

## Welcome to the Power of Radio

George Burns, the well-known radio and film comedian wrote extensively about his years in the radio business and I think he explained the changes brought by radio very well when he wrote:

It impossible to explain the impact that Radio had on the world to anyone who didn't live through that time. Before radio, people had to wait for the newspaper to learn what was happening in the world. Before radio, the only way to see a performer was to see performer. And maybe most important, before radio, there was no such thing as a commercial.

Mister Marconi is widely held to be the creator of the modern radio, though much of his work is based on earlier pioneers such as Tesla, Hertz, and others. Marconi 's telegraphs used Morse code, and were a vast improvement on the wired telegraph used to date. In fact, one of Marconi's early adopters was the British Navy. They needed something better than the semaphore that that they had been using to communicate between their ships; especially the new iron-clad naval ships that could no longer travel close together. Semaphore had become impossible. Marconi's invention revolutionized ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore transmissions.

Transatlantic communication started in 1903 and opened up the world of wireless to those without access to wire telegraph. Marconi's invention is credited with saving 700 hundred lives in the Titanic disaster of 1912. It also vitally changed communications between ships and soldiers on the land during World War I. However, despite the potential for broadcast communications, wireless telegraph was mostly viewed as useful for point-to-point communication alone. The 1920s saw a worldwide network of radio telegraph, communicating news, weather, stock market, and other diverse information, but only from point-to-point.

The developing technology brought hobbyists into the mix, and tinkers who could find the parts made radios of their own. The goal of these new hobbyists as to send and receive Morse code messages at the greatest possible distances, proving the receipt and transmission with a more traditional QSL postcard, or postcard confirming that transmission had been sent and received. Early ham operators developed a Morse based shorthand to ease conversations. Though amateur radio is now mostly voice-based, these codes persist today--almost like texting language--as evidence of membership in the radio subculture.

While the general public may not have picked up on the potential of broadcasting, hobbyists were starting to experiment. In 1909, there were 89 amateur radio stations listed in US and Canada. For those without the technology at home, nickel-in-the slot radio parlours gave a chance for a wider audience to experiment with the technology. Essentially, these early broadcasters played whatever they could get their hands on whenever they could. This meant early performers have to be free or meagrely paid. In the US, any schemes to extract funds from listeners failed, and commercial interests fought vigorously for a model funded by advertising. They did not wish to follow the model in the UK, which turned into the BBC. That is publicly funded advertising radio.

What of Canadian radio? Early radio broadcasters ran cheap, live productions involving music, plays, religion, and anything else that came around. It was an entirely private, for-profit proposal...except that Canadians had to pay for annual radio licenses. As a result of the limited Canadian options in the 1920s, 80% of programs listened to were American. To deal with this problem, a Royal commission was struck. In 1928 it recommended the end of private broadcasting in Canada. The Canadian Radio Broadcasting

Commission was created in 1932 but largely failed: licensing fees were not enough to pay for the infrastructure and programming needed. In the end, CBC was created in 1936 as Canada's national broadcaster. It now coexists now, as then, with private stations and American programming...and a great deal of advertising

In 1922, AT&T, a major player in early radio announced that it would sell "toll broadcasting." In other words, in exchange for paying for a production, your business name will be mentioned. This became the favorite advertising method in the golden age of radio. That is, before World War II and before television. Advertising expanded until most shows were products of advertising agencies wishing to showcase a sponsor. For example, we had the Champion spark plug hour of musical theater and the Voice of Firestone classical music show. In 1934, legislation in the US cemented the relationship between advertising and radio, excluding any notion of a government-funded broadcaster.

The roaring twenties brought many changes, expanding the boundaries of people's lives. Cars and railways had increased travel beyond walking distances and commercial flights became available. People moved in large numbers to cities, bringing them in contact with a greater diversity of population. The economies of mass production made less expensive and uniform goods available to many. In this period, radio brought entertainment and advertising into the home. However, the American advertising model meant that programs were designed more to maximize profit for sponsors than for the benefit of the public: more listeners meant more ears on your client. People soon came to associate particular performers and programs with the products they purveyed; the popularity of the program could determine the popularity of the product. Even during the Great Depression, network radio ad revenue grew from \$18.7 million in 1929 to more than \$80 million by the end of the 1930s. Broadcasting spread consumerism in a way nothing had before, and by consumerism I mean the theory that the increased consumption of goods is economically desirable.

The potential of radio advertising encouraged large corporations to buy up stations to form networks. As a result, North Americans were consuming news, advertising, and entertainment made by a few distant authors. No longer were people entertained by local gossip or the village fair. The public sphere was increasingly controlled by the major radio players which tended to establish a public norm, to which many people wanted to adhere. Critics worried that this was a dumbing down of culture. They had hoped for elucidating lectures to be broadcast and instead got "Amos 'n Andy." Many worried that this cultivation of mass culture meant that people were becoming consumers rather than creators of culture. For example, family music night was once spent creating music together. Now, it might just mean listening to it. There was serious concern that a culture of "radiots" would ensue (particularly if the radio were used in education), and that we would evolve as passive listeners rather than active participants. Plato anyone?

In the 1800s, politics was a shared event, with public rallies held for local politicians. As bureaucracy and political power become increasingly centralized, and direct public participation was reduced, people felt isolated from the process and the participants. Enter the Radio.

Radio personalized the public realm and re-created the notion of intimacy within it. A politician could now speak to you in your living room and it was a powerful effect, even if the intimacy was imaginary. It helped people participate in the impersonal modern public sphere.

The first Radio President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, made the notion of “personal conversations” popular. By adopting an intimate, easy-going tone, he made people feel that he was sitting in the room with them, speaking to them alone. This paved the way for the “fireside chat.” Unlike print, with its disconnect between reader and writer, this new medium allowed politicians to speak directly to their listeners, and do so across the country all at the same time.

For the record, the first Canadian politician to broadcast was R.B. Bennet in 1935, but unfortunately our early Canadians were not known as “radio Prime Ministers”. However radio ushered in a new era of communicating with constituents.

So finally, radio enabled what we now recognize as a modern form of consumerism through commercial broadcasts, and enabled politicians to communicate with the public like never before. It also had many other effects that I could not document here, such as the advent of crooning to prevent damage to radio equipment, new musical styles to satisfy public demand, the creation of radio plays, and the new cult of the “star” performer. It even became involved in distance education.

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