

The Path to Madness: McCarthyism and New York Post Editor James A. Wechsler's Campaign to Defend Press Freedom

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Abstract

Between 1950 and 1954, Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy's anticommunist crusade created a schism in the journalistic interpretive community with publishers and editors being forced by the public nature of their work to choose sides. When he called New York Post Editor James A. Wechsler before his committee in 1953 to answer for his newspaper's editorial policy, McCarthy brought that schism into clear focus. Wechsler's determination to obtain the release of the hearing transcript as evidence of McCarthy's true aims led to his capitulation with McCarthy's demands that he name names. In the aftermath of his appearance, Wechsler asked his journalistic colleagues to determine whether or not a congressional inquiry into editorial policy constituted a threat to press freedom. In a time clouded by the madness of McCarthyism and despite the clarity of Wechsler's argument that intimidation of any journalist represents a threat to all, the brightest editors of the time were unable to agree even with that fundamental assertion.

Keywords

journalism history, First Amendment, interpretive community, American studies, anticommunism, James A. Wechsler, McCarthyism, New York Post

In 1953, journalist and political commentator Elmer Davis noted that a public opinion poll of farmers found one half of the respondents would support passage of a law forbidding free speech in the United States:

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They are afraid to think because it hurts, afraid to let other people think for fear that what they themselves believe might turn out to be wrong. These frightened people provide the mass of support for the men who are trying to scare the rest of us—and have already scared some of us—out of defending freedom of the mind. (Davis, 1953, p. 12)

The chief political fearmongers seeking to silence dissent in 1953 included Sen. Joseph McCarthy, R-Wisconsin, and his enablers in government, the news media, and across the nation. McCarthy was, according to political commentator and educator Richard Rovere, America's "most gifted demagogue" (Rovere, 1959, p. 3). From 1950, when McCarthy told a Wheeling, West Virginia audience that he possessed a list of communists in the State Department, to 1954, when his Senate colleagues voted to condemn his tactics, the senator fed a community of fear among Americans. His tactic of tarring opponents with the communist label silenced many potential critics and the hysteria surrounding the communist scare led others, including many in the news media, to become cheerleaders for McCarthy's cause.

James A. Wechsler, editor of the *New York Post* for more than three decades beginning in 1949, was among the most vocal critics of McCarthy's tactics. Wechsler was hailed upon his death in 1983 as a "prominent voice of liberalism," and as one of the first, most dogged, and most prominent media critics of McCarthy and McCarthyism (Saxon, September 12, 1983, p. D13). Wechsler's own past included a youthful flirtation with communism as a member of the Young Communist League during his college years in the 1930s. In 1937, after 3 years in the YCL, Wechsler left the group, citing an untenable incompatibility between classic liberalism and doctrinaire communist orthodoxy (Wechsler, 1953). In 1948, Wechsler provided a statement to the FBI, detailing his break with communism (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], June 11, 1948, 100-26441-16X9).

It was Wechsler's past, combined with his criticism of McCarthy, that made him a target for the senator's anticommunist crusade but it was Wechsler's strident anticommunist stance as a journalist and editor that exposed McCarthy's real goal in taking on Wechsler. McCarthy attacked a vocal press critic like Wechsler to silence other journalists who might editorialize against the tactics of his anticommunist crusade. And Wechsler took up the battle with McCarthy with the goal of mobilizing American journalists against the senator's effort to circumvent their First Amendment rights.

Wechsler's journalism career was defined by idealistic liberalism, devoted anti-communism, and a four-decade-long effort to define the difference between the two political ideologies. As a result of his vocal anticommunism, Wechsler and the *Post* were frequent targets of writers for *The Daily Worker*, who once referred to Wechsler as "a frightened child" (Clark, 1950, p. 4). In an FBI interview, *Post* reporter William Shannon described his boss and colleagues as "iconoclastic liberals" who resisted the mythologizing of men and who were determined to protect liberalism against attacks from the political right (FBI, December 18, 1958, 94-43457-8). True to their ideology, Wechsler's *Post* published controversial series deconstructing the cultural icons of the

right, including popular newspaper columnist and radio personality Walter Winchell and J. Edgar Hoover. In September of 1951, the *Post* published a 17-part series on McCarthy headlined, “Smear, Inc.—A One Man Mob.” In due time, McCarthy seized upon Wechsler’s youthful flirtation with communism and attacked the *Post*, with the behind-the-scenes help of Hoover and the public support of Winchell. In April 1953 Wechsler was subpoenaed to testify before the Committee on Government Operations Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, better known as the McCarthy Committee.

