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The March of Time Radio Docudrama: *Time* Magazine, BBDO, and Radio Sponsors, 1931–39

By Cynthia B. Meyers

The 1930s live radio docudrama The March of Time, created to promote Time magazine, was actually produced by an advertising agency, Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBDO). Exploiting the sonic possibilities of what was then a new medium, The March of Time featured actors impersonating newsmakers in scripted scenes based on actual events, accompanied by live orchestration and sound effects. Audiences were encouraged to imagine they heard history unfolding. Although now dismissed as an embarrassing detour from journalism, the program was, in fact, innovative and influential. Analysis of BBDO's role, based on the agency's private archives, reveals the crucial impact of sponsor control of radio program content on the development of broadcast news in the 1930s.

Amelia Earhart's voice sounds faint, yet distinct, as she radios her position and announces her airplane's fuel levels are low. She cannot see Howland Island, yet she is sure she is near it. Many radio listeners, hearing this in 1937, believed it to be Earhart's actual last transmission before she disappeared.¹ In fact, it was a fictionalized, scripted enactment on the live radio docudrama program *The March of Time*.² Each broadcast consisted of reenactments of news stories, the more sensational the better, such as Earhart's disappearance, or the Hindenburg disaster, which radio listeners heard on the same

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¹Ann Case, "A Historical Study of the March of Time Program Including an Analysis of Listener Reaction" (MA thesis, Ohio State University, 1943), 34.

²*The March of Time*, originally broadcast July 8, 1937, CBS, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, New York (hereafter NYPL Collection).

evening the airship burned.³ The producers aimed for variety as well as drama. In one broadcast, for example, “A great religious leader dies. A senator argues with a president. A beaten legion streams across a border. A ship vanishes at sea. A prime minister talks and doesn’t bluff.”⁴

The program was promoted as combing “the five continents and seven seas each week for thrills and chills.”⁵ In fact, it was broadcast live from a New York studio. Actors impersonated real or fictional characters; original live orchestration cued listeners’ emotional responses; and an omniscient narrator, the “Voice of Time,” guided listeners on the journey from one unrelated story to the next by intoning, “Time [pause] marches on!” As a critic from *Radio Stars* put it, the writers put events into words “which high-tension acting turns into segments of yesterday’s history brought back from the past by the black arts of sound technicians and radio engineers.” This was not just “rewrites of cooled-off newspaper stories, but pulsing flesh-and-blood stuff,” the critic went on to exclaim.⁶ In 1939 critic Max Wylie praised *The March of Time* for providing “vision through sound” and for “bring[ing] before the public accurate information in memorable and provocative style.”⁷

Designed by the editors of *Time* to cross-promote the magazine on radio, *The March of Time* was aired on various networks between 1931 and 1945, with some hiatuses.⁸ The radio program’s success, which attracted more listeners than the magazine did readers, begat the newsreel iteration, which was seen in movie theaters from 1935 until 1951 and is today better remembered and studied.⁹ As scholars have noted, the program profoundly influenced radio drama aesthetics with its use of elaborate layers of sound effects, dialogue, and music; *Mercury Theater*’s 1938 “War of the Worlds”

³BBDO *Newsletter*, May 7, 1937, 5, BBDO Records (private archive), New York (hereafter BBDO Records).

⁴BBDO *Newsletter*, February 10, 1939, 9, BBDO Records.

⁵Curtis Mitchell, quoted in BBDO *Newsletter*, January 12, 1935, 12, BBDO Records.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Max Wylie, *Best Broadcasts of 1938–39* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939), 139, 140.

⁸During the 1930s and 1940s sponsors and their advertising agencies selected the network to broadcast their program—unlike later decades, during which networks selected the programs. Consequently, radio programs often changed networks and time slots based on availabilities and airtime rates that the agencies negotiated with networks. *The March of Time* was on CBS from March 1931 to October 1937; on NBC Blue from 1937 to summer 1939 and again from October 1941 to July 1942; on NBC Red 1942–44; and on ABC (previously NBC Blue) 1944–45. Usually broadcast as a thirty-minute weekly program, in the 1935–36 season it aired fifteen minutes, five nights a week. Case, “A Historical Study,” 6; L. W. Lichty and T. W. Bond, “Radio’s ‘March of Time’: Dramatized News,” *Journalism Quarterly* 51 (1974): 458–62.

⁹Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time: 1935–1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Stephen E. Bowles, “And Time Marched On: The Creation of the March of Time,” *Journal of the University Film Association* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1977): 7–13.

broadcast, for example, probably the best remembered of all radio dramas, used sonic techniques Orson Welles picked up while a young actor in the early 1930s on the program.¹⁰ The radio version of *The March of Time* deserves further scholarly attention for at least two reasons. First, although a drama program, it was based on actual news events. Although many accounts of *Time* magazine's history elide or skim over the program as an embarrassing detour away from objective journalism, *The March of Time* was originally intended to be a new form of journalism for a new medium, radio.¹¹ Thus to consider it as drama only is to overlook its role in 1930s debates over how to use radio as a news medium in the face of newspaper-industry dominance.

Second, from 1931 to 1939 *The March of Time* was produced by one of the top advertising agencies of the time, Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBDO), a central fact overlooked by nearly all other accounts of the program.¹² Its staff developed the show's format and oversaw every detail of its production, revising the scripts and hiring and rehearsing the actors, technicians, and musicians. BBDO also had to ensure that the program carried out the advertising goals of its clients. In present-day terms, *The March of Time*, like most 1930s network radio programs, was "branded content." To help *Time* finance the program, BBDO brought in other sponsors: Remington Rand, an office supplies company; Wrigley's Spearmint Gum; and Servel, Inc., an appliance manufacturer. However, the sponsorship system, which worked well for soap operas, comedy series, and variety shows, was problematic for news: Some stories rankled some listeners, and all these sponsors eventually withdrew, fearful of failing to achieve the audience "good will" they were paying for.

What follows is an analysis of BBDO's hidden role in producing *The March of Time*, based on primary documents from BBDO's private uncatalogued archive that have, for the most part, been inaccessible to scholars.¹³ These documents provide a fresh perspective not only on the

¹⁰Neil Verma, *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 66–68; A. Brad Schwartz, *Broadcast Hysteria: Orson Welles' War of the Worlds and the Art of Fake News* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015).

¹¹For example, Robert Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce: A Political Portrait of the Man Who Created the American Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994).

¹²Because the only on-air authorship credit was given to *Time*, BBDO's role has been so little known that one major scholar of *The March of Time* newsreel never mentions the agency's central role in the production of the radio program and the newsreel; Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935–1951*. BBDO personnel were also involved in the filmed newsreel; see Ruth Woodbury Sedgwick, "Time Goes Marching On—The Screen," n.p., ca. 1935, BBDO Records. The agency has been known as "BBD&O" or "BBDO" for most of its existence; "BBDO," its current official company name, is used here.

¹³BBDO's historical records have been stored in a warehouse and inaccessible to most researchers since the mid-1990s; however, in 2014 I was given access to see some,

evolution of *The March of Time* but also on the role of sponsors and ad agencies in the production of early broadcast journalism. Preceding the analysis of BBDO and the sponsors are brief overviews of *Time* magazine's journalism, BBDO's work as a top radio agency and corporate-image specialist, and some of the issues relevant to early radio journalism and sponsorship.

