

*Confronting McCarthy:
Drew Pearson, Forgotten Journalist?*

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Probably only a handful of scholars remember the part that Washington journalist Drew Pearson played in journalism and the nation's politics during his career. In fact, a quick online search of Google yields more Web sites dedicated to a 1970s-era Dallas Cowboys wide receiver of the same name than sites on the prolific journalist. However, Pearson the journalist stirred up controversy throughout his career, using his nationally-syndicated *Washington Merry-Go-Round* column to call attention to scandal and corruption in the government for more than 30 years. A Louis Harris Survey, conducted on September 1, 1969, showed that Pearson was the most recognizable columnist in the United States, and *Time* magazine once said that Pearson was "involved in more controversy than any other journalist of his time."¹ An anecdote appearing in Pearson biographies and articles about his career shows just how well-known the columnist's controversies were. After President Harry Truman called Pearson an "S.O.B", the epithet became so famous that mail addressed simply to "The S.O.B" – without a city or address – made it to Pearson's doorstep.² Though his writing made enemies with President Truman and General Douglas MacArthur, among others, it is his searching report about

¹ D.A. Anderson, *A "Washington Merry-Go-Round" of Libel Actions* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1980), 1. Indeed, the Louis Harris poll, published in *Time*, did show that by 1969, Pearson was a nationally known columnist; however, it also noted that nationally-syndicated columnists were less popular than local commentators: "Another surprising discovery was that nationally syndicated newspaper columnists do not make a very strong impression across the country. Drew Pearson is the most popular, with 7% of the nation's readers...Of all readers, only 16% cite any nationally syndicated favorite, while one in four names a local columnist." "Judging the Fourth Estate: A *Time*-Louis Harris Poll," *Time* 94, 39 (5 Sept 1969).

² D.A. Anderson, 1. The rest of this story gives a glimpse into Pearson's character. Jack Anderson relates that Pearson liked to translate the acronym to "Servant of Brotherhood" after Truman's public insult.

Senator Joseph McCarthy that represents one of Pearson's most important contributions to journalism and American history.³

Pearson's work was part of an important era in American media; not only was Pearson's investigative work integral in the buildup to McCarthy's senate censure, but his career spanned a time of monumental change in the media landscape with the birth of TV broadcasting. Though Pearson remained chiefly a print journalist, he also aired on radio and TV. His status as one of the most recognizable and heavily-syndicated columnists as well as his radio and TV work positioned him on the cusp of the television era for which CBS's Edward R. Murrow is famous. While history remembers Edward R. Murrow's *See It Now* television broadcast as the final nail in the coffin of McCarthy's senatorial career, Washington journalist Drew Pearson vigorously opposed McCarthy for years before Murrow's 1954 broadcast.

Pearson was first on at least three important stories exposing McCarthy: he was the first to question McCarthy's initial February 9, 1950 speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, he broke the story of McCarthy's questionable dealings with Lustron Corporation months before other papers, and he was the first to name Owen Lattimore as a future McCarthy target. These three examples in his *Washington Merry-Go-Round* column stand out amid Pearson's flurry of coverage on McCarthy from the beginning of his anti-Communist campaign in 1950 through his senate censure on December 2, 1954.⁴ In addition to his writing, Pearson had a few notable run-ins with McCarthy that illustrate the prominence of the columnist's influence on the senator. These include a physical fight

³ "Washington Merry-Go-Round: World of Drew Pearson," An Exhibition at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, 4 April – 27 September 1987, Exhibition Catalogue, Gary A. Yarrington, curator.

⁴ Haynes Johnson, *The Age of Anxiety: McCarthyism to Terrorism* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005), 440.

between the two men, a lawsuit that Pearson brought against McCarthy and McCarthy's speeches from the Senate floor that effectively caused Pearson's radio sponsor to drop his show. The battle waged between these two men was an epic one; it was fought in the papers, the Senate and the courts, and it started four years before Murrow's *See It Now* broadcast.

Long before he took on McCarthy, Pearson's column enjoyed a wide circulation and renown for his muckraking. A *Time* magazine article from December 1948 lists the impressive scope of Pearson's words: "Pearson's Merry-Go-Round appears in 600 newspapers with 20 million circulation...Then there's the radio. On Sunday nights he talks over ABC to 10 million people."⁵

In *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy of America's Most Hated Senator*, Arthur Herman paints Pearson as integral to the effort to take down Senator McCarthy:

Pearson is hard to understand in terms of today's Washington media. A strong and fervent liberal, he was a political commentator, investigative journalist, gossip columnist, and political blackmailer rolled into one. No other single person, neither journalist nor politician, looms as large in the effort to derail McCarthy....⁶

Herman says that "virtually every scandal" in which McCarthy figured can be traced to Drew Pearson's reporting.⁷

Jack Anderson, Pearson's longtime assistant and eventually successor to the byline of *Washington Merry-Go-Round*, discusses Pearson's relationship with McCarthy in his book, *Peace, War and Politics: An Eyewitness Account*. While he admits that

⁵ "Querulous Quaker," *Time* 70, 72 (13 Dec 1948) 75-76. The article gives Pearson credit for taking down J. Thomas Parnell, saying that "Pearson took Thomas on singlehanded, and got him indicted on charges of payroll kickbacks."

⁶ Arthur Herman, *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy of America's Most Hated Senator*, (New York: Free Press, 2000), 232.

⁷ Ibid.

