A RHETORICAL/INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS OF EDWARD R. MURROW’S CRITICISM OF BROADCAST JOURNALISM
Abstract

Corporate influence has been an ongoing concern for working journalists. Even in the early days of television, Edward R. Murrow saw a bleak future for society if broadcasters succumbed to corporate greed and failed in their responsibility to inform the public. This rhetorical study of Murrow’s 1958 speech to the Radio-Television News Directors Association, guided by Perelman's theory of the universal audience and presence, argues that Murrow’s speech prioritized broadcast journalism’s obligation to a democratic society and warned that commercial intrusion was impacting the profession’s moral obligations. At the same time, in appealing to a particular audience, Murrow deemphasized the role of individuals in the process, including both working journalists and the viewing audience. This resulted in a speech that depended on a top-down corporate solution rather than empowering the viewing audience or broadcast journalists to work towards change.
Introduction and Rationale

Since its inception, broadcast journalism has had to balance two distinct and what often appear to be contradictory objectives. On one side is the journalistic ideal of informing the public and keeping it abreast about an ever-changing world. On the other is the requirement to attract viewers and bring in the dollars necessary to satisfy the corporate entities that own and operate broadcasting stations. The clash between these two sides creates a push and pull that invites criticism of broadcast journalism and puts into question its true obligation to society.

There are those in the profession who have criticized how the corporate side of media has continually encroached on its journalistic responsibilities. An early critic of corporate media’s growing influence on broadcasting was Edward R. Murrow, who many acknowledge as establishing broadcast journalism as a profession. He is "the man credited with inventing television journalism in America" (Barnett, 2008, p. 38), its "founding father," and even "the patron saint of American broadcasting" (Edgerton, 1992, p. 75). Towards the end of his news career, he also became one of broadcasting’s greatest critics. In a 1958 speech before the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA), he warned that the industry was headed for disaster if it did not fulfill its duty to inform the masses about the serious issues that impact our society. He saw television as becoming a medium that in the future would be looked upon as providing little more than "decadence, escapism and insulation from the realities of the world in which we live" (Murrow, p. 28).

I use Perelman’s and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s (1969) rhetorical theory of the universal audience and presence to argue that Murrow’s RTNDA speech plausibly invoked the universal audience to argue for broadcasting’s moral obligation to society while resonating with a particular audience—broadcast journalists. In doing so, Murrow placed much of the blame for
what he believed was wrong with the profession at the corporate level, while de-emphasizing the responsibilities of viewers and individual journalists.

Perelman’s and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s (1969) theories of the universal and particular audience provide a useful tool in analyzing Murrow’s speech. Murrow sought to lay out a rational argument for his views that broadcasting had a moral obligation to society to provide worthwhile programming. Even today many see the value in Murrow’s arguments, which speaks to the universality of his reasoning beyond his particular time and situation. His other task was to bring about a response to the particular audience of broadcasters in the room. In doing so, he used rhetorical strategies that he presumed would resonate with other broadcast professionals. This includes Perelman’s and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s concept of presence, which allows the speaker to give more credibility to specific elements of a speech at the expense of others.

Murrow holds an important place among journalists because of his history and status in the field of broadcasting. He is also rhetorically significant because of his idealistic view of journalism and its potential impact on society. It was those convictions that drove him throughout his career, and later perhaps led to his alienation from others in the profession. Today however, he is remembered and revered for those unwavering journalistic principals, making him a historical figure that retains rhetorical significance.

**Murrow’s Contributions to Broadcast Journalism**

Murrow’s emergence as a broadcasting icon began with England’s involvement in World War II. During the conflict, he developed a reputation as a journalist that would do whatever was necessary to bring the news to the radio listener, and that notoriety grew as the war progressed (Godfrey, 1993). Murrow was willing to put himself in danger to cover what was happening to the city. CBS in New York encouraged Murrow to broadcast from the safety of the underground
bunker at BBC studios, but he refused, instead choosing to go to the rooftop so he could describe what was happening as he saw it (Rudner, 1981). That early rooftop report provided listeners with vivid details that would become an ongoing characteristic of Murrow’s broadcasts.

Murrow’s wartime broadcasts were significant for several reasons, and each helped to establish him as a broadcasting icon. These included his style of reporting, his willingness to risk himself for the story, and the moral conviction that came through in his World War II reports as he tried to show America why it needed to intervene and join the war against Germany. These aspects of his radio broadcasts added to his legendary status both during his career and the years that followed.

Murrow was able to make the transition from radio to television with the documentary news program *See It Now*. The most remembered of all his *See It Now* broadcasts took place on March 9, 1954, titled *Report on Senator McCarthy*, in which he took a stance against McCarthy’s Red Scare tactics. Edgerton (1992) contends that this episode in his career has added to Murrow’s status a broadcasting legend, conveying the message “the broadcaster as a public servant risks all and wins” (p. 85). The story has become so elevated in the annals of broadcast journalism, Hollywood turned it into a feature film in 2005 with the Warner Brother’s release *Good Night and Good Luck*, with the title inspired by Murrow’s famous closing lines to his *See It Now* broadcasts.

