators who pick, choose, and shape the chronological episodes of Edward R. Murrow's lifetime into identifiable plot structures which highlight some events, ideas, beliefs, and practices, while suppressing others.

Kendrick, Friendly, Barnouw, Sperber, Persico and most of the other Murrow historians have produced a surprisingly contiguous dialogue which essentially invents a classical hero for broadcasting at a point in the 20th-century when Americans are more inclined to reject notions of traditional heroism and embrace anti-heroes. These histories offer a similar stream of people, places, dates, and anecdotes which together mask a deeper level of order and significance.

Certainly an oral tradition began among Murrow's colleagues about the newsman's past exploits and standards while he was still alive. It is well-known that Murrow hired a generation of electronic journalists at CBS for whom he set the example as their charismatic leader. In 1977, more than a decade after Murrow's death, Dan Rather wrote in his autobiography that "it was astonishing how often his [Murrow] name and work came up.

To somebody outside CBS it is probably hard to believe. . . Time and again I heard someone say, 'Ed wouldn't have done it that way' " (Rather with Herskowitz 332). The degree of cult-like intensity which surrounded the memory of Murrow for his former associates and proteges at the network news division is evident in an anecdote from Ann Sperber's biography. She recounts that when CBS moved from its old, aging Manhattan headquarters on Madison Avenue to Black Rock on 52nd Street in 1963, Joseph Wershba took "down the door on 17 that still read 'Mr. Murrow' " and brought the relic home (Sperber 697).

The first written accounts of Edward R. Murrow beyond the journalistic sphere of television criticism or personality sketches were histories produced by CBS associates and friends. Alexander Kendrick, who was hired by Murrow in the 1940s, published his best-selling, *Prime-Time*, in 1969. In his acknowledgments, Kendrick highlights the privileged position of his narration by noting that his "documentation is as much 'biological' as bibliographical" (Kendrick 517). A year earlier, Murrow's partner on *See It Now* and other series, Fred W. Friendly, provided another insider's view of Murrow in *Due To Circumstances Beyond Our Control. . .* Friendly has been one of the most enthusiastic champions of the Murrow tradition, and in his introduction, he explains that "Murrow. . . is as much a part of this book as its author" (Friendly xxiii). For more than half of the remaining text, Friendly strikes the pose of the historian as apologist by explaining in detail the trials and tribulations he and Murrow endured while battling the CBS hierarchy over their coverage of controversial topics on *See it Now* and *CBS Reports*.

In 1967, Edward Bliss, another one of Murrow's inner circle, edited a collection of Murrow's more memorable broadcasts dating from 1938 through 1961 in a compilation called *In Search of Light*. Both Bliss and Friendly later entered academe after their careers at CBS, and continued publishing about Murrow and his tradition (Friendly, "Edward R. Murrow's Legacy and Today's Media"; Bliss, "Remembering Edward R. Murrow," "The Meaning of Murrow," "Battle Hymns and Autumn Wonders"). A wealth of primary source material involving the famous newsman dating from 1941 to the present has also been marketed toward the general public in the form of audio recordings (e.g., the three volume series *I Can Hear It Now* [Columbia Masterworks]; the two volume series *Edward R. Murrow: A Reporter Remembers* [Columbia Masterworks]; *Edward R. Murrow:*

