By Ann M. Sperber

"NO HOPE WHATEVER..."

Here is the background to Edward R. Murrow’s famous address to the RTNDA convention in 1958. The speech changed his life, and our association’s.

Dear Ed: A straight lead is the quickest way into a hard news story, and this is our story....

That was what had started it off—the invitation to Chicago. But those sending it out hadn’t really expected him to accept. Murrow was the busiest man in broadcasting—TV documentaries; radio news, live, five nights a week; his Friday night Person to Person show was consistently in the top ten. He was a network unto himself, said Time magazine: the “king of broadcast news.”

Still, they had tried, writing to his office at CBS, New York City, in the spring of 1958. Would he address the upcoming meeting of the Radio-Television News Directors Association at the Sheraton-Blackstone hotel, Wednesday evening, October 15, on any subject of his choice? “Like yourself, the officers and directors of RTNDA have as their goals raising the sights and standards of broadcast news everywhere.” The signature at the bottom was that of Bill Garry, news chief for CBS in Chicago and a regional VP of RTNDA.

It was a long shot. Murrow had been cutting back on his personal appearances. Besides, he got hundreds of such requests, and he usually turned them down—once he got around to answering.

The answer, however, came within two weeks. Garry spotted the envelope in his mail box at WBBM, recognized the unmistakable thick cream-colored letterhead marked simply “Edward R. Murrow/485 Madison Avenue/New York 22.” No company logo, just name and address elegantly embossed. Even the chairman of the board of CBS didn’t use anything like it. But then, William Paley didn’t earn as much as Ed Murrow—not in salary anyway. A story had once made the rounds that the chairman, asked the reason at a stockholders’ meeting, had reputedly smiled, with the faintest suggestion of a shrug, and said: “I guess he’s worth more.”

They were known to be extremely close, friends since the 1930s, wartime comrades-in-arms. Murrow was a pillar of the network—he had once been a company vice president—unmoved by the fanciest outside offices, bound to CBS by ties of friendship and long-term contracts.

Garry was therefore unprepared for Murrow’s response that April: Yes, he would love to try his hand at a piece for them: “Somebody ought to make a speech on one of those occasions which would outrage all of our employers. The only trouble is I don’t know where the hell I will be on October 15. What is your deadline?”

Bill Small, news director at WHAS in Louisville and program chairman for the convention, accepted on behalf of the surprised RTNDA leadership: delighted with his answer: never mind the deadline; they’d wait until mid-September if they had to.

As it turned out, they didn’t have to. By late August Murrow had given them the go-ahead, his tone oddly combative: “This may do neither of us any good....” He also told Small that he intended to write out the speech—not another departure from standard practice: most RTNDA addresses were strictly informal, off the cuff. He intended, he said, to have the text distributed.

The board of directors restrained their curiosity, asked no questions. Confirming arrangements, Small assured Murrow they were looking forward to those words which would outrage their employers. Said Small later: “It didn’t matter. We were just glad to have him.”

The afternoon of October 15, he arrived at O’Hare with his news writer, Edward Bliss, Jr., and the text for the evening newscast. WBBM, the CBS-owned station in Chicago, sent a car around. The RTNDA had booked overnight accommodations for both men at the convention hotel.

They were driven first to the station, where Murrow did the nightly radio newscast, then on to the Blackstone for the reception already in progress. Small remembered Murrow as he appeared that day: tall—that always came as a shock to those who didn’t know him; weary; a little older than he seemed on the screen; his smile, like his hands, faintly yellowed with flecks of nicotine from the ever-present cigarettes.

In a separate folder he carried the speech: 21 pages, double spaced. Transcripts had begun going out to the major news media that morning, with release time set at 9 p.m. Copies had also gone to the CBS management. Throughout the months of work he had shown the original to no one—not even his partner and coproducer, Fred Friendly, his alter ego according to some, his beine noire in the eyes of others. Instead, everything had been carefully, quietly set up: the AP alerted, along with selected TV columnists; the Reporter magazine had arranged for reprints; additional copies supplied for distribution by RTNDA.

At the Blackstone he caught the tail end of the reception, everyone crowding around for a chance at the celebrity guest of honor. Murrow was smiling but tense.

At 7:30 they went in to dinner. He took his place on the dais, an RTNDA official on one side; on the other Leslie Atlass, former owner, now manager of WBBM, representing CBS. Mayor Richard Daley welcomed the newsmen to Chicago.

By nine, the formalities out of the way, Murrow rose to address the capacity audience crowding the Mayfair Room to the edges. It was a working session—the big bash, awards, black tie, was to come on Friday night—and they were working press, a small group in those days, run by and for local radio and television news directors across the country. The networks played a minor role.

