“An Advertising Machine That Will Reach Everyone—Everywhere!”

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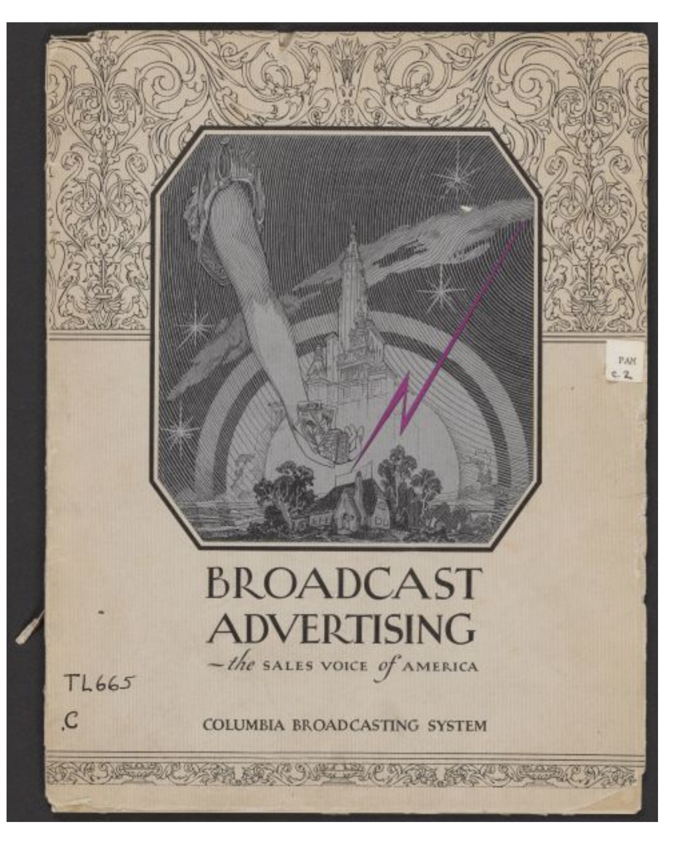
“Broadcasting permeates everything, everywhere. Its swift mysterious vibrations span the great open reaches of land and air and water, even pass through brick and steel!”[1] So noted a 1929 promotional pamphlet issued by a young American broadcast network, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Radio was the first technology that sent information through the electromagnetic spectrum, the magnetic field surrounding the earth. In the 1920s radio was still a miraculous technology, carrying voices and sounds on invisible waves, breaking boundaries of space and time, and bringing faraway signals into the privacy of the home. All listeners required was a receiving radio set to hear live events: “Broadcasting brings to every home—without cost and without effort—the sound, the spirit and the speech of the stadium, orchestra pit, pulpit, stage, prize ring, stock exchange, concert auditorium, convention hall, banquet room, newspaper office and the rostrums of government.”[2]

At this time, radio broadcasting in most countries was controlled by the government, often as an extension of existing postal and telegraphy communication networks, and frequently funded by taxes. In the United States, however, the government decided to open up radio to commercial use after World War I. The political climate in the US was hostile to tax-supported radio programming, which was perceived by some as an overreach of state power and a violation of the First Amendment. However, at first the only way to profit from this new technology was to sell radio equipment, such as receiving sets, as it was not possible to charge the receivers of radio signals. Unlike telephones, which transmitted voices along a wire from one point to another single point for which a sender or receiver could be charged a fee, radio signals moved through the air, radiating outward from a transmitter to be picked up by any receiver within range. Some radio manufacturers realized that consumers might buy more radios if there were something interesting for them to “tune in” to (by adjusting a tuning dial to find a signal). But who would provide this interesting programming? Broadcasters viewed themselves as communication technology companies, as carriers of content, rather than providers. As one observer pointed out, broadcasters “soon found out that if they supplied the programs, it would eat up all the profits they made in selling radio sets and stations, and leasing wires.”[3]



'Broadcast Advertising - the Sales Voice of America', 1929 © Hornbake Library, University of Maryland