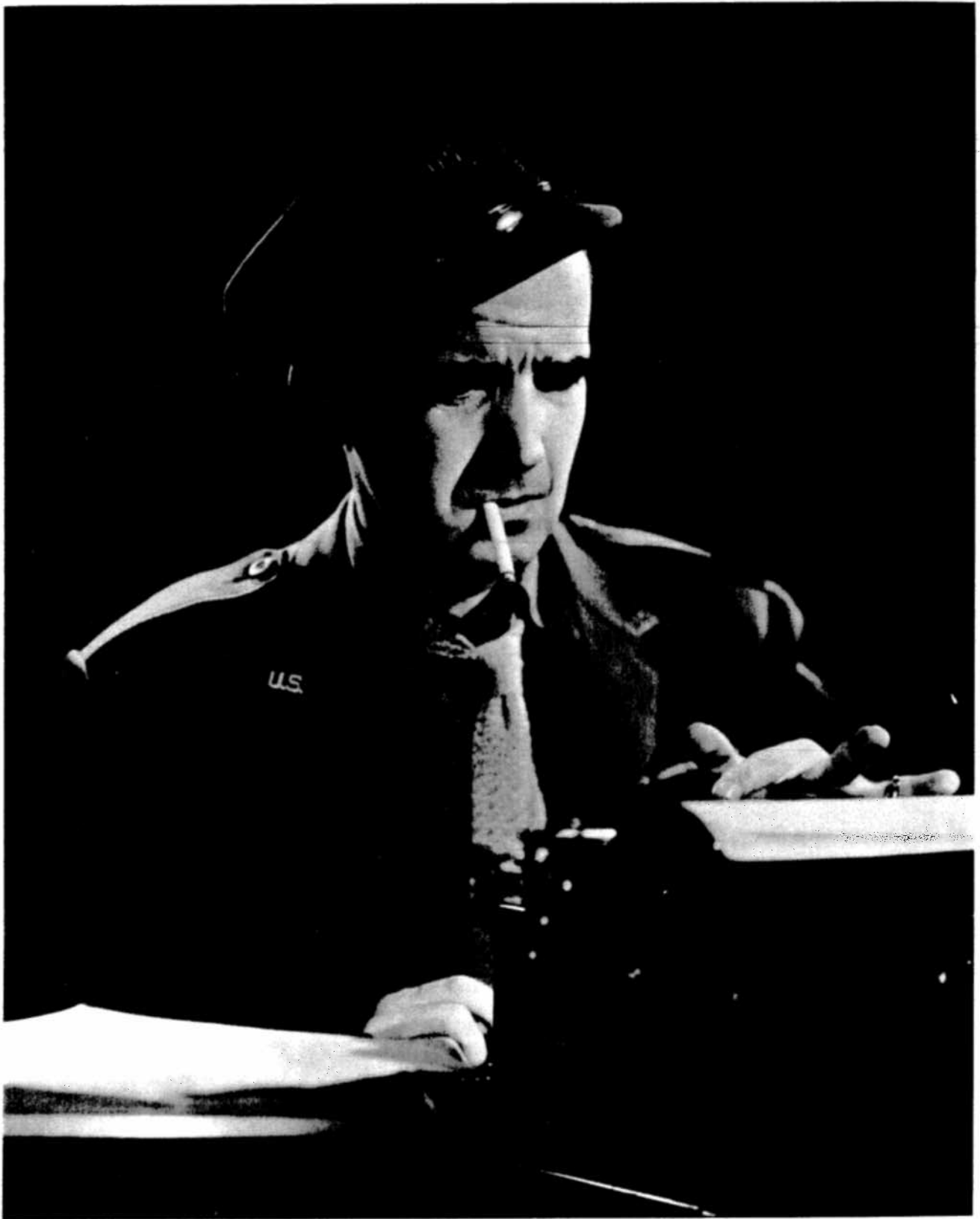


Fig. 2. Murrow was one of many heroes to emerge from World War II, but he became the eminent symbol for broadcasting. (Courtesy of the Murrow Center, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University)



Fig. 4. Murrow's strongest critics began referring to him more and more as the "voice of doom" by 1950. (Courtesy of the Murrow Center, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University)

