“Good Night, and Good Luck” [2005], starring David Strathairn [as Edward R. Murrow, one of the first radio and TV media icons] and George Clooney [who also directed and co-wrote the screenplay]. The film is easily rentable and is about 90 minutes long. The film was nominated for a number of Oscars, including best picture. Clearly, the film—which is set in 1954—tries to look like the kind of film that would have been made at that time, the same year “On the Waterfront” was seen. When watching the film, keep in mind the Cold War, anti-communist context discussed in connection with that Kazan/Brando film. Recall also that there was no color TV in the early 1950s and that it was only in those years that a TV set became a universal appliance. There was no cable and most homes received no more than three or four channels.

It is very likely that, in making the film, Clooney and his colleagues intended the viewer to make comparisons between what was going on in 1954 and what is going on today: Not just in the political area but also in areas like the role of women, the emphasis in the media on entertainment as opposed to information [was the line between news and entertainment/fluff blurred in Murrow’s own life?], and in lifestyle areas such as smoking. Clearly, this very progressive CBS newsroom was very white, very male, and very smoky. The work place is very spare and simple. What kinds of things change over time? The three TV networks in those days were largely headed by the entrepreneurial individuals who had founded their radio counterparts a few decades before. Almost all of the people in that newsroom would have lived through the Great Depression and/or World War II.

There was a lot of fear in the US at that time. How comparable are our fears today? What kinds of things do these fears lead to? What does one of the characters mean when he says: “The terror is in this room?” The film also raises some interesting questions about what “balance” means in presenting information. Does every issue have two sides? The film does not stress this but both then Senator John Kennedy and his brother Robert Kennedy, a Senate committee lawyer, played a role in the McCarthy hearings. Their father, Joseph Kennedy, was a big supporter of the Republican McCarthy, partly out of anti-communism and partly because the Roman Catholic McCarthy had the support of many in the US Catholic hierarchy, and Joseph Kennedy was close to the clergy. Note the televised speech by President Eisenhower on the need to support the right of habeas corpus, an issue in a Friday, Sept. 29, 2006, NYT front-page headline.

Fred Friendly, the character played by Clooney, later headed CBS News. It is worth noting the generosity of Clooney’s direction in the film, giving the less-well-known Strathairn [as Murrow] so much prominence, even physically, in comparison with the character played by Clooney.