Pearson was far from the only journalist working to expose McCarthy, he asserts that Pearson was perhaps the journalist who most troubled McCarthy:

Establishment journalists have given most credit to one of their own, Edward R. Murrow, who truly was a giant among broadcasters. But Drew battled McCarthy in the trenches more than a year before Murrow launched his first air attack. I'll leave it to McCarthy to identify by his actions the newsman he feared the most. He tried to destroy Drew, assailing him as a Soviet agent, attacking his radio sponsor, and driving him off the ABC network. McCarthy hardly roughed up Murrow.⁸

Indeed, McCarthy seemed to have it out for Pearson. Not only did he “rough up” Pearson on the floor of the Senate, he physically “roughed up” Pearson, attacking him at a private club in Washington. Though it seems unthinkable by today’s Washington standards for a politician to physically attack a journalist, this incident is perhaps one of the best examples of McCarthy’s ire and irrationality aimed at Pearson.

Reevaluating Pearson’s role in derailing McCarthy’s anti-Communist campaign is important to communications studies and the way journalism history is remembered; often, journalists and media scholars focus on the novel forms of media to the detriment of tried-and-true newspapers and print journalists. Today’s media landscape is characterized by the advent of the Internet, online journalism and “convergent media.” Like television in Murrow’s era, the Internet is still evolving and online journalism has not yet been codified. Today, as in the 1950s, scholars and journalists alike still look to the paper of record for accurate media coverage of events regardless of the latest communications evolution. Thus, Pearson’s clear contributions to history in exposing McCarthy should not be overshadowed by Murrow’s groundbreaking work in the new medium at the time.

⁸ Jack Anderson, *Peace, War, and Politics: An Eyewitness Account* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1999), 74.

The Sulgrave Incident

It is a scene that is hard to imagine in today's politically-correct Washington climate: a senator well-known for his personal gaffes and political scandals approaches one of the premier journalists of the day and insults, threatens, and finally physically attacks him at a dinner party held at a swank private club in the capital.

The exclusive Sulgrave Club in Washington's Dupont neighborhood was well-established in political society of the day. A February 13, 1955 *Washington Post* article highlighted the club, "in whose ballroom most of Washington's more recherché dancing parties are staged," and the club's efforts to protect the privacy of its high-profile guests: "Press photographers are barred from the Sulgrave Club to insure privacy. So when history is made, as it often is, it is pictorially unrecorded."⁹ Such was the case on December 13, 1950, which was incidentally Pearson's birthday, when Pearson and McCarthy attended the same dinner party at the club.¹⁰

Versions of Pearson's encounter with McCarthy differ slightly, but it is undeniable that an altercation between the two men occurred. A *Time* magazine article published after Pearson brought a lawsuit against McCarthy for the assault – among other reasons – relates Pearson's deposition of the encounter:

He jumped up, put his thumb and index finger behind my nerves in the back of my cranium right here, and gouged me as hard as he could and said, "You come out. We will settle this."... I was about to pay the hat-check boy, when McCarthy came up . . . pinned my arms down, swung me around, and proceeded to kick me in the groin with his knee . . . He said, "Keep your hands out of your

⁹ Mary Van Rensselaer Thayer, "The Sulgrave Outnumbers '400'; Its Numbers Are a Soigné 778," *The Washington Post* (13 Feb 1955): F1.

¹⁰ Oliver Pilat, *Drew Pearson: An Unauthorized Biography*, (New York: Harper, 1973), 26.

pockets; no firearms, no guns . . .” I tried to get away from him . . .
McCarthy broke loose and swung on me with the flat of his hand.¹¹

McCarthy’s version was similar – he never denied the incident, but said that he only slapped Pearson.¹² Two days after the fight, *The Washington Post* ran an editorial denouncing the fight by saying, “The precise details of what happened Tuesday evening in the once gracious precincts of the Sulgrave Club are of no great importance. For whether you accept the account given by Mr. Drew Pearson, or that given by Senator McCarthy, it was still a thoroughly disgraceful business.”¹³

Pearson biographer Klurfield relates Pearson’s suspicion that the Sulgrave attack was in retaliation for a recent article the journalist had penned: “McCarthy came up behind me and snarled: ‘I’m going to break your arm. You’ve done me a lot of damage.’ . . . I had just written a story of how he took \$10,000 from a housing organization for a report a few pages long. It was obviously a concealed payment for his vote on the Banking and Currency Committee.”¹⁴ This column, “RFC Dollars Seep to McCarthy,” exposed the Lustron scandal, which became a key indictment of McCarthy.¹⁵

The article, which ran in Pearson’s *Merry-Go-Round* on April 19, 1950, outlined McCarthy’s deal with the president of Lustron, a housing corporation: “In the spring of

¹¹ “Busy Man,” *Time*, 8 Oct 1951.

¹² “McCarthy Admits ‘Slapping’, But Not ‘Punching’ Pearson,” *The Washington Post* (6 Oct 1951): 9. In this AP article, McCarthy admits to talking to “many persons” about the incident. He also says that he was anonymously sent a wristwatch, which was engraved: “To Sen. Joe McCarthy for Combat Service Above and Beyond the Call of Duty on December 12, 1950.”

¹³ “The Sulgrave Brawl”. *The Washington Post* (17 Dec 1950), B4.

¹⁴ Herman Klurfield, *Behind the Lines: The World of Drew Pearson* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 26.

¹⁵ Pearson. “RFC Dollars Seep to McCarthy,” *The Washington Post* (19 Apr 1950): B15. It is notable that it seems that no journalist broke this story before Pearson. McCarthy biographer Arthur Herman credits Pearson as the source for this story, and Bayley speaks only of the *Syracuse Post-Standard’s* version of the Lustron story, which ran Oct 9, 1951 – well after Pearson’s. Herman, 232. Edwin R. Bayley, *Joe McCarthy and the Press* (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1981), 171.