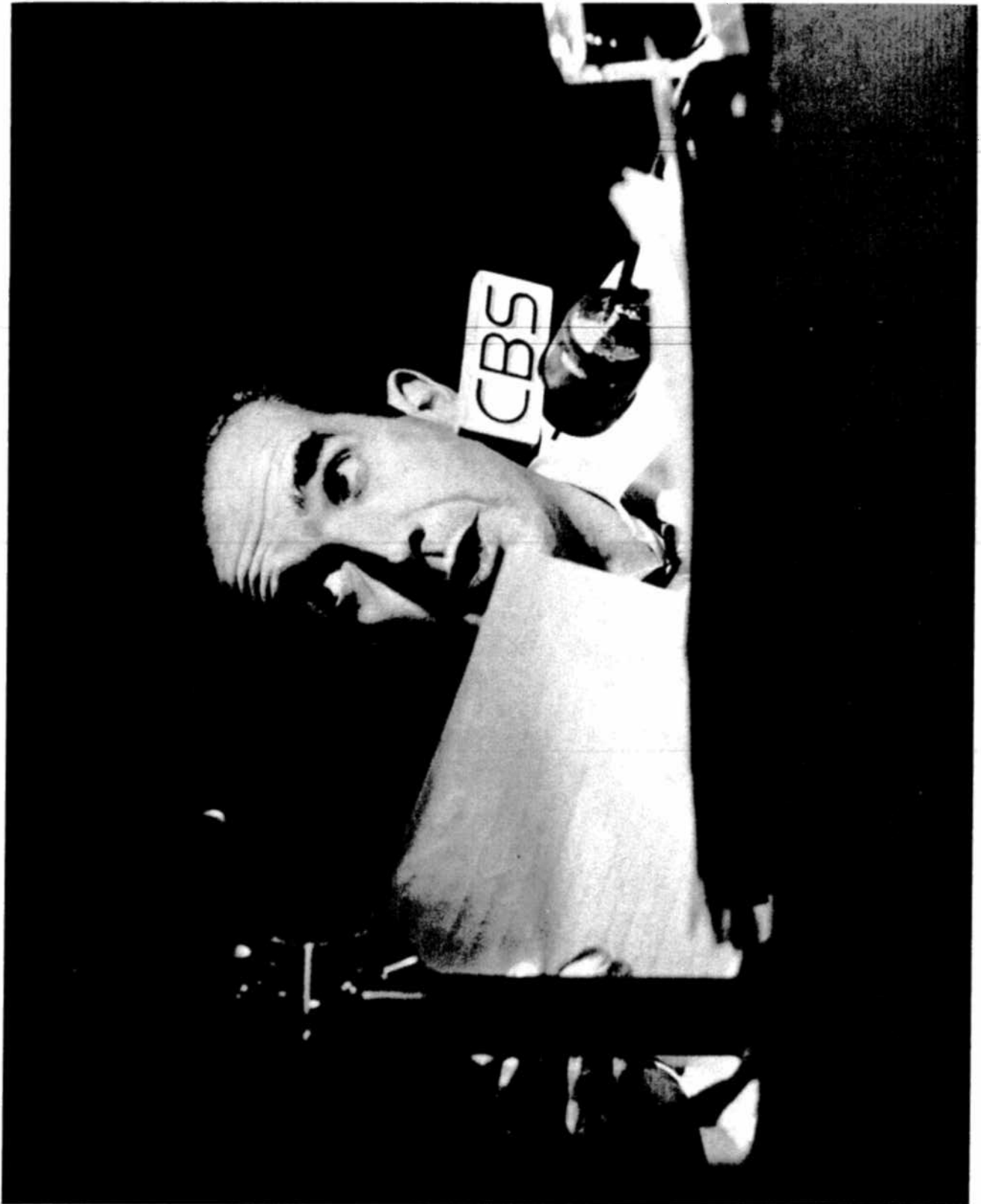


Fig. 6. Both popular and academic treatments of Murrow have blanketed his image in a number of recurring ideals, including integrity, honesty, truth, wisdom, courage, journalistic excellence, and professional conscience. (Courtesy of the Murrow Center, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University)

*Reporting Live* [Bantam Audio]; etc.), videotapes (e.g., selected episodes of *See It Now* and *Person to Person* [Video Yesteryear]; etc.), and anthologies composed of original scripts (Murrow; Murrow and Friendly). The existence of these popular items not only speaks to this newsman's long-standing celebrity status, but in turn contributes to the volume of artifacts and folklore that affects the culture's recollections, image, and resulting opinion of Murrow.