He got the usual big hand as he stood before them, the establishment personified—gray suit, narrow lapels, the corporate uniform of the 1950s, hardly the
picture of a rebel.

"This just might do nobody any good..."

Down at the ballroom level Ed Bliss watched the men at his table exchange blank looks. What kind of opening was that?

"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 having given hospitality to heretical and even dangerous thoughts. But...it is my desire, if not my duty, to try to talk to you journeymen with some candor about what is happening to radio and television...."

"Candor" was, if anything, an understatement, as for the next 20 minutes the nation's highest-paid newsmen, the friend of William Paley and David Sarnoff, early supporter of Dwight Eisenhower, golfing partner of U.S. senators and FCC commissioners, ripped away at the government, the administration, the broadcasting industry, and specifically those who paid his salary: "Our history will be what we make it. And if there are any historians about 50 or 100 years from now, and there should be preserved the kinescopes from one week of all three networks, they will find...evidence of decadence, escapism and insulation from the realities of the world in which we live...." The audience mood had gone from quizical to one of rap attention.

"If there were to be a competition in indifference...then Nero and his fiddle, Chamberlain and his umbrella, could not find a place on an early afternoon sustaining show. If Hollywood were to run out of Indians, the program schedules would be mangled.... Then some courageous soul with a small budget might be able to do a documentary telling what, in fact, we have done—and are still doing—to the Indians in this country. But that would be unpleasant."

He hauled off against the FCC for rubber-stamping license renewals and abdicating its responsibilities under the Communications Act. The station owners, pledged to operate in the public interest, had "welsched" on their promises: "The money-making machine somehow blunts their memories." Leslie Atlass, sitting at Murrow's elbow, stared stonily into space, his face expressionless.

He scored the networks for "tridity": "When my employer, CBS...did an interview with Nikita Khrushchev, President Eisenhower uttered a few ill-chosen, unformed words on the subject, and the network practically apologized...."

"Likewise when John Foster Dulles, by personal decree, banned American journalists from going to Communist China...the networks entered only a mild protest.... Can it be that this national industry is content...to leave its viewers in ignorance of the cataclysmic changes that are occurring in a nation of 600 million people?"

"Their spokesmen say, 'We are young; we have not developed the traditions...of the older media.' If they but knew it, they are building those traditions, creating those precedents every day. Each time they yield to a voice from Washington...."

Then he got to the nitty-gritty and, in doing so, broke the first taboo of broadcasting: "Sometimes there is a clash between the public interest and the corporate interest....Upon occasion economic and editorial judgment are in conflict...." With that he had placed himself beyond the pale. Statesmanlike speeches in broadcasting circles could discuss just about anything—government pressure, sponsor pressure, the difficulties of being a license-dependent business—anything, but the bottom line.

He took a breath and dived in:

"One of the basic troubles with radio and television news is that both instruments have grown up as an incompatible combination of show business, advertising and news. Each of the three is rather (continued on page 52)
"But I can find nothing in the Bill of Rights or the Communications Act which says that they must increase their net profits each year, lest the Republic collapse," Ed Murrow told RTNDA.

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bizarre and demanding profession. And when you get all three under one roof, the dust never settles. The top management of the networks, with a few notable exceptions, has been trained in advertising, research, sales, or show business. 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...."

This time it was the audience that drew breath, fascinated. Bill Small, watching Murrow from the dia, could detect no anger or rancor in his voice. What he heard were rather the accents of despair: "Let us have a little competition. Not only in selling soap, cigarettes and automobiles....Just once in a while let us exalt the importance of ideas.... Surely we shall pay... I mean the word survive literally...." And, repeatedly, "the money-making machine."

To the news director, the man at the rostrum, so conspicuously a beneficiary of the medium he now denounced with all the fervor of his puritan background, seemed a开战or still a little in love with his sins, a man in conflict not only with his industry but with himself, turning on what he helped build up. "Potentially we have in this country a free enterprise system.... But to achieve its promise, it must be both free and enterprising."

"There is no suggestion here that networks or individual stations should operate as philanthropies. But I can find nothing in the Bill of Rights or the Communications Act which says that they must increase their net profits each year, lest the Republic collapse."

Richard Salant, assistant to CBS President Frank Stanton and himself a company vice president, was in the CBS boardroom when the speech came in, and copies were passed around among the assembled top management. Murrow had been sending transcripts upstairs for the last two days ("Here is a draft of what I am saying..."). directed to everyone in the hierarchy except the company president and the chairman of the board.