Several prior studies have examined the Wechsler hearings, but only in brief. In his comprehensive examination of McCarthy’s dealings with the press, Edwin R. Bayley (1984) characterized the senator as a gifted opportunist who timed his accusations so that his targets had little opportunity to respond and took advantage of journalists’ reverence for authoritative sources and the principle of objectivity. McCarthy waged an ongoing battle with his “left wing” press opponents and coddled his more compliant friends among the press, according to Bayley. In Wisconsin’s capitol, for example, the two local daily newspapers exemplified that political polarization with one supporting and one opposing McCarthy (Bayley, 1984).

Several other authors have cited the Wechsler hearings as examples demonstrating the breadth of McCarthy’s inquiries (Griffith, 1970; Strout, 1999). In addition, Wechsler’s decision to provide information about his YCL affiliation to McCarthy in exchange for the release of a transcript of the hearing has been criticized by some scholars and contemporaries as an unprincipled sellout. At best, Wechsler has been accused of releasing the names of some YCL colleagues to demonstrate his anticommunism (Alwood, 2007) and at worst, he has been labeled a “liberal informer” (Navasky, 1980, p. 68).

In contrast, this study offers a comprehensive review of the hearings and aftermath and explores Wechsler’s motivations in some detail. Such an examination of the circumstances of Wechsler’s testimony, his First Amendment motives for acceding to some of McCarthy’s demands, and his efforts to highlight McCarthy’s work as a challenge to the rights of the free press provides insight into the role of the news media in enabling McCarthyism. The power of government and political officials to shape communities of meaning is also highlighted along with the tenuous power of the press to shed light on government abuses, particularly when a culture of fear pervades the nation. The incident expands upon understandings of the conflict with his own liberal ideological base of supporters that Wechsler faced in his attempts to sound the alarm about McCarthy’s threat to press freedom. Finally, the failure of the press to recognize a challenge to its independence from a powerful government and cultural figure like McCarthy points out how ideological polarization during a time of national crisis can alter perceptions of press freedom, even inside American newsrooms.

Cold War Anticommunism

Historian Robert J. McMahon wrote that the roots of the post–World War II era known as the Cold War lay at the intersection of, “a world rendered prostrate by a

devastating global conflict and conflicting recipes for international order that Washington and Moscow sought to impose on the pliable, war-shattered world” (McMahon, 2003, p. 5). If the end of World War II set up a battle of conflicting visions of postwar global structure, it also created an atmosphere rife for the expansion of American anticommunist sentiment. That atmosphere has been described as the beginning of the “anti-communist consensus” (Heale, 1990, p. 167) that emerged in the 1950s. That consensus, according to Heale (1990) was driven by the productive U.S. economy in the Post–World War II era that convinced most Americans that communism had no legitimate role in society. That consensus also shaped American law and policy. In 1950, Congress passed the Internal Security Act, requiring groups identified by the Justice Department as “communist-fronts” to submit membership lists to the government and to label their publications as communist propaganda. The Internal Security Act also authorized presidential orders authorizing detention of communists and others during national emergencies (Theoharis, 2000). Into this culture of fear, with legal lines separating true Americans from the alleged Un-Americans, Joseph R. McCarthy emerged from the back benches of the U.S. Senate. Elected to the Senate in 1946, McCarthy began his efforts to destroy the scourge of alleged communists in the U.S. government with his speech in Wheeling, West Virginia on February 9, 1950. In that speech, McCarthy claimed to have a list of 205 communists serving in the U.S. State Department (Bayley, 1981). McCarthy’s shocking allegation was widely disseminated by the news media, despite the senator’s refusal to share his list. Thus began a 4-year period of demagogic, reckless fearmongering that stifled dissent in American society and was labeled “McCarthyism” by *Washington Post* political cartoonist Herbert Block (Rovere, 1959).

Meaning and Fear

Journalists have been described as an interpretive community. Though they don’t share a geographic location, members of interpretive communities share many intellectual locations, including similar perceptions of the history that links them and of the present conditions, limitations, and rituals of their work (Zelizer, 1993). The journalistic community of meaning, with members linked by worldview and engaged in an ongoing project of determining who is “in” and who is “out” of the group, was challenged by McCarthy’s tactics and by the culture of fear surrounding the anticommunist hysteria of the time.

Journalistic orthodoxy suggests that reporters and editors are engaged in a common crusade of supporting democracy by providing a watchdog role, keeping an eye on the activities of government for signs of the abuse of power. McCarthyism, though, created an ideological setting where the journalistic interpretive community could not agree on the present conditions that linked them together. Was McCarthy a patriot whose work was saving democracy and capitalism from the evils of communism? Or was McCarthy a charlatan whose tactics had created a situation where the presumption of innocence no longer applied to those on the political left?

