

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

The Changing Face of News and Information ^[1]

A Reporter Remembered: Dan Rather, Ed Murrow and the changing face of news and information.

In the 1960s, when President John F. Kennedy wanted a voice of America with impeccable credentials, he turned to Edward R. Murrow. In his career at CBS News, reporting live from wartime London, later anchoring nightly news on radio and inventing much of modern broadcast news, Murrow personified the dedication to fair and unbiased news and information that Kennedy wanted as the face of American public diplomacy of his time.

A few years after Murrow went from CBS to head the U.S. Information Agency, a young reporter from Texas set his sights on becoming Murrow's successor, as a correspondent in the field and as an anchor, working long, hard hours to establish his reputation. His name was Dan Rather. And if events had gone in a different direction, it is not inconceivable that Rather might now be planning to leave CBS after a quarter century as an anchor to follow his role model into the field of public service or even public diplomacy. He would have been the third network anchor to follow that path - after Murrow, NBC's John Chancellor was the second.

But history will not be repeated, and in that difference we can see reflections of the difference of our time from the Murrow and Chancellor years. The differences are in media, in journalism and in public diplomacy.

Instead of moving to an honorable post in government, Dan Rather signs off the CBS Evening News next week under fire from critics and colleagues and criticized this week even by his predecessor, Walter Cronkite, in today's issue of *The New Yorker* magazine. Rather will have his own say in a prime time CBS News special next week, "A Reporter Remembers." That is the same title that CBS previously bestowed in tribute to Edward R. Murrow -- but only after Murrow's death.

Back then, I had a hand in that Murrow retrospective. And I was also at work in the CBS newsroom in New York a few years earlier, taking the call when Rather called from Dallas with the biggest news story he would ever report at CBS News, word that President Kennedy was dead. In next week's CBS broadcast, Rather will no doubt cover what he did in Dallas. But here is what happened in New York, when he relayed his news to us.

On November 22, 1963 I was a news writer at CBS News, assembling wire service copy and scanning other source material preparing to write the ten-minute 3 p.m. CBS radio newscast (yes, CBS then broadcast at least ten minutes of news every hour!). Behind me was a bank of news wire machines typing out news stories from around the world. At 12:34 PM several bells sounded from the UPI "A" machine, a seldom-used alert to newsrooms announcing a "flash"

story category, the most urgent. I pushed my chair back from the desk and glanced over at eye level to read the wire copy as it was slowly clicked out letter-by-letter..

UPI A7N DA
PRECEDE KENNEDY
DALLAS,NOV.22(UPI)--THREE SHOTS WERE FIRED AT PRESIDENT KENNEDY'S
MOTORCADE IN DOWNTOWN DALLAS.
JT1234PCS

While UPI's Merriman Smith was on top of the story right from inside the Presidential motorcade, Rather was stationed further along the motorcade route, unaware of what was going on, clutching a yellow "grapefruit bag" ready to be stuffed with cans of exposed film of the day's events.

Rather had joined CBS News almost two years earlier and was the network's New Orleans bureau chief. He had been assigned to Dallas to coordinate coverage of the president's visit. Writing in his book, "The Camera Never Blinks," Rather stated that he was there to produce the story that White House correspondent Robert Pierpoint would narrate on that night's CBS Evening News about the President's day in Dallas.

Rather said he positioned himself in a stationary spot along a railroad track well in advance of the motorcade -- too distant, it turned out, to hear the rifle shots that were fired -- to catch film of the President's arrival that would be thrown to him by the CBS News cameraman in the motorcade as it passed by. The plan was for him then to go to the CBS affiliate station five blocks away to begin editing the story.

Things were running late and a police car sped by. Then Rather thought he saw the President's limo swoop past right after that, but he could not be certain. He said he ran the five blocks to the station and was able to get through by telephone to a physician at Parkland Hospital where the President had been taken. The doctor told Rather that the President was dead. Rather said he received confirmation moments later in another telephone call, with a Catholic priest at the hospital.

