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Time Shifting by the Networks

The following posts by Elizabeth McLeod, a broadcast journalist and a free-lance broadcast historian specializing in the late 1920s and early 1930s, are reproduced with her permission.

Date: Sun, 29 Mar 98 22:23:55 -0500
From: Elizabeth McLeod (lizmcl@midcoast.com)
Subject: Re: By Means of Electrical Transcription...

I'm confused about when the practice of pre-recording (transcribing) radio shows began. I recall reading that the Bing Crosby show was the first transcribed network show (and I seem to recall a Crosby show in which guest star Grade Alien says "this isn 't radio, it's a transcription "), but I also seem to recall that Amos and Andy were distributed on disk. My confusion was added to when I read the little book that comes with the first Smithsonian set of Superman episodes (great set, btw) since there is a reference to prerecording the shows, but I know that The Lone Ranger and such were sometimes performed more than once for different time zones.

What's confusing you is the difference between network shows and syndicated shows. "Amos 'n' Andy," when it began in 1928 was distributed by syndication by the Chicago Daily News on 78rpm records -- the first radio program to be pre-recorded in such a manner. This continued thru mid-August of 1929, and ended when the program went to NEC. Many syndicated shows followed in the late 20s and early 30s, including comedies, dramas, serials, and musical features. These were shows produced by independent packagers and sold to stations without the need for wire-line connections.

During the 30s, there were also instances of network shows being recorded off the air and distributed by the sponsor's ad agency on discs to station who were not network affiliates. Thus you might have heard the same show live on a network station and then later the exact same show from disc on a non-affiliated station. And, some shows — "The Shadow" and "The Lone Ranger" are examples - were available either as network shows or as syndications.

As for timeshifting by recordings, beginning in the summer of 1939 west coast NBC Blue was allowed to transcribe "Information Please" from the eastern feed and air it from discs, due to the impossibility of re-staging an ad-lib show, (see "Time" magazine for 8/21/39 for details. This appears to have been the earliest use of discs for this purpose.)

For the most part NBC and CBS — and later ABC -- didn't air recordings of full programs until after the war. ABC and Mutual both began timeshifting for the West Coast around this time — I have several KHJ-Mutual airchecks from 1946 that start with "The following program was electrically transcribed for release at this more convenient time."

Crosby's Philco Radio Time was not really the "first network show to be pre-recorded." if you consider that there were occasional prerecorded shows on Mutual as far back as the mid-30s. But, as Mike Biel has pointed out, it was the first show to be played back from an EDITED recording. And, it was the first show to take advantage of tape technology, beginning in 1947. Many other shows followed this example as the networks dropped their restrictions on transcribed shows, and by the early 50s, canned shows were the norm.

I strongly recommend Mike's dissertation "The Making and Use Of Recordings In Broadcasting Before 1936," to any who have an interest in these subjects. (I know he's too modest to say so, but it's

still the definitive text.) So, Mike ~ when's the sequel coming out???

It's available from Nauck's Vintage Records, at www.78rpm.com. Not inexpensive, but definitely worthwhile. (Insert Usual Disclaimers Here.)

Elizabeth

Date: Tue Apr 98 23:26:20-0500
From: Elizabeth McLeod (lizmcl@midcoast.com)
Subject: Re: "Columbia -- The News Network!"

This, of course, finally began to cause Paley to wake up and realize something had to change with regard to his news reports. He had been burned previously by bad publicity from Boake Carter and had been reluctant to use his own employees to broadcast news information. It was probably this urgency that germinated the idea for the World News Roundup.

What's ironic about all this is that during the early 1930s, CBS had made the first real effort by a nationwide radio network to assemble a news-gathering team. When the wire services agreed to stop providing news material to the networks in April 1933, Paley authorized Ed Klauber to go out and assemble a real CBS news department. Klauber in turn picked Paul White — then a CBS PR flack — to do the actual hiring.

White took his cue from what the regional Yankee Network was already doing in New England, and assembled a nationwide team of about 600 "stringers," who would cover stories in their areas on a piecework basis. With a only a few fulltimers required to edit and package the raw stories in New York, and staff announcers to read them, they were able to keep the budget for the entire department in the range of just \$3000 a week — and half of that was paid by General Mills as exclusive sponsor for CBS newscasts.

This operation was dissolved at the end of 1933, when the networks and the wire services reached an agreement on the use of wire news, forming the "Press Radio Bureau" to see to it that radio was unable to effectively compete with newspapers for in depth reporting of hard news. The loophole, however, was that radio was still able to do "special events" reporting without the need for the Bureau, and it was this loophole which kept the idea of real network radio news alive.