Time Magazine's Journalism

During *Time's* early years, reporting the news was less important than denoting historic significance. In 1923 Henry Luce and Briton Hadden launched *Time* as a solution to the problem "busy men" had staying informed; their weekly magazine would provide the "essence" of the events the college-educated should know, conveniently and predictably organized.¹⁴ Its editors simply aggregated and rewrote newspaper stories; underpaid female assistants verified facts, sometimes by visiting the public library.¹⁵ Yet Luce and Hadden regarded their work as something far more important than mere aggregation. As *Time* writer John Martin explained, they instructed their staff to be "weekly historians, not just journalists."¹⁶

Luce believed that the most efficient way to build audience attention was to focus on the personalities in the news.¹⁷ Institutions, political and economic theories, social movements, and other abstractions were not only difficult to summarize but might bore hurried readers. Emphasizing individual newsmakers helped to humanize the news. Luce set out not just to identify the "individuals who were making history" but also to "make our readers see and hear and even smell these people as part of a better understanding of their ideas."¹⁸ These ideas led Luce to extend *Time's* content into other media that might depict personalities even more vividly than print: He launched the radio program in 1931 and the newsreel in 1935; in 1936 he reconfigured *Life* magazine as a pictorial weekly.

Time's journalism attracted many critics; its ventures into non-print media attracted even more. Though the news media already had a long history of sensationalism, manufactured facts and quotations, and content

but not all, of these records. Unfortunately, the records are not catalogued or organized, so I am unable to provide specific locations such as box or folder, but most documents are dated.

¹⁴Robert T. Elson, *Time Inc.: The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise, 1923–1941* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 7, 9.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁷James L. Baughman, *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 45.

¹⁸Quoted in Elson, *Time Inc.*, 86.

theft, these critics saw in *Time*'s ventures a betrayal of print journalism's commitment to truth and objectivity.¹⁹ As one former *Time* writer complained, "they introduced into the basically truthful concept of *Time* a meretricious (and inevitable) counterforce of all-out showmanship."²⁰ Another Luce critic blamed *The March of Time* for undermining the credibility of *Time*'s journalism, claiming that "truth" is like a virgin that "once violated, can never be the same again."²¹ Such critics assumed that broadcasting and visual media were inherently manipulative and irrational, though they might have as easily applauded this attempt to bring journalistic standards into media best known for entertainment.²² The program's reliance on dramatization and reenactment seemed evidence of its inauthenticity. Nonetheless, Luce's instinct for attracting audience attention by emphasizing personalities over ideas was clearly suited to the emerging multimedia news industry of the twentieth century.²³

BBDO: Corporate-Image Advertising and Radio Programming

In 1928 the George Batten Company, an advertising agency founded in 1891, merged with the Barton Durstine & Osborn agency, founded in 1919 by three former journalists who had met during the United War Work Campaign. The agency's early clients included a number of publishers, such as Scribner's, Condé Nast, and the *New York Tribune*. Its most famous founder, copywriter Bruce Barton, is remembered as the author of the 1925 best seller *The Man Nobody Knows*, which exhorts the modern businessman to model advertising on Jesus's short, pithy parables.²⁴ Like many corporate liberals of the time, Barton argued that business could be a form of "service" and that advertising, "the voice of business," could keep manufacturers honest by publicizing brand attributes and educating the public.²⁵

¹⁹Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 147.

²⁰David Cort, *The Sin of Henry R. Luce: An Anatomy of Journalism* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1974), 30.

²¹W. A. Swanberg, *Luce and His Empire* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 86.

²²The best-known polemic is Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking, 1985).

²³For more on Henry Luce, see Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century* (New York: Knopf, 2010); Henry Luce, ed. John K. Jessup, *The Ideas of Henry Luce* (New York: Atheneum, 1969); Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce*.

²⁴Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925). See Leo Ribuffo, "Jesus Christ as Business Statesman," *American Quarterly* 33 (Summer 1981): 206–31; Warren Susman, *Culture as History* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 122–49.

²⁵Bruce Barton, "What Advertising Has Done for Americans," *Financial Digest*, March 1928, 7; Bruce Barton, "Speech to Be Delivered over the Radio," November 30, 1929, 7, BBDO Records.

In the 1920s BBDO became the top practitioner of corporate-image advertising, also known as “institutional” advertising. Rather than promote specific products, institutional advertising aligned a company with values such as technological innovation, Americanism, and cultural uplift. Roland Marchand explains that many large firms first turned to institutional advertising to “humanize” their image, hoping to create a “corporate soul” and to build a form of “social legitimacy.”²⁶ Institutional advertising was often didactic—explaining a manufacturing process, for example—but was designed to impress the audience with the corporation’s commitment to progress. An ad produced in 1926 by BBDO for General Electric promoted electricity as social progress for women. Over a picture of a housewife hand-cranking her washing machine is the headline: “Any woman who does anything which a little electric motor can do is working for 3 cents an hour!”²⁷

In the 1920s, many involved in the formation of commercial radio, such as Herbert Hoover, feared that audiences would reject it if “direct” advertising saturated it.²⁸ “Indirect” advertising, such as naming a program after a brand, and institutional advertising, in which the program was a form of public relations, were more appropriate uses of the public airwaves.²⁹ To serve their clients seeking to exploit the new medium, many advertising agencies offered such programs.³⁰

Under Roy Durstine’s leadership, BBDO was one of the first ad agencies to oversee and produce radio programs for its clients.³¹ Beginning in 1925 with a program in which opera stars promoted the radio manufacturer Atwater Kent, by 1929 BBDO was supervising and producing programs for General Motors and General Electric. In 1932, BBDO claimed to produce 185 broadcasts per week over 974 stations for 31 clients, both national network and local broadcasts.³² For the

²⁶Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 167, 170, 9.

²⁷Reproduced in *BBDO 1891: The First 100 Years*, 24, BBDO Records.

²⁸Herbert Hoover, “Opening Address,” *Recommendations for the Regulation of Radio Adopted by the Third National Radio Conference*, October 6–10, 1924, 4; Clifford J. Doerksen, *American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 13.

²⁹Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920–34* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 70–71; Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 192. Radio programs from the 1920s named after brands include *Clicquot Club Eskimos*, *The Eveready Hour*, *A&P Gypsies*, and *The Goodrich Silver-masked Tenor*.

³⁰Cynthia B. Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 55–77.

³¹Meyers, *Word from Our Sponsor*, 175–86.

³²“Personnel and Accounts at Time of Merger,” 1928, BBDO Records; Roy S. Durstine, “General Memorandum,” May 10, 1929, BBDO Records; “Radio Department,” May 1, 1932, BBDO Records.

General Motors' radio program, *A Parade of the States* (1931–32), instead of selling cars, Barton wrote a “testimonial” intended “to sell America to Americans by a weekly radio tour of each state.”³³ For Du Pont, the chemical and munitions company, BBDO produced *Cavalcade of America* (1935–53), an anthology drama based on historical events, vetted by historians, written by well-known authors, and performed by stars. *Cavalcade*, claimed Du Pont, “offers a new and absorbing approach to history, the incidents being re-enacted so as to emphasize the qualities of American character which have been responsible for the building of this country.”³⁴ Although BBDO also produced pure entertainment programs, such as those featuring bandleaders Tommy Dorsey and Guy Lombardo, BBDO's most prestigious programs were designed as institutional advertising. Its high-minded approach to advertising—as education, service, and corporate image building rather than hectoring hard sell of products of questionable quality—dovetailed well with Luce's notions of journalism. Both Luce and Barton pursued strategies designed to attract the attention of the masses via new media technologies, yet each evoked more lofty goals than mere attention seeking.