Rather then called the CBS newsroom in New York, and I picked up the phone. UPI was saying the President may have been assassinated, but it had not been confirmed. Rather said it was confirmed.

"It's Rather, Kennedy is dead," I shouted across the desk to Robert Skedgell, director of CBS Radio News. Skedgell picked up the telephone line, joined by veteran news editors Hal Terkel, Mort Dank, and Marian Glick.

"Dan, I need to confirm this is really you," Bob Skedgell said coolly. "Describe the [New York] newsroom to me." He then proceeded to ask Rather for details about the veracity of his sources, the doctor, the priest. Did they actually see the President? Was he certain?

The story was prepared and read by CBS News correspondent Allan Jackson from Studio Nine next to the newsroom, telling CBS Radio listeners well before the President's death had been officially announced by the White House -- and well ahead of competing networks. And thus began young Dan Rather's ascendancy at CBS News. That also was the beginning of the end of the Edward R. Murrow era, but we didn't realize it at the time.

If you think I mean that things were better in the old days at CBS, well, let's just say that things were a lot different. In those days, when you said Murrow, what was really meant was the Murrow team. Back in 1958 when I started at CBS News, I could see Murrow reporting his nightly radio newscast from Studio Nine, along with Lowell Thomas, Robert Trout and other members of the team. When Murrow stepped down at CBS, the "Murrow boys" in the newsroom and around the world kept CBS going, stronger than ever.

At today's CBS News, Dan Rather is the star and has been for some time. The reality is that there is no Rather team, so there is no clear successor to him for the top anchor slot at CBS News. Many of CBS' top correspondents were attracted to other networks, moved aside or laid off during budget cuts. If Rather's "Reporter Remembers" special next week is mostly about himself, and not about the worldwide news department that supports him, then that's only an apt reflection of early 21st century journalism.

But in the Murrow era, reporting was the star, supported by a stellar cast. There was Murrow himself, of course, and all of those he had hired, including Eric Sevareid, Charles Collingwood, Winston Burdett and William L. Shirer, later joined by a young UPI reporter named Walter Cronkite. In World War II, they carried reporters' notebooks – no bulky audio recorders of the day which were banned by censors until D-Day – and they reported what they saw and heard, live.

By contrast to next week's "Reporter Remembers," here is an example of a tribute broadcast about a team, not an individual: Since 1929, Studio Nine at CBS News in New York was the principal studio for breaking news. It was where the live reports of World War II had been broadcast and was called the "Birthplace of CBS News" by longtime anchor Robert Trout. When CBS News moved to new offices across town and Studio Nine went dark, I helped produce "Farewell to Studio Nine," a special broadcast and later a record album. Rebroadcast many years later on National Public Radio [<http://www.npr.org/programs/Infsound/stories/990709.stories.html>], the program featured some of the landmark reports by CBS correspondents around the world, followed by the reporters' discussing their stories with anchor Bob Trout. Murrow, gravely ill from lung cancer, nonetheless insisted on participating. Murrow wasn't the star: the news, now history, was the star.

For "Farewell to Studio Nine," Murrow listened to one of his wartime reports from London, standing on a rooftop looking over the city, with sounds of bombing in the distance. In one excerpt from a report, he said, "Just on the roof across the way I can see a man standing wearing a tin hat with a pair of powerful night glasses to his eyes, scanning the sky. Again, in the opposite direction, there is a building with two windows gone. Out of one window there waves something that looks like a white bed sheet, a window curtain swinging in the night breeze. It looks as though it were shaken by a ghost. There are a great many ghosts around these buildings in London. In some of them companies of ghosts."

Following the recording, Murrow told listeners a story about those famous rooftop broadcasts, a story that he said had never been reported.

"I had to stand on a rooftop for six nights in succession and make a record each night and submit it to the [British] Ministry of Information in order to persuade the censors that I would ad lib without violating security," he said. "And I did it for six nights and the records were lost somewhere in the Ministry of Information so I had to do it for another six nights. So I spent a

lot of time up there.”

