

The Radio in the 1920s: A Revolutionary Invention

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Post World War I, the United States was in a time of despair and depression, debts from the war had accumulated and affected the people. People needed to find a way to keep their minds off the era they had just lived and suffered through. Additionally, the government had been under a lot of backlash since many people who had voted for President Woodrow Wilson because he had kept the United States out of World War I, were shocked to find out that the United States had entered the war. The lack of communication to the American people was present and President Wilson would declare war on Germany, angering many. Life was difficult to resume as what was once known as the norm. However, with the emergence of the radio in the early 1920s, the entertainment era grew rapidly. Along with the emergence of the radio, sitcoms such as “Sam and Henry”, which would later become “Amos ‘n’ Andy”, the growth in popularity of music, such as jazz, and the coverage of sports would grow larger and become successful as people in their houses tune in on their radios. Along with the entertainment industry, presidents would begin to realize the reliability and success of communication through the use of the radio. Thus, President Warren G. Harding would become the first president in American history to use the radio to address the people of the United States and President Calvin Coolidge would become the actual first president to deliver a radio-specific address, which would later influence the coming presidents. As the radio grew in popularity and sales, the nation began to forget about their problems of the past and look forward to either tuning into their regular basis of shows and sports coverage or addresses from the president. Therefore, the radio would be known as a revolutionary invention that would completely change the future of communication because of its success rate.

To begin, the inventor of the first radio was Guglielmo Marconi and his path to inventing the radio began with his interest in science and electricity which led him into experimenting with

radio waves. With Marconi's strenuous experimenting and incorporation of "earlier scientific work of Henry R. Hertz and Oliver Lodge in electromagnetic radiation, he was able to develop a basic system of wireless telegraphy. Though not a scientist, Marconi recognized the value of wireless technology and was adept in putting the right people together to invest in it. In 1897 he received his first patent in England" (Biography.com). With Marconi's invention of wireless telegraphy and technology, Marconi started to experiment with longer destinations of communication which would become useful in events prior to the 1920s, which is when the radio was introduced to the public and came in forms of communication through entertainment and political communication. During the events of World War I, the United States had to communicate with their military and navy soldiers. In order for their messages to not be intercepted, like how the United States came to intercept a message from Germany to Mexico, "the radio was primarily used to contact ships that were out at sea. Radio communications were not very clear, so operators typically relied on the use of Morse code messages. This was of great benefit to vessels in the water, particularly during emergencies. With World War I, the importance of the radio became apparent and its usefulness increased significantly"(techwholesale.com). This shows the clear importance of the radio in communication before the 1920s and its social success, which would be used later for many alternative ways of communication. Additionally, with Marconi's invention and progression of radio communication, the radio became an important part in sending and receiving messages throughout the United States' armed forces. After the war, with the knowledge that the radio could be used to send and receive messages, people began to buy radios for their personal use. As a result of the gradual growth of the radio in households, broadcasting channels such as KDKA and BBC began to surface and would eventually lead to the sanctioning of the Radio

Corporation Agreements, RCA, by the government. As a result of this, companies had either the rights to make receivers or the rights to make transmitters, but only AT&T was able to toll and chain broadcasts. Therefore, allowing AT&T to release the first radio advertisement and inspire the future of broadcasting through radio communication. Due to this fact, the radio would later become “a source of entertainment in which gathering in front of the radio as a family became a common occurrence in many households”(techwholesale.com). Thus began the era of entertainment and the use of the revolutionary invention of the radio in the 1920s.