Broadcast News and Sponsorship in the 1930s

Radio's emergence in the 1920s threatened to disrupt other more established media industries, such as the music recording, film, vaudeville, and news industries; hence, much scholarship on the evolution of broadcast news focuses on the rivalries, some perceived, some actual, between broadcasters and the newspaper industry.³⁵ Although the conflict between news wire services and broadcasters, culminating in the 1933 Biltmore Agreement, temporarily prevented the development of full-fledged network news broadcasts, there were a variety of radio “news” programs during the early 1930s, including news bulletins, news commentators providing opinion and analysis, and dramas based on news stories.

³³Bruce Barton, *A Parade of the States* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1932); William Bird, “Better Living”: *Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935–55* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 32–38.

³⁴Du Pont press release, September 27, 1935, Box 36, Cavalcade Folder, Public Affairs Department, Accession 1410, Du Pont Records, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

³⁵Michael Stamm, *Sound Business: Newspapers, Radio, and the Politics of New Media* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Edward Bliss Jr., *Now the News: The Story of Broadcast Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Sammy R. Danna, “The Rise of Radio News,” originally published in *Freedom of Information Center Report No. 211*, School of Journalism, University of Missouri at Columbia, November 1968, 1–7, reprinted in Lawrence Lichty and Malachi Topping, eds., *American Broadcasting: A Source Book on the History of Radio and Television* (New York: Hastings House, 1975): 338–44.

Radio's advent stimulated debate over how radio news could be different from print news. Recording technologies were not very portable or accessible, so recording actuality sound was difficult. Live scripted performances seemed to many a credible substitute. A 1938 book, *Practical Radio Writing*, coauthored by a BBDO writer, John T. Martin, emphasizes how radio allows voice and sound rather than words alone to convey meaning. The authors identify various radio news formats—straight news, commentary, interviews, and dramatized news—and contrast these formats by scripting the same story for each format.³⁶ For “straight news,” an announcer might read a story, “Dog Saves Boy Twice in Fire,” that follows objective journalistic standards, sticking to the descriptive facts but with simpler syntax than a print story. A news commentator, however, would editorialize the story: “You’ve often heard the saying that a man’s best friend is his dog.”³⁷ For a scripted interview, an announcer asks the boy to describe what happened: “All right. My dad and mother had gone out and left me with Sport. He’s my dog. And we were both asleep in my room ... The first thing I knew, Sport woke me up.”³⁸ And for “dramatized news,” actors playing the boy’s mother and firefighters, accompanied by sound effects such as sirens, debate whether or not to enter the burning building, when the sound of a barking dog alerts them to the unconscious boy: “Mrs. Holmes: You found him! Chief Chase: Yeah, the dog was dragging him down the stairs ... A darn fine dog!” and music fades up.³⁹ According to the authors, “Dramatization of actual events is one of the most interesting forms of presentation of news broadcasts.”⁴⁰ News dramatizations were not uncommon on 1930s radio; in addition to *The March of Time*, listeners could tune into *News Comes to Life*, *Eye Witness*, and *Front Page Drama*.⁴¹ These programs were meant to be taken seriously. Matthew Erlich points out that in the 1930s, “documentary” on radio referred to dramatized reenactments rather than actuality recordings.⁴² The standard for verisimilitude, then, was the apparent accuracy of the representation, not the use of actuality sound.

One of the under-analyzed factors affecting the development of broadcast news was the problem broadcasters had convincing sponsors to subsidize news. Why was this a problem? Consider the key difference

³⁶Katharine Seymour and John T. W. Martin, *Practical Radio Writing: The Technique for Broadcasting Simply and Thoroughly Explained* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938), 186–209.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 193.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 207.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 200.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 194.

⁴¹Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 66.

⁴²Matthew C. Erlich, *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 5.

between print and radio in the 1930s: In print media, advertising was separate from editorial content; on radio, advertisers controlled and were responsible for editorial content. In print media, visual and textual conventions helped readers distinguish between editorial and advertising content. An advertiser would not normally be held directly responsible for the content of an article. Furthermore, in print media, the publication's editorial staff produced the editorial content while the advertising was produced by advertising agencies. These distinctly separate spheres of production helped build the credibility of both the news content and the advertising.

But this distinction between advertising and editorial content was not carried over into early radio. Many broadcasters (both local stations and national networks) considered themselves to be not publishers but common carriers, like telephone or telegraph operators, and thus not responsible for the content they transmitted.⁴³ Consequently, broadcasters turned to advertisers to "sponsor" or finance the programming.⁴⁴ As Roy Durstine, a founder of BBDO, put it, "The public wants entertainment. The advertiser wants the public's attention and is willing to pay for it. Therefore, let the advertiser provide the entertainment."⁴⁵ Radio advertisers not only paid rent to the broadcaster for airtime but also paid for the content that filled that airtime. Although it may be hard to imagine today, in the 1930s advertisers were responsible for program decisions more often than networks or stations.⁴⁶ Sponsored programs were a form of branded content: content designed to attract audiences but also carry a brand message. To accomplish this, sponsors turned to their advertising agencies to identify or create appropriate branded content and to negotiate airtime scheduling and pricing with broadcasters.⁴⁷ As a BBDO memo from 1932 explains, "Radio definitely has become an advertising medium. The program or commercial broadcast should, therefore, be

⁴³Howard Angus, "The Importance of Stars in Your Radio Program," *Broadcast Advertising*, February 1932, 26.

⁴⁴For more on the development of US commercial broadcasting, see Smulyan, *Selling Radio*; Doerksen, *American Babel*; Meyers, *Word from Our Sponsor*; Alexander Russo, *Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio beyond the Networks* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴⁵Roy Durstine, "Do You Plan to Sponsor?" *Nation's Business*, June 1930, 28.

⁴⁶As Michele Hilmes points out, "Contemporary historians and analysts of television, projecting the decisive role played by today's network programming departments backward onto radio, neglect the true originators of most of the broadcast forms still with us: the major advertising agencies." *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 81.

⁴⁷Agencies' radio program production is so little known in part because a key tenet of advertising ethics was that agency copywriters did not claim public credit for their work; likewise, advertising agencies did not claim on-air credit for producing the sponsors' programs. Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor*, 55–77.

developed and supervised, not by outsiders, but by an advertiser's own agency with a thorough understanding of sales and advertising objectives."⁴⁸ The goal of 1930s broadcast advertising was to produce "good will" toward the sponsor and to create in the minds of listeners "sponsor identification" with the program.⁴⁹ Sponsors believed that broadcasting had stronger media effects on audiences than print media. They sought to sponsor content that would provide positive associations with their brands: If a listener enjoys Jack Benny's comedy, perhaps she would buy and enjoy Jell-O, too.

Most sponsors wanted to avoid associating their brands with anything potentially depressing or controversial, so most avoided sponsoring news programs: Violence, death, disaster, and controversial politics did not make for positive brand associations. This disinterest in sponsoring straight news is one of the reasons that, as Michael Socolow notes, "Autonomous news divisions did not exist in American network radio's earliest years."⁵⁰ News on radio in the 1920s and early 1930s was limited to "spot news," that is, announcers simply reading print news stories out loud over the air (often without permission).⁵¹ Not until 1933 did General Mills, the cereal maker, offer to sponsor half the cost of a network news program on CBS.⁵² But the 1933 Biltmore Agreement between the networks and wire services thwarted the expansion of straight news programs on networks; however, it permitted radio news commentary as less threatening to newspapers sales.

