

FLICKERING IMAGES: LIVE TELEVISION COVERAGE AND VIEWERSHIP OF THE ARMY–MCCARTHY HEARINGS

MICHAEL GAUGER

IT WAS A DRAMATIC TABLEAU unveiled before a nation: an older man, courtly, folksy, and usually gentle, rebuking a headstrong, bullying U.S. senator. Locked in a dispute with the Army, Wisconsin Republican Joseph R. McCarthy had just attacked a junior member of his adversary's law firm, who was not involved in these Senate hearings, for his past membership in an organization linked to Communists. McCarthy had dominated the proceedings, producing doctored evidence to indict his foes, interrupting to raise a "point of order," giving lectures, and making crude, personal attacks upon the participants.¹ But on 9 June 1954, Joseph N. Welch, the Army's chief counsel, whose appearance and demeanor diverted attention from his shrewdness as a lawyer, exploited the moment. Seeming close to tears, he lamented the injury that McCarthy, "so reckless and so cruel," inflicted on the "young lad" and demanded: "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?" A brief silence, then loud applause, answered Welch's remarks. Unaccustomed to losing control

Michael Gauger is a historian, writer, and editor in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. For their counsel on this project, and for their kindness, he is grateful to Carol Deptolla, James L. Baughman, Donald Alexander Downs, Matthew H. Bosworth, and Evan Gerstmann. Also, he acknowledges with appreciation the anonymous reviewers of this study for The Historian, as well as his colleagues who commented on a version of the study at the Midwest Political Science Association meeting in Chicago in April 2003.

1. McCarthy's evidence included memos that his aides had "dictated" to document their claim that the Army had employed bribery and blackmail to stop an investigation of Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. The Army also offered phony evidence, according to *Chicago Tribune* reporter Willard Edwards. After the hearings, he encountered a member of the Army's legal team at a Washington party, and this person, "a little under the weather," told him, "We knew some of the McCarthy memos were forgeries because they were responsive to memos that were forged by the Army." Edwards said there were undoubtedly "few parallels in congressional investigating history for a hearing in which one fake memo was rebutted by a fake memo from the other side!" David M. Oshinsky, *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 424–28, 452–56.

of such forums, McCarthy knew he had looked bad, without knowing why. "What did I do?" he asked. "What did I do?"²

Accepting the assessments of contemporary observers, much of the historiography dealing with McCarthy suggests that the confrontation was the pivotal moment of the nationally telecast hearings. According to this position, with the senator's tactics and behavior exposed to the country, much of the public turned against McCarthy, clearing the way for the Senate to condemn and neutralize him politically. Supporters of this argument, Richard M. Fried, David M. Oshinsky, Leo Bogart, Eric F. Goldman, Erik Barnouw, David Halberstam, Michael O'Brien, Thomas C. Reeves, John Patrick Diggins, and Arthur Herman among them, assumed that a large audience had access to, and watched, television coverage of the investigation, or that the hearings damaged McCarthy's image with hitherto-neutral viewers.³ A few scholars, including G. D. Wiebe, Edwin R. Bayley, Stephen

2. In raising the issue of the "young lad" Fred Fisher's past, McCarthy violated an agreement that his aide, Roy Cohn, and Welch struck two days previously: Welch would not discuss Cohn's suspicious military draft record, and McCarthy's side would keep Fisher out of the hearing. McCarthy approved the trade. Oshinsky, 458–60; Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 139, 216; Arthur Herman, *Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy of America's Most Hated Senator* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 274.

During the confrontation, Cohn vainly passed notes to McCarthy, imploring him to drop the subject of Fisher and to stick to the agreement. He said the confrontation was "terribly damaging" to McCarthy but complained: "It was pure nonsense, of course, and I suspect Joe Welch knew it . . . the whole story [on Fisher] had run in *The New York Times* two months previously. . . . Welch, with his superb instinct for drama, knowing a good thing when it came his way, played the scene for all it was worth." Roy Cohn, *McCarthy* (New York: New American Library, 1968), 204. Cohn alluded to "McCarthy to Shun Inquiry Till Group Acts in News 'Leak,'" a story published 16 April 1954. The astute Welch would have anticipated a McCarthy-provoked confrontation and would have been prepared to exploit it. A lawyer who accompanied Welch out of the hearing room said that when reporters and photographers stopped following them through the corridors of the Senate building, "Welch looked at me and without changing his expression, the tears streaming down his face, asked, 'Well, how did it go?'" Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (Lexington, Ky.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1970), 259–60, n46. But Welch told Fisher that the attack "caught me completely unprepared." Fried, 216, n17. In 1999, a panel of experts on public speaking rated Welch's reply to McCarthy as ninety-ninth on a list of the top one hundred American speeches of the twentieth century. See "'I Have a Dream' leads top 100 speeches of the century," University of Wisconsin-Madison news release, 15 December 1999.