A contemporary example of an ideological break in the journalistic interpretive community was described by scholar Stephen Reese. Reese traced the case of long-time *Wall Street Journal* reporter A. Kent MacDougall who, after years of apparently acceptable and “objective” service to his profession, divulged in a published memoir that he was a socialist (Reese, 1990). As a result of that admission, MacDougall was vigorously attacked in print by other journalists. MacDougall’s membership in the journalistic community of meaning, unquestioned before the revelation, became suspect and the objective news paradigm couldn’t accommodate noncapitalist reporters.

Similarly, a culture of fear can drive a wedge into the journalistic interpretive community and can even alter the fundamental “watchdog” ideology of journalism. During the immediate post-9/11 era in the U.S., journalists bent over backwards to ignore signs that the U.S. government was creating a dubious case for war with Iraq. *The New York Times* editors ultimately admitted they “found a number of instances of coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been” (New York Times, 2004, n.p.). Just 10 days after the 9/11 attacks, *The Christian Science Monitor* warned that journalists’ displays of patriotism, “raise questions about a practice that is usually kept separate from the workplace of those charged with asking tough questions of government” (Campbell, 2001, n.p.). The fear of terrorism in 2001, much like the fear of communism in 1950, forced the journalistic interpretive community to reassess its “present conditions” and adjust its practices and the boundaries of membership in good standing within the community of meaning, accordingly.

The Wechsler case highlights those questions of the criteria for membership in the journalistic interpretive community in a context complicated by Cold War anticommunism and questions of the limits of press freedom. The central questions Wechsler raised touch on core values of objectivity and independence shared by the journalistic community of meaning: What is the threshold for determining a governmental challenge to freedom of the press? And does that threshold shift during times of national crisis?

The Hearing

On April 12, 1953, Walter Winchell’s 6:45 p.m. evening telecast was monitored by FBI official Alan H. Belmont who forwarded his report to supervisor Mickey Ladd the next day. Among the items covered in Winchell’s typically fast-paced broadcast were a wave of strikes “paralyzing Brazil,” news of a “Red school for spies” near Crestline, California, and rumors of James A. Wechsler’s impending testimony before the McCarthy committee. “Washington, D.C.: The United States Senate Committee investigating Commies and strange ‘Red Fellows’ will subpoena former executives of the Young Communist League,” Winchell reported, adding that Wechsler was the first to be called (FBI, April 13, 1953, 62-31615-775). Belmont (1953) noted in his contextual comments that “Wechsler has been the target of Winchell in many of his broadcasts and columns.” Winchell had a scoop, undoubtedly from his sources on the committee, including McCarthy himself, Chief Counsel Roy Cohn and Chief Consultant

David Schine. Wechsler received his subpoena simultaneous to Winchell's broadcast, just 18 hours before the hearing was to begin on April 24 (Wechsler, 1953).

Wechsler's appearance was ostensibly prompted by the committee's "investigation" of the State Department's International Information Administration libraries. The investigation, an effort to purge the libraries of alleged communist propaganda, was undertaken by committee staff members Cohn and Schine. The two embarked in early April 1953 on a whirlwind investigative tour of Europe. "Europe laughed its head off," Rovere later wrote of the tour (Rovere, 1959, p. 199). Soon after their return, Wechsler was subpoenaed in response to the discovery in the libraries of several of his early books.

The hearings themselves featured a tendentious McCarthy and Cohn badgering the defiant but forthcoming Wechsler. The political nature of the proceedings was obvious when discussion of Wechsler's books was sidelined because Cohn and Schine were unable to identify which of Wechsler's books were shelved in State Department depositories. Instead, Wechsler's personal political beliefs and associations and the editorial policies of the *Post* were probed extensively during the 2-day hearing. Specifically, McCarthy and Cohn sought information about the inner-workings of the *Post*, particularly focusing on the newspaper's published series on McCarthy and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

The hearings were, as Wechsler had feared, a direct challenge to press freedom. A Congressional committee had called the editor of a major U.S. newspaper specifically to discuss critical articles that had appeared in that newspaper. The implications, for Wechsler, were clear: McCarthy intended to use him as an example in order to quell criticism of himself, of his anticommunist crusade, and of its enablers.

