



Edward R. Murrow: In His Own Words

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

In 1950, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy had begun to tap into Americans' growing fears about communism. He claimed that the State Department was "riddled with communists," and professed to have a list of 205 names. As time went on, his finger-pointing continued. At every opportunity, he blamed what he saw as the deteriorating morality of America on suspected communists.

Journalist Edward R. Murrow, a veteran combat reporter, was among those who thought that McCarthy should not have an unchallenged platform or be able to intimidate the American people. Murrow rose to fame with his riveting radio reports from Europe during World War II. His catchphrase, "This is London," could be heard over the sounds of bombs and air raid sirens. His report from Nazi concentration camps at the end of the war had moved many to tears. The public trusted his reporting.

After the war, Murrow returned to the United States, received two promotions, and, while covering the Korean War, began presenting weekly digests of news on the radio called *Hear It Now*. Television gained popularity in the early fifties, and he moved his show to CBS TV, re-naming it *See It Now*.

As a journalist, Murrow fervently believed that the press ought to seek and uncover the truth. He thought it was the responsibility of a free press to consider all points of view. He also believed that communist threats abroad could best be countered by free and open expression at home.

In October 1953, Murrow aired the report that would signal the beginning of a public conflict with McCarthy—and the end of the senator's grip on the nation. Murrow learned that the Air Force Reserve had dismissed a young lieutenant, Milo Radulovich, because his father and sister were thought to hold "un-American views." While no one accused Radulovich of having the same views, authorities recommended that he condemn his father and sister in order to save his position. Radulovich refused, declaring that such an action was not what it meant to be an American.

When Murrow aired the story on *See It Now*, he openly questioned the evidence for the charges, stating, "was it hearsay, rumor, gossip, slander, or was it hard ascertainable fact that could be backed by creditable witnesses? We do not know." A public outcry followed, and Radulovich's commission was re-instated.

NARRATIVE

“Good evening. Tonight, *See It Now* devotes its entire half hour to a report on Senator Joseph McCarthy told mainly in his own words and pictures.” Veteran journalist and television host Edward R. Murrow looked serious and composed. It was March 9, 1954. The Cold War was at its height, and Americans were concerned about communist influences at home and abroad. Controversy swirled around Senator McCarthy’s accusations and actions.

Murrow had learned that he was on McCarthy’s attack list. The senator’s “evidence” that Murrow was “on the Soviet’s payroll” was that the reporter worked during the 1930s as an advisor to the Institute of International Education, an organization that sponsored exchange seminars between American and Soviet professors.

Murrow’s strategy was to report on the facts of McCarthy’s tactics, without condemning or slandering him. He wanted the public to consider what McCarthy had done and said, and come to their own conclusions. Murrow and the *See It Now* staff organized audio and film clips for the show, during which time the reporter told fellow CBS journalist Joseph Wershba, “The only thing that counts is the right to know, to speak, to think—that, and the sanctity of the courts. Otherwise it’s not America . . . we must not confuse dissent with disloyalty.”

Murrow introduced his report by explaining its purpose: “If none of us ever read a book that was ‘dangerous,’ nor had a friend who was ‘different,’ or never joined an organization that advocated ‘change,’ we would all be just the kind of people Joe McCarthy wants.” Murrow fought to protect his own identity as well as the identity of others that McCarthy did or could accuse.

The *See It Now* broadcast offered a portrait of Joseph McCarthy “in his own words and pictures.” Murrow showed the public reels of footage of the senator: McCarthy mocking President Eisenhower; McCarthy insulting an army general; McCarthy challenging the integrity of his critics; and McCarthy telling half-truths.

Murrow concluded the show with the words, “we must not confuse dissent with disloyalty . . . We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine, and remember that we are not descended from fearful men, not from men who feared to write, to speak, to associate and to defend causes which were for the moment unpopular . . . we cannot defend freedom abroad by deserting it at home.”

Following the broadcast, public opinion shifted sharply against the senator. Six days later, McCarthy demanded a chance to respond and Murrow and CBS agreed to a second broadcast. In his rebuttal, McCarthy referred to Murrow, among other things, as “the leader of the jackal pack” of his opponents. The appearance did little to restore public confidence. The senator’s hold on the nation had ended; nine months later, the United States Senate censured Joseph McCarthy.

Murrow was not the only journalist who challenged McCarthy, but he is credited with skillfully using a new medium, television, so that the American people could consider the validity of the senator’s views. As Murrow later acknowledged, “The timing was right and the instrument was powerful. . . There was a great conspiracy of silence at the time. When there is such a conspiracy and somebody makes a loud noise, it attracts all the attention.”

NARRATIVE

Throughout his career, Murrow continued to report on newsworthy events, sharing contrasting points of view with the American public. He never assumed that he had all the answers. His report that March night demonstrated his ability to present the evidence and let the public consider all points of view—even those of Joseph McCarthy.

As a fellow reporter commented when Murrow left CBS, “To whatever extent television has found its voice of conscience, purpose, and integrity, it was as much the doing of Edward R. Murrow as any other single individual in one medium.” Murrow worked to protect and celebrate his own identity as a newscaster. He also helped others protect their freedom by allowing them to maintain their own views without being labeled or slandered for them.