News commentary was a low-cost form of programming that appealed to some sponsors seeking the prestige of providing an educational public service.⁵³ However, commentators and their sponsors often had conflicting agendas. Lowell Thomas was asked by his sponsor, Sun Oil, to reduce coverage of the New Deal.⁵⁴ In 1938 Boake Carter was asked by General Foods to avoid controversy because "we should seek to avoid antagonizing any groups whose antagonism to any feature of our advertising might react disadvantageously upon the sales of our products."⁵⁵ His program was ultimately canceled. In 1939 General Mills canceled its sponsorship of H.

⁴⁸Memo, "Radio Department," May 1, 1932, BBDO Records.

⁴⁹Victor Herbert, "Do Listeners Associate Radio Stars with the Correct Product?" *Sales Management*, October 1, 1936, 465.

⁵⁰Michael Socolow, "'We Should Make Money on Our News': The Problem of Profitability in Network Broadcast Journalism History," *Journalism: Theory, Practice, and Criticism* 11, no. 6 (2010): 680.

⁵¹Bliss, *Now the News* 13; Danna, "The Rise of Radio News," 344.

⁵²Danna, "The Rise of Radio News," 342.

⁵³Bliss, *Now the News*, 43.

⁵⁴Mitchell Stephens, *The Voice of America: Lowell Thomas and the Invention of 20th-century Journalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), 185.

⁵⁵David Culbert, "US Censorship of Radio News in the 1930s: The Case of Boake Carter," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 2, no. 2 (1982): 175.

V. Kaltenborn after only a few months. German-American bakers and Catholic listeners had criticized Kaltenborn's remarks on the rise of the Nazis and the civil war in Spain and threatened to boycott General Mills products.⁵⁶ BBDO, as General Mills's ad agency, had intended to protect its client by reviewing Kaltenborn's scripts in advance of broadcast, but Kaltenborn apparently neglected to provide them.⁵⁷ Kaltenborn's opinions, the General Mills board noted, produced "violent political emotions," which a company making branded packaged consumer goods should avoid provoking.⁵⁸ Another advertiser, Pure Oil, a petroleum company, sponsored Kaltenborn's program until 1953, most likely because it was less vulnerable to threats of consumer boycotts.⁵⁹

Sponsors' concerns about negative audience reaction were based on experience: Some listeners did identify the sponsor with the program. Thus advertisers interested in sponsoring news or commentators had to be willing to manage controversy. Because broadcasting depended entirely on advertising for revenues, unlike print media, which also earned revenue from issue sales and subscriptions, broadcasters assumed that advertisers' needs had to take priority. Despite all these issues, in the late 1930s and during World War II, news programming expanded, in part because of audience demand; networks committed more airtime and sponsors' tolerance for news increased.⁶⁰ Still, the conflict between news and advertising continued to be enough of an issue that FCC Chairman James Fly suggested that broadcasters air news without sponsors.⁶¹

BBDO's Production of *The March of Time*, 1931–39

The origin story of *The March of Time* is shrouded in myth, but most accounts agree that *Time* magazine was involved in radio from its beginning.⁶² In 1923 *Time*'s business manager Roy Larsen promoted the magazine by producing a news quiz on New York's WJZ station as a

⁵⁶David G. Clark, "H. V. Kaltenborn and His Sponsors: Controversial Broadcasting and the Sponsor's Role," *Journal of Broadcasting* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1968): 309–21, reprinted in *American Broadcasting: A Source Book on the History of Radio and Television*, ed. Lawrence Lichty and Malachi Topping (New York: Hastings House, 1975): 236–44; David Holbrook Culbert, *News for Everyman: Radio and Foreign Affairs in Thirties America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 76–80.

⁵⁷Clark, "H. V. Kaltenborn and His Sponsors," 237.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 240.

⁵⁹Culbert argues it was because the Spanish Civil War had more or less resolved by the time Pure Oil took over sponsorship. *News for Everyman*, 80.

⁶⁰Mitchell V. Charnley, *News by Radio* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 46.

⁶¹Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1999), 196–97.

⁶²Lichty and Bond, "Radio's 'March of Time'"; Elson, *Time Inc.*, 98; Fielding, *The March of Time*, 10; Baughman, *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media*, 42.

sustaining program—that is, a program “sustained” by the broadcaster rather than paid for by an advertiser.⁶³ Shortly after, Larsen learned that Fred Smith, a station manager at Cincinnati’s WLW, was reading *Time* stories aloud on the air. Larsen hired Smith to write radio scripts, titled *NewsCasting*, based on *Time* articles and distributed to radio stations at no charge. The stations were free to employ their own announcers to read the scripts on the air; “*Time*’s credit line [was] its recompense.”⁶⁴ According to Robert Elson, some newspapers objected to the “ethics” of this form of broadcast news—probably because *Time* routinely copied articles from newspapers.⁶⁵ To address these complaints, Smith suggested dramatizations instead. Smith and Larsen then developed *NewsActing*, five- to ten-minute recordings of dramatized scenes of current events distributed by transcription disc to more than a hundred stations for free airplay.⁶⁶ Stations receiving this free programming were supposed to promote *Time* in exchange; however, *Time* had no way of enforcing that requirement.

By 1931, Smith is said to have convinced both Larsen and Luce to invest in paid radio airtime, thus guaranteeing exposure. Smith argued that *Time* should compete on radio with its rival, *The Literary Digest*, which was sponsoring Lowell Thomas’s radio commentary.⁶⁷ Luce was reluctant; he assumed that radio listeners were not *Time*’s target market and that the “showmanship” demands of radio would be difficult to meet. According to Elson, Larsen convinced Luce “that this was journalism and *showmanship*.”⁶⁸ As *Time*’s advertising agency, BBDO bought airtime on the national network CBS and also was hired to oversee the program’s production at CBS studios. CBS personnel, such as Howard Barlow, the orchestra conductor, and Ora Nichols, the sound effects technician, also were enlisted.⁶⁹ The program title, inspired by Harold Arlen’s song from the Broadway show *Earl Carroll’s Vanities*, included the sponsor’s brand name to ensure sponsor identification.⁷⁰

In the tradition of *Time*, producers selected current news events with an eye to entertainment as well as information. According to *Radio Guide*, “It is newspaper business. And it is show business. It must be ‘good theater’ because it is show business. Yet no fact may be distorted for theatrical effect.” *Radio Guide* described the writing process: “A research woman from the magazine, *Time*, stands by embodying

⁶³“Marching Faster,” *Tide*, ca. September 1935, 54.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵Elson, *Time Inc.*, 176.

⁶⁶Lichty and Bond, “Radio’s ‘March of Time,’” 459.

⁶⁷Fielding, *The March of Time*, 10. For more on Lowell Thomas, see Stephens, *The Voice of America*.

⁶⁸Elson, *Time Inc.*, 177. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁹“Making Time March,” *Encore*, April 1933, 12.