The first hearing session convened at 4:10 p.m. on April 24, 1953 in room 357 of the Senate Office Building. The hearing, like all of the McCarthy committee's hearings, was closed to the public. In addition to McCarthy and his staff, only Democratic Senators John L. McLellan of Arkansas and Henry M. (Scoop) Jackson of Washington were in attendance (Hearing Transcript, 1953, April 24). Within just a few minutes of calling the hearing to order, McCarthy had turned his attention from State Department libraries to the operations of *The New York Post*, interrupting Cohn's examination abruptly and asking, "Mr. Wechsler, do you have any other people who are members of the Young Communist League, who were or are members of the Young Communist League, working for you on your newspaper?" Wechsler responded that he would answer the question, "because I recognize your capacity for misstatement or misinterpretation of a failure to answer." He added that there were no communists on the staff of the *Post* at that time, but that four members of the staff, including himself, were former YCL members (Hearing Transcript, 1953, April 24, p. 257).

Wechsler continued by introducing evidence of his anticommunist stance, including several *Daily Worker* editorials. Wechsler read short passages from the editorials into the record, including one strident attack that labeled him as responsible for having "paralyzed independent political action (among Communists)." Wechsler noted that

he was “rather fond of this tribute, and it may perhaps have some bearing on your comment that I have not been active in fighting communism” (Hearing Transcript, 1953, April 24, p. 258). McCarthy’s response became the basis for Wechsler labeling the proceedings as the way to madness as a nation (Wechsler, 1953, June). Referring to the *Daily Worker* condemnation, McCarthy suggested it was part of a conspiracy to give Wechsler anticommunist credibility: “Did you have anything to do with the passage of that resolution? Did you take any part in promoting that resolution?” (Hearing Transcript, 1953, April 24, p. 258). Wechsler provided endorsements of his anticommunist writings from sources including Richard M. Nixon and Louis B. Nichols, Assistant to the Director of the FBI. Yet Wechsler was unable to shake McCarthy’s theory that he had renounced communism on orders from Soviet authorities so he could, decades later, publicly lead the fight against communism while promoting it from within. According to McCarthy,

I know if I were head of the Communist Party and I had Jim Wechsler come to Moscow and discovered this bright man, apparently a good writer, I would say: “Mr. Wechsler, when you go back to the United States, you will break with the Communist Party, you will make general attacks against Communism, and then you will be our ring leader in trying to attack any man who tries to hurt and dig out the specific traitors who are hurting our country.” (Hearing Transcript, 1953, April 24, p. 258)

Wechsler later noted the irony of McCarthy’s position, particularly considering the widely held critique of McCarthy’s tactics which presumed that an alleged communist was considered guilty until proven innocent:

But now I can personally report that [The McCarthy Committee] is also a place where existence of proof of innocence becomes damning evidence of guilt. This is the way, of course, to total madness for a nation as well as for individuals (Wechsler, 1953, May 9).

McCarthy continued probing the editorial workings of the *Post*, particularly objecting to the newspaper’s editorial criticism of anticommunist crusaders, including several Members of Congress and Hoover’s FBI. McCarthy presented the *Post*’s criticism of anticommunists as further evidence of Wechsler’s undercover communism.

I know that you have never testified in a case against a Communist. I know that none of the men that you have named here as anticommunists have ever testified in a case against Communists. I know that they and you have been consistently and viciously attacking anyone who does testify against Communists, anyone that exposes Communists. . . . So you cannot blame the average person who questions whether you ever did break with the party. (Hearing Transcript, 1953, April 24, p. 268)

Wechsler remained defiant, entering into the record 34 more exhibits, including examples of his anticommunist writings and further criticism of him in print by communists. It was clear, Wechsler said, that the entire hearing was an effort to silence criticism of McCarthy in the press:

The *Post* has been fighting Senator McCarthy for a long time. Our editorial page, I'm happy to say, has never wavered on that point. . . . I regard this inquiry as a clear invasion of what used to be considered the newspaper's right to act and function independently. (Hearing Transcript, 1953, April 24, p. 276)

Again and again, McCarthy pressed the *Post's* criticism of the FBI as evidence of Wechsler's crypto-communism. The chairman asked repeatedly whether the *Post* had been critical of Hoover in its editorials and then, whether the *Post* had published anything laudatory about the Director of the FBI. Wechsler noted that he had a sometimes contentious, but friendly relationship with the bureau. (Hearing Transcript, 1953, April 24, p. 260)

In fact, the FBI considered Wechsler a radical and monitored his work and personal life closely for decades. After receiving the hearing transcript from McCarthy on May 11, the FBI's Belmont prepared a summary of Wechsler's testimony for Ladd, the third most senior administrator in the FBI (FBI, 1953, May 11, 62-31615-29). The four-page summary confirmed that Wechsler had been forthcoming in his 1948 FBI interview during which he provided a statement outlining his YCL activities and break with communism. A second memorandum, summarizing Wechsler's April 24 testimony, ran seven more pages (FBI, 1953, May 18, 62-31615-33). Hoover's view of Wechsler mirrored McCarthy's. On Feb. 7, 1948, Hoover added a handwritten comment to a memorandum regarding Wechsler's FBI interview: "Wechsler is a rat & is like a corkscrew can't be straightened" (FBI, 1948, February 7, 62-31615-15). Wechsler later became one of the most outspoken media critics of Hoover, but in 1953, the *Post's* criticism of the FBI had been relatively mild. "We do not consider any government agency as above criticism," Wechsler told McCarthy. "We have at the same time taken very strongly the position that the charge that the FBI is a Gestapo or Fascist agency as an unfounded, unwarranted charge" (Hearing Transcript, 1953, April 24, p. 260).

