

## **Between the Lines:**

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### **McCarthy, Little Rock and the Birth of Interpretive Journalism**

In recent years the myth has grown that journalism in the 1950s was a monolith of rigidly “objective” reporting which seldom sought to clarify or illuminate the news of the day. While there is certainly some truth in this view, it ignores the fact that the ‘50s saw the birth of a new kind of journalism combining in-depth analysis with interpretation.

On February 9, 1950, Wisconsin Senator Joseph R. McCarthy delivered a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia charging that Democratic president Harry Truman’s State department was a haven for spies. McCarthy, a Republican, claimed possession of a list naming 205 State department employees as communists, and also alleged that Truman’s Secretary of State Dean Acheson was aware of their identities. These allegations, like all those that followed, were patently false. Yet false as they were, McCarthy’s charges were printed again and again. Most newspapers in the 1950s still relied on wire services (the Associated Press, United Press, and International News Service) to provide coverage of events beyond their regional grasp. Because wire stories simply repeated McCarthy’s statements regardless of their veracity, the senator received a free ride from much of the nation’s press.

As former *Milwaukee Journal* reporter Edwin Bayley writes in his book *Joe McCarthy and the Press*, intense deadline pressure to turn in fresh copy for papers issuing several editions daily created a frantic scramble among wire service journalists, and the scramble frequently led them to report McCarthy’s charges without checking the facts. (Bayley, 66-70.)

In addition, the wire services were hampered by adherence to the journalistic shibboleth of “objective” reporting. News standards up to that time prescribed a “just the facts, ma’am” approach to reporting that eschewed analysis and interpretation, and any deviation from this principle invited criticisms of bias and lack of professionalism. McCarthy was well aware of these constraints, and for five long years (1950 to 1954) he exploited both to full advantage. Trapped, the wire services became little more than stenographers disseminating McCarthy’s latest accusations. The newspapers who published their reports became, in turn, the senator’s greatest ally.

From the very beginning of the McCarthy era, however, some newspapers refused to be manipulated by his tactics, realizing that the best way to report the story accurately was to provide readers with interpretive analysis of the events he set in motion.

Future *Boston Globe* correspondent and eventual editor Thomas Winship, who was a reporter at the *Washington Post* from 1945 to 1956, recalls how the trend toward interpretive journalism evolved. “I don’t know how to describe interpretive journalism. I just describe it as aggressive reporting, very aggressive. It started at the *Post*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and, to some extent, the *New York Times*. There were four reporters at those papers – Murrey Marder at the *Post*, Phil Potter at the *Sun*, Don Irwin at the *Herald Tribune*, and Clayton Knowles at the *Times* – that were extremely vigorous journalists. Unlike all the other reporters during that period, they just dogged McCarthy for answers. They were trying to get the straight facts out of him. McCarthy would bring out his broadsides, and the AP and most other papers would just report them as presented. They didn’t pursue McCarthy, didn’t interview him thoroughly, didn’t press him. But those four reporters *dogged* McCarthy. I just can’t tell you how far ahead of everyone else they were.”

The *Washington Post* reported McCarthy's activities very early on, beginning coverage within five days of the Wheeling speech. Unlike many newspapers that caught up with the story later, the *Post* was highly critical of the junior senator from Wisconsin from the start. On February 23, 1950, under the headline "Spreading Confusion," columnist Marquis Childs noted that "Of the four names mentioned by McCarthy in his Nevada speech (given a few days after Wheeling), the only individual still connected with the State department is John S. Service ... who was cleared" of past charges of communism. Childs was one of the first to point out that "the names to which McCarthy refers apparently came from a list of 108" State department employees, all of whom, the columnist reported, "had been subjected to a most thorough loyalty check ... investigated, and subsequently cleared" by the department. The next day – barely two weeks after McCarthy's initial charges – the *Post* editorialized that "Senator McCarthy's extravagances about the State department are certain to produce a great deal of mischief – which seems, in sober truth, to be their principle intent. ...Mr. McCarthy should be compelled at last to put up or shut up. But exposure of the senator should not be allowed to entail exposure of groundless allegations against individuals who have already passed through the mill of loyalty clearance." A March 9, 1950 editorial deplored McCarthy's strategy of linking the people he accused of communist activity to known communists by grouping their names together. Asked the *Post* rhetorically, "Does this in itself prove that (they) are communists?"