Salant watched the speech go from hand to hand, the decision level rising abruptly, the effect that of Pearl Harbor night at the White House: "Ingrate.... Pouling his nest... Biting the hand that feeds him...." Said Salant later: "They were flabbergasted. The reactions were so strong—great surprise, anger. It was kind of like the child you've nurtured turning on you."

Down on the seventeenth floor, Sig Mickelson, president of CBS News, appeared in the doorway of the newsroom to announce the speech was to be given full play wherever possible.

Earlier in the day, Stanton—cool, trim, perfectly in control—had withdrawn to his office to draft the company reply. On Tuesday, CBS Press Information rushed out a release: "TO CITY AND TV EDITORS: IN RESPONSE TO INQUIRIES ON A TALK SCHEDULED TO BE MADE BY..." (continued on page 54)
WAR R MURROW...

Down the corridor, news writers were already at work sandwiching the details—first Murrow, then the rebuttal (“What he has to say does not, of course, reflect the views of CBS management...”) into the 11 p.m. newscast, beating out the AP wire, with repeats slated for midnight, 1 a.m., and the early hours.

Nine-thirty in Chicago, Murrow was finishing up.

“It may be that the present system...can survive. Perhaps the money-making machine has some kind of built-in perpetual motion, but I do not think so...We are currently wealthy, fat, comfortable and complacent...Our mass media reflect this. But unless we get up off our fat surpluses and recognize that television...is being used to distract, delude, amuse and isolate 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...

“I began by saying that our history will be what we make it. If we go on as we are, then history will take its revenge, and retribution will not limp in catching up with us.”

There were a few seconds of silence, then roaring acclamation. Newsmen crowded around Murrow’s place on the dais. An adman from Young & Rubicam nodded agreement. Bill Garry saw a colleague, a man known never to sit for more than a few minutes at a time, turn to him and say, “It could have been longer, and he could have gone into more details.”

Bill Small and his wife guided Murrow to the elevator past scores of well-wishers waiting to shake his hand. There were no misgivings. “We felt it was a good, tough speech,” said Small later. “that he said what needed saying.”

Out in the corridor Murrow’s face was momentarily dark as he muttered, “Dirty, rotten sonuvabitch.” Only one of those present caught it. Back in the ballroom someone thought of as a friend had supposedly turned his back. “...Coward...” A mistaken impression perhaps, perhaps not; it had been a long, tense evening.

Upstairs, they relaxed. Murrow back on his high—“I need a drink!” Glasses were passed around. No one referred to the speech, least of all Atlass. They engaged in small talk, shop talk—anything but the events of the last two hours. Atlass, never careful with his language, indulged in a foul expression. Mrs. Small took offense; Murrow stepped in angrily. The speech, an unseen presence, hung over the suite.

In fact, it was a bombshell, both inside and outside the industry. Television, already undergoing investigation that fall for the quiz show scandals, had been exposed, denounced by one of its superstars. Murrow’s challenge was picked up in TV columns, on the news pages, sometimes on the front pages across the country. In Chicago the RTNDA was inundated with requests for copies. The Reporter, which had carried the address in toto, received more than 2,000 requests for offprints in the first few days alone. Excerpts ran in publications as diverse as the Times of London, Reader’s Digest, and the New Republic. The Los Angeles Times television columnist devoted three days to the address, which otherwise got curt handling in the southern California press.

The University of Chicago wanted offprints for its faculty. So did journalism schools and political science departments across the country. Bill Garry begged for more transcripts; not a single negative reaction, he reported: “My own reaction is that the thoughts expressed by you in Chicago will be quoted for months...to come; the most positive reactions will be reserved for the future.”

The speech was praised by Walter Reuther and John Kenneth Galbraith, damned by Henry Luce; analyzed, dismissed, kudosed, and condemned—as was Murrow himself, to a degree unrivaled since the time four years before, when he had taken on Joe McCarthy. This time, however, he was a general without an army.

The Chicago address, and the issue it raised, had indeed been given full play—in the print media; not, barring the brief news items of the first night, on network television.

The reason was obvious. As a New Republic reader commented, “Here is a man who has the ear of the industry; they can’t simply shrug him off as a harmless crank.”

What really stung Madison Avenue, in other words, was not merely the criticism; it was also the source. “Paley was furious about that speech,” said Salant, “just furious. As he had a right to be. Ed had been part of management but chose to go outside. When somebody—not just staff, talent, but part of management—does that, it’s seen as a breach of faith.”

