

Radio Begins

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On November 2, 1920, the first commercially recognized radio broadcast was heard on station KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Radio became a family experience. Friends and neighbors joined the family and gathered around the radio to listen to the news, comedy shows, and music. The world became a little smaller.

Radio, like music, is an entertainment form that is directed to the ear, not the eye. Radio uses sound to stimulate the imagination. The mind's eye is exercised, and the listener is forced to imagine what is happening, what the performers look like, and where the action is taking place. Think about how radio affects the imagination. For example, in 1938 when Orson Welles presented a Halloween eve program of H. G. Wells's 1898 book *War of the Worlds* (about a Martian invasion of Earth), millions of listeners panicked. They thought the invasion was really happening.

The Golden Age of Radio lasted only about thirty years, from 1925 to around 1956, when television captured Americans' attention with visual programming.

The first known radio broadcast in America was made from an experimental station in Brant Rock, Massachusetts, on December 24, 1906. It was a Christmas Eve program of phonograph records; a speech; and a violin solo. There is no record of how many people may have heard it.

Radio's potential would not be realized for another ten years, except by the military in World War I. In 1916 David Sarnoff believed in the possibility of having a radio receiver in every home. Sarnoff would later become the head of RCA (Radio Corporation of America) and NBC (the National Broadcasting Company).

Dr. Frank Conrad, a Westinghouse assistant chief engineer, transmitted the first true wireless radio program in 1916, over station 8XK, from Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania. The program consisted of talks and some recorded music. When Conrad ran out of phonograph records, the Hamilton Music Store agreed to supply him with more records if he announced that they came from its store in Wilkinsburg. This became the first commercial on radio.

By 1920 the Joseph Horne Department Store in Pittsburgh advertised in the local paper that the music broadcast by Dr. Conrad could be heard on the wireless sets they were selling. Westinghouse, realizing the potential, began to manufacture and sell radio receivers.

On November 2, 1920, Westinghouse station KDKA—Pittsburgh went on the air with the

presidential returns. President Warren G. Harding's inaugural ceremonies later followed.

KDKA in 1921 set many firsts: the first commercially licensed station; the first remote church broadcast; the first broadcast by a national figure, Herbert Hoover; the first regular baseball scores; the first stock market reports; and the first World Series broadcast.

In 1920 Westinghouse, General Electric, AT&T (American Telephone and Telegraph Corporation), and RCA opened radio stations. By the end of 1920, there were thirty broadcasting licenses issued, and by 1923 there were nearly six hundred.

AT&T was the most aggressive, with station WEAF in New York. It developed many early technical changes and many broadcasting techniques, including sponsored continuous broadcasts. AT&T sold ten-minute blocks of time for one hundred dollars each. On December 6, 1923, WEAF–New York; WCAP–Washington, D.C.; and WJAR–Providence, Rhode Island, were connected by wire and became the first radio network in the United States.

The first North Carolina radio station—as well as the first commercial station in the Southeast—WBT, started broadcasting in Charlotte in 1922. The second station licensed in the state was WLAC at North Carolina State College. Students and faculty of the communications department founded that station, which first broadcast on October 16, 1922. WLAC went off the air one year later because of financial hardship.

The first popular radios cost sixty dollars, without headsets or speakers. Sixty dollars in 1920 was a lot of money. In today's currency, it would equal about six hundred dollars. In 1922 radio crystal sets were in general use. Listeners had to use earphones, and only one person could listen at a time. Static was a big problem.

In 1922 Gimbel Brothers' department store broadcast an hour-long musical program, and the American Tobacco Company came on the air with the *Lucky Strike Radio Show*. By late 1925, radio was really beginning to prosper because of the financial support of the many advertisers anxious to get more recognition for their products.

Newspaper publishers throughout the country feared the success of radio. Many papers refused to carry lists of radio programs, because radio was taking away a large number of their advertisers. Time reduced their fears, and radio even increased their business.

NBC became the first nationwide radio network on November 15, 1926. It was headquartered in New York, with WEAF, and connected nineteen scattered stations, using more than thirty-five hundred miles of telephone wire. The first coast-to-coast broadcast occurred in January 1927. It was the Rose Bowl football game, broadcast over NBC.

CBS started in 1927. It was originally called the United Independent Broadcasters, Inc., which merged with the Columbia Phonograph Company and aired on September 18,

1927, as the Columbia Phonograph Broadcasting Company. The name was changed in 1929 to the Columbia Broadcasting System. It began with 28 stations, and it grew in ten years to 114 stations.

Types of Programs

The early years of radio were experimental. Programming was based on what station managers thought people wanted to hear. Before radio existed, audiences liked sports events, dance bands, and vaudeville. It was therefore thought that they would like the same type of entertainment over the radio. As time went on, radio listeners had an assortment of types of programs to choose from. Radio appealed to almost every musical taste, from grand opera to novelty music. From the 1930s on, radio began offering more of a variety of programming. The Metropolitan Opera in New York began airing productions every Saturday afternoon. The Longines Symphonette offered chiefly classical music. The National Barn Dance and Grand Ole Opry dominated country music.

Radio's comedy shows were mainly of two types: those with plots and those without. Those with plots were called situation comedies. They included the widely popular serial *Amos 'n' Andy*. Comedy-variety shows had no plots but instead consisted of skits, music, and joke telling. Most of the radio comedians were veterans of vaudeville.

Some dramatic programs were showcases, or groups of short stories. They presented plays that had been written for the stage or plots of Hollywood films. The showcase programs included *The Lux Radio Theatre*, *Hallmark Playhouse*, and *Hollywood Star Playhouse*.

Radio also offered mystery, crime, and suspense—everything from everyday detectives to the most bizarre encounters with the supernatural. Westerns, which later became popular on television, varied from the singing-cowboy shows of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers to the more dramatic *Gunsmoke* and *Have Gun, Will Travel*. Commonly called the “soaps” or soapers, because soap manufacturers sponsored many of them, serial dramas appealed mostly to women and were broadcast during the day. Soap operas started in Chicago, and most were fifteen-minute shows broadcast five days a week. Radio offered a number of quiz programs, but these gave very little money as prizes.

In addition to the daily newscasts at noon and in the early evening, there were commentators on current events. Gossip columnists thrived, feeding their audiences tidbits on celebrities in Hollywood and New York City. Documentary shows such as *The March of Time* and *Passing Parade* dramatized events around the world. *America's Town Meeting of the Air* provided a forum for debating major issues.

The after-school hours and Saturday mornings were devoted to children's programming. These shows were mostly adventures, featuring such heroes as Jungle Jim, Captain Midnight, Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, Superman, Tarzan, and Dick Tracy. There were also programs in a lighter vein, such as *Gasoline Alley*, *Joe Palooka*, *L'il Abner*, and *Popeye*. Some shows fit into no category. *Major Bowes and His Original Amateur Hour*,

for instance, was a weekly talent contest. It was the predecessor of such popular television shows as *American Idol* and *Star Search*. *The Answer Man* gave responses to listeners' questions on all subjects. And *Vox Pop*, Latin for "voice of the people," was an interview show. It originated in Houston, Texas, as a man-in-the-street program and was later transferred to New York, becoming one of the most popular shows on the air.

Radio in the 1920s was a way for many people to escape from their everyday cares. They could listen to a variety of programs. People could find out what was happening in the world almost as soon as it happened, and much faster than waiting for the newspaper to print it. Listeners could hear favorite performers or dramas. Radio became the popular form of entertainment of the 1920s for most Americans.

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