3. Herman, 273; Fried, *Men Against McCarthy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 282; Oshinsky, 416–17, 464–65; Griffith, 263; Leo Bogart, *The Age of Television* (New York: Ungar Publishing Co., 1972), 222–24; Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade—and After* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 271, 279; Erik Barnouw, *The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume 3* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 54; David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 202–9; Michael O'Brien, *McCarthy and McCarthyism in Wisconsin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), 160; Thomas C. Reeves, *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy: A Biography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1982), 595, 636; and John Patrick Diggins, *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941–1960* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Ltd., 1988), 148–51.

J. Whitfield, James L. Baughman, and Ellen Schrecker, pointed to flaws in the assertion that the hearings precipitated McCarthy's downfall, although they did not deal with the issue in depth.⁴ To broaden the discussion, this study examines public attention to the hearings as gauged by television ratings, the extent of television coverage, and limits on the effects of the hearings among viewers. The inquiry finds that the hearings were shown in their entirety only on the two weakest television networks, whose coverage was broadcast on an extremely small number of stations, that viewer interest was relatively low, and that there are several reasons to doubt whether the telecasts stirred significant and decisive public opposition to the man who inspired the word "McCarthyism."

McCarthy made national headlines beginning in February 1950 with the claim that Communists had infiltrated the State Department. A Senate committee would conclude that the assertion was baseless, yet he persisted, investigating charges of subversives in the federal government and the armed forces—despite furnishing scant proof of his accusations. Then in March 1954, Army officials charged that the senator and his aides had tried to obtain privileged treatment for Private G. David Schine, a member of McCarthy's investigative team who had been drafted into military service. McCarthy replied that Army officials had attempted to blackmail and bribe him and his staff in an effort to derail their inquiries into suspicions of Communist infiltration of the Army.⁵ The Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, a McCarthy vehicle for investigating communism, subsequently launched hearings into the

4. G. D. Wiebe, "The Army-McCarthy Hearings and the Public Conscience," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 22 (1958): 490-502; Edwin R. Bayley, *Joe McCarthy and the Press* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 204; Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 165-66; James L. Baughman, *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America since 1941* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 52; and Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1998), 263-64.
5. The subcommittee would release majority and minority reports on 1 September 1954, agreeing that McCarthy was to be faulted for allowing Cohn to intervene on Schine's behalf, that Cohn had overstepped his authority, that Army Secretary Robert Stevens tried to appease McCarthy and Cohn, that Stevens and the Army's chief counsel, John Adams, tried to influence McCarthy's investigation into suspected Communist infiltration of the military base, and that Stevens and Adams were not "soft" on communism. Generally, though, the reports reflected partisan views; the majority Republicans' exonerated McCarthy and the Democrats' criticized him for actions before and during the hearings. In the meantime, several principals in the case had quit the government under duress; Vermont Republican Senator Ralph Flinders had proposed a Senate censure of McCarthy; and a special Senate committee had started to investigate serious charges against the Wisconsinite. The consensus of press comments, public opinion surveys, and political leaders was that the hearings produced no heroes but wounded the reputations of most people involved. See Oshinsky, 472-73; Reeves, 636-37.

Army-McCarthy affair (the Wisconsinite stepped down from the panel for the proceedings), offering the first protracted and televised look at the senator by a national audience.

Convened on 22 April 1954, the hearings would be the subject of 18 meetings, followed by a one-week recess, and 18 more sessions, ending on 24 June; in all, they would preempt 35 days of regular telecasts and consume around 187 hours of airtime. At the outset, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) declined to offer live coverage, fearing the loss of revenue from its daytime shows, including *Arthur Godfrey Time* and *Art Linkletter's House Party*. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) telecast the sessions live the first two days before withdrawing because of scant viewer interest and substantial losses in advertising money (the subcommittee did not permit commercial sponsorship of broadcasts of the first two weeks of the hearings). NBC, which provided 45-minute summaries of the hearings daily throughout the investigation, as did CBS, lost \$125,000 over those two days of live coverage—preemption of the *Home* show and the *Kate Smith Hour* particularly hurt the network's bottom line—and stood to lose \$300,750 weekly if it continued with expensive live telecasts of the slow-paced hearings. The ten-day cost of the coverage alone was projected at more than nine million dollars for all networks.⁶

The American Broadcasting Company (ABC) and the Du Mont network offered live coverage throughout the hearings, although some stations dropped the telecasts. Virtually without daytime programming, ABC, which supplied programs to just fifty to seventy-nine stations, and Du Mont, which numbered only ten stations, lost no advertising revenue and could afford public affairs telecasts.

6. "TV Hearings," *Business Week*, 1 May 1954, 52, 54; "Point of Order," *Newsweek*, 24 May 1954, 84; "NBC Halts Live TV on Army, McCarthy," *New York Times*, 24 April 1954, copy of clipping in Sydney E. Eiges papers, National Broadcasting Company papers, box 165c, folder 34, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison; "Background Memorandum on NBC Coverage of McCarthy Army Hearings," *ibid.*; Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory of Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-Present*, 6th ed., (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 513-14.

The coverage would cost the networks more than \$5.5 million: \$2.85 million for ABC, \$1.05 million for CBS, \$983,000 for NBC, and \$700,000 for Du Mont. See "At Deadline," *Broadcasting-Telecasting*, 21 June 1954.