1949, Senator McCarthy was in need of financial aid, while Carl Strandlund, president of the Lustron Corp. of Columbus, Ohio, was in need of congressional aid.”¹⁶ Pearson explains that McCarthy received \$10,000 from Lustron for a writing a brief article on housing development, and that “the rate of pay was \$1.33 a word, which would make most authors green with jealousy.”¹⁷ Johnson notes that later investigation of the deal revealed that McCarthy had never written the article, and pocketed the \$10,000; Lustron declared bankruptcy a year later.¹⁸ In *The Age of Anxiety: McCarthyism to Terrorism*, journalist and media commentator Haynes Johnson says that “the Lustron deal never received the kind of public airing it deserved.”¹⁹

Pearson had been reporting on McCarthy for months before the fight at the Sulgrave club, and the incident serves as an example of McCarthy’s hatred for the journalist. Johnson notes that, at the time of the Sulgrave incident, Pearson “was the single source of anti-McCarthy material for most newspaper readers outside the capital and New York,” and after the altercation between the journalist and the senator, McCarthy again used the floor of the senate to attack Pearson.²⁰ In this speech, McCarthy charged that anyone who supported the Adam Hat Company, Pearson’s radio sponsor, was supporting Communism: “He called on ‘every loyal American’ to threaten the sponsor of Pearson’s radio broadcasts with an economic boycott if the sponsor didn’t immediately cancel its underwriting of Pearson’s program.”²¹ Just over a week later, Adam Hat cancelled Pearson’s sponsorship.²²

¹⁶“RFC Dollars Seep to McCarthy.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Johnson, 84.

¹⁹ Johnson, 85.

²⁰ Johnson, 197.

²¹ Johnson, 206.

²² Johnson, 207.

After being physically and verbally attacked by McCarthy, Pearson suffered financially and professionally when Adam Hat canceled his radio sponsorship. As Anderson pointed out, McCarthy's actions speak for themselves; McCarthy accosted Pearson with multiple personal and physical attacks, showing how far Pearson's columns incited the Senator and showing the hazards Pearson faced in confronting McCarthy.²³

Lawsuit against McCarthy

Pearson's lawsuit against McCarthy was filed a few months after the Sulgrave fight, on March 5, 1951.²⁴ Though it seems that the physical attack at the Sulgrave Club was the impetus for the lawsuit, Pearson sued for a host of other charges, as well. McCarthy had been continually slandering Pearson from the floor of the Senate, but as the Senate floor is a libel-proof forum, Pearson had not been able to file charges. A *Time* article in March 1951 sums up the case: "As usual, [McCarthy] made his attack from the libelproof U.S. Senate floor. But last week litigious Columnist Pearson thought he had found a way around McCarthy's immunity, slipped a libel suit against him."²⁵ According to the article, Pearson's lawyers claimed that McCarthy made the same libelous

²³ McCarthy wasn't the only person in the capital that Pearson incited to violence. After Oliver Pilat's extensive examination of the incident at the Sulgrave Club in his biography of Pearson, he enumerates other physical altercations Pearson encountered. Pilat describes Pearson's run-in with a lobbyist, saying, "A couple of weeks after the Sulgrave Club incident Pearson encountered in the Mayflower Hotel lobby Charles Patrick Clark, \$100,000-a-year lobbyist for Franco Spain. Furious over stories that he had paid off Senator Owen Brewster of Maine and Representative Eugene Keogh of New York, Clark unleashed a wild one-two punch which floored Pearson." Pilat notes that Clark was fined \$25 in court for the assault, but that he received over \$400 in cash gifts from McCarthyites. Pilat quips, "A favorite Congressional joke was that a license to slug Pearson could be obtained for only \$25—which was a bargain!" Pilat 29.

²⁴ Reeves, 350. Reeves goes on to mention that the research for the suit, including depositions by both Pearson and McCarthy, provided Pearson information that he included in his columns and that was also published in anti-McCarthy newspapers.

²⁵ "Pearson v. McCarthy". *Time*. March 12, 1951.

accusation against Pearson in a Senate press release, prompting the suit. Pearson demanded \$350,000 in damages for the libel, and “For good measure, Pearson demanded \$250,000 for being ‘painfully grabbed by the neck and kicked in the groin’ by McCarthy in the December brawl at Washington’s Sulgrave Club.”²⁶ Reeves, in his McCarthy biography, says that the lawsuit encompassed a number of other charges against McCarthy sympathizers, and was “largely a bizarre antitrust suit designed by Pearson’s attorney Warren Woods to circumvent McCarthy’s congressional immunity.”²⁷ The suit survived several motions to dismiss, but the case never went to trial. Pearson dropped it in 1956.²⁸

Pearson the man

Though many journalists remain strictly objective and remove themselves personally from their work, Pearson was infamous for his strong opinions and personality. He often injected his own life into his work. For example, in late December 1950, Pearson’s column appeared in the form of a letter to his daughter – a device Pearson often used to express opinion and give advice. In that column, Pearson reflects on his 1946 column calling for an investigation of Alger Hiss, whom Pearson suspected was leaking information. As he says, “Byrnes did investigate, and Hiss left the State Department. It was impossible for me to tell whether he was a communist – an extremely serious charge for a newspaperman to make, even though it is brandished about so

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Thomas C. Reeves, *Life and Times of Joe: A McCarthy Biography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1981), 350.