In the 1920s, the radio was most commonly known as a sort of entertainment in many American households, whether it would be sitting down and listening to music or listening to shows/sitcoms. When one thinks of popular and inspiring American sitcoms, usually the name “Amos ‘n’ Andy” comes to mind. “Amos ‘n’ Andy”, which originally had the name of “Sam and Henry”, was created by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. Their show followed the lives of two African Americans in a comedic way. “Gosden and Correll portrayed all the male roles and preformed over 170 different voice characterizations in the first decade of the show. Amos ‘n’ Andy was the first radio show to be distributed by syndication in the United States”(Osburn, par. 10). This shows the overall success of the show because of the exposure it received from the radio. People loved the show and due to the radio, people had something to look forward to and the radio would help influence many other shows, since “Amos ‘n’ Andy” was one of the most popular and successful radio sitcoms. This helps prove the statement that the radio was a revolutionary invention and changed the future of communication because if it weren’t for radio communication, this era of entertainment wouldn’t have been as successful as it was because of the radio. The radio provided hope for the future of the nation years after the devastating repercussions of World War I. “Amos ‘n’ Andy would have continued to grow, but there would

be a growing controversy in relations to Gosden and Corell. As seen in the picture “Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll perform as Amos and Andy in the NBC radio studios”, the primary actors of the lead roles were white (Library of Congress). The show was heavily based on racial stereotypes of the 1920s and would continue to be looked down upon by the uprising of activists. However, even though the show of “Amos ‘n’ Andy” did receive some backlash, it still doesn’t take away from its success and popularity that it gained from radio communication. Furthermore, without radio communication and the growth of popularity of “Amos ‘n’ Andy”, many shows wouldn’t have had the opportunity to grow. With radio communication, people were able to come together and enjoy sitcoms together, progressing society and leading to many opportunities in the entertainment industry. Stemming away from shows from the radio, music would begin to develop, mainly jazz. The radio helped build the most important period in American cultural history by producing “a generation of artists, musicians, and writers who were among the most innovative and creative in the country's history” (Digital History). With the growing popularity of radios and there being more radios in American households, people were able to expand their horizons in entertainment and learn more about music in different areas. “The 1920s are often called the Jazz Age because Jazz music became very popular during that time. With lots of improvising and syncopated rhythms, jazz music influenced dances, fashion, and culture. The upbeat sounds of jazz became a favorite on the radio” (Tennant, par. 7). Through the exposure of jazz music on the radio, jazz gained popularity and was heard in many areas beyond its place of origin which was New Orleans. Additionally, musicians such as Louis Armstrong was accepted throughout society and became a figure in the music industry. Therefore, the communication made available from the radio brought people of different a step closer together and furthered the American cultural period. Thus, the radio would be known as a revolutionary invention that

would completely change the future of communication because of its success rate and effect on the American cultural movement.

Following the entertainment industry, sports also began to gain popularity in the 1920s due to exposure from radio communication. Before the 1920s, sports did have audiences that watched their teams play either baseball, football, or various other sports. However, with the exposure it gained with radio communication, certain sports began to overtake other sports in popularity. Baseball would gain more popularity than football and people began to start betting on the Kentucky Derby. People would tune in and listen to sports broadcasts, further progressing the popularity of sports and acceptance of new attractions in society. Therefore, through the use of radio communication, society was able to progress and learn about new attractions beyond their knowledge before the radio. The radio radically changed what people found entertaining and helped the American cultural movement. Additionally, with the increase in popularity of many sports, "...sports superstars were soon household names as well. In 1926, Gertrude Ederle became the first woman to swim the English Channel...The biggest star of all was the "Sultan of Swat," Babe Ruth, who became America's first baseball hero"(Khan Academy). This shows that with the exposure given from communication through the radio, people began to know sports superstars and pursue careers that inspired them when listening to the radio. Furthermore, a coverage from the 1920s called "The Adventures of Babe Ruth" covered the baseball career of Babe Ruth and portrayed him as a hero for many (otrcat.com). This shows that people really had an interest in sports superstars and would even tune into a coverage of their sports heroes. Without communication that was made available from the radio, people like Babe Ruth wouldn't have got the recognition they deserved and sports wouldn't have been as big as they got.

Therefore, the radio would be known as a revolutionary invention that would completely change the future of communication because of its success rate and spread of sports acceptance.