A second hearing on May 5 focused primarily on crafting a deal whereby a transcript of the Wechsler hearing would be released if Wechsler provided a list of names of his former YCL colleagues to the committee. Wechsler's 1948 statement to the FBI included the names of several YCL officials. McCarthy wanted more (Hearing Transcript, 1953, May 5, p. 267). Wechsler's intention to ask the American Society of Newspaper Editors to investigate the hearings as an impingement on First Amendment press protections depended upon the release of the transcript. None of the transcripts of McCarthy committee hearings had been released at that time. In fact, Wechsler's hearing transcript was the only one released contemporaneously during the 2-year run of the committee and the rest of the transcripts were only released in 2003. So Wechsler's

effort to protect press freedom was at issue and he agreed to name names of early 1930s YCL members for McCarthy. Wechsler took pains to place his reasoning for agreeing to the deal in the hearing record and asked that the names he provided not be included in the public release of the transcript:

From the moment Senator McCarthy summoned me to Washington, it has been my conviction that he has raised grave questions of freedom of the press worthy of full investigation by the American Society of Newspaper Editors. . . . I believe Senator McCarthy instituted this whole proceeding as a reprisal against a newspaper and its editor for their opposition to the methods of this committee's chairman. In short, I believe I have been called here by Senator McCarthy not because of anything I wrote or did 15 or 18 years ago—none of which I ever concealed—but because of what my newspaper has said about the committee's chairman in very recent times. (Hearing Transcript, 1953, May 5, p. 290)

Wechsler repeated that he had never been told which of his books was found objectionable by Cohn and Schine during their travels or why. According to Cohn, it was a "practical impossibility" to determine which books were housed in the libraries. Wechsler responded that in fact it was a crucial question since he wrote two of the books when he was an anticommunist (Hearing Transcript, 1953, May 5, p. 309). McCarthy denied that the hearings in any way infringed upon freedom of the press:

It puts me in mind of so many people screaming that their right to scream has been denied. I have not found that your right to scream has been denied at all. I have not found that your right to distort and twist the news has been interfered with since you have been here. (Hearing Transcript, 1953, May 5, p. 310)

Of course McCarthy had already asserted that Wechsler's "screaming" against communism was merely part of a conspiracy to hide his communist leanings. Wechsler had his deal and provided the list to the committee during the May 5 hearing. McCarthy instructed Cohn and Committee Consultant Howard Rushmore, a journalist and former communist, to glance through the names on Wechsler's list. Cohn and Rushmore informed McCarthy that all the names on the list were people whose YCL involvement was already known (Hearing Transcript, 1953, May 5, p. 299). The list was not publicly released and nothing in Wechsler or McCarthy's FBI files indicates it was ever provided to the bureau. The transcript of the Wechsler hearing was publicly released a few days later.

The ASNE Investigates

In the wake of the hearing, Wechsler, noting that McCarthy was positioning for further inquiries into the press, called for an investigation by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE). "I believe such a committee will agree that this hearing

constitutes a clear and present danger to freedom of the press,” Wechsler wrote. “I hope the ASNE will investigate this attack promptly and speak out eloquently” (Wechsler 1953, May 9, p. 8).

The response of many newspapers, publishers, editors, and of the ASNE committee demonstrates an ideological division within in the journalistic community. Journalists could not agree on whether the hearing, and additional potential hearings, constituted an effort to silence media criticism of McCarthy’s tactics. Some editors and reporters, including many from more rural newspapers who objected to Wechsler’s outspoken liberalism, found little to object to in the hearings. Others felt, as Wechsler did, that the hearing had been an unacceptable government challenge to press freedom. *Editor & Publisher* cited several newspapers that had supported Wechsler’s position and raised concerns about the chilling effect of the hearing. Those supporters included *Newsday*, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, and the *Washington Post*, whose editors declared, “Senator McCarthy has now put editors and other newspapermen on notice that criticism of him in the press may subject the writer to a summons and star chamber grilling by the Senator’s private *auto de fe*” (Reprinted in Wechsler, 1953, May 9, p. 7). C. P. Kimball, publisher of the Blackfoot, Idaho *Daily Bulletin*, exemplified the politically conservative faction who supported McCarthy, opposed Wechsler and were unmoved by his decades-long anticommunist record:

Since when does a Senatorial Committee’s questioning of an upstart editor constitute intimidation of the press? What a smoke screen! A typical Commie diversionary tactic. . . . We say more power to Senator McCarthy. (Kimball, 1953, p. 45)

In several editorials on the subject, the editors of *Editor & Publisher* played both sides of the issue, reflecting the ideological division among the journalistic community. On May 16, 1953, *E&P* editors seemed to side with Wechsler:

There is no doubt in our mind that Senator Joseph R. McCarthy’s examination of *New York Post* Editor James A. Wechsler before the Senate Investigations Committee was an attempt to intimidate a newspaperman for expressing editorial views with which the Senator disagrees. That Senator McCarthy obviously failed in trying to intimidate Mr. Wechsler is beside the point. . . . we think it is an abuse of [Sen. McCarthy’s] position, and a dangerous precedent for him to use the forum of his investigating committee to accuse an editor of subservience to the Communist cause because that editor’s or newspaper’s writings are not to his liking. (“Wechsler vs. McCarthy,” 1953, May 16, p. 38)

One week later, however, *E&P* editors softened their position, asserting that there was no “direct” infringement of freedom of the press in the Wechsler hearing:

Some people seem to see an outright infringement of freedom of the press in Senator McCarthy’s investigation of James Wechsler, editor of the *New York*

Post. We cannot agree. There has been no interference with the right of Mr. Wechsler nor of the *Post* to write or publish what they please. . . . The threat to freedom of the press was certainly implicit in Senator McCarthy's questioning, but there was and has been no direct infringement of that freedom. ("Free Press' Cry," 1953, May 23, p. 36)

Wechsler, of course, had not argued that any "direct" infringement of press freedom had occurred. The mechanism of McCarthyism did not involve government purges or action against those accused. It was, as many have observed, the stigma of the accusation that often carried with it dire consequences for the recipient. How many American newspapers, at the height of the McCarthy anticommunist hysteria, could afford to keep a "communist" on staff? How many readers would shrug off that mark of dishonor? Those who saw no intimidation in the calling of Wechsler before McCarthy's committee were the same people who would press for action against accused communists. So the *E&P* editors, in seeming to take very different stands in consecutive weeks were merely reflecting the truth of Wechsler's accusation. By calling Wechsler before the committee, McCarthy had put reporters and editors on notice that criticism of his anticommunist crusade would lead to consequences, and those consequences could include being marginalized by the journalistic community. When it came to Wechsler, many journalists happily obliged.

ASNE President Basil L. Walters, Executive Editor of Knight Newspapers, assigned the investigation to the organizations Freedom of Information Committee under chairman J. R. Wiggins, managing editor of the *Washington Post and Times Herald* ("Walters Refers Wechsler Protest," 1953, May 16). The 11-member committee examined the hearing transcript and conferred for several months to draft a reply. In the end, the members could not agree on the main question of whether or not the hearings represented a threat to press freedom. The committee ultimately produced two reports, a compromise report summarizing those points agreed upon by all members, and a minority report authored by four of the editors particularly concerned about the press freedom implications of the Wechsler hearings.

The compromise report issued by the entire committee noted that members profoundly disagreed on whether the hearings were a threat to freedom of the press:

Indeed the disagreement ranges from the opinion that Senator Joseph McCarthy, as committee chairman, infringed on freedom of the press with his questions about the editorial policies of *The New York Post* (an opinion held by the chairman of the committee), to the contrary viewpoint that the senator's inquiries did no damage to this freedom. In between are committee members who felt disturbed by the tenor of the investigation but do not feel that this single interchange constituted a clear and present danger to freedom of the press justifying a specific challenge. (American Society of Newspaper Editors [ASNE] Comment, 1953, p. 1)

The bulk of the four-page report restated the circumstances and some of the exchanges of the hearings and concluded that editors should have their attorneys

review the question in case they are called before Congress for their news judgments. Each individual editor, the report suggested, should judge the implications of the hearing for himself.