The papers of Eiges, a vice president for press and publicity at NBC, were extremely valuable for this study. They contain copies of correspondence among Eiges and other network executives about the hearings and copies of newspaper and magazine articles on the coverage. I did not have access to such material from other networks; and I acknowledge that my reliance on the Eiges papers might open me to a charge of NBC bias in this work. But I believe that the array of sources I was able to consult gave me a sufficient picture of other networks' experiences with the hearings and offered a good check against any bias. I plan to consult primary sources related to other networks for an expanded version of this study.

Furthermore, because the American Telephone & Telegraph Company, whose cables linked the two networks' stations, charged ABC and Du Mont for a whole day and evening of transmission, even if the networks were not providing programs, the networks had no reason not to televise the hearings.⁷

If the prospect of lengthy hearings strained some network officials' patience or budgets, or frayed Republican nerves, with some of the faithful believing that the spectacle was damaging their party, the inquiry did not annoy the titular Grand Old Party (GOP) (Republican) leader, President Dwight Eisenhower. Early in his administration, Eisenhower had tried to ignore McCarthy and to avoid a conflict with him. The strategy did not work; McCarthy continued to crusade against Communist influence in government, even when the White House was under the control of his own party. McCarthy proved such a liability that ultimately Eisenhower and his associates quietly moved against him, advancing the Army allegations that helped prompt the hearings. Moreover, Eisenhower worked to ensure the hearings were lengthy, so the country could get a good, long look at McCarthy.⁸

Viewers saw a man whose appearance put him at a disadvantage in front of cameras. Recognizing that a heavy beard gave him an unattractive afternoon shadow, McCarthy shaved again daily after lunch, to no avail. His "freshly shaved face caked with a cream-colored makeup gave a startling aspect to his jowls from nearby," said Michael Straight, a McCarthy critic and a keen analyst of the televised hearings. When McCarthy leaned across the table to speak, "a roll of flesh beneath his black eyebrows came down over his upper eyelids, making slits of his eyes, and giving his face an almost Satanic look." As his countenance haunted him, so did his conduct, according to *New York Times* columnist James B. Reston. On television, Reston wrote, McCarthy

demonstrated with appalling clarity precisely what kind of man he is. . . . The country did not know him before, despite all the headlines. Now it has seen him. . . . People are still clearly divided on the substance of his charges and the countercharges between him and the Army, but on one

7. James L. Baughman, "Television in the 'Golden Age': An Entrepreneurial Experiment," *The Historian* 47.2 (1985): 191; "TV Hearings," *Business Week*, 1 May 1954, 52, 54; Fred W. Friendly, *Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control* (New York: Random House, 1967), 162; Bayley, 204, 209; J. Fred MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace: The Video Road to Vietnam* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1985), 56.

8. Oshinsky; Herbert S. Parmet, *Eisenhower and the American Crusades* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972), 247–67, 331–53; Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York: Harper Collins, 1982), 155–227.

thing there seems little division: the Senator from Wisconsin is a bad-mannered man.⁹

Reporter Richard H. Rovere claimed that most of the country perceived McCarthy as a “seditionist,” leaving the Senate no alternative but to rebuke him. Years later, in an echo of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s observation that “Every hero becomes a bore at last,” Reston’s *Times* colleague, television critic Jack Gould, commented: “That coverage did McCarthy in. People started to laugh at him. He became a joke, then a bore. He got tiresome.”¹⁰

Assessing the significance of the televised hearings, contemporary writers focused on Eisenhower’s intentions to undercut McCarthy, on the agreement of the press with the president’s aims, on poll data showing that moderates’ support of McCarthy waned as they watched, and on the hearings’ potential for drama. These commentators took for granted a large viewership. Fred W. Friendly, a CBS-TV news producer, said the televised hearings were “the decisive blow against the senator.” *Newsweek* declared,

It seemed that little else was talked about. From coast to coast—in homes, bars, clubs, offices, even in GI day rooms—men and women clustered around television sets to watch the developing battle between Sen. Joseph McCarthy and the Army officials. . . . And while they looked, they argued among themselves. Who was lying? Who was telling the truth?

Rovere claimed that the audience “was almost beyond belief—upward of twenty million at a time, or not much less than the population of the entire country just before the Civil War”; he also said that “hundreds of thousands” saw every hour of the hearings. John M. Fenton, the managing editor of the Gallup Poll, noted that 45 million Americans had seen part of the hearings on television, although he did not elaborate on how much people had seen, or on whether (if they were not among his critics in the first place) they had seen enough to turn them against McCarthy.¹¹

9. Herman, 265; Michael Straight, *Trial by Television* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954), 80, 90; James B. Reston, “Unintended Achievements of Senator McCarthy,” *The New York Times*, 30 May 1954, 6E.

10. Richard H. Rovere, *Senator Joe McCarthy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 213; Bayley, 209.

11. Friendly, 61; “The Country: Looking and Deciding for Itself,” *Newsweek*, 3 May 1954, 27; Rovere, 207; John M. Fenton, *In Your Opinion . . . : The Managing Editor of the Gallup Poll Looks at Polls, Politics, and the People From 1945 to 1960* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1960), 137–38.

