

# RADIO—the "Voice of the City."



By James C. Young

WHEN WNYC sends out its evening call from the high Gothic tower of the Municipal Building on lower Manhattan Island, it speaks with the voice of the only American city which commands a place "on the air." To put the matter a little differently, this is the single station owned and maintained by an American city. Perhaps it may seem strange that this should be the one truly representative municipal station at a moment when institutions of every sort are turning to radio with a sure instinct for publicity. But plans under way may be expected to result in several new municipal stations. A half-dozen others scattered across the country fall into this classification, although not directly owned by local governments. Thus it may be said that the day of the municipal station has definitely arrived; that the personalities of cities are to be made familiar throughout the ether.

This development brings far-reaching considerations. Some observers affirm that the municipal station will be freer of prejudices and restrictions than any other kind of station possibly could be; but another phase of public opinion holds that the political element is likely to become troublesome. Doubtless, the true estimate lies somewhere between these extremes. It is beyond question that the next year or two will witness the installation of municipal plants in growing numbers.

Long ago a famous poet asked the Roman populace to "lend me your ears." That same request is being made to-day in the name of American cities, anxious to command a hearing from the world, by means of radio. A forcible case in point arose when WLAG shut down in Minneapolis. Instantly the city government, the community's business men, and the community itself, felt the loss of prestige. An old friend had departed. Instead of the fair name

of Minneapolis being wafted around the world every night, the microphone was silent, and Minneapolis suffered.

Such a condition could not be tolerated in a city so fair and hustling. A number of its citizens said that "something should be done about it," and presently something was done. The Washburn-Crosby Company, the big millers, offered to assume all liabilities in addition to half the cost of maintenance for three years, at \$100,000 a year. Ten other business concerns came forward with the necessary \$5,000 each, and now Minneapolis has its station going again, better than ever, perhaps; every night cities throughout the world may listen-in across the reaches of space when their neighbor entertains. Incidentally, St. Paul shares in this glory and the expense. Its quota of the \$50,000 is 40 per cent.

WHERE MATTER DOES MORE THAN SERVE MIND

THE experience of Minneapolis is a typical instance of the associations that gather around a radio station. It is something more than a mere mechanical creation; indeed, this is a place where matter is harnessed in the service of mind. It is a poor sort of station that does not develop a definite identity in the consciousness of a multitude. If we reason upon the matter, we must see that this result cannot be escaped. Even the voices of announcers become so familiar that the absence of one for a night is promptly detected. When the personality of a man is so easily conveyed and understood, how much greater is the opportunity to spread broadcast the civic spirit which distinguishes many cities.

And cities throughout the land are beginning to understand the possibilities which await. Late they may be in starting, but it is likely that their alacrity in catching up will more than offset the delay. Boston is contemplating a station near the Parkman bandstand on



THE VOICE OF NEW YORK CITY

The New York Municipal Building. The top insert (photo © Underwood & Underwood) shows John F. Hylan, Mayor, under whose administration \$50,000 was spent in purchasing the station. The two lower inserts show the elaborate reception room and studio of the station

Boston Common to be connected with all of the sixty-five parks in the city. Many of these parks are provided with stands for music and speakers in the summer months. It has been proposed so to arrange the system that a concert or address in any park could be picked up and radiated from the central station. Or a varied program might be supplied by means of selections from the several parks. At other seasons indoor programs would offer opportunity to let the world know that the spirit which once flared on Boston Common still lives in the breasts of its citizens, but now applied to peaceful pursuits. Probably no station in the country can offer more of interest than WNYC, New York's own. Situated on the twenty-fifth floor of the Municipal Building tower, it has special advantages of location. At 7:30 P. M., when the station "takes the air," lower New York has fallen into its nightly slumbers, after an intensive day. No place in the country is so much like a deserted village as is this section at that time. The big pile of the Municipal Building rises up in serried floors, overshadowing City Hall Park and the lesser buildings gathered around.

Away up in the tower, so far up that a man in the street below could not see the light, is WNYC. If a visitor be lucky and runs the gauntlet of elevator men, guards, and other functionaries, he arrives at the studio in time for a pleasant illusion. Stepping through the door of WNYC's own home means going from the marble and glass of an office building into a tented palace that seems to have been created for romance. There is a colorful awning sus-

pending below the ceiling and brilliant cane furniture to match, with a fountain in the center where spraying streams converge over the changing hues of an electric globe.

It required a vision of the first order to conceive this station and carry out its installation. The conception was that of Grover A. Whalen, until recently Commis-

sioner of Plants and Structures, and a prominent figure in the administration of Mayor John F. Hylan. Mr. Whalen suggested the plan early in the year. Mayor Hylan thought well of it. Other officials opposed. It would cost too much money, maybe a prodigious sum. But Mr. Whalen said that he wanted merely \$50,000. But, it was objected, that would not even purchase the plant. "Give it to me," said Mr. Whalen, in effect, "and I will show you."