The minority report was submitted by Wiggins, *Hartford Courier* Editor Herbert Brucker, *Eugene (Ore.) Register-Guard* Editor William M. Tubman, and Eugene S. Pulliam, Jr., Managing Editor of the *Indianapolis News*. The minority objected to the hearings on the grounds that Wechsler was compelled to testify regarding his opinions and writings as a journalist, activities that are protected by the First Amendment. The minority concluded that repeated Congressional inquiry into newspaper editorial policies would "extinguish" the watchdog role of the press, "for more is comprehended in the term 'freedom of the press' than just immunity to punitive statutes, it having been the intent of the founding fathers to free the press from all restraints and harassment by government." (ASNE Additional Comments, 1953, p. 4)

McCarthy's response to the minority report was a predictable call for an investigation of Wiggins, alleging that he and the *Washington Post* had "prostituted and endangered freedom of the press by constant false, vicious, intemperate attacks upon anyone who dares expose any of the undercover communists" (McCarthy, 1953, p. 1).

Having triangulated the issue in prior editorials, *E&P* editors on this occasion sided with the strongly worded minority report, reprinting it as the body of their editorial and concluding, "Those are our sentiments exactly" ("ASNE report," 1953, August 15).

ASNE had not put the issue to rest with the release of the reports. The continued schism in the journalistic community left editors sharply divided on the issue of McCarthy's crusade. The Wechsler case was discussed at the 1954 and 1956 ASNE national conventions in Washington, D.C.

At the 1954 convention, *Trenton Times* Editor James Kerney, Jr. addressed the issue in a session entitled "Senator McCarthy in the News." Kerney began by declaring McCarthy was the "worst Senator in the entire history of the United States," and chastised his colleagues for failing to rally to Wechsler's defense and to the defense of freedom of the press. "I just can't get over the idea that this Society didn't rise wrathfully the moment an editor was attacked for his editorials," Kerney said. "It seems to me this is one of the reasons we ought to have such a society, not for these clambakes in Washington, but because we ought to have a purpose." Kerney took issue with those who claimed that no infringement of freedom of the press occurred because there was no direct intervention by the government to stop Wechsler from publishing. "Jim Wechsler was intimidated," Kerney said. "Now it is a fact, thank goodness, that Jim Wechsler shows no effect of the intimidation. But the effort to intimidate him was made by a United States Senator. And the real point is that the effort was made, not whether or not he was intimidated" (ASNE Proceedings, 1954, p. 98).

New York Journal-American Managing Editor Sam Day focused his rebuttal of Kerney on McCarthy, avoiding the press freedom issue entirely. "I don't ask his critics to like Senator McCarthy," Day said while asking his colleagues to join in McCarthy's anticommunist crusade (ASNE Proceedings, 1954, p. 99). Several months later, the U.S. Senate voted 67 to 22 to condemn McCarthy's behavior (U.S. Senate, 1954).

The issue returned to the ASNE convention in 1956 when another session of the convention was devoted to the larger question, "Is Congressional Investigation of the Press a Threat to Freedom?" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* Editorial Page Editor Irving Dillard asserted that the relative silence of the press when under investigation, including the Wechsler hearing, suggested that editors have failed to speak out in protection of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. "Liberty does not disappear overnight," Dillard told his colleagues. "History shows that it is crumbled away a little at a time. The process is one of erosion and the time to stop that wearing away is when it makes its first beginnings" (ASNE Proceedings, 1956, p. 63). But the schism remained as Vermont C. Royster, Senior Associate Editor of the *Wall Street Journal* argued that no infringement of press freedom occurred since there was no proof that any editor failed to state their opinions on McCarthy as a result of the hearings. "We have a tradition in this profession that we are not even intimidated by men who march into the city room with bull-whips in their hands," Royster said. "So I don't think that the intimidation question rests with the committee as much with ourselves" (ASNE Proceedings, 1956, p. 99).

Wechsler noted that his case for infringement of freedom of the press may have been weakened by his unwillingness to demonstrate in some dramatic way that he had been intimidated:

I feel in a sense I am guilty of having confused the issue because it seems perfectly clear that if I had retired to Mexico or jumped off the 15th floor of the *Post* building at the end of the McCarthy inquiry, I would have established that this was a threat to freedom of the press, and that my physical survival has been cited since then as rather dramatic evidence that this was an inconsequential episode. (ASNE Proceedings, 1956, p. 71)

Conclusion

Much of scholarly focus on the Wechsler hearings has been not on the question of press freedom, but on the controversial issue of naming names of alleged communists. Victor Navasky highlighted the apparent hypocrisy of news organizations that supported Wechsler but were silent when English citizen Cedric Belfrage, editor of the controversial *National Guardian* was forced out of the U.S. for refusing to cooperate with the McCarthy committee. For his silence in Belfrage's case, and for his own compliance with McCarthy's request for a list of YCL members, Navasky labeled Wechsler a "liberal informer" (Navasky, 1980, p. 68). Likewise James Aronson, cofounder of the *National Guardian*, viewed the silence of the mainstream press with regards to Belfrage a matter of hypocrisy: "For the newspaper industry," Aronson wrote, "the First Amendment was divisible" (Aronson, 1970, p. 102).