Not that there were wholesale or even noticeable reproaches on Murrow’s return to New York. Not from Paley, who had withdrawn, or from anyone in the hierarchy. Murrow’s social life with the CBS people seemed to continue as always. But a curtain of silence had been drawn over the events in Chicago. In the past, of course, management had often kept its silence after a controversial broadcast—he was used to that—but it seemed a bit odd to him, perhaps; friend, friendly, ever earie. “Nobody,” Friendly recalled, “said anything to him or asked him about it—like ‘Why did you do it?’ Nothing was ever said about that speech. It was as if it had never happened.”

Despite the usual praise from the usual liberal cheering section, there were signs, on and off, that things were getting rough. An anonymous viewer was thanked fervently: “In a sometimes lonely battle...it is most encouraged to receive letters such as [yours].” Thanking a CBS colleague for his “kind words,” Murrow confided, “Your sentiments are not universally shared in this shop.” The RTNDA was back in touch. It was running out of transcripts. Any chance of getting more from CBS? Murrow referred the group to the Reporter: “I doubt that CBS would be eager to supply copies.”

The election night. November 4, he was for the first time in his TV career missing from the commentator’s desk, replaced by Eric Severeid. Instead, he had been put to work on the catwalk, reporting regional returns.

That winter a friend lunching with him at the Century Club found him more than usually nervous, with a pinched look about the eyes. They talked about the speech. Congratulations were offered; Murrow acknowledged: Oh, yes, he had really worked on that talk, sweated blood over every word. He looked sideways at his companion—“Didn’t make me very popular with my company.”

On top of the professional rupture had come a personal one. The 22-year friendship that had been a broadcasting legend,
By T. P. Hole

TRUTH WITHOUT TRICKS

In the archives, we found a powerful speech given at our 1957 convention by T.P. Hole, the news editor for the BBC. Hole pleaded for "truth without tricks" in broadcast news coverage and sounded a note RTNDA members would become accustomed to hearing. Referring to the rapid pace of technological development in broadcast news, he warned: "We must not allow a technical gimmick to interfere with basic news values, no matter how much it may seem to improve what is called "program attractiveness.""

We know the world can be encircled by television as it is now encircled by two satellites and a dog, by radio and cable. The day will come—and more quickly than many think possible—when what is done on the main street of Capetown, or of Little Rock, will be witnessed as it is happening by millions of white and colored peoples in other countries across the seas and oceans. In Rome, a suburban family will settle down to look at the electoral campaign for the Presidency of the United States, and that family's counterpart in Sydney, sitting in their own parlor, will look at a demonstration in Peking.

Far from being anywhere near the end of the story of global communication, we are merely at the opening chapters; in this realm of electronic communications, theory can give way to practice surprisingly quickly. Sectionally, already, it has done so. When it does so generally, there will be new strange audiences, new problems, new responsibilities, new commitments, new techniques.

In their generation, many men have wished that by one or another of their accomplishments they might be remembered. It has been the fortune of successive August and proud processions that posterity saw to it that they were. A good journalist anywhere, and in whatever medium he may be employed, is destined to join them if he will but strive to ensure that as each fresh furrow is turned in the whole field of national activity, national life and national culture, the average man reads, hears or sees a fair and honest report of it.

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between the CBS chairman of the board and the man once described as his conscience, had suffered a body blow. From then on, said one observer, there was the tear between Murrow and Paley: "The closeness was gone. It was we and they."

In the aftermath one question kept coming up, posed alike by columnists, co-workers, and close friends enclosing notes in envelopes marked "personal": Just what the hell had he expected to accomplish?

There was, it turned out, no easy answer. "It may be a little effort," he told a listener, "but it has to be done."

To Lester Markel at the New York Times: "I have not detected any indication that it has had any effect as far as the industry is concerned, but it did stir up a little talk."

"I have no hope whatever," he wrote a Washington friend late in the year, "that my words will produce any change in this industry, which seems determined to destroy itself."

"This could be the most exciting and fruitful method of communications yet devised, but it is in the hands of timid and avaricious men and the public appears to be incredibly apathetic."

Weeks later, however, he was raising the issue again, this time on public television, appearing with Louis Lyons of the Nieman Foundation on WGBH's The Press and the People show. CBS had just announced that Edward R. Murrow was going off on a year's sabbatical, amid rumors speculating on the reasons for his departure and his chances of coming back. Parrying the question of a TV columnist—had he any further comment on his Chicago speech?—he replied, "I will neither add nor subtract one word."

At one point, back in October, a Chicago journalist had come right out and asked Murrow exactly why he had "lashed out at the hand that feeds you."

He sat back and grinned, for the first time in days.

"I've always been on the side of the heretics against those who burned them," he replied, "because the heretics so often are proved right in the long run. Dead—but right!"

50 YEARS of ELECTRONIC JOURNALISM