

Handout 1 – Media and Mainstream Culture in the 1950s

Americans' interaction with media increased in the 1950s. Though older mediums such as newspapers, magazines and comic books rose in popularity, the television became a centerpiece in American life. In 1948 less than one percent of homes owned a television set but the number swelled quickly, rising to over 50% in 1954 and over 80% in 1958. For the first time, American families were presented with moving, talking images of leaders, entertainers, and fictionalized characters on a nightly basis. Also for the first time, Americans from disparate regions were able to see the same stories at the same time. That experience of simultaneous viewing, together with what was shown, not shown and represented as either positive or negative images in those stories helped create a shared sense of what it meant to be an American.

The “Perfect” Family:

Images 1 and 2 to the right show the idealized American households from two popular 1950s sitcoms, *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. Both feature white, middle-class American families, led by businessmen fathers and housewife mothers who together help their children navigate various situations as they progress toward “mainstream” white, middle-class futures.



The Perceived “Threat”:

Below, Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy lectures about what he called the “communist threat.” McCarthy spearheaded a “witch hunt,” accusing politicians, government employees, writers, artists, musicians and others of sympathy for communism, homosexuality and other behaviors he labeled “deviant” and “un-American.” From 1950-54

McCarthy published lists of names and called many of the accused to public, sometimes televised, hearings that resulted in the blacklisting and ostracization of hundreds of individuals who did not adhere to a narrowly defined set of social norms. Though the Senate censured McCarthy in December 1954, a general fear around any deviation from the behaviors associated with the American “norm” lingered.



Questions:

- Where does Jimmie Snow fit into this image of the 1950s?
- What do you think Snow was trying to defend?
- Do you think there was room for Rock and Roll culture in the vision of America televised in the 1950s?
- What does it mean to be “blacklisted”?