From that \$50,000 WNYC was installed and developed. Mr. Whalen first cast around for a station. He found that the station used in Rio de Janeiro during

the recent exposition there, would be sold. And he became the buyer, in the city's name. The whole apparatus was shipped to New York and set up again. The plant corresponds exactly to the former WJZ station in Newark, of which it is a copy.

The first program was sent out on July 8, 1924. And from that day, WNYC has held a well-defined place "on the air." By degrees its programs have been turned into a definite direction which differs widely from the average program, intended for entertainment only. It is the announced purpose of WNYC to mix a larger measure of instruction and enlighten-



WNYC

The cage antenna of the New York City municipal radio station atop the Municipal Building. The station first went on the air during the Democratic Convention and since has been the storm center for some acrimonious disputes. Mayor Hylan made an address about the transit situation, in which he attacked the Transit Commission. A member of the Commission demanded the right to reply from the same station, but was unwilling to have his speech censored by the Mayor. This was finally done, however

ment with its entertainment. That effort has been carried forward with a degree of success which raises up many interesting possibilities for other municipal stations.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE WITH THE STATION

JUST now a plan is under advisement which would link the station with all of New York's 632 schools, scattered through five boroughs, comprehending some 300 square miles of ground. If a lecturer endeavored to visit these schools, one a day for 300 days a year, he could not reach the last in less than two years. Therefore it is impossible for any instructor in the schools to extend his influence beyond a few. By means of WNYC he could achieve the work of two years in a half hour.

That is but one aspect of the station's educational plans. It is expected to open radio extension courses dealing with many themes, along the lines already laid down by a number of colleges. These courses will be devised to reach the adult public sitting by its fire at night. The other educational programs will be broadcast during school hours.

Still another avenue of development has been opened by invitations to workers in almost any field who have substantial achievement to their credit. Not long ago the returning Olympic athletes described from WNYC just how it felt to come back victors from Colombes, after winning from the first athletes of the world. Such a message was largely entertainment, with a dash of instruction. But on the next night, perhaps, speakers from this station discussed such a momentous matter as the future of New York transit, one of the city's most difficult problems. In this case the entertainment was small indeed, but it may be believed that the instruction was not without value.

The mission of WNYC is not always entertainment or instruction. It has a grim purpose in part. Every night at 7:30 and 10:30 a man in blue coat and prominent brass buttons sits down at the microphone.

"WNYC broadcasting," he says, "for the New York Police Department. General alarm for Harry Martin, age 30, 5 ft. 6 in. tall, weight about 140 pounds. Dark face, with bold fea-



HOW THE NEWS IS SPREAD

Important events are broadcast from the municipal radio station and others in New York, and picked up by receivers and amplified so that great crowds may hear. The photograph shows crowds in City Hall Park, New York, in the shadow of the Woolworth Building, listening to broadcasting. The city, Mr. Young points out, may accomplish real service, with a properly run broadcasting station



#### WHEN SOMETHING IS SAID, PEOPLE LISTEN

Digests of the meetings of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, the Commissioners of the Sinking Fund, and the Board of Aldermen are put on the air from WNYC in New York on the days these meetings occur. Besides the more political elements of the city programs, they also contain the usual musical and oratorical features

tures and frowning eyes. Has a slight limp. Dangerous man. Escaped from Welfare Island early to-day. Believed traveling west."

The listener rather catches his breath at such use of radio. It is an eerie thing—this pursuit of a man by air. An observer wonders what chance there will be of detecting Harry Martin among all the other men in the country of that general appearance. But his speculations are cut short by a new description which the officer is spreading far and wide. This time another man is wanted. And presently it is another, until the department has sent out particulars of some twelve or fifteen men whom the law demands.

A surprising number of these are apprehended, not always directly by the intervention of radio, but its use has become an invaluable part of an intricate whole. In a number of cases radio has made it possible promptly to broadcast descriptions of dangerous persons, with the result that their arrest soon followed. No quicker method is known to criminal procedure, and it has the power of drama as well. Descriptions of missing persons also are sent out, about four a day. Not long ago a stolen automobile was captured by a policeman on Williamsburgh Bridge within twenty minutes after the number had been broadcast from WNYC.

#### WHAT OTHER CITIES ARE DOING

LEAVING WNYC, busily engaged in its high tower, the next radio plant which the United States Department of Commerce

classifies as a municipal station, will be found at Stevens Point, Wisconsin, using the call signal WLBL, and operated by the Wisconsin Department of Markets.

The West is progressive in the matter of municipal stations, for there is another near by, in Omaha, conducted by the Central High School, and known to many listeners as WNAL. The Boise High School in Boise, Idaho, has a municipal station identified as KFAU. In Dallas, Texas, the Police and Fire Signal Department of the city government operates WRR, while the Detroit Police Department owns and operates station KOP, and there is a sixth station, KFPR, under direction of the Los Angeles County Forestry Department.