The creation of *See It Now* and the McCarthy broadcasts add to the significance of Murrow as an iconic broadcasting figure and contributed to his legendary status. For many, Murrow’s work with *See It Now* helped to reveal the power of television as a medium for news, reaffirmed Murrow as the brave journalist they knew from World War II, and bolstered his
reputation as a news reporter who was willing to stand up for convictions. The radio news legend had fully established himself on the television airwaves.

The “Lower Murrow” and Person to Person

While historians and broadcasters tend to remember Murrow based on his high-profile journalistic accomplishments, he had another side that is often downplayed. Biographer Joseph Persico (1990) describes this chapter in the broadcaster’s career as “Another Murrow” (p. 343). Gates (1978) goes as far as to refer to this aspect of Murrow’s broadcasting legacy as the “Lower Murrow” (p. 14). Each title is indicative of the stark contrast between the lofty journalistic standards he established with his radio broadcasts and his McCarthy telecasts, and the lowbrow nature of what would become the Person to Person program.

The idea was for Murrow to “visit” the homes of celebrities and other prominent people in their homes through the use of television. Murrow would remain in the New York studio, but the celebrities would be in their own homes. Murrow would interact with them through a “picture window,” which created the illusion that he was peering into the celebrity’s home, even though it was all done electronically (Merron, 1988). Person to Person debuted on October 2, 1953, nearly two years after Murrow’s first leap into television with See It Now.

While Person to Person was a favorite among the television audience, many media critics, who saw it as a frivolous show unworthy of Murrow, panned the program. Time magazine called it “substandard Murrow” with an “aimlessness and a degree of silliness” (Persico, 1990, p. 346). Merron (1988) contends that Person to Person is as a big of part of Murrow’s television legacy as See It Now, even though many would rather see it expunged from his journalistic career. He argues that “the personality parade began with Person to Person” even though “nobody would like to admit it” (Merron, 1988, p. 29).
Murrow’s Fall at CBS

By the late 1950s the television industry experienced tremendous expansion and growth. The emergence of ABC, the third television network, meant that the other two, CBS and NBC, had to compete harder for advertising dollars. This led to an even greater emphasis on providing programming that would attract an audience at the expense of more educational and news-centered offerings (Kendrick, 1969). This also meant that programs like *See It Now*, which had enjoyed nearly unlimited financial resources from CBS despite low ratings, were now under greater scrutiny.

As quiz shows flourished, the networks began devoting less airtime to news and information programming. One of the causalities was Murrow’s *See It Now*. In June of 1955 *The $64,000 Question* first aired just before *See It Now* and quickly emerged as a ratings success (Persico, 1990). CBS realized that the audience’s appetite for quiz shows and similar entertainment was too great to warrant giving up valuable primetime space for low-rated public affairs programming. The program was the demoted from a weekly program to an occasional special, and *See It Now* soon earned the unofficial title “See It Now and Then” (Grossman, 2002). To the shock of Murrow and others involved in the highly acclaimed program, *See It Now* was taken off of CBS’s schedule altogether. Its final broadcast aired in July of 1958, a program dealing with the reemergence of Germany (Edwards, 2004).

Murrow was also starting to fall out of favor at CBS. His style of broadcasting, which often exemplified urgency and worry, was fitting for World War II and immediately after, but came across as antiquated by the late 1950s (Baughman, 1981). Some critics even began referring to him as the "voice of doom," implying that his style no longer reflected the mood of the nation (Edgerton, 1992). Persico (1990) contends that Murrow was becoming “a nagging
Murrow’s growing dissatisfaction with broadcast journalism culminated in a high-profile address to others within the industry. In 1958 the Radio-Television News Directors Association asked Murrow to give the keynote address at their annual convention in Chicago. Murrow gave his address to the RTNDA during a time when he believed broadcasting began emphasizing profits over quality programming, and his assessment of his profession was not flattering. He told his fellow radio and television journalists that he was “seized with an abiding fear regarding what these two instruments are doing to our society, our culture and our heritage” (Murrow, 1965, p. 27). He argued that the industry was headed in the wrong direction and needed to change its course. He forewarned that broadcasters “shall pay for using this most powerful instrument of communication to insulate the citizenry from the hard and demanding realities which must be faced if we are to survive” (Murrow, 1965, p. 28).