Later, Bayley and Whitfield acknowledged the limited scope of the coverage, but they did not challenge the conclusion that the hearings helped scuttle McCarthy. Baughman cautioned against making too much of television's role in the senator's fall. Schrecker noted that the senator's public stature had begun to ebb months before his exchange with Welch. These scholars did not deal with the issue in detail, however, and most writers accepted the view that the hearings were critical. They emphasized that the hearings made an impact as a collection of dramatic images, rather than as a fact-finding enterprise, on an audience of "millions of viewers," as Fried and Oshinsky put it. Oshinsky also mentioned that surveys showed two-thirds of people with TV sets were watching the hearings the first week, and that department stores reported an increase in television sales and a decrease in daytime shopping because people stayed home to watch. The hearings, he said, had a "powerful effect on the uncommitted," in which they turned against McCarthy by two to one, according to pollster George Gallup's unpublished findings. Robert Griffith wrote of "heavy attrition" among "moderates who had long tolerated McCarthy, despite or in ignorance of his methods." Herman denied that the telecasts eroded McCarthy's support base, yet he suggested that the hearings, plus the repeated highlights of them in news programs and newsreels, made many neutral or casual observers into doubters, and doubters into "McCarthy-haters."¹² Oshinsky, Griffith, and Herman, though, did not quantify just how many moderate, neutral, or casual citizens became McCarthy foes, so the strength of their claims is in doubt.

Like Oshinsky, Bogart cited viewership surveys, and Goldman, Barnouw, Halberstam, O'Brien, Reeves, and Diggins joined in emphasizing the reach and power of television. Goldman and Barnouw pointed to McCarthy's self-inflicted wounds. Goldman said, "He went on looking for the haymaker and the right man [Welch] was present to see to it that when the Senator swung his wildest, he swung himself flat on his face." Barnouw said, "A whole nation watched him in murderous close-up—and recoiled."¹³

Ratings information yields a clearer and quite different picture. Overall, the hearings never attracted more than 15 percent of the television audience during the first two days. NBC also pointed to a survey showing that not more than twelve in one hundred homes with TV sets were tuned in to the proceedings (an estimated 27.5 million families, or 58 percent of all families in the country, owned

12. Bayley, 204; Whitfield, 165–66; Baughman, *Republic of Mass Culture*, 52; Schrecker, 263–64; Herman, 273; Fried, *Men against McCarthy*, 282; Oshinsky, 416–17, 464–65; Griffith, 263.

13. Bogart, 222–24; Goldman, 271, 279; Barnouw, 54; Halberstam, 202–9; O'Brien, 160; Reeves, 595, 636; Diggins, 148–51.

sets). Hooper ratings for Monday, April 26, in New York City, where three stations carried the hearings live, were 5 and 7 for the morning and afternoon, respectively, down from 9 and 12 the previous Friday, and from 10 in the first afternoon of the inquiry. (The ratings reflected percentages of television sets tuned in to the programming; a rating of 9 meant that nine people of every one hundred with TV sets were watching the hearings, for instance.) Had the hearings scored 9–12 on one station instead of on three, they would have been in good company, Gould observed. Godfrey's show and *The Big Pay-Off* each drew a 10, and *The Pinky Lee Show* a 9, in the first week of April. Typically, daytime soap operas received a 9 or 10, yet some dramas attracted just a 2 or 3. The average network program reached about 5.4 million, or 18 percent, of all TV homes.¹⁴

ABC agreed that surveys showed the hearings' ratings dropped after the first day or so, but it then detected a sharp upswing, to an estimated 8.5 million TV sets in the ten cities where the network had affiliated stations. Nonetheless, the national audience, estimated at thirty million the first day, swiftly and markedly declined as the hearings became bogged down in procedural detail and red tape. By 4 May, the hearings "appear to have settled into a groove as television's latest soap-opera—long-run, low-rated and sexless," the entertainment industry newspaper *Variety* declared.¹⁵

Trendex ratings underscored NBC's decision to drop live coverage. Ratings in ten key NBC cities on the first day of the hearings were 6.9 in the morning and 6 in the afternoon (they were 1.7 for the morning in seven ABC cities, 1 for the afternoon in six ABC cities, and 1.7 in the afternoon for three Du Mont cities). NBC's ratings were higher than those of the network's regularly scheduled programming in the first week of April: 3.1 in the morning and 3.8 in the afternoon; for Du Mont, the rating for regular afternoon programming—the only rating available for the network—was 3.1. Still, to NBC, its improvement repre-

14. Ed Keath, "Television Networks Learn 'Hearings' Isn't a Magic Word," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 9 May 1954, copy of clipping in Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 34; L. A. Young, "CBS Guessed Right on McCarthy Hearings," *Hartford Times*, 4 May 1954, copy of clipping in *ibid.*; "CBS-Nielsen Count 27,500,000 TV Sets," *Tide*, 27 February 1954; Jack Gould, "Television in Review: McCarthy-Army Inquiry, Like Veteran Video Favorites, Has Its Own Hooper," *New York Times*, 26 April 1954, copy of clipping in Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 34; Ben Gross, "What's On?," *New York Daily News*, 24 April 1954, copy of clipping in *ibid.*; "Trends in TV Audiences," *Tide*, 3 July 1954, 55; Bayley, 205. Some soap operas exceeded the ratings norm. In a two-week period that ended on 22 May, *Search for Tomorrow* received an 18.2 rating from Nielsen, indicating that 5,212,000 TV sets were tuned in to the program. *The Guiding Light* received a 17, representing 4,723,000 homes. See "Trends in TV Audiences."

