
 SPEECHES

Ed Murrow's Legacy and the Real World Broadcast News

HARRY RADLIFFE

Good afternoon, Dean, Members of the Faculty, Students, Guests:

It's a real pleasure to be with you here and to be a part of your annual forum on Murrow. Quite frankly, it's also a relief to be out of my office in New York. You may have noticed a lot of news reports recently speculating again about the future of the organization that employs me. If it seems that CBS News is in perpetual upheaval, one explanation is the inordinate amount of time our colleagues and competitors in the press spend discussing and speculating about CBS News. There's a direct correlation to the reason we receive all that attention and the reason we are all here. It boils down to one man: Edward R. Murrow.

CBS News receives "an inordinate amount of attention" because CBS News is the house that Ed Murrow and his band of brothers—and one sister—built. It's a house that, with the exception of two years, has been my home for my entire professional career.

If it seems that our house is a little unstable, I would not deny that we have our disagreements and a habit of airing them openly and loudly. "Animal House" comes to mind; some sort of dysfunctional family. Some of my colleagues say that the factional warfare at CBS News resembles, in part, the War in Iraq. Over there, you have the Shi'a, the Sunni, and

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the Kurds. Over here, we have our factions, too. So, in the interest of full disclosure, I should tell you that I'm here as a representative of the Kurdish faction of CBS News also known as *60 Minutes*.

But if you can get past all the titillation and sensationalism that inevitably accompanies a medium that reaches into millions of people's homes, there's a better explanation for the focus on us. The spotlight on the goings-on at CBS News is part of broader discussion about the future of journalism itself and of the future of broadcast journalism in particular.

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These are interesting and dangerous times in journalism. The annual report on "The State of the News Media" describes a "new era of shrinking ambitions," "fragmentation," and oversupply with "too many news organizations doing the same thing." The old business models are dated. Traditional advertising is drying up and people are still trying to figure out how to make money on the internet.

We are probably in the midst of a fundamental retrenchment in the news business. Newspapers, radio, and TV are all in turmoil as costs skyrocket. Every once in a while when I come back from a shoot somewhere, they show me the final tally of costs on my story. They're shockingly high.

At the same time, like the annual report says, there's increasing audience fragmentation. That just means that with hundreds of channels—or choices available to you—it's not surprising that there aren't as many eyeballs watching CBS, NBC, and ABC as there were when there were only three networks. Ah, the good old days.

None of this is new. These trends have been developing for years. The dilemma is how to solve it and the future is anything but clear. The attempt to chart a path to the future has inevitably led to conflict and major soul searching, especially regarding broadcast news. You have to remember that the networks are a business driven to earn profits. While a particular news program can be profitable, there's a natural conflict between news fathering and the bottom line.

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“This instrument can teach. It can illuminate. Yes, it can even inspire.” He went on to add: “but it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise, it is merely wires and lights in a box.” Basically he’s saying that it’s up to us. Murrow made that speech 50 years ago. He could have written it yesterday. So you see this debate’s been going on for a while.

I was originally asked to speak to you about Murrow’s world at CBS News. I wish I could. I wish I could have been one of “Murrow’s Boys.” The news organization they built from scratch lured me and many of my colleagues to broadcast journalism in general and to CBS News in particular. But by the time I joined CBS News, Murrow was long gone, driven out by the same dilemmas and frustrations we’re still dealing with today.

But Murrow’s legacy permeated the CBS News I joined. He was the reason I joined CBS News. He was the reason I got into broadcast journalism. He believed that news was a sacred trust—that news reported accurately and fairly could not only inform, but that it could change things. News and information were powerful. They still are. CBS was the only place I wanted to work. I used the word “joined” a moment ago when I mentioned my beginnings at CBS News. I used that word intentionally.

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For me—and many of my colleagues—working for CBS News—the house Murrow built—was more than a job. It was a calling. “Joining” CBS News was like joining the church. Journalism was our religion. Murrow’s DNA flowed through the veins of CBS News. He was the North Star, our guiding light.

When I started and for many years after, some of the original members of his team—Charles Collingwood, Eric Sevareid, Douglas Edwards, and Richard C. Hottelet—were still working there. Walter Cronkite had not been one of Murrow’s Boys, but he inherited the DNA and was driven by the same passions that drove Murrow.

Those same passions still drive many of us. I’ve had the honor and pleasure to work with some of the giants in the history of broadcast journalism—Walter Cronkite, Harry Reasoner, Peter Jennings, Ed Bradley and Mike Wallace, Steve Kroft, Scott Pelley, Lesley Stahl, and Bob Simon. My colleagues at *60 Minutes* are all driven by the standards Murrow set. I hope this doesn’t sound like some corporate PR pitch, but if you could see and

hear the shouting matches that take place in our shop every day, you might be surprised. They're not about ratings, although we all want to know if anyone's watching. It's mostly about journalism, language, facts, and fairness.

CBS sent Murrow to Europe to be Director of Talks; he got into news by accident. Casey Murrow was telling me yesterday that his father was in Vienna for the Anschluss. When there was no one else from CBS to cover the events, Murrow filled in—and the rest, as they say, is history. Murrow hired William Shirer, who covered Berlin, and together they covered the Czech crisis, the crisis in Danzig, and the Polish corridor. Anyway, most of you know what followed. Have you ever heard some of those broadcasts? Through the static of history and the poor quality of audio feeds in those days, they still send chills down my spine as I listen to them broadcasting the first draft of history.

I often wonder what it would be like if Murrow were a working journalist today. Can you imagine? Bill O'Reilly, Larry King, Keith Olbermann, and Ed Murrow tonight on some cable channel. No doubt Murrow would be stunned and thrilled that technology has made it possible to broadcast live from battlefields, refugee camps, conference halls, and street corners anywhere in the world.

In Murrow's day the quality was accepted. There wasn't any alternate and there wasn't that much competition. NBC and the old Mutual Broadcasting System were also in their infancy—just like CBS. Today there's more competition than anyone can reasonably absorb. I can only speculate on how he would feel about the cacophony coming from the broadcast nets, cable channels, radio, the Internet and YouTube. I can't begin to imagine what he would make of the blogosphere. The fact that an ordinary American with a cell phone, a built-in microphone, and a camera can record a picture or a comment that can fundamentally alter the outcome of an election would certainly take some getting used to. It's produced a kind of whiplash journalism that I'd like to think he would find distasteful.

But I think Murrow would be impressed that being courageous is now routine. When he and his colleagues broadcast that report on Joe McCarthy; when they reported on Lt. Radulovich, whom the U.S. Government asked to repudiate his own father over allegations, allegations that turned out to be false; when they reported on the plight of migrant workers—that was groundbreaking stuff. The risk of repercussions for them all—Murrow in particular—was real. But Murrow withstood it.

Today reporters routinely take on everything—the President, government, big business, science, and institutions—without fear. Aggressive

journalism is routine. Despite all the angst about the future, we are living in a Golden Age of journalism. Despite obvious flaws, the quality and quantity of good reporting has never been greater. Reporters—American reporters—are anxious to report the world. What's holding them back are the economic realities of the world we live in. The major networks are part of large corporations focused on the bottom line. It is difficult to ask them to hemorrhage money so my colleagues and I can run around the world covering stories. Hopefully we'll find some way to sort out the economics and construct new business models that can finance the future.

Thank you. ■

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