**Rhetorical Criticism of Murrow’s RTNDA Speech**

Rhetorical criticism offers a useful method of considering Murrow’s RTNDA address by analyzing how he rhetorically constructed his address not only for the crowd of news directors gathered in the room, but also for the lasting impact it might have on his profession. Through careful word selection and emphasizing some elements over others, Murrow formulated a speech that is quoted by broadcasters even today and for many has become the standard they use to carry out their profession. Thus, rhetorical analysis is uniquely applicable Murrow’s speech because it aids scholarly understanding of history and rhetorical legacy from an interpretive rather than methodologically driven approach.
The first step in my rhetorical analysis was to examine Murrow's speech using the technique of descriptive analysis as outlined by Campbell and Burkholder (1997). As Campbell and Burkholder (1997) state, the goal becomes to answer two questions: “1) What is the apparent purpose of the discourse, or what aim or goal does the rhetor seek?” and “2) How does the discourse work to achieve that purpose, or what strategies does the rhetor employ to achieve the goal?” (p. 20). In order to achieve that goal, they recommend examining the artifact for seven key elements: purpose, persona, audience, tone, structure, supporting materials, and other strategies of the speech. To accomplish this task I read through Murrow’s RTNDA seven times, keeping in mind each element as I analyzed the address. By considering each of these elements, I was able to gain more familiarity with the contents of the speech that led to a deeper understanding the text.

The findings of the descriptive analysis informed the next steps in the rhetorical process. I conclude that the purpose of Murrow’s address was to liberate broadcasting from what he saw as the evils of corporate and commercial influence. He made a rational appeal to a broader audience while formulating a vision of the industry that would appeal to more immediate audience of broadcast journalists. To accomplish that goal, Murrow used the strategy of moralizing the profession of broadcasting journalism as virtuous and significant for maintaining a democracy. This strategy relates to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s (1969) theories of universal audience in that he makes a rational appeal to an audience beyond his immediate listeners, but he also appeals to the particular audience of broadcast journalists, who he knew would respond to such a message.

The descriptive analysis also reveals that Murrow places an emphasis on corporate responsibility in solving the problem. In doing so, however, Murrow downplayed the struggle of
the individual. He fails to mention the circumstances concerning his frustrations with CBS and what some considered to be his own contributions to television programming that was more distracting than informative—the Person to Person program. This would suggest that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s (1969) rhetorical strategy of presence is also an appropriate analytical tool.

**Perelman's Universal and Particular Audience**

The idea of framing specific messages for maximum persuasive effect is a central theme in the work of Chaim Perelman. Along with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, he provided valuable insight into the formulation of persuasive messages by developing the concept of the particular and universal audience as it relates to making an argument. In rhetorical critical analysis, these strategies can reveal the way in which an argument can resonate with not only the immediate audience, but one that transcends time and space.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) emphasize the importance of audience and argue that a speaker must often be concerned with the audience beyond those who are physically present at the time. They provide the examples of a politician addressing parliament or a person granting an interview to a reporter (p. 19). In such cases the speaker may not simply be addressing the people in the same room, but is making an argument that is meant for an audience that is not there. It is this broader unseen audience that leads Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca to the conclusion that the audience becomes a construction in the mind of the speaker. They therefore introduce the concept of the universal audience in order to create an argument that has the potential to be affective beyond the immediate time and setting.

While the universal audience is described as one that would react to an appeal based on facts, reason, and truths, Perelman (1979) contrasts this with those who respond to specific
values, such as shared standards. "Indeed, most values are particular in that they are accepted only by a particular group" (p. 15). This particular audience is made up of those with shared ideas that would respond to an argument other groups would not. The particular audience responds not to the real, but rather to the preferable, which Ray (1978) describes as dealing with "values, hierarchies of values, and lines of argument which refer to the preferable" (p. 365). There can therefore be multiple levels of persuasion within the same address, attempting to persuade both those individuals who respond to the rational and real and others that would be persuaded by adhering to particular values and beliefs.

**Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s Theory of Presence**

Another key concept of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) in creating an effective argument is the orator giving certain parts of an argument "presence," by which "the very fact of selecting certain elements and presenting them to the audience, their importance and pertinence to the discussion are implied." (p. 116). The idea is that those items that are closer or more apparent to the audience are the ones they will see as more important, and in many cases help win their acceptance. It is vital, therefore, for the presenter to make a series of choices in formulating an argument by selecting and highlighting certain components so that they come to the fore. By doing so they are endowed with a "presence" that makes those elements of the message more persuasive.

Conversely, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) discuss the negative effects of presence. When certain facts or elements are suppressed or downplayed in making an argument, the audience may deem them as unimportant. Perelman (1982) argued that giving elements of a presentation presence "prevents them from being neglected" (p. 35), so therefore the opposite is also true. By not giving certain elements of an address presence, those components will tend to
be the ones that the audience will deem inconsequential. Presence therefore becomes a tool of the rhetor to not only lend more credibility to certain aspects of an argument, but to deemphasize others the speaker may find undesirable.

**Murrow’s Appeal to the Universal**

Within his RTNDA address, Murrow crafted a speech that he believed would make a rational argument for his assertions that changes needed to be made to the broadcasting industry as it was transforming in 1958. In doing so, he used a line of reasoning that drew upon his own background and reflected the concerns of the times. These primary appeals to the universal audience included the following assertions: a) distraction is dangerous, b) controversy can be constructive, and c) greed should not supersede societal responsibility. With each point, Murrow attempted to urge an audience that would respond to facts and reason so they would begin to question the status quo within the broadcasting industry and take action to change its course.