One way to finance broadcasting was through advertising: broadcasters could sell access to the airwaves. The most significant example of this was in 1922, when American Telephone & Telegraph (AT&T) experimented with renting out the transmitter at its WEAF station, calling it “toll broadcasting.” Some advertisers, such as tobacco companies and grocery chains, were interested in renting this “airtime.” However, not everyone was convinced. The then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover reflected the concern of many in broadcasting when in 1924 he pointed out that, unlike a reader of magazines and newspapers, a radio listener could not skip a radio advertisement and that the potential for offending listeners with “direct advertising” could be the “quickest way to kill broadcasting.”[4] Hoover encouraged businesses to use radio for “indirect advertising” instead, as a promotional or public relations medium. Advertisers were encouraged to “sponsor” a program, that is, to pay the performers for the entertainment and the broadcaster for the airtime—but they were instructed not to include any “direct” advertising, such as information about a product and its price. Consequently, sponsors named their programs after their products such as *The Eveready Hour* (1923-30), sponsored by a battery company, and *The Clicquot Club Eskimos* (1925-36), sponsored by a ginger ale brand. An NBC executive praised the Clicquot program as “audible advertising” because the program included “the effect of an effervescent beverage together with clinking ice in a crystal goblet.”[5] Advertisers were also encouraged to sponsor music programming. As the 1929 CBS promotional pamphlet claimed, “The keystone of the broadcasting entertainment structure is music which stimulates the emotions and awakens the imagination and memories like nothing else in all the world.”[6] This might also help listeners feel “good will” toward the sponsor or, even better, feel so much gratitude to the sponsor for the free entertainment that they would buy the product.[7] This system of selling a block of airtime to a single advertiser, who then provided the programming designed to promote one product, was known as “single sponsorship.” Before long however, “direct advertising” during sponsors’ programs grew more accepted.

Despite this, advertisers were becoming frustrated that broadcasters had little information about the number of listeners.[8] Publishers of magazines and newspapers counted the copies of each issue and provided their “circulation” numbers so that an advertiser could estimate the size of the audience for an advertisement and pay for the space accordingly. Broadcasters claimed that radio was a better advertising vehicle than print because it could reach many people all at once.[9] At first, though, most broadcasters provided only locally-produced programs of varying quality to nearby audiences, so national advertisers were wary of radio. They wanted high quality programs reaching national audiences. As early as 1924, the live broadcast of the musical program *The Eveready Hour* was shared among multiple stations by telephone wires and so was heard simultaneously in New York, Boston, Cleveland, and Buffalo. This reduced the advertiser’s program costs and increased their “reach” (the number of consumers exposed).