²⁸ Reeves, 350.

irresponsibly on the floor of the Senate.”²⁹ He follows this allusion to McCarthy’s rants from the floor of the Senate with a more direct indictment: “All this was in February 1946, four years before McCarthy suddenly discovered an easy way to make headlines.”³⁰ Pearson is comparing his own exposure of Alger Hiss as a possible Communist sympathizer to McCarthy’s stand against communists in the State Department, saying that his own outing of Hiss proves at once the criminality of McCarthy’s fabricated accusations and that Pearson himself is not a communist sympathizer.

As in this case, Pearson often inserted his life into his work, and the intersection of Pearson’s career and personal life was often prominent in the news of the time. A prime example of this is Pearson’s first marriage to Felicia Patterson, the daughter of media heiress Cissy Patterson. As the owner of the *Washington Times-Herald*, Cissy had a tumultuous relationship with Pearson, at first encouraging him to marry her daughter, Felicia, but later in his career “Cissy missed no opportunity to harass Drew...Cissy pounded her ex-son-in-law in print on the average of once a week.”³¹ Cissy turned on Pearson after he notified her that he would be moving his column from her paper to *The Washington Post*.³² Pearson’s marriage to Felicia ended as publicly as his fights with his mother-in-law, when in 1928 Pearson learned of Felicia’s intentions to divorce him when he “glimpsed in another man’s newspaper a headline announcing his divorce.”³³

Along with a publicly querulous relationship with his first wife and mother-in-law, Pearson had several private peccadilloes that he unsuccessfully tried to keep out of

²⁹ Drew Pearson, “A New Grandson Enters a Difficult World,” *Washington Merry-Go-Round. The Washington Post* (22 Dec 1950): 3.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Pilat, 169.

³² Pilat, 168.

³³ Pilat, 91.

the public eye. One such instance is Pearson's marriage to his second wife, Luvie Smith. She had been previously married, as well – to Pearson's former friend and colleague, George Abell.³⁴ After Pearson and Smith eloped 1936, they concocted a plan to take back Smith and Abell's son, Tyler Abell, which was tantamount to kidnapping; Pilat includes Abell's reaction to Pearson's actions: "'I'll follow them to the ends of the earth to get back my child,' George Abell told reporters in London. 'When I meet Pearson, I will know how to use my fists!'"³⁵ Though George Abell continued to threaten Pearson and sued for custody of his son, he never regained custody. When Pearson was warned that George may resort to violence to reclaim his son, Pearson "thought of getting a judge to bind George over to peaceful behavior, but he gave up that notion because it involved a public hearing. He had no intention of spreading the quarrel over the front pages of the newspapers."³⁶ However, *The Washington Post* carried steady coverage of the drama, with several articles appearing from August through September of 1937, including two articles tucked below the fold of the front page.³⁷ Thus, in his private life as well as his public life, Pearson stirred controversy quite often. Though he tried to keep this last scandal out of the headlines, his prominence as a columnist and Washington society member qualified his personal life for front-page news.

Pearson First to Report on McCarthy

³⁴ Pilat, 148.

³⁵ Pilat, 149.

³⁶ Pilat, 150.

³⁷"Son Taken From George Abell In Britain by Drew Pearsons," *The Washington Post*, (23 August 1937): 1; "Abell to 'Follow Pearsons Around World' to Get Son," *The Washington Post* (24 Aug 1937): 1; "Mrs. Pearson Gets Exclusive Custody of Boy; Reno Judge Issues New Order Settling Control Case," *The Washington Post* (14 Oct 1937): 3.

McCarthy had been sounding alarms among journalists on a small scale with his climb to prominence in the Senate throughout the late 1940s. William Evjue, editor of the *Capitol Times* based in Madison, Wisconsin, had been exposing McCarthy's misconduct in Wisconsin as early as 1947.³⁸ However, Pearson was the first nationally-syndicated columnist to pick up the McCarthy story and would be the first to break later stories in the unfolding of McCarthy's scandals.

In his study, *Joe McCarthy and the Press*, Edwin R. Bayley observes that syndicated columnists were largely the only source of analysis and interpretation in national papers after McCarthy's infamous speech in Wheeling, West Virginia on February 9, 1950. Bayley notes that "Pearson was the most influential of the columnists. His columns appeared in 34 of the papers surveyed. He was the first columnist to take on the subject of McCarthy, and the first reporter to expose the source of the discredited lists of possible security risks upon which McCarthy was basing his accusations."³⁹

Pearson's coverage of McCarthy came soon after McCarthy's February 9 speech to the Republican Women's Club in Wheeling, the first speech in which he declared that he had a list of 205 names of State Department employees who were communists or spies.⁴⁰ The only journalist on hand that day was Frank Desmond of the *Wheeling Intelligencer*. His coverage of the story "reads like a report on a local Kiwanis meeting," according to Johnson: "His front-page story the next morning was written as if he were unaware of the significance of McCarthy's charges, but nevertheless assumed everyone

³⁸ "Mud for Muckrakers", *Time*, Nov. 28, 1949. McCarthy won his senate seat in 1946, but was largely an unknown senator until his rise to infamy beginning in 1950. Johnson, 10.

³⁹ Ibid. Bayley compares Pearson's appearance in 34 of the surveyed papers to the next columnist to criticize McCarthy at the time, Marquis Childs of the *St. Louis Post-dispatch*, whose column appeared in 17 of the surveyed papers.

⁴⁰ Johnson, 14.

knew they were true.”⁴¹ It was Desmond’s story that ran on the AP wire the next day, and it was not until over a week later, when Pearson’s column ran, that the story was questioned.