**Distraction is dangerous.** One of Murrow’s key assertions is that a society will eventually find itself in danger if it becomes distracted and is ill-informed about the important issues of the day. Murrow (1965) alludes to this early on in his address when he talks of his “abiding fear regarding what these two instruments are doing to our society, our culture and our heritage” (p. 27). He makes a point of listing the three items as an indication that the dangers he fears from distraction are far-reaching and have the potential to impact many facets of America. For Murrow, the potential dangers to “our heritage” (p. 27) included not only the heritage of the nation as a democracy, but also the heritage of the broadcasting industry that he held in such high regard. He was concerned that the emphasis placed on entertaining the masses and distracting them from world concerns would be a legacy that he and others in the profession would not be proud to say they had a hand in establishing.
Murrow (1965) then looks ahead to the future and contends that historians will look back at the programming schedule of the three major networks and see “evidence of decadence, escapism and insulation from the realities of the world in which we live” (p. 28). He asserts that during primetime viewing hours in particular the networks are supplying only “fleeting and spasmodic reference to the fact that this nation is in mortal danger” and that by doing so “television in the main insulates us from the realities of the world in which we live” (p. 28). Murrow knew this to be the case from his own experiences with his *See It Now* program. At one time it was on the primetime schedule, but towards the end of its run was delegated to Sunday afternoons when few viewers were watching. As programs like *See It Now* were disappearing from the schedule, more game shows and similar lucrative entertainment offerings were filling up the time slots. He envisioned a bleak future if the broadcasting industry continued to turn America’s attention away from the global threats it was facing.

Murrow (1965) continues his vision of a dismal outlook for both the nation and the broadcasting industry if his concerns are not addressed.

We are currently wealthy, fat, comfortable and complacent. We have currently a built-in allergy to unpleasant or disturbing information. Our mass media reflect this. But unless we get up off our fat surpluses and recognize that television in the main is being used to distract, delude, amuse and insulate us, then television and those who finance it, those who look at it and those who work at it, may see a totally different picture too late. (p. 32)

Murrow expands on the idea of distraction by including the word “delude,” which implies a type of deception. Part of the delusion Murrow likely saw in television is that Americans were being lulled into thinking the threats to the nation were not as great as they seemed because they were not being exposed to them. Without the knowledge of these threats, there could possibly be a
false sense of safety and security. This idea is carried forward with Murrow’s choice of the word “insulate.” Murrow worried that with lack of information, citizens were being placed in a protective shell, unaware of what was transpiring on the outside.

**Controversy can be constructive.** Another ongoing appeal to the universal audience in Murrow’s address is that stirring up controversy by talking about issues that generate public debate can have a positive outcome. He believed that once citizens became aware of the important issues of the day, it would lead to a public discourse that would help in dealing with the problems that faced America. Murrow (1965) expresses this concept through quoting World War I correspondent and *New York World* columnist Heywood Broun:

> I am frightened by the imbalance, the constant striving to reach the largest possible audience for everything; by the absence of a sustained study of the state of the nation. Heywood Broun once said, "No body politic is healthy until it begins to itch." I would like television to produce some itching pills rather than this endless outpouring of tranquilizers. It can be done. Maybe it won't be, but it could. (p. 30)

Murrow wanted broadcasting not only to begin to lead people away from distraction, but stir up some positive anxiety. He wanted listeners and viewers to begin to feel uncomfortable about what was going on in the world. Murrow believed that only then might the public begin to be engaged in world affairs and confront the challenges that they had been hiding from through watching constant entertainment programming.

Murrow (1965) continues this line of argument by offering evidence from his past experiences that would support his assertion that covering contentious topics can lead to a positive outcome: “I have reason to know, as do many of you, that when the evidence on a controversial subject is fairly and calmly presented, the public recognizes it for what it is--an
effort to illuminate rather than to agitate” (p. 28). Murrow goes on to describe a broadcast concerning relations between Egypt and Israel and the naysayers that urged him not to confront such a topic saying “it is an emotion-packed controversy, and there is no room for reason in it” (p. 28). According to Murrow the broadcast received a positive response from officials on both sides of the debate who described it as a “fair account,” and saying that “the information was there. We have no complaints” (p. 28).

This account is a description of a See It Now broadcast from early in 1956 with Murrow covering the Israeli side of the debate while Howard K. Smith filed a report from Egypt (Persico, 1990). The controversy began after the U.S. had withdrawn American aid for the Egyptians to build a dam at Aswan (Sperber, 1986). This move caused the Egyptians to turn to the Soviets for support, which led to more intense anti-Israeli sentiments (Kendrick, 1969). By late 1956, Egypt would nationalize the Suez Canal, which would lead to the start of the Suez War. Despite the broadcast not leading to a resolution to the conflict, during that time Murrow wrote to a friend describing what he considered to be the goals of the broadcast: “I don’t expect anybody to agree with all of it, but at least the Arabs and Jews get a better opportunity that they had…. to express their views (Sperber, 1986, p. 508). Murrow realized covering a controversial subject like Arab-Israeli relations would not always lead to definitive solution, but he saw value in creating a better understanding of such issues.