15. John Beaufort, "The Senate Hearings on the Air: Variations in Attitudes of Networks," *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 May 1954, copy of clipping in Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 34; "D. C. Hearings TV's Biggest Soaper; GOP Tries Scalpel on Hottest Show," *Variety*, 4 May 1954, copy of clipping in *ibid.*

sented only a qualified success. The ratings were “disappointing” in light of the advance publicity the hearings received, and because the number of TV sets in use did not increase substantially during the hearings, public interest in the proceedings seemed to be lacking. On the second day, the hearings fared better in the Trendex ratings, as NBC realized an 8.8 in the morning and a 9.2 in the afternoon, ABC received a 1.8 and a 1.4, and Du Mont recorded 0.4 and 2.4. Again, though, the ratings for NBC were disappointing.¹⁶

More evidence of low public interest came from a comparison of estimated Nielsen ratings for the second day of the hearings with ratings for other special daytime events. The estimate of 11 for the hearings paled beside the 43.4 rating for the New York Yankees–Brooklyn Dodgers game during the baseball World Series on 4 October 1953 and the 33.9 for the presidential inauguration ceremonies on 20 January 1953. Other special programs with ratings that dwarfed those of the hearings were the Jersey Joe Walcott–Ezzard Charles heavyweight boxing match on 18 July 1951 (51.7), the Academy Awards show on 25 March 1954 (44.8), the campaign speeches for Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson on 3 November 1952 (25.3), the Army–Navy football game on 28 November 1953 (25.1), and the national election returns programming on 4 November 1952 (24.8).¹⁷

But the ratings against which the hearings were most frequently measured were those of the 1951 Senate investigation into organized crime, an important event in television coverage in this period. The Crime Investigating Committee hearings under Tennessee Democrat Estes Kefauver involved top underworld figures and were a national sensation. Networks preempted morning and afternoon programming to televise the hearings, whose ratings eclipsed those of the Army–McCarthy hearings. In New York City, the latter hearings attracted just around half the number of viewers who were tuned in to the Kefauver hearings at their high point—even though there were far more TV sets in 1954. Of 2.24 million homes with television in March 1951, about 716,000 sets were tuned to the Kefauver proceedings, which had a top Hooper rating of 34. Coverage of the second day of the Army–McCarthy hearings, when there were 4.15 million TV homes, was on roughly 373,000 sets in the morning, for a low Hooper rating of 9, and 498,000 in the afternoon, a rating of 12. The 1954 hearings were at a

16. The sets in use on 22 April were reckoned at 16.5 million in the morning and 15.9 million in the afternoon, as against 14.4 million and 13.1 million in the comparison slots. See H. M. Beville to Robert Sarnoff, 23 April 1954 and 27 April 1954, Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 33.

17. Beville to Sarnoff, 27 April 1954.

disadvantage in this comparison: they involved figures who were not as dramatic as the crime bosses in the Kefauver investigation, and they were televised opposite a formidable CBS lineup, whereas the earlier hearings did not have such competition. The critical point, though, is that the Army-McCarthy hearings fell far short of expected ratings. "Apparently, a Senate investigating subcommittee, together with 'Dragnet' and 'I Love Lucy,' is now subject to television's inviolate law of the popularity rating," Gould opined.¹⁸

ABC and Du Mont achieved some ratings coups. ABC's Hooper ratings for particular afternoon sessions in May were as high as 30 in Boston, where the Irish Catholic McCarthy was quite popular, and 12 in Houston. In early May in New York City, ABC and Du Mont coverage attracted close to 60 percent of the TV audience and raised the number of sets in use from 50 to 75 percent over the average. ABC's Hooper ratings there ranged from 10 to 13 during a two-day period. According to Trendex, over another two-day span in the city, the Du Mont station WABD had an average rating of 8, beating the ABC station WABC, which averaged 2—better than the figures for the leading afternoon programs, *House Party* (6.3), *The Bob Crosby Show* (5.8), *Big Payoff* (5.1), and *Welcome Travelers* (5.3). In late May, Hooper ratings in New York, Boston, Houston, and Washington demonstrated that interest in the ABC and Du Mont coverage remained high, although it was "somewhat lower" than the level registered earlier in the month. ABC's ratings were perceived as a triumph for the fledgling network because they helped it gain goodwill and a position of respectability, the platform from which it became competitive. But sporadic successes should not obscure the general ratings disappointment. Relatively few people sampled more than one or two of the telecasts, and some affiliate stations that picked up ABC's coverage had a sharp ratings drop.¹⁹

The low number of complaints to networks and stations that did not cover the hearings live furnished another signal of lackluster viewer attention. NBC did not find that the volume of protests it received, 449 in the first three days after live telecasts were halted, was significant. "Without attempting to disparage their importance, it should be pointed out that other program terminations often generate far more adverse comment," a network memorandum stated. The seasonal

18. *Ibid.*; Gross, "What's On?"; Gould, "Television in Review."