There is little doubt of that. The Wechsler hearings demonstrate that the mainstream press, fractured by the culture of fear pervading the nation, was unable even to agree that McCarthy's crusade represented a threat to press freedom despite the fact that he targeted Belfrage and Wechsler, among others in the press.

For his part, Wechsler was consistent in his efforts to raise the issue with his colleagues. Wechsler's later writings demonstrate clearly that his primary concern at the time was raising the issue of McCarthy's threat to press freedom. Wechsler well understood the implications for those who, like Belfrage, refused to cooperate with McCarthy. Those who had invoked their Fifth Amendment rights before McCarthy's committee, refusing to testify or name names, had been pilloried and left without any cultural capital to fight McCarthy or raise important questions about McCarthy's tactics. As a result of that reality, Wechsler chose a different approach. He said repeatedly in the hearings that it was his intention to answer every question, demonstrating his own anticommunist credentials, and exposing the madness of McCarthy's "guilty until proven innocent" and "silence is guilt" approach. By testifying and ultimately crafting a bargain to release the hearing transcript, Wechsler hoped to defeat the upside-down logic of McCarthy's crusade. While he did name names, Wechsler did so to gain access to the hearing transcript to force his colleagues in the press to address important questions of press freedom. After the hearings in 1953, Wechsler wrote,

I am an active anti-communist; McCarthy wanted to prove that I must be pro-communist because I am opposed to McCarthy. I did not see how I could persuade my perplexed countrymen that unwillingness to trust such a list to McCarthy was different from the now stereotypical refusal of communists to answer questions before congressional committees. (Wechsler, *The Age of Suspicion*, 1953, p. 290)

Wechsler found himself in a position where he could not remain silent or his hopes to mobilize the divided journalistic interpretive community to action would be dashed. As Wechsler told Navasky in 1976,

The interesting thing, in the context of that period as distinct from now [1976] is that if I had challenged the Committee on that issue and McCarthy had said 'The hearing is over, we're going to cite you for contempt,' the ASNE would not have gone with me. . . . The appalling thing is the sense we all had then that it was almost impossible to make this case without yielding on the list issue. (Navasky, 1980, p. 64)

The hearing transcript was the key exhibit in Wechsler's case to defend freedom of the press, and it had come at a great price. By naming names, Wechsler became, "an essential part of the machinery for the mass production of the citizen informer," according to Navasky (1980, p. 68). But by doing so he gained access to a transcript of his hearing, a prize that the 2003 release of the remainder of the McCarthy transcripts proves was very valuable. Without it, Wechsler would have had no evidence to bring his case to the ASNE. With it, he sparked a conversation that highlighted the divisions within the journalistic ranks with regards to McCarthy's crusade and his tactics.

I. F. Stone, second to none as a journalistic hero to the left, refused to condemn Wechsler for naming names. Stone, in fact, equated Wechsler's plight with those of others who were persecuted by McCarthy. Commenting on the banality of a 1954 House investigation of government information providers, Stone concluded,

Though the first day's witnesses included the best and boldest of the regular press, no one mentioned the recent deportations of radical foreign language editors and of Cedric Belfrage of the *Guardian*. No one mentioned the communist editors and reporters prosecuted—for *their ideas*—under the Smith Act. No one mentioned the way McCarthy "investigated" James Wechsler. Surely thoughtful men, as aroused as these were over the future of the free press, might have given a moment's consideration to the possible danger in such precedents. (Stone, 1955, p. 2)

As Stone suggests, the investigations of the McCarthy era forced all Americans, including members of the press, to continually reassert their credentials as Americans. Within the McCarthyistic culture of fear, news reporters and editors were forced by James Wechsler to examine the values that defined their own interpretive community and the ideology of journalism. Wechsler asked his colleagues to determine whether or not a congressional inquiry into editorial policy constituted a threat to press freedom. In a time clouded by the madness of McCarthyism and despite the clarity of Wechsler's argument that intimidation of any journalist represents a threat to all, the brightest editors of the time were unable to agree even with that fundamental assertion.

Political priorities and journalistic ideology are frequently, and necessarily, in opposition. Journalism history, particularly the 20th century history, is littered with occasions where the priorities or ideology of political figures and what they see as the unhelpful work of journalists exercising their First Amendment rights have clashed. The Wechsler case demonstrates McCarthy's tactics and goal of silencing dissent and provides a particularly clear example of how ideological polarization within American newsrooms can alter journalists' perceptions of press freedom.

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