The initial academic publications about Murrow were undertaken by Erik Barnouw in his three-volume history of broadcasting in the United States. These widely read and referenced works derive most of their agenda, evidence, and shared interpretations of Murrow from aforementioned sources written by Murrow's former colleagues. For instance, the subchapter that addresses *See It Now* and the Murrow-McCarthy confrontation entitled, "The Fault, Dear Brutus . . ." in *The Image Empire* (Barnouw 46-56), and which was later reprised as "The Murrow Moment" in *Tube of Plenty* (Barnouw 172-184), is largely a reconstruction of corresponding parts from *Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . .* and *Prime Time: The Life of Edward R. Murrow* with the following conclusion: "The Murrow documentaries helped to make television an indispensable medium. Few people now dared to be without a television set" (Friendly xi-98; Kendrick 35-71). Barnouw is, of course, careful to employ footnotes and citations, although he clearly informs the reader of his preferences by alluding to Friendly as "eloquent" and Kendrick as "indispensable" in *Tube of Plenty's* "Biographical Notes" (Barnouw 489).

Barnouw, in turn, has influenced a whole generation of fellow researchers and their students. His trilogy is still the most comprehensive and extensively used academic source concerning the history of radio and television in America. A perusal of the footnote and bibliographical sections in subsequent books, textbooks, and journal articles that treat Murrow and his career uncovers the debt these authors owe not only to Erik Barnouw, but also to Alexander Kendrick and Fred Friendly (e.g., Emery and Emery 536-537; MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial!* 379-380; Persico 505-538; Sperber 733, 770; Stephens 357-358; Winfield and DeFleur, 109-110; etc.). Considering that the subsequent historical dialogue about Murrow has always drawn heavily on the original agenda, "facts," opinions, and plotlines established by those closest and most sympathetic to this newsman, it is little wonder that Murrow holds a position of apotheosis in the memory of most Americans who know his name.

Within any broad, narrative discourse, not all story episodes are accorded equal importance. The Murrow discourse, for instance, centers on three, now legendary events, no matter how much detail individual authors might use to either retell these bits of broadcasting lore or fill in the gaps among their appearances within the historical plotlines: (1) Murrow's radio reporting during the London blitz (Murrow acts heroically and invents a journalistic tradition); (2) the McCarthy broadcast (the broadcaster as a public servant risks all and wins); and (3) his 1958 RTNDA [Radio and Television News Directors Association] speech which attacked the state of television (the broadcaster as public servant risks all and is slowly martyred).

A more augmented cultural dialogue which shares similar philosophical and ideological bearings is created when Alexander Kendrick, Ann Sperber, and Joseph Persico spend hundreds of pages building their plot structures around these three strategically placed climaxes, or when other historians of broadcasting concentrate the energies of their historical narratives on the legendary London Blitz (Barnouw *The Golden Web*; Bilski; Culbert, *News for Everyman*; "This is London"; Kuralt; Manchester; Metz; Paley; Rudner, "The Heart and the Eye"; "Born to a New Craft"; Smith; Sterling and Kittross; Stephens; Stott; Woolley); or the McCarthy Broadcast (Barnouw, *The Image Empire, Documentary, Tube of Plenty*; Baughman, "See It Now and Television's Golden Age, 1951-1958"; Bayley; Bilaski; Bluem; Emery and Emery; Friendly, *Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control . . .*; Gates; Kuralt; Leab; Leonard; Lichello; MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial!, Television and the Red Menace*; Manchester; Matusow; Merron; Metz; Miller; Murray; Paley; Rudner, "The Heart and the Eye"; Stephens; Sterling and Kittross; Wershba; Yaeger); or the RTNDA speech and the resulting Murrow legacy (Baughman, "The National Purpose and the Newest Medium"; Bliss, "The Meaning of Murrow"; Friendly, "Edward R. Murrow's Legacy and Today's Media"; Gates; Lichello; "Murrow's Indictment of Broadcasting,"; Winfield and DeFleur).