Over the proceeding four years, the *Post* printed dozens of interpretive pieces about McCarthy. These appeared in two basic forms. One examined McCarthy's life beyond the headlines; the other sought to lend perspective to his allegations by contrasting them with factual information. The November 17, 1953 *Post*, for instance, carried an article describing the motley assortment of famous and little-known individuals who had become intimates

of McCarthy's ("a heady mixture of Texas millionaires... hardworking political bosses, reportorial sleuths, hotshot investigators, radio stars, market plungers and solid industrialists"). On November 26, 1953, Murrey Marder described McCarthy's charges of espionage at the Army Signal Corps laboratories in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. This story, like others Marder wrote about McCarthy, was not "interpretive" in the broadest sense, but relied instead on exhaustive detail and simple fact to provide readers with a clear understanding of what was happening. After explaining McCarthy's spy-ring accusations, Marder wrote the next paragraph in typical fashion: "None of the witnesses heard in the two days of hearings... have been current or even relatively recent Fort Monmouth employees. McCarthy, however, has related them to the signal center while seeking to support his implication that espionage has been continuing there."

Of the leading newspapers, the *Washington Post* proffered perhaps the most extensive coverage of the McCarthy episode. The March 11, 1954 edition, for example, carried three lengthy articles, a stinging rebuke of the senator's misbehavior from columnist Walter Lippmann, and yet another editorial condemnation. Asked how *Post* publisher Philip L. Graham felt the McCarthy story should be reported by his paper, Tom Winship remembers that "Phil Graham was a very, very emotional, serious, and brilliant publisher who cared like hell about what was right and what was wrong. He had a deep sense of fairness and he was quite disturbed and involved in the McCarthy coverage. A lot of people at the *Washington Post* were concerned about the paper's aggressiveness, and a lot of enemies of the *Post* accused us of Red baiting, of being too left-wing. We got a lot of heat for our coverage, but Phil Graham felt strongly about handling the story aggressively because he knew some of McCarthy's victims."

The *Christian Science Monitor* and the *New York Times* also brought interpretive journalism to the McCarthy story; the *Monitor* quite early, the *Times* rather belatedly. On April 7, 1950, the *Monitor* featured one of the first in-depth profiles of the senator, headlined “McCarthy Unfolds Career of Charm Matched with Intense Ambition.” What is remarkable about the piece, written by staff correspondent Max K. Gilstrap, is its biographical breadth and even-handedness. Gilstrap tells McCarthy’s story – his apparent charm and inflated war record, his tainted reputation as a Wisconsin circuit judge, his admiring supporters and alleged tax dodging – without characterizing it one way or another. Like Marder, he lets the facts tell the story and allows readers to make up their own minds.

In his book *Joe McCarthy and the Press*, Edwin Bayley observes that “As late as August 1952, (*New York Times* publisher) Arthur Hays Sulzberger was not ready to make the leap to interpretive reporting. But by March 1954, policies had changed. If McCarthy’s charges were on page one, stories that proved the allegations unfounded (were) also on page one, not on the editorial page.” (Bayley, 136.) On March 11, 1954, for example, the lead story on the front page of the *Times* described the preferential treatment given to G. David Schine, close associate of McCarthy’s chief counsel on the Senate Permanent Investigations Subcommittee, Roy Cohn. An accompanying story on the jump page was devoted to strong criticisms of Cohn and Schine by European allies of the U.S. during their “whirlwind tour of Europe in 1953” as investigators for McCarthy. “They were described as brash, tactless young men who had made incredible claims as to the number of reported communists they had investigated in the United States,” reported the article, which added that “many editorials regarded them as subjects of light humor.” By May 30, 1954, the *Sunday Times* was completely up to speed, devoting an entire section to the ramifications of McCarthy’s struggle over control of the Republican party with President Eisenhower. One story concentrated solely

on the relationship between the two men, another (headed “ ‘Big Show’ Hurts G.O.P. – Question Is How Much”) examined the split within the party and how the Democrats were responding to it, while in a third, columnist Arthur Krock ruminated on the conflict’s constitutional implications.

Offering more “interpretation” than analysis of McCarthy was *Time*, a weekly newsmagazine already justly famous for injecting strong editorial comment into ostensibly straight news stories. Its nearest competitor, *Newsweek*, had mildly assayed in its August 20, 1951 issue that “Even those Republicans who believe McCarthy’s tactics are justified find him difficult to like.” Two months later, at a moment when the senator’s star was still very much in the ascendant, *Time*’s cover story on McCarthy left little doubt as to where the magazine stood on his character and tactics. “McCarthy never answers criticisms, just savagely attacks the critic...kicking up a storm of denunciation and then shifting his ground. Anyone who voices reservations about his methods is blasted as a ‘defender of communists.’” McCarthy, *Time* concluded, was a demagogue “who maliciously cries wolf, shoots up the coconut trees, and keeps the camp in a state of alarm and confusion.”