19. "ABC Radio Curtails McCarthy-Army Pickups," *Broadcasting-Telecasting*, 10 May 1954, 57; "Chicago Seeks Graceful Out on D.C. Gabs; Houston Exits, Cincy, L.A. Love 'Em," *ibid.*, 12 May 1954, 29; American Broadcasting Company press release, 13 May 1954, Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 33; Barnouw, 55; Baughman, *Republic of Mass Culture*, 52.

ending of the situation comedy *Mr. Peepers* drew 6,482 communications in 1952, and the decision to pare the puppet show *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* from thirty to fifteen minutes elicited 6,042 comments in 1951. But in Washington, the NBC-owned station recorded “relatively few” complaints about the halt to the hearings, and the CBS station registered about a half dozen daily. The response to Southern NBC affiliates was less pronounced: 125 calls to a station in Atlanta, some merely of an inquiring nature, but none to Memphis. The protests to NBC were higher on the West Coast, including more than 4,000 in Los Angeles and nearly 2,000 in San Francisco, mainly because by 27 April, no station there offered live coverage.²⁰

Nor were complaints entirely in favor of covering the hearings, for the displacement of entertainment programming sometimes prompted protests. At WNAC, the only Boston station with live coverage after the NBC outlet in the city dropped its offerings, the tide of comment turned from positive to negative after an on-air appeal for viewer reactions. Likewise, New Yorkers objected when their area NBC station preempted *The Tonight Show* to air a summary of the hearings. Gould said that viewers complained if public service programming was not on the air, or if it was on because it disrupted regular shows. He noted the stations’ predicament by observing, “Moral: there’s a reason for having a television ulcer.” Striking a lighter note, James D. St. Clair, one of Welch’s assistants, said his two children had asked, “When is Daddy going to get off [television] so we can see *Howdy Doody* again?”²¹

Lack of coverage on the West Coast pointed to another problem: coverage was erratic and unavailable in major regions of the country, only 60 percent of which would have access to it. NBC’s withdrawal of live coverage meant that markets without ABC—whose telecasts never went west of Lincoln, Nebraska—or Du Mont stations would have no such coverage. The Los Angeles area was among these

20. “TV Coverage Cut Arouses Protests,” *New York Times*, 27 April 1954, copy of clipping in Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 34; Kathryn S. Cole to Sydney E. Eiges, 28 April 1954, Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 33; “Background Memorandum on NBC Coverage of McCarthy–Army Hearings,” undated (likely 1954), Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 34; Sid Shalit, “What’s On?” *New York Daily News*, 28 April 1954, copy of clipping in *ibid.*; “Deluge of Protests of McCarthy ‘Blackout’ Smacks NBC Affiliates,” *Variety*, 28 April 1954, copy of clipping in *ibid.*; “McCarthy TV Shutout Protests Soar,” *Los Angeles Herald-Express*, 27 April 1954, copy of clipping in *ibid.*; “D.C. Hearings”; “See Army–McCarthy Hearings as Best Single Hypo for UHF,” *Variety*, 5 May 1954, copy of clipping in *ibid.*; “Radio Ads Cleared For McCarthy–Army,” *Broadcasting-Telecasting*, 17 May 1954, 64; “Closed Circuit,” *ibid.*, 31 May 1954, 5; “At Deadline,” *ibid.*, 21 June 1954, 9.

21. “See Army–McCarthy”; Gould; “Welch is Seeking ‘Obscurity’ Again,” *New York Times*, 19 June 1954, 7. Two decades later, St. Clair was again involved in a national political drama that played out before television cameras. He was counsel for President Richard M. Nixon during the impeachment crisis that led to Nixon’s resignation in 1974.

markets (but KTLA, after losing NBC coverage, offered a live audio feed with still pictures flashed on the screen). ABC had dropped its coverage on the West Coast because not enough viewers were awake to see the start of the morning sessions of the hearings at 7:30 in their time zone, and because the cost was prohibitive.²²

Even when stations around the country picked up live coverage of the hearings, their schedules were abbreviated.²³ Only morning sessions were seen in the Seattle-Tacoma area of Washington because CBS needed the lone TV cable there to show its afternoon programs. Major-league baseball struck out the hearings in Cleveland, where Indians games preempted the afternoon coverage, as well as in Baltimore, where coverage was dropped altogether to accommodate telecasts of the Orioles games. Many other stations declined the coverage, and the number of stations carrying the coverage fluctuated. At first, ten Du Mont cities and forty-eight of seventy-three ABC cities carried the hearings, but by 29 April, a week into the proceedings, Du Mont was down to eight cities and ABC rose to sixty-seven. By 12 May, Du Mont was down to one station and ABC to eleven stations, none west of the Mississippi River; by 24 May, ABC coverage was being shown on just fifty-four stations in forty-nine markets, and Du Mont was up to ten outlets (the totals do not include affiliates alone, as some stations not affiliated with ABC or Du Mont picked up those networks' telecasts). Coverage of the hearings was "no ringing victory for public-affairs television," MacDonald wrote.²⁴