In Pearson’s column of February 18, 1950, titled “McCarthy Red Charges Fizzle,” Pearson outlines the accusations made by McCarthy and debunks them.⁴² Pearson says that McCarthy’s original list of 205 names had shrunk to 57 names, and that he could only four names when pressured: “When the Senator from Wisconsin finally was pinned down, he could produce not 57, but only 4 names of State Department officials whom he claimed were Communists. A careful scrutiny of these names is important.”⁴³ Pearson then goes through each name, explaining that of the four names, one man never worked for the State Department, two of them had resigned four years before McCarthy’s accusations, and the last was reinstated to service after a lengthy investigation “and after virtual apologies for ever questioning his loyalty.”⁴⁴ After this initial column, Pearson again attacked McCarthy on March 31, 1950, saying that President Truman “really poured it on mud-slinging Senator Joe McCarthy,” and asking if McCarthy knows that he “is doing irreparable harm to his Government by all this loose talk.”⁴⁵ Bayley says that “For a number of papers, Drew Pearson’s column on February 18 was the first mention of the McCarthy story; news coverage began then, as if Pearson had awakened editors to the fact that something was going on.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Johnson, 17.

⁴² Drew Pearson, “McCarthy’s Red Charges Fizzle,” *The Washington Post* (18 Feb 1950): B13.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Drew Pearson, “McCarthy Draws Truman Blast,” *The Washington Post* (31 Mar 1950): B13.

⁴⁶ Bayley, 57.

Pearson Breaks Lattimore Story

Pearson did not cease to expose McCarthy's faults after initially reporting on McCarthy's list of 205 names. Next on Pearson's radar were McCarthy's accusations against Owen Lattimore.

Johnson's *Age of Anxiety* outlines the facts in McCarthy's case against Owen Lattimore: McCarthy accused Lattimore of being a "Soviet agent," and Lattimore appeared before the Tydings Committee, a subcommittee formed to investigate McCarthy's charges of communism in the State Department, to contest these accusations. Eventually, Lattimore was indicted on seven counts of perjury, but three years later all were dropped.⁴⁷ Again, it was Pearson who broke this story: "In an executive session [McCarthy] identified Lattimore as the culprit, Drew Pearson broke the story, and, from remote Afghanistan, Lattimore replied that the allegation was 'pure moonshine.' Nevertheless, McCarthy declared he would 'stand or fall' on the Lattimore case."⁴⁸ Pearson reflects on this episode in his *Diaries*, published in 1974, saying,

March 25: McCarthy has now said that he would stake his whole case against the State Department on one man, whose name he has not yet divulged but who happens to be Owen Lattimore.

March 26: I finally decided to mention Lattimore's name on the air. No other newspaper had done so due to the fear of libel. I am now being called unethical by other members of the press. Actually the AP sent out and FYI message to clients that they had Lattimore's name but were worried about libel. When I take the risk of libel, however, I am unethical.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Johnson, 167.

⁴⁸ Johnson, 190.

⁴⁹ *Drew Pearson Diaries*, Tyler Abell, ed. (Holt: New York, 1974), 116.

McCarthy's own assertion that he would stake his entire anti-Communist campaign on Lattimore's case speaks to the significance of the episode. McCarthy spoke at the 1952 Republican National Convention, where he capitalized on the apparent success of his case against Lattimore, saying, "the American people are through with you, Mr. Truman, and through with the Achesons, the Jessups, and the Lattimores."⁵⁰ Along with other "successes" of his Communist witch-hunt, Owen Lattimore became symbolic of McCarthy's anti-Communism, and so when Lattimore was cleared of the charges, Pearson was again vindicated in calling out McCarthy's scare tactics.

Murrow, McCarthy, and Pearson

The most remembered chapter in the media's struggle against McCarthy is Murrow's famous *See It Now* broadcast on March 9, 1954. As Bayley states in *Joe McCarthy and the Press*, "this program, along with the climactic ending of the Army-McCarthy hearings, are among the things many of us remember best of the McCarthy period; for some, they are almost the only things remembered."⁵¹ In 2005, George Clooney directed the Oscar-nominated film, *Good Night and Good Luck*, which immortalized Murrow to contemporary audiences as the sole savior of a nation duped by McCarthyism.⁵² In his critical review of the movie for Slate.com, media critic Jack Shafer aptly points out that the production is overly-nostalgic and gives Murrow far too much credit; Shafer notes that Thomas Doherty's *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* "cites *Washington Post* cartoonist Herblock and

⁵⁰ Johnson, 239.

⁵¹ Bayley, 192.

⁵² *Good Night and Good Luck*, dir. George Clooney (Los Angeles, CA: Warner Independent Pictures, 2005).

muckraker Drew Pearson as members of a ‘lengthy lineup’ of Fourth Estaters who ridiculed and attacked McCarthy.”⁵³ In his case study of published reaction to Murrow’s broadcast on McCarthy, journalism historian Brian Thornton further asserts that print journalists were well-established critics of McCarthy before Murrow’s broadcast:

But outside the world of TV, complaints about McCarthy were common and getting stronger every day. There was a strong chorus of anti-McCarthy comments from well-known liberal newspaper columnists and reporters, such as Walter Lippmann, James Reston, Joseph and Stewart Alsop, Drew Pearson, and the editorial cartoonist Herblock. Further evidence that Murrow’s critique of McCarthy came late in the game, well after many news attacks, was supplied by long-time Murrow friend and co-producer Fred Friendly, who admitted in 1967, ‘Ed didn’t want to get too far ahead of public opinion,’ and therefore he waited quite a while before confronting McCarthy.⁵⁴

