What Would Murrow Do?

This year, RTNDA marks two anniversaries in the life of a broadcast pioneer who raised issues today’s journalists still face.

When you walk into the RTNDA office in Washington, the first thing you see is a larger-than-life photomural of Edward R. Murrow mounted on the wall. To feature Murrow so prominently in our headquarters is entirely fitting. Murrow has long been the patron saint of RTNDA, a pioneer in electronic journalism who set the example many still feel is the touchstone for excellence.

That’s why RTNDA’s annual awards for outstanding work in electronic journalism are named the Edward R. Murrow Awards. That’s why, even though he died 43 years ago, his name is still invoked in discussions of the mission and purpose of broadcast news.

This year, two anniversaries will remind us of Murrow and the lessons he taught. Murrow was born 100 years ago on April 25, 1908. And he delivered his most important speech about journalism 50 years ago at the 1958 RTNDA convention in Chicago. That speech, known as the “wires and lights in a box” speech, was brought to public attention in George Clooney’s 2005 movie, “Good Night, and Good Luck.”

To many, and maybe even to many who currently work in radio and television newsrooms, Murrow may be a distant or even forgotten figure. Still, a look at his life and his words reveals many lessons for today’s journalists. For that reason, RTNDA and RTNDF will make those lessons a theme for 2008. Simply put, we’ll explore the question, “What would Murrow do?” You, as a member of RTNDA, are invited to take part in a variety of ways.

Next month’s Communicator will feature a series of essays about his life and work and how his lessons apply to the current state of the news media. In April, the month that marks the centenary of Murrow’s birth, a special session at RTNDA@NAB will bring together news leaders, Murrow biographers and one or two of “Murrow’s Boys” to assess his legacy and what advice he might offer to deal with today’s journalism challenges. In June, RTNDF, the McCormick Tribune Foundation and the McCormick Tribune Conference Series will host a summit of top news executives, anchors, correspondents and scholars to address the questions Murrow raised in his RTNDA speech of 50 years ago. The report from that summit will be published so that everyone can benefit from the results of the discussion. In October, the RTNDA Awards Dinner, where the national 2008 Murrow Awards will be presented, will feature a special tribute to Murrow.

Who was this industry pioneer whose life we’re celebrating this year? Bob Edwards, himself an outstanding radio journalist, summed up Murrow’s accomplishments this way in his book, “Edward R. Murrow and the Birth of Broadcast Journalism.” Edwards writes: “On a single day in 1938 he pioneered the overseas network reporting staff and the roundup news format. ... Then in 1951, he moved television beyond its function as a headline service and established it as an original news source. ... He also gave broadcast journalism a set of standards that matched those of the best newspapers in terms of what stories to cover and how to cover them.”

Murrow’s reporting on World War II and his ground-breaking investigative television program “See It Now” still hold up as examples of the best in broadcast journalism. He built the extraordinary team that became the heart of CBS News, ranging from Eric Sevareid and Walter Cronkite to Daniel Schorr and Marvin Kalb. But by the fall of 1958, Murrow had become disillusioned and even angry. “See It Now,” which had exposed the demagoguery of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, had been canceled that summer. Murrow accepted an invitation to address the RTNDA convention in Chicago. On October 15, he began the speech that is still studied in journalism schools and quoted by critics with an appropriate warning: “This just might do nobody any good. At the end of this discourse, a few people may accuse this reporter of fouling his own comfortable nest, and your organization may be accused of giving hospitality to heretical and even dangerous thoughts.”

The best-known quote came near the end of his nearly 40-minute speech. Summing up his concerns about the future of serious journalism on television, he said:

“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.”

The issues Murrow raised 50 years ago are still before us. Are entertainment values overwhelming serious news? What place does opinion and controversy have in a traditional impartial press? What are the business models of the future that will support journalism in the public interest? Excerpts from Murrow’s speech point toward questions today’s journalists need to ask themselves.
“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. But even if they are right, what have they got to lose? 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.”

Murrow himself was no stranger to celebrity journalism. His “Person to Person” broadcasts brought figures as varied as Marilyn Monroe and Liberace into American homes. But he rationalized that doing a show with high fluff content bought him goodwill with CBS executives to do the more serious “See It Now.”

The question of entertainment versus news is just as hot today as it was 50 years ago. When Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan dominate the headlines, journalists have to ask themselves how to find the balance between what people want to know and what they need to know. Some think news about crime and violence is a form of entertainment, that covering car chases appeals to voyeurism. In a celebrity-obsessed culture, how do news directors maintain and grow their audience while giving them the substantive news they need to function as citizens?

“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. 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.”

Murrow made no secret of his point of view in many of his broadcasts. In his coverage of McCarthyism and documentaries such as “Harvest of Shame,” he marshaled facts to prove his thesis. Some of his statements on controversial parison? How do journalists draw the line between reporting and opinion?

“I can find nothing in the Bill of Rights or the Communications Act which says that (news divisions) must increase their net profit each year, lest the Republic collapse.”

In Murrow’s day, with less competition, networks and stations had few financial worries. News departments were not expected to earn a profit, but were considered a necessary expense to prove the station operated “in the public interest, convenience and necessity.” Advertisers were eager to use the popular medium to reach a vast audience. Now, bigger challenges confront mainstream news in a digital age—a time when anyone with a camera or a cell phone can be a reporter, when the blogosphere offers a forum for those without professional training or standards and when the struggle for audience share threatens the entire industry. What business models will preserve quality journalism in the future? How can we guarantee that the public has the kind of information needed to function in a democracy?

At a time when journalists are looking to the future, some in fear and some in eager anticipation, it’s also helpful to look back. Murrow, who as much as any single person created broadcast news, taught lessons that are relevant today. As RTNDA celebrates the life of this industry pioneer, I hope you’ll take the opportunity to join in this year-long commemoration by reflecting on these issues and sharing your thoughts on the key question, “What would Murrow do?” —Barbara Cochran may be reached at president@rtnda.org.