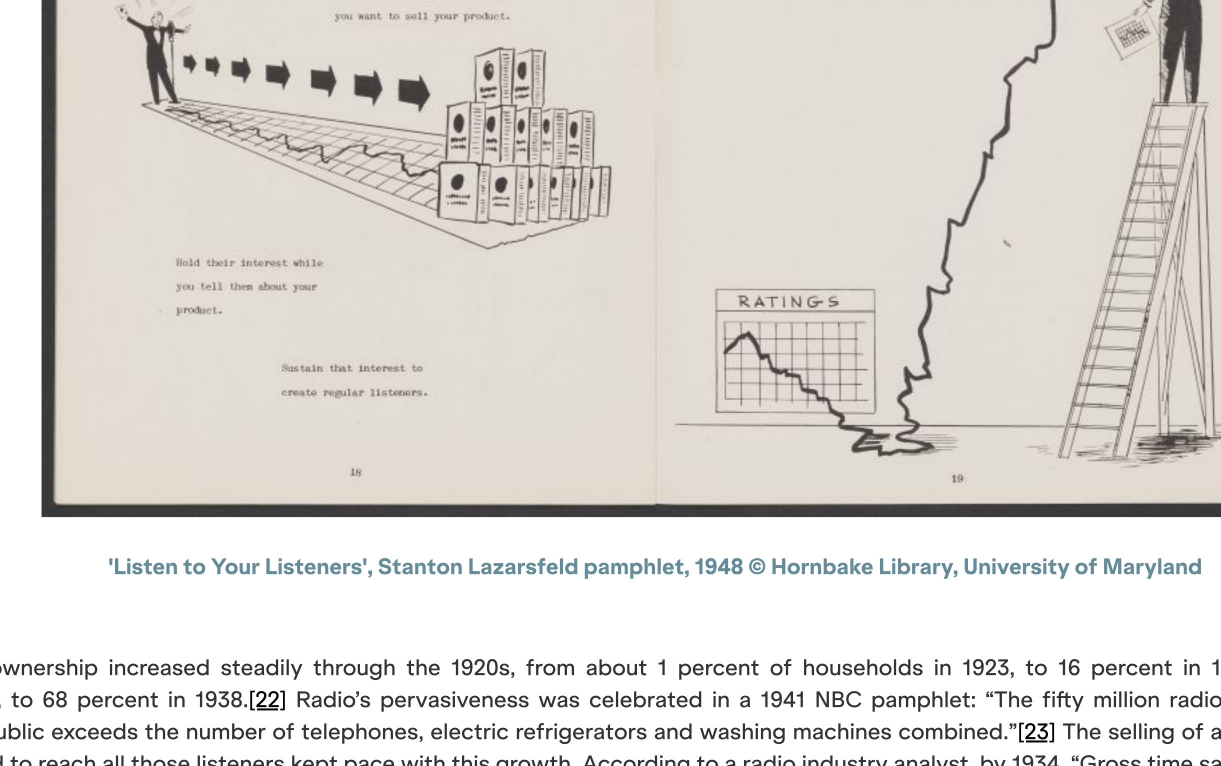
Recognizing the need to spread high-quality programming among multiple stations and to stimulate radio set sales, in 1926 the Radio Corporation of America, one of the top radio manufacturers, created the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). As a network rather than as a station, NBC sold airtime to national advertisers, and then transmitted the advertisers’ programs to affiliated stations in cities such as Chicago, Kansas City, Washington DC, and Cleveland. CBS, NBC’s primary competition, was founded in 1927 with stations in Philadelphia, Washington DC, and New York, and was bought in 1928 by the heir to a tobacco company, William Paley, who entered radio by sponsoring *La Palina Hour* to sell La Palina cigars.[10] Whereas NBC was created to stimulate more radio set sales for its parent company RCA, the CBS network was always in the business of selling airtime to advertisers.

'Radio Reaches People Through the Human Voice', 1939 © Hornbake Library, University of Maryland

The other significant advantage radio had over newspapers and magazines was through the use of the human voice. A radio analyst asserted that listeners would recall a brand they heard about on the radio better than one they read about in a magazine: “Psychological studies and analyses have shown the spoken word to possess the greater memory value than the printed word.”[11] As the network CBS explained to advertisers, “Broadcasting is the most intimate and sensitive of all advertising media. It is intimate because it is the sound of a voice, a human personality speaking directly to you.”[12] Unlike printed words, the human voice could convey nuances of meaning or express feeling and intimacy. As the analyst continued, “The emotional value of the spoken word in persuasion, command, and all the other nuances of speech is the property of broadcast advertising. So, also, is its intimacy, where the announcer, if wise, addresses each listener as if individually.”[13] Vocal impersonations of the friendly local grocer, or a neighbor down the street, could engage the listeners’ trust. Radio personalities spoke directly to “you” the listener.

How could advertisers ensure that the programming they selected would have the desired effect on listeners? As an advertiser complained in 1930, “It is extremely difficult to generalize upon the type of program that is most popular.”[14] Advertisers wanted to know, “Should my entertainment reflect my product?”[15] Program producers from the broadcasting or entertainment industries would not necessarily share the advertisers’ goals. Who would? Enter the advertising agencies, who promised to combine their skills at “salesmanship” with the flair of “showmanship.”[16] Soon the companies manufacturing and selling products began to hire advertising agencies, the organizations that oversaw their ad campaigns, to develop and produce sponsored programming to ensure that their brand would benefit from the association with the entertainment. Spurred on in part by the claim that more tubes of Pepsodent toothpaste were sold after it began sponsoring the national broadcast of the blackface comedy, *Amos 'n' Andy* (from 1929 until 1937), agencies began developing and producing programs for their clients, the advertisers.[17] Soon, ad agencies such as J. Walter Thompson, Young & Rubicam, Benton & Bowles, BBDO, and McCann were producing programs whose primary purpose was to sell products. By 1930, at least 150 national advertisers were heard on the radio.[18]