In his biography of Pearson, Klurfield makes the apt point that while Pearson continued to attack McCarthy in his columns for years, Murrow’s broadcast not only was aired after a slew of Pearson’s columns, but was an isolated incident.⁵⁵

A month later, McCarthy was given airtime to respond to Murrow’s indictment. Although Pearson did not address Murrow’s original broadcast, he penned a response to McCarthy’s broadcast. Not only did Pearson give his own opinion of McCarthy’s response, but he used the opportunity to air an old grievance of his against Murrow: “But Drew Pearson, a battle-scarred McCarthy fighter with no love for Murrow – a feeling strictly mutual – dubbed it ‘a savage and effective job.’”⁵⁶ Pearson begins his column on April 14, 1954 by, outlining his previous run-in with Murrow, saying that after McCarthy’s first attack on him in 1950, Murrow refused Pearson airtime on CBS to react

⁵³ Shafer, Jack, “*Good Night and Good Luck* and Bad History,” *Slate.com*, 5 Oct 2005. <<http://www.slate.com/id/2127595>> (accessed 7 April 2008).

⁵⁴ Thornton, Brian, “Published Reaction When Murrow Battled McCarthy,” *Journalism History* 29, 3 (Fall 2003): 133.

⁵⁵ Klurfield, 188.

⁵⁶ A.M. Sperber, *Murrow: His Life and Times* (New York: Fordham UP, 1998), 449.

to the senator's accusations.⁵⁷ With this background, Pearson says, he watched McCarthy's response to Murrow "with more than usual interest, understanding, and I might add, sympathy."⁵⁸ Though Pearson continues his criticisms of McCarthy with a tongue-in-cheek litany of the ways in which McCarthy has actually *helped* Communism in the United States, he includes a last jab at Murrow: in making his rebuttal, McCarthy "had, of course, the help of some of the best hucksters along Park Ave...And the film which resulted can be shown and reshowed by McCarthy all over the U.S.A. with no chance by Mr. Murrow for rebuttal."⁵⁹

Pearson biographer Klurfield enumerates Pearson's efforts to expose McCarthy, but he also reinforces the point that it is Murrow's broadcast that is remembered as having an impact on the end of the McCarthy era. He devotes nearly 20 pages to describing McCarthy's grip on the nation before introducing Pearson's battle against the Senator, saying, "Pearson's biggest guns were directed at McCarthyism."⁶⁰ Klurfield argues that the advent of television acted as a turning point in the fight against McCarthy, allowing Murrow's broadcast to wield great impact. He elevates Murrow above those in the television industry who would be spooked by McCarthy's power: Murrow "was the most respected and popular newscaster of that era. In March 1954 he decided it was time for a candid look at McCarthyism...The cumulative effect of McCarthy's charges and Murrow's corrections resulted in a dramatically impressive and revealing half hour."⁶¹ Klurfield praises Murrow's broadcast, but also outlines the limits of Murrow's show:

⁵⁷ Drew Pearson, "McCarthy's Reply to Murrow," *The Washington Post* (14 April 1954): 55.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Klurfield, 187.

⁶¹ Klurfield, 187.

“Unhappily, his clash with McCarthy damaged his career as a newscaster, and he never again attained the pinnacle he gained in March 1954...Nevertheless, in 1954 television played a major role in the downfall of Senator McCarthy.”⁶²

McCarthy’s anti-Communist campaign and Murrow’s program coincided with a new era in media; in 1950, almost twice as many TV sets sold as had been sold in the entire previous decade, and the number of TV sets in American households continued to increase dramatically in the 1950s.⁶³ In 1954, the year of Murrow’s *See It Now* program on McCarthy, the number of households with a TV set rose above 50 percent for the first time. In 1950, only 9 percent of households in the U.S. had a television set; this number steadily rose and by 1954, 55.7 percent of households had a TV.⁶⁴ At the time of Murrow’s *See It Now* broadcast on McCarthy, 26 million Americans owned a TV set.⁶⁵

Even though Klurfield does praise Murrow’s broadcast, others are not so quick to adhere to the notion that it was a legendary moment in journalism. Herman, in his revisionist biography of McCarthy, notes that the tide had already begun to turn against McCarthy by the time of Murrow’s broadcast, and that the *See It Now* program was not particularly great television, but it was accepted as landmark nonetheless.⁶⁶ In his article, Thornton closes his argument that Murrow merely summarized the work pioneered by

⁶² Klurfield, 188. Whereas Klurfield seems to define Murrow’s broadcasting career by his “Report on Joseph McCarthy”, he is sure to include the point that Pearson’s career spanned a much wider range. He mentions Pearson’s reaction to McCarthy’s death two years after the height of McCarthyism, saying, “Pearson’s post-mortem was rather casual. He admitted that the McCarthy interlude was ‘one of the most painful of my life,’ and added, ‘I was mainly concerned with the damage McCarthyism inflicted on the country.’...For Drew Pearson, the story of McCarthyism was followed by a sensational exposé involving President Eisenhower’s leading adviser.” As a Pearson biographer, Klurfield is sure to include that Pearson’s career was not defined by the McCarthy episode while suggesting the Murrow’s was.

⁶³ Cobbett S. Steinberg, *TV Facts* (Facts on File: New York, 1980), 142.

⁶⁴ Cobbett, 142.

⁶⁵ Cobbett, 142.