Murrow (1965) offered other examples where controversial subjects were covered and received a positive response: the supposed connection between cigarette smoking and lung cancer and nuclear tests and radioactive fallout. He used these instances from his past to demonstrate, as he states in his RTNDA address, “that timidity in these areas is not warranted by the evidence” (p. 28). He evokes the universal audience with this claim by providing factual
evidence through several examples to support his ideas. He has seen for himself that discussion of controversial topics benefits society and he was attempting to convince others of this truth.

**Greed should not supersede societal responsibility.** Murrow further evokes the universal audience with his arguments that the pursuit of money should not get in the way of the industry’s responsibility to the public. Murrow believed the power of the media brought with it a duty to properly inform the citizenry even though that choice might not always be lucrative for the networks and the corporations that sponsored them. His contention was that along with the seemingly endless broadcasts of game shows, comedies, and other profitable programs, the industry had a responsibility to offer informative, thought-provoking fare to its viewers.

Murrow (1965) suggests that like newspapers, broadcasting should also engage its viewers with occasional editorial content, but that the concern over profits often gets in the way:

> It is much easier, much less troublesome, to use the money-making machine of television and radio merely as a conduit through which to channel anything that is not libelous, obscene or defamatory. In that way one has the illusion of power without responsibility.

(p. 29)

In his RTNDA address, Murrow certainly would have been considering his confrontation with McCarthy when he talked about putting duty ahead of profit. He was presenting his case that with the “power” that broadcasting wields, it also has the “responsibility” that comes with it (Murrow, 1965, p. 29). Murrow saw for himself the need to fulfill that responsibility and accomplished it with his *See It Now* broadcasts. He would expect the same of the industry as a whole.

Murrow drives this point home further by questioning whether what the stations are offering can even be considered to be worthwhile: “If radio news is to be regarded as a
commodity, only acceptable when saleable, then I don't care what you call it--I say it isn't news” (p. 29). Murrow draws a distinct line here between what should be a station’s obligation and what is optional depending on whether it can attract a sponsor. If the amount of news available to public is dictated solely by sponsorship, the public has the potential to miss out on crucial information they need to function in society.

Murrow (1965) continues to lay out the facts to support his case by reminding stations of their legal requirements in broadcasting to the public:

Every licensee who applies for a grant to operate in the public interest, convenience and necessity makes certain promises as to what he will do in terms of program content.

Many recipients of licenses have, in blunt language, welshed on those promises. The money-making machine somehow blunts their memories. (p. 30)

Murrow appeals to the universal by stating a given fact—that stations have a legal responsibility to serve the public. He his reminding them that putting the public ahead of their profits is not just something that they should do, but it is a commitment they are legally bound to fulfill.

Murrow’s RTNDA was based on what he considered to be “real” in the midst of complex and dangerous world. As defined by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) the “real” is composed of "facts, truths and presumptions" (p. 66). While the goal is present an argument that is “self-evident, and possess and absolute and timeless validity” (p. 32), as Frank (1998) asserts, it is still dependent on “the speaker's experience, culture and time-period” (p. 124) since it is a construction in the mind of the speaker. Murrow based his arguments to the universal audience of the dangers of distraction, the benefits of covering controversy, and the need to put social responsibility ahead of profits on his background as a journalist and the state of the world as he
observed it. By using several examples and taking his audience through what he believed were logical choices, he formulated an argument to the universal.

**Murrow’s Appeal to the Particular Using Presence**

In addition to his appeal to the universal, Murrow also appealed to the particular audience of broadcast journalists, drawing upon their shared devotion for the profession and a belief that it holds a special place in protecting a democratic society. This address to the particular included two major assertions: a) broadcasting is a moral endeavor and b) the moral struggle concerning the profession lies at the top. These points speak to "values” and “hierarchies of values” as described by Ray (1978) in his discussion of the particular audience. Murrow and many others in the profession saw themselves as providing an invaluable service to society that was crucial to its survival. They wanted to believe that they could make a difference if only they could be unshackled by the corporate greed that was corrupting their otherwise moral profession.