Commercial sponsorship likewise suffered, possibly indicating that advertisers detected low interest in the hearings. The televised sessions were first made available for sponsorship, with some limits on advertising, on 13 May, with the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* initially the lone taker.²⁵ Only 12 ABC affiliates reported

22. Whitfield, 166; "See Army-McCarthy"; "Extent of Stir on TV Coverage Cut Argued," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 April 1954, copy of clipping in Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 34; Walter Winchell, "Of New York," *New York Daily Mirror*, 29 April 1954, copy of clipping in *ibid.*; Associated Press, undated dispatch (likely 29 April 1954), copy in *ibid.*; Bayley, 204.
23. In all, about 380 TV stations were on the air in the nation. See "What to Watch for on Television This Fall," *Tide*, 24 April 1954, 62.
24. Maurice Van Metre, "Television and Radio," *Cleveland News*, 27 April 1954, copy of clipping in Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 34; C. E. Butterfield, "Only 75 Stations Carry Capital Quiz," *Miami News*, 29 April 1954, copy of clipping in *ibid.*; John A. Hilton to Eiges, 12 May 1954, Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 33; MacDonald, 56-57. Hilton's memo to Eiges revealed no stations whose call letters began with "K," a designation for stations west of the Mississippi River.
25. "Two Bills vs. Com'l Hearings: Hit 'Absurdity,'" *Variety*, 19 May 1954, copy of clipping in Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 34; "Hill Hearings Gain Local Sponsorships," *Broadcasting-Telecasting*, 31 May 1954, 84. There was a twist to the *Post-Dispatch* story. The station that the newspaper owned, KSD in St. Louis, was an NBC affiliate that did not carry the hearings live, so the newspaper's sponsorship went to a market rival, Du Mont affiliate WTVI, across the Mississippi in Belleville, Ill. Later, though, WTVI sold its coverage to KSD.

advertising sales by the second week in May.²⁶ Sponsor reluctance might have worked to limit coverage because stations would likely be unwilling to pay for the coverage without revenue from commercial sales.

Gallup Poll numbers, also relevant in assessing opinions about McCarthy, showed that his favorable rating had dipped significantly since January 1954, when it peaked at 50 percent. It was down to 46 percent in March, 38 percent in April before the hearings, 35 percent in May, and 34 percent in June.²⁷ These numbers, however, reflected overall public opinion, not opinion among viewers only, which would have been more meaningful as a measure of the hearings' significance. More important, McCarthy's slide in the poll had started well before the hearings, suggesting that other factors had influenced public views of the senator and that the hearings' power was not as great as many writers hinted.²⁸

Although these did not question TV viewers exclusively, published results of Gallup surveys that asked people about the hearings showed that the inquiry did not appreciably damage McCarthy. In fact, the greater shifts in opinion went against the Army, not the senator. Before the hearings, more of the public (46 percent to 23 percent) agreed with the Army rather than with McCarthy. After the proceedings, the Army continued to lead, although the margin narrowed to 40 percent to 25 percent. Also before the hearings, just 34 percent thought that the Army had tried improperly to prevent McCarthy from investigating at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey—a figure that jumped to 54 percent by the conclusion of the proceedings. By contrast, McCarthy's support remained fairly static. Before the hearings, 70 percent believed that McCarthy and his chief aide, Roy Cohn, exerted undue pressure on the Army to get favors for Schine; after the hearings

26. "Web Affils Still Carrying Probe, At Coin Loss," *Variety*, 5 May 1954, copy of clipping in Eiges papers, NBC papers, box 165c, folder 34; "Chicago Seeks Graceful Out"; "Two Bills"; "Point of Order"; "Hill Hearings"; Gilbert Seldes, "TV and the Hearings—An Interim Report," *Saturday Review*, 29 May 1954, 23; Seldes, "TV and the Hearings: Unfinished Business," *ibid.*, 10 July 1954, 27.

27. Oshinsky, 464; George A. Gallup, "Group of Those Undecided about McCarthy Up by 6%," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 12 November 1954, quoted in Oshinsky, 464.

28. An extensive examination of why McCarthy's public stature had been waning before the hearings is not within the province of this study. One plausible explanation, however, is that the senator had lost political strength. McCarthy seized on anticommunism when the issue was of great political salience and fellow right-of-center Republicans could employ him and it to their advantage. The situation changed when the 1952 elections yielded two key outcomes: a popular Republican war hero who would be trusted to replace McCarthy as leader of the anticommunist fight won the White House; and McCarthy trailed the rest of the GOP ticket badly in his home state and exerted no influence where he campaigned away from Wisconsin. See Oshinsky, 244–45; Griffith, 224, 239–42; O'Brien, 143–75.

this segment dipped slightly, to 68 percent. The Army's loss of support, and McCarthy's inability to gain correspondingly, prompted people to wish for a plague on both houses, Fenton remarked.²⁹

Wiebe's 1958 study underscored the hearings' apparent failure to evoke appreciable anti-McCarthy feeling. His surveys of 21 middle-class homemakers and 25 middle-class shopkeepers found that only two interviewees changed their minds and became hostile to McCarthy because of the hearings. Moreover, among the study subjects, the hearings did not prompt a defense of civil rights against a lawmaker whose anticommunist crusade, critics said, had threatened such liberties.³⁰ "The abiding tragedy" of the hearings "may well be that only half of us have seen this in them," journalist Marya Mannes wrote.