Trout then asked Eric Sevareid to recall Paris when the Germans drew near:

“The whole horizon started to darken and close toward the city and looking up the Champs Elysees, the great boulevard, there was hardly a car left,” said Sevareid. “I noticed one waiter out putting the chairs from a café back inside. No one was sitting there. The life just simply ran out of the city like a beautiful woman lying in a coma. With the life blood draining out from every vein, every street.”

Trout recalled that William L. Shirer, a newspaper man in Berlin, “was hired by [then] European News Director Ed Murrow to help fill the growing call for more broadcasts from Europe as the lights again began going out one by one.”

“Shirer was in the forest at Compiègne in France, June 22, 1940,” recalled Trout, “looking through a window of a train car where inside Hitler was accepting the French surrender. It was the same train car in which 22 years earlier the French accepted the German surrender.” Then they played Shirer’s broadcast:

“Hitler stepped up into the car followed by Goering and the others,” Shirer reported. “We can see nicely now through the car window...The Germans salute, the French salute, the atmosphere is what Europeans call correct. But you get the picture when I say that we see no handshakes. Not on occasions like this.”

Shirer’s told Trout that his report was broadcast live, and the news stunned the free world.

“Even people like Churchill in London first got the news (from that report),” said Shirer, “because Hitler did not release the news of the armistice for six hours.”

Trout and Murrow had a good laugh about Studio B-4 at the BBC, a former lavatory that would serve as their London studio throughout the war. And they remembered Murrow’s first live broadcast from London, when he was not supposed to be on the air at all. Murrow had been hired as CBS’ Director of Talks, but he had to fill in for Trout, who had had too much wine to go on the air - or even to count down to the end of the broadcast.

That’s right,” said Murrow. “And you were going to give me the cut - you were going to give me the ‘watch’ at the end, and you gave it to me a minute early and we left forty-five seconds of dead air at the end.”

“I don’t remember that at all,” said Trout.

Murrow’s and Trout’s final words on that broadcast were the last words spoken on the air from that historic studio.

“I haven’t seen them,” said Murrow, referring to the new CBS studios across town. “But I’m wondering if they will make it any easier to know what to say and how to say it. I rather doubt it, no matter how fancy they are. What do you think?”

“I doubt it very much,” said Trout.

“Farewell to Studio Nine” was Murrow’s last broadcast for CBS News. As Murrow’s physical

condition worsened, his long time producer, Fred Friendly, phoned me at home one Saturday morning to ask that I put together a record album of Murrow's most memorable wartime broadcasts, in their entirety. Friendly wanted them to run their "original fifteen or twenty minutes because that's what brought their original impact." We worked on the project for more than a year, tracking down recordings from glass-based discs at CBS, from the BBC and from other archives. We pieced together the clearest segments of each short-wave broadcast, tweaking them as best we could in the evening after work. The result was the two-disk album, "Edward R. Murrow: A Reporter Remembers The War Years.'

What Friendly had in mind was not the Grammy that it won, but a definitive document that would keep the Murrow tradition. He directed me to be certain that every new CBS News correspondent who was hired listened to the entire album, in my presence, before they began to file their own stories. And so they did, until Friendly quit CBS News in 1966, resigning when the network dropped live coverage of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on the Vietnam war to switch to regular daytime entertainment.

All of which brings us full circle to Ed Murrow and public diplomacy. Those Senate hearings on the war were not only a critical forum for Americans to see and hear a serious debate of U.S. policy. Those hearings, and live coverage of the Senate hearings on Watergate several years later, were critical for international audiences around the world. Relayed by Voice of America and other international broadcasters, the world could watch and listen to American democracy at its most open. The legacy of Ed Murrow at CBS may have receded, but the legacy of Murrow's live and courageous style of broadcasting is more important than ever in the worldwide competition of ideas.