⁷⁰Elson, *Time Inc.*, 178.

accuracy,” just like the women fact checkers at the magazine.⁷¹ When she questions a fact, the director commands a staff member to look it up and confirm. As at *Time* magazine, tension between “showmanship” and accuracy permeated the production process.

BBDO claimed that careful attention to detail and precision ensured *The March of Time*’s credibility and authenticity.⁷² The staff worked hard to create accurate sound effects; for example, in order to replicate the sound of a beheading, sound effects supervisor Nichols chopped “liverwurst, salami, apples and bananas before the microphone” before trying a honeydew melon, which was deemed accurate.⁷³ The program was not drama, nor news commentary, nor mere “narration,” explained BBDO writer Martin.⁷⁴ Instead, the program’s style would be “terse or mellifluous” depending on the news story, the music would match in “the tempo and mood of the subject,” and the sound effects would “intensify theme or mood.” Like drama, some scenes would be dialogues, but other stories might require “single voices, speaking short, disconnected lines.”⁷⁵ For example, in a broadcast devoted to “The Great St. Patrick’s Day Floods” in 1936 that devastated many communities, the narrative was not structured around an individual or place—instead, “the river is the protagonist influencing the lives of helpless humans.”⁷⁶ As the scenes switch from Kentucky to Pennsylvania to Tennessee to Ohio, listeners hear rescuers in boats, ham-radio operators reporting conditions, victims fleeing burning gas-filled flood waters, and priests giving last rites.⁷⁷ Each scene conveyed urgency and immediacy, allowing listeners to imagine these moments.

Neil Verma notes the role of the central narrator, “The Voice of Time,” in guiding audience attention from one imaginary location to another. Verma describes this experience as “kaleidosonic”: Instead of shifting images, the audience experiences “shifting sonic worlds.”⁷⁸ For example, one 1937 broadcast includes these scenes: a boat caught in a storm off Cape Hatteras; a dialogue with a Japanese admiral justifying the invasion of China; a scene with a scam artist who impersonates celebrities; a scene featuring a starving family in Brooklyn discovering their son who has hanged himself to relieve them of expense; a

⁷¹Hally Pomeroy, “Time Marches On,” *Radio Guide*, July 16, 1936, 20.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 21.

⁷³The honeydew melon turns into a cantaloupe in later versions of this story, such as Elson, *Time Inc.*, 181, and Swanberg, *Luce and His Empire*, 87.

⁷⁴Seymour and Martin, *Practical Radio Writing*, 131.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 131.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 132.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 132–39.

⁷⁸The “Voice of Time” was initially voiced by Harry von Zell and Ted Husing, but Westbrook Van Voorhis became the primary announcer in 1933. Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 68.

Roosevelt speech about the stock market; British reporters interviewing Haile Selassie; and a debate in the British House of Commons.⁷⁹ The “Voice of Time” signals the end of each scene by announcing “1937 marches on!” or “Time marches on!” accompanied by orchestral fanfare. Verma notes that the “Voice of Time” remains outside the scene, never playing a character, and sets up the scenes from a distance. This opening to the reenactment of the Hindenburg disaster illustrates: “Late this evening under a grey-black sky, the huge silvery hull of the German airship Hindenburg noses across Manhattan from the North Atlantic, her four great motors purring smoothly as she nuzzled through the murk over the darkening Hudson.”⁸⁰

The production process was labor intensive, and this intensity was trumpeted as a signifier of quality. In 1933, “Seventy-five actors, musicians, sound effects technicians and producers work at least thirteen hours every week in order to present a single half-hour program.”⁸¹ By 1936, the workload had increased: “Two hundred and forty hours is a conservative estimate” for the labor of seven writers, one editor, two researchers, two directors, ten actors, and a twenty-three-person orchestra and its leader.⁸² In 1938, radio critic Max Wylie claimed each broadcast took “1,000 man-hours of labor” by “an average of 72 people” who prepare and rehearse a dozen scenes and then perform on air only a selected six or seven scenes.⁸³

Arthur Pryor Jr., William Spier, and Homer Fickett were the BBDO executives deeply involved in producing *The March of Time*; they were also key personnel for programs BBDO produced for General Motors, Socony, General Electric, and Gillette.⁸⁴ Pryor, son of a famous band-leader, was so well known in the radio industry that when the agency presented its credentials to potential clients, BBDO attributed the format of *The March of Time* to Pryor alone.⁸⁵ Pryor, gushed a journalist, “is an expert director, with an ear like a lynx for puffy acting. His idiom would turn Broadway dizzy ... ‘Ora, dear, have a real blizzard sent up from The Playhouse, and give me another wolf at that cue.’”⁸⁶

⁷⁹*The March of Time*, originally broadcast January 18, 1937, CBS. <https://archive.org/details/1930-1937RadioNews>.

⁸⁰Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 68; BBDO Newsletter, May 7, 1937, 5, BBDO Records.

⁸¹“Making Time March,” 12.

⁸²Pomeroy, “Time Marches On,” 20.

⁸³Wylie, *Best Broadcasts of 1938–39*, 137–38.

⁸⁴Roy Durstine, “Account Representatives: Radio in General,” November 4, 1929, BBDO Records.

⁸⁵Pryor led BBDO’s radio department from 1927 until his death in 1954. “Arthur Pryor, Radio Pioneer, Dies in New York at 57,” BBDO Press Release, May 25, 1954, BBDO Records. BBDO Credentials, 1938, BBDO Records.

⁸⁶Sedgwick, “Time Goes Marching On—The Screen,” 39.

In 1933 the BBDO newsletter described “The Inside Story of The March of Time.” For the weekly Friday night broadcast, “The script is written by the editors at *Time*; edited, rewritten, and nursed into final shape with the help of BBDO. On Monday, Arthur Pryor, Bill Spier, and Homer Fickett get together with Roy Larsen, Joe Alger, and other people from *Time* to discuss the events of the past week and decide what is to be dramatized.”⁸⁷ The *Time* writers worked on the first draft and then on Tuesday the same executives met again to discuss which stories to include. “Bill Spier and Homer Fickett interview new actors, and go to the newsreels to hear the voices of people currently in the headlines.”⁸⁸ BBDO kept a core group of actors on retainer for the program, but Spier and Fickett also searched every week for new actors for specific impersonations. They watched and listened to newsreel footage as their guide to vocal style.

“On Wednesday morning, the first draft of the script is finished... In the afternoon, the show is cast. In the evening, Arthur Pryor meets with the musical conductor and the sound effects people,” Barlow and Nichols. Sometimes the scenes would change at the last minute: “Often the editors of *Time* will dig up an extra bit of news, or something will happen at the last minute that means changing a whole sequence. The script is never finished until it actually goes on the air.” “On Thursday, the show is rehearsed from 9 until 1 at Columbia. After lunch, there is a preliminary dress rehearsal, which is piped downstairs to the Conference Room. Everybody sits around and listens and criticizes. Then back to BBDO, where the rewriting begins and continues all night long... On Friday, rehearsals all morning, then another dress rehearsal at 2:15, then more rewriting.”⁸⁹ Finally, on Friday night, the program went on the air, live.