Then, of course, when H. V. Kaltenborn went to Spain in 1936 for the first live reports from an actual battlefield, eyes were really opened to radio's potential as a serious global news medium. By 1938, everyone was ready, and world events just made it that much easier.

Elizabeth

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The following posts by Dr. Michael Biel of Morehead State University to the Old Time Radio Digest are reproduced here with his permission.

Date: Tue, 17 Jun 1997 05:26:41 -0400
From: Michael Biel (mbiel@kih.net)
Subject: Re:Time Shifting Programs by Stations

We all know the history of recorded programs from the networks perspective. All shows live until Ring Crosby changed all that.

Only as far as NEC and CBS was concerned. Mutual had allowed recordings back as far as 1935 although most of their programs were live, too.

Starting in the Spring of 1946, ABC recorded and delayed ALL of their broadcasts one hour for those stations which had remained on Standard time while most were on Daylight time. THIS is why they allowed the pre-recording of the Crosby program. Everybody conveniently forgets this fact. The only aspect of the Crosby program that was really unusual is that it was EDITED. This practice was common on Armed Forces Radio, but not yet on the civilian networks.

But from the local stations perspective at what point was the technology available for them to record the network feed for later playback.

In theory, equipment was available from the very beginning of broadcasting, and there are instances of it being used in the 1920s for special occasions. WGY Schenectady used an experimental optical film recorder as early as October 13, 1922 for recorded messages. A December 24, 1922 broadcast included optical film recordings of Vice President Coolidge, Secy of War Weeks, and Secy of the Navy Denby. In 1923 they aired recordings of Jackie Coogan, Edison, Steinmetz, Pope Pius XI and General Pershing. They are also said to have aired a film recording of Sarnoff.

There are recordings of a few broadcasts from the mid 20s, but I have no evidence of any of them being aired as "repeats" except for WFAA playing on August 4, 1927 the issued Victor recordings of the NEC broadcast of the Lindbergh arrival back in Washington, D.C. in June. Syndication of recorded programs began with "Amos 'n' Andy" in March 1928, and the Maytag program in December 1928. But none of these yet answers your specific question except to say that it was possible to record a broadcast. But all of these recordings were done on wax and thus had to be processed by electroplating and then making shellac pressings.

Embossing on uncoated aluminum was available by 1930, but the sound quality was not sufficiently good to allow for use for rebroadcasting. The development of the lacquer coated disc in 1934 made this possible, and by 1936 many stations had this equipment. It was now possible to make high quality instantaneous recordings relatively inexpensively and available for immediate playback. NEC got their first machines some time in 1935 and announced their Reference Recording department on Jan 1, 1936. But they had restrictions on how these recordings could be used, even if purchased by the advertising agency or performers. There were instances where the Blackett Sample Hummert Ad Agency wanted to repeat their afternoon soap operas in the evening on the Texas Quality Network and NBC passed a rule prohibiting any affiliate from making a recording for rebroadcast on other stations of any program not originating at their own station. These practices were declared illegal by the FCC and Justice Department in the Network Case. B-S-H was able to use NEC's recording facilities for soap opera repeats on WMCA starting on May 9, 1939. Six shows were from NEC, and two were from CBS. CBS was more liberal, and specifically allowed programs like Ford's Fred Waring program to be recorded off the CBS lines and syndicated to other stations by the World Broadcasting System in 1935. CBS did not install any recording equipment until September 1938 and did not restrict outside studios recording off their lines. In 1939 WOR was repeating the previous evenings Kay Kyser program from NBC. NBC Blue was forced to allow the placement in 1939 of recordings of Little Orphan Annie and Jack Armstrong on the Pacific Coast Mutual network until they broke down and allowed ANY recording to be played on the Pacific Coast Blue network starting June 21, 1939. Thus NBC Blue programs were not required to have a second live broadcast for the West coast after that date, but Red programs still had to have a live repeat.

At the same time there are references in these rules that allowed stations to record individual programs for delayed broadcast in certain cases if they ask permission. Ball games was one allowable reason. KIRO, Seattle got permission from CBS in 1939 to delay broadcast all the major CBS newscasts because of the three hour time difference, and this collection of recordings is THE major CBS news collection of the WWII era. CBS's own recordings are minimal.