The concern that “direct advertising” would annoy audiences led to the integration of product information into the program content. Ruth Cornwall at the McCann agency described how they produced a dramatic sketch program about small town life, inserting information about the sponsor Chesebrough’s product, Vaseline, without any “direct selling talk”: “[I]n each sketch, there were several references to ‘Vaseline’ which were made by the characters themselves. These were worked in in such a natural and subtle way that they did not appear to be commercial references at all, but simply part of the dialogue.”[19] Letters from listeners claimed they enjoyed the “many practical suggestions that had been given for using ‘Vaseline.’”[20] Cornwall declared the sponsorship a success: “This program has not only gained many new users for ‘Vaseline,’ but it has extended the use of ‘Vaseline’ among old users. It has made millions of good friends for the Chesebrough Company. The characters which it has built up are so real to the audience and so closely identified with ‘Vaseline’ that the product itself has assumed a very real personality.”[21]



'Listen to Your Listeners', Stanton Lazarsfeld pamphlet, 1948 © Hornbake Library, University of Maryland

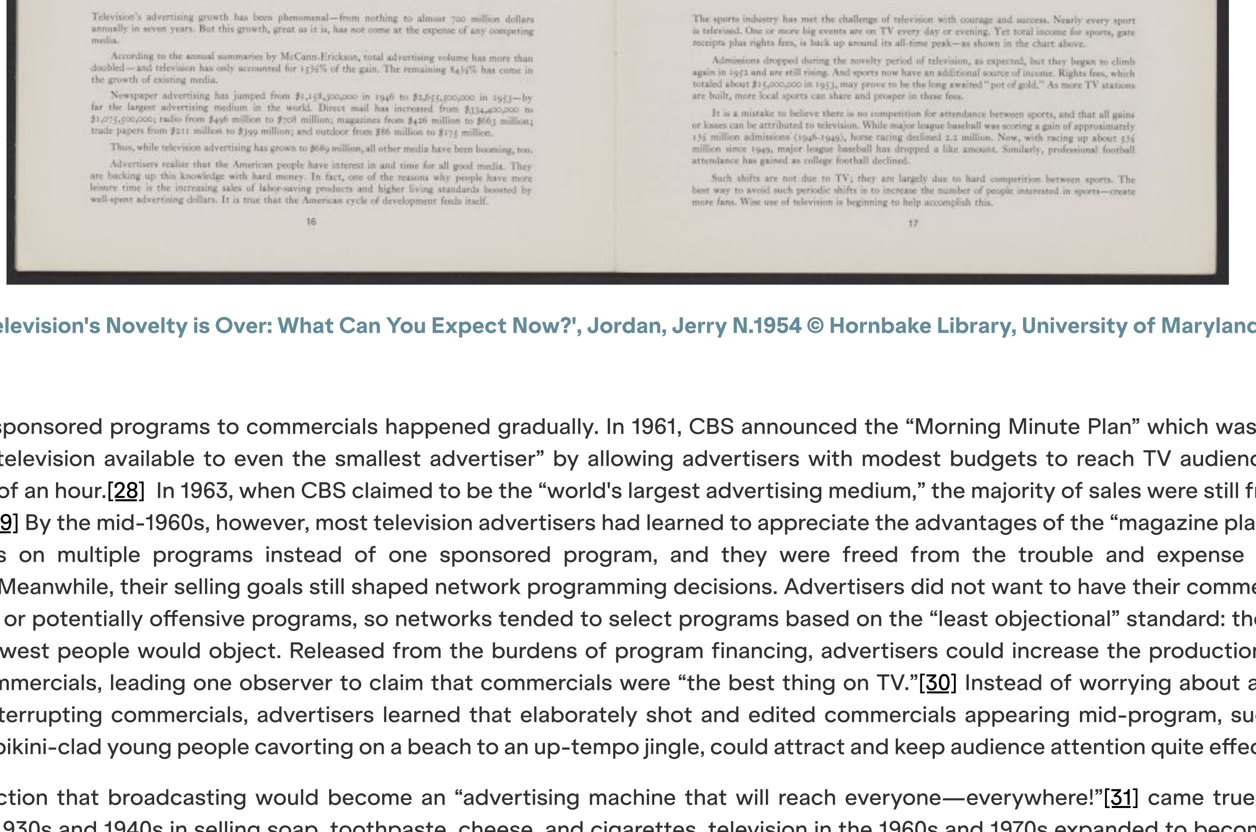
Radio set ownership increased steadily through the 1920s, from about 1 percent of households in 1923, to 16 percent in 1926 when NBC was established, to 68 percent in 1938.[22] Radio’s pervasiveness was celebrated in a 1941 NBC pamphlet: “The fifty million radio sets owned by the American public exceeds the number of telephones, electric refrigerators and washing machines combined.”[23] The selling of airtime to advertisers who wanted to reach all those listeners kept pace with this growth. According to a radio industry analyst, by 1934, “Gross time sales to advertisers by stations and networks totalled $72,887,000.”[24] National advertiser spending on network radio (not including local stations) increased from $18 million in 1929 to $39 million in 1932, and then to $165 million by 1937.[25] The advent of the Great Depression in the early 1930s may have increased advertiser interest in radio; some advertisers hoped that radio, with its presumed powerful media effects on listeners, could stimulate consumer demand.