⁶⁶ Herman, 253.

others with Murrow's own words: "He said, 'My God, I didn't do anything. Scotty Reston and a lot of guys have been writing like this, saying the same things, for months and for years. We're bringing up the rear.'"⁶⁷ Murrow and Pearson's aforementioned distaste for each other would likely prevent Murrow from giving Pearson credit for starting the trend toward anti-McCarthyism, but Murrow certainly doesn't take the credit for himself.

Perhaps the most telling evidence that history misremembers Murrow's *See It Now* broadcast on McCarthy is that, as McCarthy biographer A.M. Sperber notes, when *See It Now* compiled its best shows into a book in 1955, "A Report on Joseph R. McCarthy" was not included.⁶⁸ While it is true that other journalists – James B. Reston of *The New York Times* and Richard Rovere of *The New Yorker*, to name two – wrote early and often about the excesses of McCarthy, no other columnist of national prominence, was first on as many stories about McCarthy, or was as consistently and vehemently critical of the Wisconsin senator, as was Drew Pearson.⁶⁹

Letters to the Editor

Another measure of the success of Pearson's columns appears in the letters to the editor component of American University's online database of Pearson's Merry-Go-Round columns. Harold Russell, National Commander of AMVets, wrote to the editors of the Merry-Go-Round in December 1951, saying, "The recent attempt in the United

⁶⁷ Thornton, 143.

⁶⁸ A. M. Sperber, 145.

⁶⁹ Reston's earliest articles covering McCarthy begin in March 1950 – a month after Pearson dissected the senator's Wheeling speech. Thus, although Murrow credits Reston for early work on McCarthy, Pearson still stands out as the foremost and earliest critic of McCarthy. James Reston, "Capital Still Split on Rights Of Accuser and of Accused," *New York Times* (9 Mar 1950): 5.

States Senate to impugn the Americanism of Mr. Drew Pearson does such shocking violence to Mr. Pearson's record of patriotic humanitarian endeavors that I feel compelled to voice my views."⁷⁰ Russell cited the case of J. Parnell Thomas, in which Pearson uncovered the representative's corrupt money scheme, saying that Pearson "has fearlessly exposed public malefactors with great courage as well as great success."⁷¹ Editorial reaction from *The Denver Post* – a subscriber to Pearson's column – added on December 26, 1950, "At present, Joseph McCarthy is smearing Drew Pearson, the Denver Post columnist. It is true that Mr. Pearson is a highly controversial figure, but that gives Senator McCarthy no right to blacken his character by innuendo, half-truth and perhaps even by falsehood...The McCarthy-Pearson feud may accomplish some good. Pearson is no mean antagonist, even for a senator who has no regard for the American tradition."⁷² The document includes editorial reaction from papers across the country, including from the Watertown, New York, *Daily Times*, the Greensboro, North Carolina, *Daily News*, the Tampa, Florida, *Tribune*, and the Sturgis, Kentucky, *News*.⁷³ Strong reactions from readers and middle American newspapers speak to the ubiquity of Pearson's column and the scope of his words; Pearson was truly speaking to a national audience.

Pearson's Legacy

In American University Library's Pearson archives is a March 3, 1951, *Merry-Go-Round* column, written not by Pearson but by his staff. Explaining that Pearson is

⁷⁰ Harold Russell, Letter to the Editor, *Washington Merry-Go-Round*, American University Special Collections, Washington, D.C.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Letter to the Editor, *Washington Merry-Go-Round*, American University Special Collections, Washington, D.C., December 26, 1950.

⁷³ Ibid.

away on a story, the writers say, “While he is skirting the iron curtain countries and in no position to blue-pencil us, we can say some things that he would never say if he were here.”⁷⁴ The staff column further reinforces the idea that the Pearson-McCarthy clash was exceptional:

We have talked with quite a few senators and old-timers around the Senate and, so far as we can find out, this is the most unprecedented senatorial attack in American history. On top of this, McCarthy has had reprints made of speeches attacking the boss and has mailed them under his frank, at the taxpayers’ expense, to 1,900 newspapers. These speeches again urge a boycott of the Pearson column and ask newspaper editors to drop it. Furthermore, copies of these speeches have been put in the hands of rival newspaper syndicate salesmen for discreet use in efforts to sell rival columns. This again makes use of senatorial immunity in a manner never heard of before in the entire history of the United States.⁷⁵

It is undeniable that McCarthy had a vendetta against Pearson. Not only did he publicly attack the columnist from the floor of the Senate, he physically assaulted Pearson. McCarthy’s tirades against Pearson even cost Pearson a sponsorship of his radio program. No other journalist suffered so much at the hands of McCarthy; and it is probable that no other journalist caused so much harm to McCarthy in return. Drew shared this sentiment, and expressed it in a letter to Senator William Benton, saying,

I agree with you that, while you suffered politically from the McCarthy attack, you and your children will look back on it as one of the most worthwhile battles of your life and one of your greatest victories. You ask me how much I suffered as a newspaperman because of McCarthy. My income dropped \$100,000 a year, and I’ve been working harder than ever to keep my budget balanced. I no longer am on a network and have been unable to get any fat calf like yourself to sponsor me. But I do not regret the battle.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ “Pearson Staff Says: McCarthy’s Senatorial Attacks on Pearson Unprecedented,” *The Washington Post*, (3 March 1951): B13.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Washington Merry-Go-Round: World of Drew Pearson,” 51. Benton was a U.S. Senator whom McCarthy tricked into making libelous statements, then sued. The episode cost Benton his Senate seat.