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DaTeTIun729MaFT998 23:38:54 -0500
From: "Michael Biel mbiel@kih.net" (mbiel@kih.net)
Subject: Re: Transcriptions

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I'm confused about when the practice of pre-recording (transcribing) radio shows began. I recall reading that the Bing Crosby show was the first transcribed network show, but I also seem to recall

that Amos and Andy were distributed on disk. My confusion was added to when I read the little book that comes with the first Smithsonian set of Superman episodes (great set, btw) since there is a reference to prerecording the shows, but I know that The Lone Ranger and such were sometimes performed more than once for different time zones. Could someone set me straight on all this? Thanks!

Actually it is rather simple. There are three different things at work here. The first thing is syndication of recorded programs to LOCAL stations. Amos 'n' Andy was the first program distributed in this fashion in 1928, but once the program was taken over by NEC Blue in 1929 it was thereafter done live. The Superman programs you mention were also syndicated recordings. The Lone Ranger started syndicating recordings of the live network broadcasts to additional stations in 1938.

The second thing is NETWORK radio, and it is they-actually NEC and CBS--that didn't allow the use of recordings. (Mutual was not anywhere near as strict.) There were a few exceptions, the Hindenburg Disaster in May 1937, Prime Minister Chamberlain's declaration of war Sept 1939, a few D-Day reports in June 1944, a few other battlefield reports late in the war, the McArthur peace treaty signing in 1945, etc. Also, NEC did allow NEC Blue to have some recorded West Coast repeats starting in June 1939 to keep a few valuable shows that they were losing to Mutual. It is possible that this rule might have allowed recorded repeats for a while for "The Lone Ranger", and possibly also "The Jello Program Starring Jack Benny." Somebody mentioned a week or so ago that there was a time where Benny's East coast airing was on Red and the West coast airing was on NBC Blue. This might be the reason for the shift to Blue on the West coast.

But with Crosby's ABC series there was a third situation. Although they did make a big fuss about it being pre-recorded, what worried the industry more was the fact that it was being EDITED! Crosby wanted to use the techniques of editing via disc dubbing that Armed Forces Radio had perfected during the war, but it could result in loss of sound quality if the editing had to be complicated. They started using tape experimentally in 1947 but still dubbed the final edited tape to disc until 1948. By that time the networks were using recorded delays of ALL programs for areas that did not change to daylight savings time. When ABC switched this delay to a tape system, they then allowed the Crosby tapes to be aired directly.

NBC finally rescinded their ban on using recordings of any type on Feb 8, 1949.

Michael Biel mbiel@kih.net

Date: Tue, 31 Mar 1998 03:20:55-0500

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From: "Michael Biel mbiel@kih.net" (mbiel@kih.net)
Subject: Re: transcriptions

As for timeshifting by recordings, beginning in the summer of 1939 west coast NBC Blue was allowed to transcribe "Information Please" from the eastern feed and air it from discs, due to the impossibility of re-staging an ad-lib show, (see "Time" magazine for 8/21/39 for details. This appears to have been the earliest use of discs for this purpose.)

Thanks for this info—I will definitely look it up. I had been privy to the NBC Interoffice Memo Files on this matter and they give details on how Blue Policy 12, Series B, of June 22, 1939 came about. This policy allowed the playback of recorded programs on the Pacific Coast Blue network. The Bracket-Sample-Hummert ad agency had placed recordings of their live NBC Blue programs "Little Orphan Annie" and "Jack Armstrong" onto the Pacific Coast Mutual network in the Spring of 1939. While they went along with this loss at first in order to maintain good relations with B-S-H, they changed their policy and allowed recorded repeats on Pacific Coast NBC Blue specifically in order to try to get those two programs back. I should have followed thru and found out what programs WERE broadcast in this fashion, but NEC's New York logs would probably not be too helpful in this

venture. West Coast newspapers would be a better source.

I recall reading that the Bing Crosby show was the first transcribed network show.

I think you and I may have read the same discussion I read of the creation of Ampex by Bing Crosby and others in roughly 1947.

Ampex had been around for a few years before that, building precision motors during the war. Jack Mullen convinced Ampex to start work on an American version of the Magnetophone, and Bing Crosby put in a bunch of money into the venture.

While the Allies had been stuck with the wire recorder, the Nazis had gone ahead and developed the tape recorder.

The 1936 AEG Magnetophone K-2 that I own had been sent to General Electric in Schenectady in 1937 for their inspection, and they wrote a report about it. The tape recorder was not a secret war development of the Nazis, but it WAS greatly improved during the war, as was Marvin Camras's wire recorder.

The triumphant American army had found three tape recorders in Nazi radio stations.