In crafting these appeals to the particular, there is also evidence of establishing “presence” as described by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969). This is evident through Murrow’s use of metaphors and analogies, which Murphy (1994) and Measell (1989) contend can become important in establishing presence. In creating presence, however, Murrow also places other facts and lines of argumentation in the background. In Murrow’s case, he places the responsibility viewers have in embracing informational programming in the background, instead placing the burden solely on the corporate structure. He also downplays his own disagreements with CBS, including the cancelation of his *See It Now* program. Murrow also deemphasized the individual dilemmas and responsibilities related to the broadcasting industry. This is seen in his lack of attention to the compromises individual reporters might face; such as some contend he did when hosting the popular but fluffy *Person to Person* program.
**Broadcasting is a moral endeavor.** Throughout his RTNDA address, Murrow speaks to the particular audience by picturing broadcast journalism as not just a profession, but a moral pursuit. Murrow (1965) establishes this tone of reverence for broadcast journalism early on in his speech by address the audience in the room as individuals who “labor in this vineyard that produces words and pictures” (p. 27). By painting a picture of a vineyard Murrow is alluding to broadcast journalism as a profession that should bear fruit. The expectation is that the toil and effort that broadcast journalists put in on a daily basis should result in reports that feed and nurture society.

Murrow (1965) describes the two segments of broadcasting—television and radio—as “instruments” (p. 27). Murrow’s connection of radio and television as “instruments” is an ongoing theme throughout his address. He describes how “these instruments have been good to me beyond my due,” (p. 27), shows concerns for what “these two instruments are doing to our society” (p. 27), and speaks of “the obligation of these instruments” (p. 30). Seven times throughout his address Murrow refers to radio and television as “instruments,” implying that they should be more than just a distraction, but they also have a purpose. Broadcasting was not meant to simply be a distraction, but should and must become something more.

Murrow (1965) further alludes to the moral responsibilities of the broadcasting profession when he poses a question concerning the time it spends informing the public: “Do we merely stay in our comfortable nests, concluding that the obligation of these instruments has been discharged when we work at the job of informing the public for a minimum of time?” (p. 30). He quickly follows his reference to “comfortable nests” by reminding them of the “obligation of these instruments” (p. 30). In doing so, he implies that there is a moral responsibility that
accompanies being involved in broadcast journalism and that it should be focused on serving the public over profits.

Just as he began by alluding to the wondrous nature of the technology involved in radio and television and the moral responsibilities connected with that power, Murrow concludes his address by once again reflecting on those ideas. Murrow (1965) puts forth the hypothetical question of what would happen if his conclusions related to the moral obligations related to broadcasting are incorrect:

Because if they are right, and this instrument is good for nothing but to entertain, amuse and insulate, then the tube is flickering now and we will soon see that the whole struggle is lost. This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. 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. (p. 32)

With this statement Murrow connects the people involved in broadcasting with their ethical duties. The technology involved with broadcasting brings with it an obligation to serve the public, but that can only happen if those involved with the profession fulfill that mission. Without that moral compass to guide them, the marvelous technology associated with broadcasting is meaningless.

Placing this final appeal concerning the moral obligations of the profession at the end of his address again speaks to Murrow’s (1965) use of presence in his speech. At the start of his speech he describes the technology involved with broadcasting as “miraculous” (p. 27), but now at the end he counters that by downplaying the miraculous nature of these instruments if they are not used properly. He entire speech was an indictment of the industry and how greed had impeded its obligations to the public. Without that moral foundation to keep broadcasting on
course, the technology was no longer “miraculous,” but merely “wires and lights in a box” (p. 32).

The moral struggle lies at the top. Murrow’s appeal to the particular audience of broadcast journalist continued with the argument that the battle in maintaining the moral standards of the industry can only be resolved at the top of the broadcasting structure. This message would have been appealing to the broadcast journalists he was addressing since it reinforced their own frustrations. Murrow gave presence to his argument that the responsibility for demoralizing broadcasting rested with the corporate heads. At the same time he deemphasized the role of the individual in the struggle for maintaining the moral foundation of the industry.

One of Murrow’s (1965) main contentions is that the wrong people are in charge of making decision about news content. He argues that the business of news, entertainment, and advertising are by their nature “incompatible” (p. 29) and that the leaders of the networks were trained in sales or entertainment and do not have the proper knowledge concerning news and informational programming. According to Murrow giving these individuals power over news divisions is unwise: “But by the nature of the corporate structure, they also make the final and crucial decisions having to do with news and public affairs. Frequently they have neither the time nor the competence to do this” (p. 29). An indictment of the network leadership would have been a message welcomed by the particular audience of broadcast journalists, reinforcing their own beliefs that the heads of the networks were making the wrong choices.

Murrow follows by placing the blame related to the constant barrage of entertainment shows at the expense of informational programming on the corporate sponsors. Throughout his speech, he had defined the problem. Murrow finally gets to what he sees as a possible solution
by connecting the concept of the “corporate image” with a moral obligation to better society. Murrow (1965) seeks to redefine the term “corporate image” to include a responsibility to better serve the public:

I am not precisely sure what this phrase means, but I would imagine that it reflects a desire on the part of the corporations who pay the advertising bills to have the public image, or believe that they are not merely bodies with no souls, panting in pursuit of elusive dollars. (p. 30)

Murrow constructs a metaphor that recognizes that corporations must also be concerned with not just financial, but also ethical concerns. By referring to them as “bodies with no souls,” he implies that they become entities with no moral compass.