Joe McCarthy’s ultimate downfall is frequently attributed to two televised events: the “Army-McCarthy hearings,” which began in April of 1954, and Edward R. Murrow’s “See It Now” telecast on McCarthy which aired in early March. After months of meticulous research, Murrow and “See It Now” producer Fred W. Friendly hit upon the idea of juxtaposing footage of McCarthy making his charges against refutations of actual fact.

“See It Now” featured segments of McCarthy insinuating 1952 Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson was somehow connected with “the communist conspiracy,” as well as film of the senator interrogating academic and would-be communist Reed Harris. These segments were

followed by Murrow's forceful recitation of the facts, a technique employed throughout the program to devastating effect.

The host's highly critical narration overlaid selective footage of the senator, embellished with unflattering close-ups edited to portray McCarthy in the least favorable light. In one excerpt, Murrow intones flatly that, "Operating as a one man committee, the senator has traveled far, interviewed many, terrorized some," while the camera focuses tightly on McCarthy's eyes, as if searching for the evil within. Another shows McCarthy ridiculing President Eisenhower and giggling with unsettling delight at his own impudence. Yet another depicts McCarthy the demagogue thundering his abuse of Brigadier General Ralph Zwicker for an appreciative audience. The program ended with Murrow's peroration (lasting a good two and a half minutes), which eloquently stated the case against McCarthy and why conscience dictated his repudiation.

The "See It Now" program on McCarthy represents both the best and worst of interpretive reporting, magnifying their effect through the power of television. The show was scrupulously factual, but it was also undeniably biased. As Fred Friendly wrote in his memoir Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control, "there was no doubt in (Murrow's) mind that (his) ending crossed the line into editorial comment... To do a half hour on so volatile and important a matter and then end with a balanced 'on the other hand' summation would be to dilute and destroy the effect of the broadcast." (Friendly, 34-36.)

The "See It Now" program on McCarthy has been acclaimed as an example of TV journalism's ability to expose truth through visual images, but criticized for manipulating those images in service of an agenda. The McCarthy show has been cited as a defining moment in the maturing process

of television journalism, a first step toward the medium's eventual preeminence as the #1 source of news for most Americans. Still, its legacy as an illustration of interpretive journalism – especially on TV, where manipulative editing often trumps reality – is a troubling one. However laudable, “See It Now’s” McCarthy broadcast begs questions about basic journalistic integrity. When seeking to explain and interpret a story for its audience, what is a news organization’s responsibility to fairness, balance, and objectivity? Whither the means if the end is deemed justified? How far, in short, is too far? Even now, such questions remain unanswered.

By the time of the Little Rock crisis of September, 1957 – in which President Eisenhower reluctantly federalized the Arkansas National Guard and sent U.S. troops to enforce the Supreme Court’s decision to integrate schools – the trend toward interpretive journalism was in full swing. Major newspapers like the *Post* and the *New York Times* were no longer alone in adopting the new style of reporting. Even the *Boston Globe*, then considered a regional paper and not a very distinguished one at that, began to change.

Remembers former *Globe* publisher William O. Taylor, whose father Davis Taylor published the paper from 1955 to 1977, “The growth of interpretive journalism, at least at the *Globe*, had a lot to do with economic factors. When the newspaper started doing well financially, in the ‘60s, we brought on a larger staff that could do interpretive and analytical reporting. We did a bit of that with Little Rock, but not as much as we might have.” Even so, Taylor says the *Globe*’s editorial page – the purview of fictional “Uncle Dudley,” to which all editorials were attributed – changed because of the events taking place in Little Rock. “Before that, ‘Uncle Dudley’ was fairly bland, concerned with inconsequential things like the weather. But when the race issue started to become more significant around the time of Little Rock,



there was a big change. The interpretation and opinion in ‘Uncle Dudley’ started to have a sharper focus because of what was happening in society.”

Throughout the crisis, which began on September 3 after Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus instructed the state’s National Guard to bar black students from entering Central High School, the pages of the *Boston Globe* were filled with interpretive news stories. Though as yet the *Globe* couldn’t afford the luxury of providing homegrown analysis, the paper made sure readers received the historic perspective the story demanded by carrying articles by A.P. news analyst James Marlow. (“Someone has to back down on this one,” wrote Marlow on September 5, “If Faubus gets away with what he’s doing, every Southern governor could feel free to do the same.”) On September 7, “Uncle Dudley” declared that “The Arkansas National Guard may be powerful enough to interrupt the vacation of the President of the United States, but it cannot disrupt the unfolding will of the people.”