The other half—the man looking at TV in the bar? the woman next door? the cousin in Akron?—will have seen a loyal American, Joseph R. McCarthy, battling to protect his country from the inroads of treason.³¹

Even if the televised investigation mobilized the public outrage that many authors presumed, it was far from certain that the indignation would have translated into the action needed to topple McCarthy. Other examples of political communication suggest that any ire would likely have faded quickly. Studying the impact of the Kefauver hearings on 260 New Yorkers who watched the sessions on television, Wiebe discovered that 65 (25 percent) "felt like" doing things that could be called "problem-solving," such as talking to others about the hearings, voting more carefully, getting active in good-government groups, or writing to elected officials. Thirty-three people (13 percent) actually did things that, interpreted liberally, could be referred to as problem-solving; thirty eight people (14 percent) were convinced that what they did made a difference, but of these, only six really engaged in problem-solving activity. In all, just 21 percent thought the hearings would help improve conditions, 21 percent believed they might improve, 49 percent thought things would remain much the same, and 2 percent thought they would worsen. Later, David O. Sears and Steven H. Chaffee found that following the 1976 presidential debates between Republican incumbent Gerald R. Ford and Democrat Jimmy Carter, the effects on voters were fairly

29. Fenton, 137–39.

30. Wiebe, "The Army–McCarthy Hearings."

31. Marya Mannes, "Channels: 'Did or Not . . .'" *The Reporter*, 8 June 1954, 42. For other perceptions of the hearings in stark, black-and-white terms, see John Steinbeck, "How to Tell Good Guys from Bad Guys," *The Reporter*, 10 March 1955, 42; and "Leading Men for Big Show," *Life* 3 May 1954, 32–33.

short lived, leaving little cognitive residue after the election, and they paralleled the effects of other campaign information sources that were available even had there been no debates.³²

What W. Phillips Davidson described as the “third-person” effect in communication might well have influenced scholars who credited the Army–McCarthy hearings with a huge television audience that was agitated enough to defeat the senator.³³ The effect leads people who read or view a convincing communication in mass media to see it as having a greater impact on others: “I might not be convinced, yet they might be swayed.” This is not to deny that the hearings had an impact on viewers, particularly among those who had been undecided about McCarthy. Perhaps the hearings did solidify antipathy against him or prompt people to see him as a liability to the anticommunist cause, as Fenton suggested.³⁴ More important, perhaps perceptions that McCarthy was self-destructing before millions of eyes, whatever the real audience size, led top Republicans and senators to think that he was sufficiently weakened and encouraged them to move against him.³⁵ The hearings, and press coverage of them, might well have influenced *elite* opinion more than *mass* opinion.³⁶

Actions of elite leaders—who had not launched major challenges to McCarthy earlier—indeed figured prominently throughout 1954. There were Army officials’ disclosure of their accusations against the senator, Eisenhower’s decision to undermine him, journalists’ criticisms (especially a documentary on Edward R. Murrow’s influential *See It Now*, a CBS program), Vermont GOP Senator Ralph Flanders’s introduction during the hearings of a Senate censure resolution, and senators’ subsequent condemnation of McCarthy for conduct unrelated to the hearings. The new elite opposition, particularly in the Senate, was pivotal. Most damaging to the Wisconsinite, the Senate condemnation eroded his influence

32. Wiebe, “Response to the Televised Kefauver Hearings: Some Social Psychological Implications,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 16 (1952): 179–200; David O. Sears and Steven H. Chaffee, “Uses and Effects of the 1976 Debates: An Overview of Empirical Studies,” in *The Great Debates: Carter vs. Ford, 1976*, ed. Sidney Kraus (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1979), 223–61.

33. W. Phillips Davidson, “The Third-Person Effect in Communications,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47 (1983): 1–15.

34. Fenton, 139–40.

35. Griffith observed that Democrats would not have acted until Republicans did, and that Republicans would not have acted as long as their party reaped headlines and partisan advantage from McCarthy. See Griffith, 224; Fried, *Nightmare in Red*, 139–41.

36. For example, Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967), argued that McCarthyism was an elite phenomenon.

inside and outside Washington. His political health declined, as did his personal health, and he died on 2 May 1957 of liver disease associated with alcoholism.

The question of just what animated the actors who nullified McCarthy politically is worthy of investigation beyond the scope of this study, which posits not a final answer about the impact of the hearings but an historiographical corrective and a stimulus for scholarly discussion, starting with the point that the prevailing position on public reaction to the telecasts should not be accepted uncritically. That position, like many early TV sets, needs fine-tuning.

Copyright of *Historian* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of *Historian* is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of *Historian* is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.