The three most comprehensive chroniclers of Murrow—Alexander Kendrick, Ann Sperber, and Joseph Persico—all wrote sweeping and epic biographies of their subject. Each of these narratives proceeds chronologically from forebearers to final eulogies, and follows the logic of 19th-century tragedy where the existence of the tragic flaw shifts from inside the classical hero, or away from some metaphoric "fall from grace," to the infirmity



These speeches did not start the Murrow legend and tradition, which had been born between newsman and America's listening public two years before. The sentiments expressed by MacLeish and Paley do reflect, however, the reification process that was already fusing this "man and an ideal" into a "non-human or possibly suprahuman" construct for many in the United States and Britain (Berger and Luckmann 89). Original recordings of Murrow's early broadcasts make it abundantly clear why his rich, full, and expressive voice had such a direct and dramatic impact on his listenership. In words evocative of America's original founding fathers, Murrow frequently used the airwaves to revivify and popularize many of the democratic ideals that resulted from a broader liberal discourse in England, France, and the United States, such as free speech, citizen participation, the pursuit of truth, and the sanctification of individual liberties and rights. Resurrecting these values and virtues for a mass audience of true believers during the London blitz was high drama as the impending threat of Nazi bombs was ever present in the background. Murrow's broadcast persona was thus established, embodying the political traditions of the Western democracies, and offering the public a heroic model on which to focus their energies.

Murrow, of course, was only one of the many heroes to emerge from World War II, but he became the eminent symbol for broadcasting. Murrow's dark, sober, and humorless countenance reflected a nation gearing itself up to face down Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo. His urgent and inspirational style of presentation fit the life-and-death psychological milieu of a world war, as it was later appropriate for the McCarthy crisis. By 1958, though, the mass audience and the television industry were less inclined to listen to yet another of his ethical lambastes, especially since his RTNDA speech was directed at them and their shortcomings. Towards the end of the 1950s, a number of Murrow's strongest critics began referring to him more and more as the "voice of doom."

This gibe, like any nickname or caricature, exaggerates and reveals prominent features or qualities of the person it portrays. The Murrow persona is likewise a congealed and symbolic version of the newscaster. Like the relationship between any radio or television star and his or her audience, listening to or watching Murrow functions as a kind of collective Rorschach test where the public singles out and reifies personality traits while suppressing others.

The meaning of Murrow and his tradition are indelibly rooted in the dreams of a generation that came of age during the Second World War. As television critic Robert Lewis Shayon perceptively noted on the day of Ed Murrow's funeral: "It seemed as though the generation burying Murrow were burying its hopes of that younger time (Sperber 704). The great expectations and intensity that Americans brought home from their World War II experiences were forever etched on Murrow's face; so was the eventual disillusionment when a better world did not ensue, and individual freedoms were threatened and subverted at home during the "Red Scare."

The power of Murrow's elongated face and solemn demeanor grew in ennobled permanence throughout the 1950s. In remembering Murrow, or watching films or videotapes of his programs, or even reflecting on the dozens of photographs that remain of the broadcaster, one sees an eerie sameness to the Murrow presence. He is almost always sitting in shadows, dressed formally in a conservative suit, and peering skeptically from behind his ubiquitous cigarette as if transfixed on some indeterminate worry. His clothes and posture bespeak sophistication and experience, while his sense of sadness and irony discloses feelings of incertitude and disillusionment. In the context of television's lightness, action, and inveterate presentism, Murrow projects a presence ever darker, more trapped, and almost paralyzed with awareness.

The meaning of Murrow is partly a reminder of the world's imperfections. His call to action was embraced during World War II; acknowledged and acted upon during the McCarthy era, but rejected as the 1950s came to an end. Murrow reveled in his role as broadcasting's Jeremiah, numbed by his scrupulous sense of morality, though still eloquently able to warn Americans about the dangers of Hitler, McCarthy, and the excesses of the profit motive in television.

The tragedy of Murrow is implicit in his apparent need to ascribe higher motives to his own profession. His searing gaze finally came to rest on the industry where he worked. As the business of TV grew astronomically during the 1950s, Murrow's priorities fell progressively out of step. For the first time in his career, Murrow's uncompromising standards were no longer welcome at CBS; the source of his genius as a newsman had become his greatest liability with the passing of time.