Exclusive (and sympathetic) interviews with some of the black students attempting to integrate Central High School appeared in the September 8 *Globe*, while a column by Edwin A. Lahey on September 9 expressed the hope that “the Little Rock Negro children will be permitted to begin their classes with a minimum of hatefulness.” On September 25, “Uncle Dudley” weighed in again, proclaiming that Eisenhower’s decision to send troops to Little Rock was a moral imperative. However “shocked” Southern governors were by the president’s action, the editorial stated, it was “nothing compared with the amazement and indignation felt by their fellow Americans, North, South, East and West, at the spectacle of disgraceful mob violence in Little Rock.” Concluded “Uncle Dudley, “it is impossible to imagine that the overwhelming majority of our citizenship will not support (the president’s) decision.” An article entitled “Not the Mob But Faubus,” by syndicated columnist Walter Lippmann, appeared on page one the next day.

Severely critical of both the governor and the president, the column's prominence underscored the *Globe's* new commitment to bringing interpretive journalism to readers.

Tom Winship, who by 1956 had moved from the *Post* to become the *Globe's* only Washington correspondent, wrote just one story about Little Rock for the *Boston Globe*, but observes that "The *Globe* did a good job covering Little Rock. They sent a reporter down to cover it, which wasn't done much then. They were strong editorially, too. What you must understand is that, in those days, the paper was still fairly cautious because they were in the middle of the heap in a seven-paper town. The *Globe* had to be cautious so it wouldn't lose readers. The issue of race was new, and you also have to remember that the press then was pretty conservative. Even with our limitations, I suspect some elements of the press didn't cover Little Rock as vigorously as we did."

Winship adds that *Globe* readers were fortunate to have an enlightened man like Davis Taylor as the paper's publisher during these years. "Davis Taylor was a quietly vigorous advocate of fairness to the oppressed, and I mean both of those things – he was quiet and vigorous at the same time. He felt the *Globe* could make a difference by editorializing strongly and covering race in a comprehensive way. Davis Taylor was a giant. He was very bland, very conservative in the way he acted and looked, but he had the right instincts." Overall, Bill Taylor gives the *Globe* "pretty high marks for interpreting and analyzing the race issue for our readers in the late '50s. You can always do better, but we kept right after it and reported the story consistently. Interpretive journalism works when papers approach issues in a comprehensive way, and I think the *Globe* did that."

Articles about the Little Rock crisis appearing in the news weeklies *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Life* confirm that by 1957, interpretation and analysis had become the chosen method of explaining events to readers.

*Newsweek's* analysis of the story was thorough and generally free of heavy-handed editorializing. Even before Little Rock had garnered national attention, the magazine's first edition for the month of September, 1957 dedicated a "Special National Affairs Report" to the problem of school integration, posing questions like "Exactly how much headway has been made by this fall, and how much now continues to be made? In what states is integration going forward? How far and how fast?" Under the heading, "The Great Issue," the September 16 *Newsweek* concentrated on the contentious issue of federal authority versus state's rights, and how the growing Little Rock imbroglio might impact the matter. The next week, in chronicling how the Little Rock situation had inflamed racial tensions in Nashville, Tennessee, *Newsweek* focused on "Who Is Stirring Up the South." Analyzing in turn the motives and behavior of "The Politicians," "The Agitators," "The Riffraff" and "The Teenagers," *Newsweek* opined that "the fact remains...Faubus lit the match;" pointed out that Nashville "agitator" Frederick John Kasper, while claiming to speak for the South, was actually from Camden, New Jersey; and variously characterized the mob outside Central High School as "truculent street-corner drunks" and "trouble-makers from way back." ("Detailed examination," revealed *Newsweek*, "shows that at the most, ten teen-agers out of (the entire) student body had taken an active part in the situation... and of the ten, none had been even average students.") The October 7 *Newsweek* reserved ten full pages to a final examination of the events in Little Rock and their consequences for the nation. Every major facet of the story was considered in-depth, from its effect on the South (with state by state analysis), politics, the presidency, international opinion, the clergy, and, ultimately, the nation itself.