In fall 1935 the format was changed to fifteen minutes, five nights a week. The complexities and exigencies of live radio program production are difficult to imagine today; instead of a weeklong writing and rehearsal process, each weekday BBDO staff had to develop and rehearse a new broadcast. A BBDO *Newsletter* from 1935 noted, “The writing, casting, directing, and rehearsing of this show five nights a week is probably the most complicated and difficult job ever done in radio.”⁹⁰ Scenes were prepared and then scrapped when breaking news arrived at the last moment. “The March of Time was ready to handle the news even if word had come after the show was actually on the air.” Each weekday, *Time* editors selected stories; by 2:00 p.m. Fickett met with the *Time* writers and made suggestions; by 3:30 p.m., Spier joined them; rehearsals began at 5:00 p.m.; a rough dress rehearsal, when stories were cut and new stories added, was held at 7:00 p.m.; at 8:30 p.m. the cast and orchestra rehearsed

⁸⁷BBDO *Newsletter*, November 10, 1933, 5, BBDO Records.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰BBDO *Newsletter*, September 13, 1935, 4, BBDO Records.

separately; a final dress rehearsal was held at 9:30 p.m.; and last-minute changes were made up until airtime. “Then, at 10:30 on the dot, *The March of Time* is on the air—as smooth and professional a performance as if it had been worked over a month instead of a day.”⁹¹

Despite claims that most dialogue was “verbatim” and “based on verified quotations,” dialogue, characters, and scenes were often pure invention.⁹² For example, in 1938 a British ship was torpedoed in the Mediterranean; everybody on board was killed, so no witnesses survived. Nonetheless, the producers invented a scene in which listeners could “hear” the ship’s last moments through layers of sound effects, including sirens, explosions, and panicking crew members. To heighten the drama, the disaster is portrayed as the fictionalized last moments of the ship captain’s wife—we even learn her name was “Laura.”

Captain: We’re settling fast. Man the lifeboats! Abandon ship!
Abandon ship! [Ship’s horn, shouting]

Captain: Laura! Where’s my wife? Laura!

Laura: Here I am! [Loud explosion, crashing water]

Captain: Jump, Laura! The boilers are exploding!

Laura: Harry!

Captain: Jump, I tell you! Try to keep clear of the ship!

[Orchestra fanfare]⁹³

The putative innocence and feminine helplessness of the captain’s wife allow the audience to personalize the injustice and horror of the attack. Thus what might have been a distant foreign incident killing a ship’s nameless crew is reconfigured as a tragic love story, engaging the audience’s sympathy and stimulating their horror. While not all *March of Time* scenes were this dramatic—many were simply imagined dialogues between newsmakers—it was this type of scene that gathered accolades from critics and audiences.⁹⁴

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²BBDO *Newsletter*, November 10, 1933, 5, BBDO Records; Elson, 180.

⁹³*The March of Time*, originally broadcast February 3, 1938, NBC, accessed at <https://archive.org/details/1938RadioNews>

⁹⁴Examples of *March of Time* scripts can be found in Wylie, *Best Broadcasts of 1938–39*, 141–54; Seymour and Martin, *Practical Radio Writing*, 132–39; Elson, *Time Inc.*, 178; White, *News on the Air*, 256ff.

The impersonation of actual people raised a host of questions. The program might, for example, be accused of infringing on copyrights, privacy rights, or publicity rights by imitating well-known voices. BBDO protected itself from such accusations by claiming that it was a news program overseen by journalists at *Time*, and therefore they were not required to get permissions from living people as they would for an advertisement.⁹⁵ In addition, *Time* claimed, “A voice, as a face, is public domain.”⁹⁶ *Time* and BBDO both claimed they went to great lengths to make their impersonations accurate. The actor William Adams, who played Franklin D. Roosevelt, “studies newsreels to get personality as well as correct inflection into his impersonations.”⁹⁷ The Herbert Hoover impersonator, Ted De Corsia, when he impersonated an Arab “will have a Moslem prayer dug out of the library, translated phonetically, so that he can get the exact cadence.”⁹⁸ This attention to detail was apparently successful: In 1933 a listener wrote that the reenactment of an assassination attempt on Roosevelt was “so realistic” that she wondered if they had recorded the actual event with a “sound machine.”⁹⁹

At BBDO, confidence in the accuracy of the impersonations was so high that they tested it on Eleanor Roosevelt in 1934 when, visiting the agency for a different broadcast, she was introduced to Adams, her husband’s impersonator.¹⁰⁰ Adams offered to read a recent Roosevelt speech in the studio while she listened in the control room to judge his accuracy. According to a BBDO report, “When Adams finished, she said she thought his impersonation was wonderful—though she added, ‘I do think I could tell the difference.’”¹⁰¹ Later in 1934 President Roosevelt, fearing his efforts to calm the national mood were undercut by these impersonations, asked BBDO to stop. Not only was he concerned that *The March of Time*’s fictionalized dialogue would confuse his public statements with fictionalized ones, he was also using radio to communicate directly with the electorate in his *Fireside Chats*.¹⁰²

⁹⁵BBDO *Newsletter*, March 20, 1931, 3, BBDO Records.

⁹⁶Pomeroy, “Time Marches On,” 21.

⁹⁷Sedgwick, “Time Goes Marching On—The Screen,” 39.

⁹⁸*Ibid.* One serious drawback to the producers’ claims of verisimilitude was their decision to impersonate foreigners as speakers of English with a foreign accent; the Hitler impersonator, for example, spoke English with a German accent.

⁹⁹BBDO *Newsletter*, February 24, 1933, 5, BBDO Records.

¹⁰⁰Eleanor Roosevelt spoke about education for six broadcasts sponsored by the Typewriter Educational Bureau. BBDO *Radio Bulletin*, November 7, 1934, 1, BBDO Records.

¹⁰¹BBDO *Newsletter*, December 8, 1934, 7.

¹⁰²While Roosevelt allowed *The March of Time* to impersonate him again in 1936, he complained again in 1937. Elson, *Time Inc.*, 185; Pomeroy, “Time Marches On,” 21.

The Sponsors: Remington Rand, Wrigley's Spearmint Gum, and Servel, Inc.

Time downplayed *The March of Time's* role as a "circulation pumper" and claimed it was designed "to acquaint dealers and retailers with the medium," that is, to attract new advertisers to buy pages in the magazine and to provide *Time* "a basis of trade influence that its relatively small circulation could not give it."¹⁰³ In other words, its primary goal was not to sell more copies but to attract more advertising revenue. Despite favorable reception, Luce was apparently unhappy that the radio program had a larger audience than the magazine. In a February 1932 editorial, *Time's* editors argued that its 400,000 print subscribers were unfairly subsidizing free entertainment for 9 million radio-set owners: the broadcasters themselves should be responsible for paying for programming rather than sponsors.¹⁰⁴ Broadcasters were mandated to provide a public service, and news coverage could be categorized as such a service.¹⁰⁵ Buying airtime was a commercial transaction, and so, according to Luce, "Obviously *Time* cannot be expected to buy advertising when it does not want it, in order to perform a public service."¹⁰⁶

Some scholars have interpreted Luce's decision to cancel *The March of Time* in 1932 as evidence that the program lost money for the magazine.¹⁰⁷ However, the story is more complex, as a 1932 memo found in BBDO's private archives shows. BBDO executive F. R. Feland wrote, "Time is willing to edit" the program "provided somebody else will sponsor it, pay the wire and talent costs, and take the incidental advertising." Luce wanted another sponsor to pay for the airtime, actors, and musicians and to help subsidize the program by paying to advertise on it. But the program was not losing money for *Time*; in fact, as Feland noted, it was greatly increasing its subscribers. But this was a problem; Feland pointed out that, "If they increase their circulation, they would have to increase their advertising rate. They think this is a bad time to increase their advertising rate, and they do not want to bear the extra circulation costs."¹⁰⁸ The cost of printing more copies of *Time* for more subscribers would have to be covered by charging higher advertising prices to its advertisers. However, February 1932 was a particularly "bad time," the middle of the Great Depression, and so Luce feared *Time*

¹⁰³"Marching Faster," *Tide*, 56.