Today in the lobby of CBS there is a small plaque which contains the image of Murrow and the inscription: "He set standards of excellence that remain unsurpassed." The seeming paradox between Murrow's life and the way he is

The discursive formation surrounding Murrow only broadened over time. Murrow became a figure that CBS consciously promoted as early as World War II as symbolic proof that the network represented the best in broadcast journalism; as Murrow and his clique of fellow newsmen continued their professional growth into television in the 1950s, the Murrow tradition became emblematic of the quintessential electronic news organization in the business. The most confining dimension about the discourse was its socio-economic pedigree: Murrow's relative independence at the network progressively dwindled as CBS grew to corporate proportions throughout the 1950s, as is evident by the problems and eventual cancellation of *See It Now* in 1958, and the rapid enervation of the newsmen at CBS after this point. The historical Murrow was good for neither ratings nor sponsor relations in the role of investigative journalist that he most wanted to play.

The most striking irony of the Murrow discourse is that it eventually excluded the historical man himself when his hard-hitting expressions of explorative journalism on *See It Now* caused discomfort and embarrassment to his employer, CBS, and his corporate sponsor, Alcoa. When push came to shove, the evolving industrial context of broadcasting that had always employed, once nourished, and finally blunted Murrow's instincts toward public debate and televised controversy, asserted its governing ownership over the Murrow tradition. After 1960, the Murrow image became institutionalized on plaques and professional awards, in published memorials (e.g., Bliss, "Remembering Edward R. Murrow"; Friendly, "Edward R. Murrow's Legacy and Today's Media"; Kurault; Wershba; etc.), and in many compilation documentaries, including an hour-long telecast entitled, *This Is Edward R. Murrow* (1975), which was produced as a tribute by his colleagues at CBS News after his death.

As many of Murrow's contemporaries eventually retired or left the news organization, and some such as Kendrick and Friendly translated the tradition, legacy, and legend of Murrow into book form, the power of the Murrow discourse supported contradictory aims at CBS, Incorporated and its news division. Dan Rather echoed Edward R. Murrow when he asked in his 1987 editorial, "Do the owners and officers of the new CBS see news as a trust or only as a business venture?" (Rather). The point, of course, is that commercial television news functions simultaneously as an information service and a money-making proposition. When bottom-line financial considerations need to take

precedence over concerns of public interest, however, CBS and the rest of network journalism are never reluctant to disguise their position by once again reaffirming their allegiance to the Murrow tradition.

Is the existing Murrow discourse then nothing but grist for the public relations mill? Such a blanket condemnation would be too facile and superficial, and would ignore the daily accomplishments of network journalism. For instance, there are clear benefits when skilled newscasters, such as ABC's Ted Koppel are influenced to an extent that he remembers "by the time I was 9 years old, living in England, listening to this rich, deep baritone on BBC, I had already decided that this is what I wanted to be, a foreign correspondent...it was all based on this *image of Murrow* [emphasis added]" (Unger). The memory of Murrow's exploits has doubtlessly inspired many newspeople in radio, television, and cable during the past two generations.

The present legendary version of Murrow and his tradition is probably best understood as forming the allowable boundaries of agenda and controversy pursued by broadcast news; it is both an ideal and a dynamic construct that sometimes inspires action, other times brackets the possible, and vaguely limits how far electronic newsgathering can go. As with any discourse, the Murrow composite has so far served us as both a catalyst and a constraint. It is crucial to consider that an oral legend and tradition created by a small group of electronic journalists during the development of CBS News has long ago been usurped by the more complex and conflicting agencies of an industry and a profession, with the former strain of influence remaining the stronger force.

Murrow and his legacy are now mediated by the uneasy confluence of socio-economic controls and the organizational mores and aspirations of broadcast journalism. For all intents and purposes, these vested interests circumscribe much of the perceived significance of Murrow, and thus confront present and future historians of broadcasting with a more subtle challenge than just retelling a story that is already in place. We should instead begin by broadening our frame-of-interest to include much more than the day-to-day occurrences of Murrow's life history. These episodes and the manner in which we arrange them are ultimately of great importance; however, we first need to recognize that the Murrow legend and its hero are most evocative from a figurative standpoint.

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