Pearson's role in the McCarthy story should not be undermined by Murrow's famous broadcast; Murrow and McCarthy may have had a dialogue for a few hours on television, but Pearson's battle with McCarthy began four years before Murrow's *See It Now* broadcast and clearly had very tangible negative effects for Pearson.

In the epilogue to his memoirs, Pearson's successor Anderson reflects on Pearson's status during his lifetime: "The Pearson gang, as the only investigative reporters in town, were [sic] outcasts from our own profession. The politicians who inhabited the towers of power regarded us as outright pariahs...Drew died a pariah before Watergate suddenly transformed his heirs into folk heroes."⁷⁷ Perhaps Pearson is not remembered by the popular history of journalism because Murrow's broadcast was so novel at the time; television was in its infancy, and garnered much attention as a new medium. Murrow's 1954 *See It Now* broadcast came in the year that saw more than half of American households with a TV for the first time.

Though television was reaching more viewers than ever before, Pearson's circulation was still impressive. According Cobbett Steinberg's *TV Facts*, there were 26 million households with a TV in 1954.⁷⁸ However, Pearson's voice was heard and read by roughly the same amount of Americans: the 1948 *Time* article estimated that Pearson's column had a circulation of 20 million and his radio show was heard by 10 million listeners each week, adding up to a total audience of 30 million per week. Furthermore, in 1950, "radio was by far the most prevalent form of broadcasting," with 94 percent of Americans having at least one radio in their home.⁷⁹ Pearson's columns and radio

⁷⁷ Anderson, 415.

⁷⁸ Steinberg, 142.

⁷⁹ Bayley, 176.

broadcasts persisted throughout the McCarthy era, beginning four years before Murrow's television broadcast, and reached a wide scope of listeners through a myriad of media.

In a time in journalism when newspapers are declining in sales and nearly every publication has a Web site, it is useful to look at the status of print media during the last wave of media evolution and the arrival of television. Though Murrow is remembered for his work in television and his *See It Now* broadcast, Pearson and other print journalists had been writing about McCarthy for four years by the time Murrow aired his show on the senator. It was print journalists, chiefly Pearson, who paved the way for Murrow's broadcast. Pearson's influence on McCarthy's downfall is clear – his persistent and unforgiving columns on McCarthy reached a wide audience, and incited McCarthy himself to take action against Pearson.

Pearson appeared on TV, as well, but his television career was less successful than his *Merry-Go-Round* columns and radio shows. In a letter to his daughter in 1951, Pearson admits,

I still have not been able to work out everything for television. I feel like Charlie Chaplin must have felt when he faced talkie movies. He could act, but couldn't speak. I can speak, but not act. And I am afraid that people are going to get awfully tired of seeing my visage of the TV screen with nothing to relieve the monotony.⁸⁰

Pearson's sentiments capture the difficulty of trying to navigate the emerging medium of TV in the 1950s. As Klurfield points out in his Pearson biography, "until 1954 [television] was a weak journalistic tool. Since television officials had an obsessive fear of 'controversy,' newscasts were devoted to readings of bland news agency bulletins."⁸¹

⁸⁰ Drew Pearson, Letter to Daughter, 25 July 1951, Special Collections, American University Library.

⁸¹ Klurfield, 187.

Pearson's penchant for controversy did not suit the fledgling television journalism of the early 1950s, and so he flourished in his *Merry-Go-Round* column and on the radio.

However, many media commentators continue to insist that it was television and Murrow's broadcast that ended McCarthy's campaign. James Von Schilling's *The Magic Window: American Television, 1939-1953* claims that the visual element of television gave Murrow an advantage in his broadcast: "Using TV's power to transmit realistic images close up, *See It Now* conveyed the bullying style of Senator McCarthy and the sympathetic plight of the people he attacked; he fell quickly from power in late 1954 and died less than three years later."⁸² In *Defining Visions: Television and the American Experience in the 20th Century*, Mary Ann Watson asserts that it was television that ended McCarthy's anti-Communist campaign:

The *See It Now* broadcasts and the televised hearings destroyed McCarthy's credibility. The Senate finally summoned the courage to formally condemn his conduct. Television showed more effectively than any other medium that McCarthyism was the antithesis to Americanism. The downfall of a demagogue marked the ascent of TV journalism.⁸³

Television may have been able to send a resounding visual image to audiences, but Murrow's broadcast came after years of criticism and commentary from columnists and newspaper writers, particularly from Drew Pearson. Pearson's prolific writing on McCarthy, volume of subscribers and status as most-recognizable columnist of the time compete with Murrow's famous broadcast; furthermore, that Pearson was first on key stories and writing aggressively about McCarthy for four years prior to the March 1954 broadcast underscores Pearson's importance in the McCarthy era. His work did not

⁸² James Von Schilling, *The Magic Window: American Television, 1939-1953* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth, 2003), 201.

⁸³ Mary Ann Watson, *Defining Visions: Television and the American Experience in the 20th Century* (Malden, Ma: Blackwell, 2008), 234.

derail McCarthy's campaign single-handedly, but neither did Murrow's. Pearson was not the only journalist covering McCarthy's scandals, but no other writer is so unjustly overshadowed by Murrow's legend than he. He wrote early, aggressively and consistently about McCarthy, and was so effective that the senator attacked Pearson on multiple occasions. Considering the availability of resources on Pearson's work and the prominence of the McCarthy era in communications, journalism pedagogy and scholarship are doing themselves a disservice by accepting and propagating the notion that Murrow's broadcast was seminal in ending McCarthy's anti-Communist campaign. Neither journalist can be solely credited with McCarthy's downfall, but neither should be forgotten.