Lastly, another major progression that was made available due to the communication from the radio was the ability to listen to political speeches from the president. The first president to ever address people on the radio was President Warren G. Harding. This signified a revolutionary shift in how presidents would later address the American public (History.com). Radio stations broadcasted the official winner of the presidential election as Harding in 1920 and Harding also became the first president to own a radio in the White House. This signifies a step towards a more technologically advanced government that mirrors the advancements of society because when Harding won the presidential race, radios became common to be found in American households. However, the succeeding president would make use of the radio to a further extent than President Harding did. President Calvin Coolidge made use of the radio more times and more frequently than President Harding. “The radio enabled President Coolidge to speak directly to the American people, bypassing Congress and the newspapers, and he made the most it. For example, he spoke twice annually over the air about the fiscal affairs of government, thereby keeping the pressure on Congress for “constructive economy” and away from wasteful boondoggles” (Wallace V). This shows that through radio communication, he was able to address and even gain the support of millions of Americans who were listening to him across the country from their houses. Furthermore, this adds to the difference in which presidents addressed the nation. Presidents, such as George Washington, traveled by horseback or by locomotive, like Abraham Lincoln, to address the gathered people in a certain place. If presidents continued to do this, their words would slowly spread out throughout the nation on newspapers, but by communicating on the radio, the president can ensure his words were heard by people around the

nation. Beyond President Coolidge's few addresses, President Franklin D. Roosevelt would connect with American households and talk about what was going on in their nation. During the 1930s, President FDR would address "...the problems and successes of the Great Depression, and later, World War II. President Roosevelt had not originally planned a title for these broadcasts, but the name "Fireside Chat," coined by CBS station manager Harold Butcher in reference to the president's conversational speaking style, stuck. During President Roosevelt's twelve years in office, the Fireside Chats connected the White House to ordinary American homes as never before"(Biser, par. 1). This shows that due to past influences from past presidents, FDR was able to connect more frequently with the people of the United States and was able to step towards a new form on how to address the people of the United States. Therefore, the radio would be known as a revolutionary invention that would completely change the future of communication because of its success rate and progression in presidential addresses/speeches.

To conclude, the radio would be known as a revolutionary invention that would completely change the future of communication because of its success rate, mainly referring to its effect on the American cultural movement, sports acceptance, and progress in presidential addresses/speeches. The radio was able to further society by communicating a way of entertainment and political news. By doing this, the radio allowed for society to progress and the nation to be more technologically accepting.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources



Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll perform as Amos and Andy in the NBC radio studios. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/98512306/.

This image shows the creators of the show “Sam and Henry” which was later changed to “Amos ‘n’ Andy”, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. This shows that the creators performed as the roles of “Sam and Henry”, later changed to “Amos ‘n’ Andy”. Back then in the 1920s, two white people playing two African-Americans in a stereotypical way was seen as acceptable by the people. However, besides the fact that it is looked down upon today, the show was still extremely successful and filled the houses of many Americans with smiles and happiness.

“Sports in Old Time Radio.” *Sports in Old Time Radio | Old Time Radio*, www.otrcat.com/sports-in-old-time-radio.

This website provides radio broadcasting from the 1920s and later of various sports that people enjoyed listening to on the radio. This helped me understand that the radio was used as a form of communicating the broadcastings from sports, such as baseball and horse racing, to people in their houses. I used it when referring to the growth of popularity of sports through the radio. I

then connected it to my thesis and based it on the success and effect it had on the American society.

Secondary Sources

Biography.com Editors. "Guglielmo Marconi." *Biography.com*, A&E Networks Television, 25 June 2020, www.biography.com/inventor/guglielmo-marconi.

This article was written by Biography.com editors and they cover the life of Guglielmo Marconi, especially about his major accomplishment which was the invention of the radio. This article helped me understand the historical context of the radio and its invention which would lead to a major change in the future. I used this source as historical context to start my writing.

Biser, Margaret. "The Fireside Chats: Roosevelt's Radio Talks." *WHHA (En-US)*, 19 Aug. 2016, www.whitehousehistory.org/the-fireside-chats-roosevelts-radio-talks.