Murrow’s illustration of corporations needing to acquire a better moral foundation continues with his description of a plan to have the largest corporations give up some air time to make room for informational programming. Murrow (1965) even formulates the words these corporations can use to explain why they are choosing to give up the valuable airtime by describing it as a “tiny tithe” (p. 31). The use of the word “tithe” also points to a moral obligation. This is again an indication of Murrow’s belief that the corporate world has demonstrated an ethical lapse by only supporting programming they know will attract the largest audience, resulting in greater profits for them.

Murrow (1965) continues to endow presence to his contention that the moral struggle concerning broadcasting lies with the heads of industry. He accomplishes this by placing it towards the end of speech, reinforcing his position:

The responsibility can be easily placed, in spite of all the mouthings about giving the public what it wants. It rests on big business, and on big television, and it rests at the top.
Responsibility is not something that can be assigned or delegated. And it promises its own reward: good business and good television. (p. 32)

By placing this statement near the conclusion of his speech, it acts as a closing argument in Murrow’s case against the industry. He had spent his address laying out examples of broadcasting’s deficiencies in their service to the public and discussing the implications of keeping vital information from listeners and viewers. Murrow appeals to the particular audience of broadcast journalists by contending that they are in many respects victims of the corporate structure in which they labor every day. While warning them about the moral lapse within the industry, he asserts that the struggle for reclaiming what he sees as the overriding purpose of broadcasting lies at the top of structure.

**Viewing audience responsibility is diminished.** By giving presence to his argument that those at the top of the corporate structure are ultimately to blame for the lack of news and information on the schedule, Murrow downplays the contributions of the public in influencing the lack of such programming. Murrow (1965) decries the corporate idea of reaching “for the largest possible audience” which leads to “this process of insulation, of escape from reality” (pp. 30-31), but never dares criticize the public for flocking to such fair. He instead deflects responsibility away from the viewers who choose to watch entertainment programming that distracts them from the realities of the world. In doing so, Murrow presents an idealistic view of the viewing public, who he asserts respond to informational programs in a rational manner.

Within his argument, Murrow makes some broad statements that indicate an optimistic view of the viewing public. Murrow (1965), for example, describes an audience that would be receptive: “I am entirely persuaded that the American public is more reasonable, restrained and more mature than most of our industry's program planners believe. Their fear of controversy is
not warranted by the evidence” (p. 28). Murrow reinforces this idea towards the end of his speech, again using the word “evidence” in describing his reasoning: “To those who say people wouldn't look; they wouldn't be interested; they're too complacent, indifferent and insulated, I can only reply: There is, in one reporter's opinion, considerable evidence against that contention” (p. 32). Murrow paints a picture of an audience that would respond positively to programming that includes controversial subjects. According to Murrow they would watch and react in a reasonable manner.

Murrow’s evidence that the public would respond rationally to programming that deals with controversial topics was likely based on his own experiences with his See It Now program and particularly the telecasts that took on McCarthy. What Murrow fails to mention in his RTNDA address is that despite the critical acclaim See It Now garnered, it was never a ratings success among the public. Even when CBS moved the program to a prime time slot, few viewers gravitated towards the program. Even the celebrated Report on Senator McCarthy, as Merron (1988) points out, “was viewed in only 2,394,000 homes, a small audience even then for prime-time television.” While the McCarthy debate that the program addressed did spark a reaction from the public, that interest did not translate into large numbers tuning into the program. Merron suggests that it was coverage of the broadcasts, not the telecasts themselves that often made the show impactful: “…what the critics thought important and noteworthy did not necessarily correspond to the viewing audience’s opinion” (p. 6).

While it is possible, as was the case with the Report on Senator McCarthy, that even a low rated telecast can spark a lively debate on a topic, Murrow goes well beyond that single example in his assessment of the public. He implies that the audience will respond appropriately to all informative programming if given the opportunity. By ascribing these idealistic traits to the
viewing audience, he diminishes their responsibility in creating a programming lineup full of entertainment offerings. The blame is instead placed solely on the corporate leaders who should fulfill their moral duty to society by providing such programming.

**The struggle of the individual broadcaster is diminished.** In putting the burden of maintaining the moral obligations of the broadcasting industry at the upper corporate level, Murrow (1965) also places in the background the struggle individuals can have within that structure. This can be found early in his address when he asserts: “These instruments have been good to me beyond my due. There exists in my mind no reasonable grounds for personal complaint. I have no feud, either with my employers, any sponsors, or with the professional critics of radio and television” (p. 27). Murrow gives the impression that his views on broadcasting are removed from any personal grievances that he might have with CBS and its leadership.