The 1930s and 1940s have been called “the golden age of radio” because in this period radio was the national broadcasting medium—television would not arrive in American homes until the 1950s. Listeners could “tune in” to hear stars from movies, music, vaudeville, theater, and radio in dramas, comedies, and musical variety shows, as well as news, interviews, sermons, and educational broadcasts. All nationally broadcast programs were live, the majority were sponsored, and many of those were produced, directed, scripted, and cast by advertising agencies, who ensured that the programs would reflect well on the sponsors. As one advertising executive explained, “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.”[26]

Five examples will demonstrate how this system worked. The J. Walter Thompson agency hired movie stars to play their roles in radio versions of their films on *Lux Radio Theatre* (1934-55) and employed the popular singer Bing Crosby to host the musical variety show *Kraft Music Hall* (1935-46). They hoped that fans’ appreciation for the stars would carry over to the products – soap and cheese. The Benton & Bowles agency produced *Maxwell House Show Boat* (1932-37), a musical variety program that included an intermission, during which listeners would eavesdrop on the performers sipping Maxwell House coffee and praising it. They hoped that having cast members extol the product in a scene scripted as an intermission would make the commercial message less jarring to listeners. The Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn agency produced *Cavalcade of America* (1935-53), a dramatization of historical events such as the invention of the sewing machine, to help its client DuPont (a chemical and munitions manufacturer), build a positive public image after it had been heavily criticized for doing business with the enemy during World War I. They hoped the program would be educational and impress listeners with DuPont’s role in American history. The Young & Rubicam agency produced the *Jack Benny* program where the popular vaudeville comedian integrated mentions of his sponsor, Jell-O, throughout each show, opening with the pun “Jell-O again, this is Jack Benny!” and performing in skits about the various Jell-O flavors. They hoped that audiences would laugh and be disarmed by the humor and so would not be annoyed by the product mentions. The agency Blackett-Sample-Hummert produced dozens of daytime serials, such as *Ma Perkins, The Romance of Helen Trent,* and *Stella Dallas.* These were long winded, serious, repetitive dramas, usually centered on a main character who faced problems she had to solve over the course of daily 15-minute episodes. To hear the next chapter, listeners were urged to “tune in tomorrow!” Announcers would explain how listeners could solve their laundry problems by buying the sponsor’s laundry soap: “Oxydol will wash your clothes 25 to 40 percent faster, whether you use a tub or the latest improved washing machine. It washes clothes four to five shades whiter by actual scientific tests than any other soap can do.”[27] These sponsors hoped that housewives, listening while doing their housework, would buy their soap, which is how these programs earned the nickname “soap operas.”