This source was written by Margaret Biser. This source talks about Franklin D. Roosevelt's interactions with the radio. This source helps me understand the advancements that presidents have been able to make due to the invention and the communication opportunities of the radio. I used this source when referring to the coming presidents after Calvin Coolidge, who was the first president to really use the radio as a way to communicate with the people of the United States from their houses. This adds on to the theme because speeches and talks coming from the president can be heard from people's living rooms, instead of having to deliver speeches the way of the past.

History.com Editors. "Warren G. Harding Becomes the First President to Be Heard on the Radio." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 16 Nov. 2009, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/harding-becomes-first-president-to-be-heard-on-the-radio.

This article was written by History.com editors. The editors explain how Harding became the first president who used the radio as a way to reach out to the American people, but Coolidge was the first to do a radio specific address. The editors then explain the difference in how past presidents would give speeches and address the people of the United States. This helped me understand that the radio was not only used as a form of entertainment for the people of the United States, but rather as a form of communication in which a president can talk to people in their households.

"History of the Radio." Edited by Joe Wood, *History of the Radio: A Complete Radio Timeline*, www.techwholesale.com/history-of-the-radio.html.

This article talks about the events that occurred before, during, and after the radio became popularized in the 1920s. This article helped me understand the historical context of the radio and helped me understand the importance of the radio to people in the United States and in foreign places.

"Movies, Radio, and Sports in the 1920s (Article)." *Khan Academy*, Khan Academy, www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/rise-to-world-power/1920s-america/a/movies-cinema-sports-1920s.

This article briefly describes the introduction and emergence of sport superstars that had appeared during the 1920s due to the growing popularity of the radio. This article helped me understand that the radio had impacted the United States in a way that it was used as a way to communicate broadcasting of sports around the country. This shows that due to the people of the United States wanting to take their minds off the difficult times they were living through post World War I, they resorted and relied on the radio as a form of entertainment.

Osburn, Karen. "Radio in the 1920s." *Geneva Historical Society*, 7 July 2020, genevahistoricalsociety.com/recreation/radio-in-the-1920s/.

This article was written by Karen Osburn, who is an archivist. In this article, Osburn briefly discusses the history and significance of the radio in the 1920s, which includes the variety of dramas and shows that were being broadcasted on radios for many families to enjoy. This article introduced me to the statement that the radio was a revolutionary invention and had a positive social impact in the United States. I used this source by quoting sentences from the article that explained the success of the show "Sam and Henry", which was later changed to "Amos 'n' Andy". I then connected the success of the show to the thesis and explained why it was important and how it had an effect on society, even though today people would down on the show since it was heavily based on racial stereotypes.

Tennant, Amie. "1920s Radio and Music in America • FamilySearch." *FamilySearch Blog*, 6 July 2020, www.familysearch.org/blog/en/1920s-radio-music-america/.

This article was written by Amie Tennant, who is a genealogy researcher, writer and presenter. This article talks about the effect that the radio had on music in the 1920s. I used this article when referring to the entertainment part that the radio helped improve. I also referred to this

when mentioning the positive effect it had on society. Furthermore, this article helped me understand that through the use of radio communication, music could be broadcasted around the country and would benefit society.

“The Formation of Modern American Mass Culture.” *Digital History*,
www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3397.

This article covers the success and effects that the radio had in the 1920s. I used this article throughout my paper as a reference or starting place for my argument. This source enhanced my understanding of the radio and how it benefited society as a form of communication.

Wallace, Jerry L. *Calvin Coolidge: Our First Radio President*. Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation, 2008,
coolidgefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CCBOOKOur-First-Radio-PresidentPrint-Copy-July-2008-PDF.pdf.

This book was written by Jerry L. Wallace and it covers the basis of Calvin Coolidge being the first president to officially address the nation through the use of the radio. I used a part of the book where it stated how many times he used the radio to address the nation and how Coolidge used the radio broadcastings as a way to gain supporters to advocate for a spending restraint on Congress. This enhanced my understanding of how the radio had more uses than just for entertainment. This would then add on to my thesis that the invention of the radio was revolutionary and benefited the American society and even the future generations.