Murrow is being disingenuous with the audience when he states that he has no “grounds for personal complaint” and that he has no “feud” with his employer or sponsors. Murrow had seen his award-winning *See It Now* program demoted to an occasional special and eventually cancelled altogether (Sperber, 1986). Even worse, CBS decided to cash in on the valuable prime time slot *See It Now* was occupying, replacing it with the quiz show *Beat the Clock* (Persico, 1990). Murrow had an ongoing dispute with his employer, but was not forthcoming about it at the start of his speech.

Murrow also had reason to be personally frustrated with the corporate sponsors that he had seen turn away from supporting *See It Now* during its run on CBS. Alcoa had dropped their financial support of the program, presumably over a *See It Now* telecast that criticized the Texas state government during a time when the company was hoping to expand its operations there.
(Persico, 1990). Murrow had seen for himself the fickle nature of corporate sponsors, who often acted out of their own interests rather than that of the public.

By giving presence to the broader, corporate issues related to the industry at the expense of the personal battles, Murrow places the individual conflicts in the background. Certainly news directors and others in the RTNDA audience had faced debates with their own management concerning news content versus commercial interests. Murrow (1965) alludes to this when he mentions that their “aspirations are frequently frustrated” (p. 27), but he fails to go into further details. Instead, Murrow’s solution to their frustrations rests on the good will of corporate heads to sponsor occasional quality programming.

Murrow also places in the background of his address what some considered to be his own contributions in creating a prime time schedule of programming that reflected the “escapism” Murrow was speaking out against. For many television critics and colleagues, Murrow’s Person to Person was an indication Murrow had been benefiting from viewers’ appetite for such programs (Sperber, 1986). In not mentioning his involvement with Person to Person, Murrow fails to acknowledge that in order to function as part of the broadcasting industry he had to be a willing participant of the corporate structure.

By giving presence to the broader corporate struggle for broadcasting’s moral direction and failing to mention what some would consider to be his own personal compromises, Murrow deemphasized the struggle the individual broadcaster has in balancing their journalistic obligations with those related to the corporate structure. His actions with hosting Person to Person suggest that within a commercial system of broadcasting Murrow realized that there is a give and take that occurs for the individual broadcaster. Like Murrow, television reporters are often confronted with having to make their own compromises because of the commercial nature
of the industry. The individual must comply with the corporate requirements in order to perform their journalistic duties.

Conclusion

Murrow crafted his RTNDA address in a way that would appeal to multiple audiences. He put forth a rational argument filled with factual examples to convince a universal audience that to continually distract the public is dangerous, that discussing controversial topics can be beneficial, and that greed should not get in the way of broadcasting’s duty to society. In speaking to a particular audience of broadcast journalists, he incorporated the strategy of presence to emphasize his assertion that broadcasting is a moral pursuit and the battle for its soul lies at the top.

In endowing presence to his argument concerning the corporate battle for the ethical foundation of broadcasting, Murrow deemphasizes the roles of both the viewers and individual broadcasters. He creates an idealistic vision of the viewing public, asserting that they would respond reasonably to informational programming if only given the chance. His emphasis on the broader corporate struggle also downplays the dilemma individual broadcast journalists face in maintaining their own moral balance between serving the public and their employer.

The sum total of these strategies led to a speech that has set the tone for the broadcast profession today, but in many ways is a construction based on Murrow’s journalistic ideals. It emphasizes the corporate dangers to society while ignoring many of the realities of the profession. This includes a viewing audience that may be ambivalent towards hard news reports or the requirement of a newscast to be successful in the ratings and turn a profit. While his speech is an ongoing inspiration for those in the professional, for many of them it has also become, using Murrow’s words, an “insulation from the realities of the world in which we live”
(Murrow, 1965, p. 28). The idealism that was illustrated throughout his career is reflected in his RTNDA speech, and by using it as an inspiration for today’s broadcast journalists, it fails to provide a full and accurate picture of the profession.

By formulating an address that appealed to a particular audience of broadcast journalists that placed the blame at the top, also Murrow missed the chance to encourage broadcast journalists to evaluate their own efforts in fulfilling their journalistic obligations. There was an opportunity to challenge them to assess what kinds of stories they were producing for their viewers. Were they fulfilling their journalistic obligations or simply providing entertainment value? In what ways could broadcast journalists at the local level help viewers develop an appetite for informative programming? Besides his call for changes at the top, Murrow could have helped encourage change from within.

Murrow has become an inspiration for those in broadcast news through his many journalistic accomplishments and the moral standards he set for the profession. Part of that legacy includes his criticism of the broadcasting industry and the growing imbalance between its commercial and journalistic obligations. Those challenges still exist within the industry and broadcast journalists can easily become frustrated when changes for the better fail to occur. The reality, however, is that they must still operate within that system. While many quote Murrow’s 1958 RTNDA address even today to describe what is wrong with the broadcasting industry, the rhetorical strategies he employed led to an incomplete assessment of the problem, and therefore limited his vision for improvements. His emphasis on a top-down solution resulted in an address that releases the viewing public from any responsibility and offers little in the way of advice on how broadcast journalists can help make improvements from within.
REFERENCES