With the growth of television, these practices would change dramatically. At first, the broadcasting industry kept the single sponsorship format on television. Advertisers continued to rent a time slot on a network and then to select a program to fill it, often named after itself, such *General Electric Theatre, US Steel Hour,* and *Kraft Television Theatre*. Like earlier national radio programs, these television programs were broadcast live: their sets, costumes, and lights led some to extol television as a form of live theater in the living room. However, such programs were expensive and difficult to produce; they soon gave way to filmed programs in which actors no longer had to worry about messing up their lines, and which, after the invention of videotape in 1956, might be recorded and re-aired.

Within the broadcasting and advertising industries, debates raged over how to build television as an advertising medium. Shouldering the entire cost of a television program was too expensive for most advertisers. Furthermore, reaching large audiences through the sponsorship of a single program was risky—what if the program flopped? Some prominent advertising and broadcasting executives proposed moving to a “magazine plan,” that is, inserting commercials in between segments of a program, just as magazines insert ad pages between articles. Rather than the advertisers, the three major networks, NBC, CBS, and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), instead would need to finance and select the programs, and then sell airtime to advertisers around and during the programs.



'Television's Novelty is Over: What Can You Expect Now?', Jordan, Jerry N.1954 © Hornbake Library, University of Maryland

The shift from sponsored programs to commercials happened gradually. In 1961, CBS announced the “Morning Minute Plan” which was “designed to make network television available to even the smallest advertiser” by allowing advertisers with modest budgets to reach TV audiences for only a minute instead of an hour.[28] In 1963, when CBS claimed to be the “world's largest advertising medium,” the majority of sales were still from “program sponsorship.”[29] By the mid-1960s, however, most television advertisers had learned to appreciate the advantages of the “magazine plan”: they could air commercials on multiple programs instead of one sponsored program, and they were freed from the trouble and expense of producing entertainment. Meanwhile, their selling goals still shaped network programming decisions. Advertisers did not want to have their commercials appear in controversial or potentially offensive programs, so networks tended to select programs based on the “least objectional” standard: those programs to which the fewest people would object. Released from the burdens of program financing, advertisers could increase the production budgets for their filmed commercials, leading one observer to claim that commercials were “the best thing on TV.”[30] Instead of worrying about annoying their viewers with interrupting commercials, advertisers learned that elaborately shot and edited commercials appearing mid-program, such as one for Pepsi showing bikini-clad young people cavorting on a beach to an up-tempo jingle, could attract and keep audience attention quite effectively.

The 1929 prediction that broadcasting would become an “advertising machine that will reach everyone—everywhere!”[31] came true. After radio’s success in the 1930s and 1940s in selling soap, toothpaste, cheese, and cigarettes, television in the 1960s and 1970s expanded to become the largest and most profitable mass advertising medium ever seen. In the course of a few decades, US broadcasters succeeded in doing what had seemed, as recently as 1935, a near impossibility: “sell[ing] time, an invisible commodity, to fictitious beings called corporations for the purpose of influencing an audience that no one can see."[32]

Endnotes

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[2] Columbia Broadcasting System, *Broadcast Advertising: the Sales Voice of America* (1929).

[3] Angus, Howard and James, E. P. H., *The Why and How of Broadcast Advertising Tie-ins* (New York: NBC, 1932), 7.

[4] Quoted in Carl Joachim Friedrich and Jeanette Sayre, “The Development of the Control of Advertising on the Air”. *Studies in the Control of Radio* (November 1940): 1, 5.

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[8] Karol, John, *The Advertiser Looks at Radio* (New York: Association of National Advertisers, 1930), 6.

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[12] Columbia Broadcasting System, *Broadcast Advertising: the Sales Voice of America* (1929).

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[14] Karol, John. *The Advertiser Looks at Radio,* 46.

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[32] "And All Because They're Smart" *Fortune*, June 1935, 82.

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