¹⁰⁴Editorial, *Time*, February 29, 1932, 32. This point, that radio should be more like a magazine, with its editorial control separate from advertising, was debated in the radio industry. Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor*, 84–85.

¹⁰⁵The Radio Act of 1927 mandated that in exchange for a broadcast license, stations must serve the "public interest, convenience, and necessity."

¹⁰⁶Luce, quoted in Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935–1951*, 19.

¹⁰⁷See, for example, Erlich, *Radio Utopia*, 14.

¹⁰⁸F. R. Feland to William Johns, memo, March 1, 1932, BBDO Records.

would lose advertisers if they raised the prices. Without a guarantee of increased revenues, Luce, whose support of the radio program was tepid, preferred to end what he viewed as the radio experiment.

But *Time* and CBS were flooded with letters from listeners who demanded that *The March of Time* be continued, and so a compromise was reached. In September 1932 CBS agreed to schedule it as a sustaining program, and by November 1932 *Time* agreed to sponsor it again. Meanwhile, BBDO worked diligently to appease *Time* by finding another sponsor. BBDO executive Feland hoped that a fellow BBDO client would take over the program, such as Continental Baking, Chesterfield cigarettes, Squibb toothpaste, or, ideally, Hamilton Watch, which might make an easy tie-in with “time”; but Hamilton was “suffering from nodoughlia,” that is, lack of budget to spend on radio.¹⁰⁹

Eventually, in October 1933, BBDO convinced another client, Remington Rand, to sponsor *The March of Time*. This manufacturer of “typewriters, accounting machines, filing systems, [and] safe cabinets” was possibly the first radio sponsor to agree to buy time “to put on another advertiser’s program.”¹¹⁰ In 1933, sponsorship meant content control, and it was unusual for one sponsor to concede it to another. As *Time* editors noted, although *Time* was willing to allow other advertisers to help with the costs, it “would not allow any one to tinker its program.”¹¹¹ James Rand Jr., however, believed that the program, as overseen by *Time*, “would do more to sell his products than many minutes of high-pressure ‘blurbing’ in a program less straightforward, businesslike and serviceable.” Rand hoped it would motivate his sales force of 1,800 men to sell more office machines; as a trade publication pointed out, having 25 million listeners “could be helpful” to the “RR men” because the program increases “the general knowledge of the company’s values and the good will toward the RR name.”¹¹²

Remington Rand sponsored or alternated sponsorship with *Time* until 1936. Each broadcast opened with the announcement, “Again, Remington Rand presents *The March of Time*, a re-enactment of the news of the week, selected and dramatized by the editors of *Time*, the weekly news magazine.”¹¹³ Segueing into the one-minute commercial announcement, copywriters ensured that the Remington Rand brand was clearly associated with the program content: “From every part of the world by news, cable, direct wire, or radio, the editors of *Time* collect important facts for *The March of Time*. From every part of the world

¹⁰⁹Feland to Johns, March 1, 1932.

¹¹⁰“Radio Innovation,” *Time*, August 28, 1933, 41.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*

¹¹²“Remington Rand’s Preview Sells Sales Force on ‘March of Time,’” *Sales Management*, October 20, 1933, 417.

¹¹³*The March of Time*, originally broadcast March 29, 1935, CBS, NYPL Collection.

Remington Rand collects business facts that form a background of knowledge for more than 2,200 trained field representatives.”¹¹⁴ BBDO executive Pryor noted that Remington Rand’s willingness to sponsor *Time*’s program was a “splendid investment” in “a good will builder.”¹¹⁵ The company’s belief in the congruence between its brand of office products and the target audience for *Time*’s reenacted news continued on and off until 1936, when it shifted its sponsorship to another news reenactment program, *Five Star Final*, broadcast on a regional network, over which it might exercise more control. BBDO, offered the job of producing it, declined because it was too similar to *The March of Time*.¹¹⁶ Remington Rand’s move was perceived as a betrayal of sorts: Both *Time* and BBDO had been concerned about copycat programs and had shifted to a five-night-per-week schedule in 1935 in order to allay “the fear of uncredited imitation.”¹¹⁷

In April 1936, Wrigley’s Spearmint Gum took over sponsoring *The March of Time* with this announcement: “Time for Wrigley’s Spearmint! The March of Time! The makers of Wrigley’s Spearmint Gum believe that the March of Time has become an institution to millions of radio listeners, and that it is in the public service—and in the public interest—to continue it on the air without interruption.”¹¹⁸ After noting that the dramatized news was a “public service” rather than mere commercialism, Wrigley pointed out that *Time*, not Wrigley, was in control of the program content: “So, tonight, and for an indefinite period, Wrigley’s take [*sic*] pleasure in turning this program over to the Editors of *Time*.” Wrigley’s decision to sponsor came as a dramatic surprise after the show had apparently ended the Friday before. Roy Larsen of *Time* and Roy Durstine of BBDO flew to Chicago to meet with Philip Wrigley. Durstine told the BBDO staff to prepare another broadcast, and at 6:10 p.m. the following Monday, he called BBDO from Chicago and told the staff to go on the air that night: “Go ahead with the show!” Hastily getting commercials approved by telephone from Chicago, “the March of Time marched on the air as usual.”¹¹⁹

By pointing out that it was advertising on radio the way most brands advertise in print media—next to editorial content supplied by a

¹¹⁴*The March of Time*, originally broadcast August 29, 1935, CBS, NYPL Collection.

¹¹⁵Arthur Pryor Jr., “Radio Sponsorship Meets Double Success,” *System and Business Management*, June 1935, 16.

¹¹⁶BBDO Newsletter, May 2, 1936, 6, BBDO Records.

¹¹⁷“Marching Faster,” 56. Apparently in 1935 both CBS and NBC had barred a competing program, *News Parade*, because it sounded too similar to *March of Time*. BBDO Newsletter, October 19, 1935, 10, BBDO Records.