Many more than three were discovered, but there were three separate people who shipped machines home, Jack Mullen, R.H. Ranger, and Herbert Orr. Mullen became a consultant to Ampex, Ranger started his own company and made the Rangertone, and Orr formed Orradio in Opelika, Alabama to make Irish brand tape.

One of those three had fallen into the hands of Bingle and associates in Burbank.

Actually Jack Mullen had two machines, and he had already made some improvements when Ampex (an already existing company, as I mentioned) was brought into the picture.

Ampex was formed around this stolen technology. Things like patents and copyrights on the technology were up in the air, one presumes, because the victors were taking the spoils.

Because the Germans had not taken out U.S. patents, the technology was up for grabs in the U.S. and other Allied countries. On the other hand, in Germany there WERE patents, and AEG held and licensed those patents. One of the most important German patents—the one on record-head bias—was declared invalid because it had been the subject of a 1920s era U.S. patent.

Bing had a radio show on the blue network which had just become the new ABC at this time.

No, the Kraft Music Hall was on NBC (the former NBC Red network.) NBC would not allow it to be recorded and Kraft didn't want to move the program to another network. Crosby had to find a network AND a new sponsor. ABC and Philco volunteered, but Philco demanded an agreement that the show would resume live broadcast if the ratings declined. So it WAS a big deal.

All of the networks had a prohibition against transcriptions for variety shows, for most shows, really. Bing recorded and edited his show on the new tape recorder and took it to ABC after persuading them to let him prerecord.

The show had already been on the air for a full year in disk-edited form before the tape recorder was used in a side-by-side test for several weeks.

/ think this move might have broken the network prohibition of transcriptions permanently, though I'm not certain of it.

No, this still took a while as was mentioned yesterday.

/ have read that networks had considered shows that were not live as the perpetuation of something like fraud.

Quite true. Network representatives at the 1929 National Assoc of Broadcasters convention filled a discussion session about the use of transcriptions with their propaganda against their use. They scoffed at "canned programs" but conveniently forgot that movies came in cans and nobody complained that the film stars are not performing live in that theatre. They also talked about the poor quality of some transcriptions, also conveniently forgetting that the sound quality of network lines to smaller and distant cities was far worse.

A variety show, for instance, with all of the seeming spontaneity, would be a fraud if recorded and presented that way. I think the worries were even larger in the area of news shows.

In the early days there was very little spontaneity in even variety shows. It was all carefully scripted and passed by the censors. In fact, one of the most notable examples of an "extemporaneous" program, the famous "eagle" episode of Fred Allen's "Town Hall Tonight" contains an example of a carefully scripted interview with an "audience member" during a commercial. The segment with the eagle's trainer was also carefully scripted—but unfortunately the bird couldn't read and messed up his lines (and the carpet.) There is also a famous Rudy Vallee Fleishman Yeast Hour where George Gershwin is his guest, and the interview was carefully scripted. Rudy "explains" that he talked with George over lunch and jotted down his answers.

Actually, news was where they WERE extemporaneous! H.V. Kaltenborn prided himself that from the very beginning of his radio career he could do a 15 or 30 minute commentary without a script. It made it easy for him to be one of the first to do a live battlefield broadcast (Spanish Civil War 1936.) But until the WW II censorship required scripts to be written hours before the broadcast, the important factor about fearing misleading the public was centered around the time element—was the reporter giving the current situation because he was speaking live?

The CBS men who put on the round robin of live short wave pickups from Munich and other places in 1937, could have had their stuff edited back in New York and put on the air, if someone in charge hadn't worried that it would not be an honest way to present news.

Many was the time that the short-wave signal was lost just as the broadcast was about to begin. Without the anti-recording rule they could have recorded it when the signal was still good. In London, Murrow used to have to submit scripts five hours ahead of time to be censored. He could have recorded it and gone home to get some sleep before the nightly air raids, but instead he had to hang around Broadcasting House to do the live broadcast well after midnight—and then often couldn't go home afterwards because of the air raids. He had to do a weeks worth of sample rooftop extemporaneous broadcasts on recording to convince the censors that he could do it live without giving away secrets, but when he went live this was the only time that censorship was lifted. And when it came time for that live broadcast-there was a lull in the bombing during the entire time. The recordings—which were lost—were probably more exciting. I must mention here that the BBC and the CBC allowed AND ENCOURAGED the use of recordings for news events and interviews during the war. The CBC sent a recording van across the Atlantic for their reporters to use in England before the invasion and on the continent afterwards. There is a whole book written about this venture. Canadians were hearing great on-the-scene reports during the entire war, but the U.S. networks broadcast practically nothing of this type.