*Time's* interpretation of the Little Rock story was predictably more weighted toward opinion and invective. A September 16 profile of Gov. Faubus ("rhymes with raw buss") strongly suggested that this "Hillbilly, Slightly Sophisticated" had precipitated the Little Rock crisis in a cynical ploy for political gain. Likewise, *Time* saw the racial passions stirred by Little Rock exemplified in "the raucous curses of a fat Kentucky harridan and the horrid spit of a North Carolina fanatic... (the) fine, quiet dignity of a pretty, besieged Negro girl in Charlotte, and the warm and courageous heart of a gentle, white-haired woman in (Arkansas)." *Time's* September 23 issue included a "Report Card" on Southern school integration (neatly divided into "The Border States," "The Complying South" and "The Defiant South.") On October 7, an article entitled "The Meaning of Little Rock" furnished a dramatic narrative of President Eisenhower's deployment of troops to Little Rock, which had occurred the previous week. The story heaped scorn on "Faubus henchman" James Karam, head of the Arkansas State Athletic Commission, who had taken a leading role in orchestrating violence against the integrating black students, and praised the "crisp, careful military movements" of Major James Meyers, "a thin, hard man with the glint of a hawk in his eyes." Beyond a concluding paragraph highlighting Eisenhower's denunciation of Faubus as the instigator of the crisis, however, "The Meaning of Little Rock" failed to offer the kind of sober analysis supplied by rival *Newsweek*.

Buttressed by written captions reflective of a definite point of view, the pictorial *Life* brought evocative images of Little Rock to millions of readers. Its September 16 issue contained photographs of a stoic Elizabeth Eckford, wearing sunglasses and a bland expression, attempting unsuccessfully to gain admittance to Central High, a screaming white girl taunting her from behind. Another showed the anticipatory look on a white boy's face as a girl prepared to shove Dorothy Counts, who sat in front of him, unaware. The

picture essay ended on a hopeful note: the last photo showed a smiling Counts in class, laughing with the white girls who surround her.

The memorable cover photo from *Life's* October 7 edition, however, must have come as a shock to Americans in the late '50s. The picture showed typical teen-agers milling about the front steps of their school, while below them at ground level, grim-looking federal troops stood in front of a forbidding granite wall engraved "Little Rock Central High School." The jarring reality and frightening implications inherent in this cover photo, the brilliance of its composition, told the story of Little Rock in a strongly visceral way. Taken as a whole, the photos appearing *inside* the October 7 *Life* not only told that story, but also interpreted it. Under the caption "Governor's Good Friends," a photo showed the governor of Arkansas sharing a friendly dance with the wife of "Faubus henchman" James Karam. To the left, another photo showed state employee Karam assisting Faubus with a radio address. Below this, an arrow pointed to "Jimmy Karam On the Scene" outside Central High. Read the caption: "Photographer Ramon Williams, who is being shoved from behind and was later attacked, is arguing with a policeman. During the exchange, Karam was heard to say, 'The nigger started it.'" Other pictures showed black newspaper editor Alex Wilson before, during, and after being physically assaulted by a mob of white men. The caption read, "Policemen nearby did nothing to protect Wilson or to Jail His Attackers." Through the use of these dramatic pictures – and leading captions – *Life* used the persuasive power of images to interpret the issue of Little Rock in starkly moral terms. As with "See It Now's" treatment of McCarthy, one may argue that the magazine's methods were manipulative, but the probability that readers gained a greater perspective on what was happening in Little Rock seems high.

Ultimately, perspective is what interpretive journalism is all about. Yet the challenge of providing that perspective carries attendant risks. As Bill Taylor says of his father's efforts to interpret news for readers of the *Boston Globe*, "Doing that style of journalism is a question of degree and balance. You have to do it in context. Interpretive journalism works when papers approach issues in an exhaustive way, not on a 'hit or miss' basis. Editorials, columns, and interpretive stories need to be in the paper day after day to make a difference." Notes Tom Winship, "Interpretive and analytical journalism have made our business better because they flesh out the news and give the reportage more meaning. But interpretive reporting is subject to going too far and losing the confidence of readers. You have to be very, very careful with it."

Though the fact is rarely acknowledged, the interpretive journalism practiced today was born and nurtured in the 1950s. The McCarthy story and the Little Rock crisis demonstrate that negotiating some kind of compromise – if not a happy medium – between objectivity and interpretation, fairness and "truth," is a tricky business. Too much interpretation can cross the line into opinion and advocacy; too little leaves news consumers with information but no context. Such dilemmas are likely to plague interpretive journalism as long as news organizations find the style useful. Nevertheless, a return to "straight reporting" appears both implausible and unwanted. Though at times deeply flawed in execution, interpretive journalism represents one of the prime means through which people understand the world around them. We can thank publishers like Davis Taylor for enlightening *Globe* readers about what was at stake in Little Rock, and reporters like Edward R. Murrow for exposing the dangers of McCarthyism. As long as their inheritors display similar vision and commitment, interpretive journalism will continue to render a vital service to the American public.

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