¹¹⁸“Wrigley Is New Sponsor of ‘The March of Time,’” BBDO Newsletter, April 4, 1936, 5, BBDO Records.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

publisher—Wrigley hoped to deflect potential negative associations. At the opening of an August 1936 broadcast, the announcer noted, “The maker of Wrigley’s Spearmint Gum have [*sic*] no more control over *The March of Time* than they have over the editorial policies and magazines in which they advertise. . . . Wrigley’s are [*sic*] content to sit back as you are doing now, to see what the editors of *Time* have in store for all of us tonight. They hope you like the program. They know you will like Wrigley’s Spearmint Gum.”¹²⁰ The following week, the opening announcement made the point even more stridently: “The makers of Wrigley’s Spearmint Gum believe that they know the gum business. But they do not consider themselves experts in presenting the news of the world. So, without control of any kind, without even seeing a script, they turn this program over to the men they consider the ablest historians of our day, the editors of *Time* magazine.” Having reminded audiences that they had no content control, the announcement continued with a plea to buy gum: “Do you like this arrangement? Won’t you say so by getting a package of Wrigley’s Spearmint Gum?”¹²¹

All to no avail. Wrigley canceled the sponsorship in September 1936, after only six months. Wrigley’s advertising manager attributed the decision to “the controversial nature of the news current today.”¹²² German-American groups had expressed anger to Wrigley about the portrayal of Nazis.¹²³ According to *Tide*, news publishers know that “The more controversial the news the greater the interest. . . . But it’s not so comfortable if you’re out to sell penny sticks of gum to every soul in the US. Many a gum-chewer, who tuned to the ‘March,’ was addressing angry diatribes to Wrigley’s.”¹²⁴ The belief in “sponsor identification” was strong not just among advertisers but among audiences as well. Although Wrigley believed news is appropriate for radio audiences, “a manufacturer advertises to establish friendly relations with his prospective customers, and even though we try to point out the fact that we did not make the news, nevertheless some of them seemed to figure we were to blame for the news.”¹²⁵ The polarizing politics of the era certainly contributed: According to one account, by 1936 *The March of Time* had been banned in Germany, William Hearst had “branded it as communist propaganda,” while “Communists scream that it is fascist!”—these contradictory reactions bolstered the producers’ claim that it was

¹²⁰*The March of Time*, originally broadcast August 17, 1936, CBS, NYPL Collection.

¹²¹*The March of Time*, originally broadcast August 31, 1936, CBS, NYPL Collection.

¹²²“Off and On,” *Tide*, October 1, 1936, 27.

¹²³Fielding, *The March of Time*, 19.

¹²⁴“Off and On,” 27.

¹²⁵H. S. Webster, quoted in “Off and On,” 27.

“impartial.”¹²⁶ *Time* publicly declared that other sponsors were lining up for the chance to sponsor *The March of Time*; however, Wrigley’s negative experience probably discouraged them. So *Time* saved face by returning to sponsoring it alone, primarily to promote its new photo-journalistic magazine, *Life*.¹²⁷

Then in 1937 until the summer of 1938, Servel, Inc., a manufacturer of appliances, sponsored *The March of Time* in order to promote its gas-powered refrigerator.¹²⁸ The opening announcement began with a description of the “tiny gas flame” powering the refrigerator and a request that the audience “listen as it slowly burns. It is silent; it will always be silent.” This “tiny gas flame” provides the advantage because it “circulates a refrigerant that produces steady cold” without any “moving parts in the freezing system,” which “means permanent silence, nothing to wear out, continued low running costs, more years of efficient money saving service.” Having made the point aurally that its appliances were noiseless, Servel’s announcement concluded that *Time* editors, “the men they consider to be the ablest historians of our day,” will “present their reenactment of memorable scenes from the news of the world. From the March of Time!”¹²⁹

Servel expected that its “advertising talks” at the opening and closing would “bring to the vast radio audience the value of the use of gas in the home.”¹³⁰ Servel executives praised the program as “all the important news of the world . . . brought to the fireside with a skill, realism, and picturesqueness that makes listeners feel that they are actually present when the events portrayed take place.”¹³¹ For the first broadcast sponsored by Servel, the program included a scene in the “hot room” of a Servel factory: “Members of the ‘March of Time’ cast impersonated visitors, engineers, and others talking together in the ‘hot room,’ thus portraying to the radio audience just what Servel does in a testing operation in order to produce a refrigerator which operates perfectly no matter how hot the kitchen may be.”¹³² BBDO’s integration of Servel’s product into a scene was similar to what other agencies did to promote brands on sponsored radio programs.¹³³ Servel’s co-sponsorship did not last either, however, ending in July 1938.¹³⁴

¹²⁶Pomeroy, “Time Marches On,” 21.

¹²⁷“Off and On,” 27.

¹²⁸BBDO *Newsletter*, July 1, 1938, 4, BBDO Records.

¹²⁹*The March of Time*, originally broadcast July 8, 1937, CBS, NYPL Collection.

¹³⁰“‘March of Time’ Program Sponsored by Servel, Inc.,” *AGAEM Bulletin*, April 1938, 12.

¹³¹*Ibid.*, 13.

¹³²“‘March of Time’ Program Sponsored by Servel, Inc.,” *AGAEM Bulletin*, April 1938, 13.

¹³³For example, agency Benton & Bowles employed performers sipping and discussing the taste of Maxwell House coffee between acts on the variety program Maxwell House *Show Boat*. Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor*, 192.

¹³⁴BBDO *Newsletter*, July 1, 1938, 4, BBDO Records.

Like Remington Rand and Wrigley, Servel probably found it unwise to associate itself with a program that audiences assumed it controlled. If *Time* and BBDO had thought to sell interstitial minutes of time between scenes, in what was then called the “magazine plan” for broadcast advertising, they might have found more outside advertisers. But magazine-style advertising would not become dominant in broadcasting until the 1960s, when control over program content had passed to the networks. In the 1930s, the broadcasting and advertising industries were too committed to the single-sponsorship model to consider such an alternative.¹³⁵

Conclusions

BBDO’s production of *The March of Time* ended in 1939, and the show went off the air until *Time* restarted it with a different agency, Young & Rubicam, in October 1941.¹³⁶ The format changed: it featured fewer fictionalized and reenacted scenes, more journalists interviewing actual newsmakers, and some live remote broadcasts.¹³⁷ As the newsreel *March of Time* expanded, and as audiences’ expectations shifted toward actuality recordings and live remote broadcasts, the radio version seemed less and less authentic.¹³⁸ By the end of World War II, its era had ended. As Erlich explains, after the war “docudramas featuring actors impersonating real people were supplanted by actuality-based programs that took advantage of new recording technology.”¹³⁹ Although the newsreel version continued until 1951 and is still remembered and screened today, the live radio program left few extant recordings and so has slipped from popular memory.¹⁴⁰

As a new format exploiting the affordances of a new medium, *The March of Time* used sonic techniques to engage audiences in current events. Despite the program’s reenactments and impersonations, its producers strove for “accuracy,” for an “impartial presentation of fact.”¹⁴¹ Given the problem of limited recording technologies and the networks’ then-insistence on live broadcasts, reenactments seemed the best

¹³⁵Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor*, 195–96.

¹³⁶A prominent Young & Rubicam radio producer, Donald Stauffer, had started his career at BBDO helping to produce *The March of Time*; that may have been a factor in the agency shift. Stauffer’s name is misspelled in Fielding, *The March of Time*, 12.

¹³⁷Bliss Jr., *Now the News*, 67. Recordings can be found at <https://archive.org/details/1945RadioNews>.

¹³⁸Erlich, *Radio Utopia*, 155.

¹³⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴⁰A few recordings are accessible online at the Internet Archive, and more are available at the Paley Center for Media in New York and at the New York Public Library.

¹⁴¹Pomeroy, “Time Marches On,” 21.

available means to that end.¹⁴² *The March of Time* served both Luce's interest in emphasizing the personalities of newsmakers and BBDO's mission of using radio and advertising for education and cultural uplift. Analysis of its production by BBDO reveals little-known facets of the role of advertisers and agencies in shaping 1930s radio news programs. It vividly displays the commercial pressures on radio broadcasters, the tensions between the news and broadcasting industries, and the role of advertising agencies in producing branded content for what was then the newest media technology.

¹⁴²Russo, *Points on the Dial*, 77–114.