These six stations, with WNYC, are commonly classified by the Department under the title of municipal plants. But the New York station has the distinction of being the sole station directly operated by any city government. It is likely that a similar plant soon will "take the air" in San Francisco, where somewhat jealous eyes have been turned toward Los Angeles and its station. The city council and various business organizations there have the details under consideration. If the city does not install a station, it is believed that private enterprise will supply the need.

Municipal radio stations enjoy some peculiar privileges. One of these is the willingness of entertainers to contribute their services. Although many entertainers find radio so rich in prestige that they are willing even to pay for the opportunity of broadcasting, it is one of the unsettled questions confronting the public and the owners of stations, as to how these services shall be compensated. In the case of municipal plants it seems generally agreed that the stations do not yield a profit to anybody concerned, and entertainers more willingly extend their help. This is an important consideration that calls up many other questions which must be answered. As the municipal plants develop and the demand for radio entertainers increases, people will certainly compare the municipal station with the other stations. And so now we have the old question of governmental competition—in a new way.

## THE GREAT AND SILENT VOID WAITS

IN SO FAR as the political phase is concerned, there seems little reason to believe that any city administration would overlook such opportunity to sound its praises. That is not in the nature of things—human or radio. But it is just as certain that any fulsome use of radio to spread word of the deeds performed by Mayor What's-his-name would be likely to fall upon a great and silent void. The radio public probably makes up the most sensitive audience which any speaker could be summoned to address. Political propaganda is not wholly unwelcome, as evidenced in the recent campaign for President, where it was tested on a larger scale than ever before. But it soon was learned that the best political speech was the shortest, a policy rigidly followed by speakers of all political shadings.

There is no reason, of course, why a political address should be objectionable. On the contrary, it frequently is enlightening. Few matters have a larger influence on the welfare of the nation than its government, and politics is but another name for government. The political address properly is a part of radio. But when all this has been granted, it is even more certain that the American radio public

would not yield its ears for even five minutes to the man who dispensed bombast about himself. So it may be believed that the good sense of the public will be the surest check on the misuse of municipal stations by spellbinders.

With so many advantages evident to city, nation, and public arising from municipal stations, it requires but one scant glance to perceive that a number of these stations will be added to the radio resources of the United States. Perhaps in time the municipal station will take the place, in some measure, of the numerous stations which have sprung up because there was nothing better in the neighborhood. It is a fair guess that the average municipal plant will draw about it the best to be had in any city, as concerns both entertainers and public confidence. Such stations inevitably will crowd to the wall others of uncertain status that merely fill a gap in the evolution of radio.

## SELLING PRESTIGE

IT IS wholly conceivable, even distinctly probable, that municipal stations will be rapidly financed in some such manner as the Minneapolis station. If a similar proposal should be submitted to the business communi-



ONE OF THE TWIN CITIES

—Minneapolis, Minnesota. When WLAG recently closed, business men of both cities felt that civic pride and actual definite benefits both demanded that the locality continue to have a broadcasting station. They raised sufficient money to operate the station and WCCO is the result. Mr. Young points out that a city broadcasting station can give a very important idea of the character and advantages of the city to listeners in other parts of the nation



#### LISTENING TO POLITICAL BROADCASTING

Interested politicians during the recent Democratic Convention in New York kept tally cards of the balloting in Madison Square Garden. The municipal service may be extended beyond this, however. New York plans, for example, to broadcast market information daily to New York housewives. At a given hour each morning, housewives who own radio sets may tune-in and learn what foods are cheapest and what in the most abundance, and govern their purchases accordingly

ties of almost any city above 100,000, a plant would be the probable result. Proceeding along a slightly different line, cities may supply plants and call upon organized business to undertake maintenance for the common good. Whatever the method, it cannot be doubted that the municipal station will have a rapid expansion. There are so many evident advantages that it may be wondered why these stations have not come into their own long ago. But it need be only pointed out that the whole radio industry is so new and still in such a highly formative state that many goals are yet to be reached.

There is something of inspiration and much of glory in the thought that before the lapse

of many years municipal stations strung across the country will keep American cities in intimate touch, day or night, through their own plants. The assurance that these will be operated for direct public benefit is one of importance. They never can be accused, as all other stations have been, of fostering private enterprise. Assuredly there is nothing to be censured in this enterprise, considered by itself, but wherever private interests enter, the possibility of criticism also must arise. Municipal stations will have nothing to sell—unless it be the prestige of their cities; and if some candidate occasionally oversteps the bounds of radio, he may depend upon a prompt tuning out, his worst punishment.

The prediction is familiar that the number of commercial stations must decrease rather than expand. But despite the closing of some stations the number has gone steadily upward instead of down. Even with the stations now projected, it is probable that this expansion soon must reach its logical working out. And the moment additional municipal stations are opened, the pressure on weaker commercial plants will be hard to resist. It is likely that municipal enterprise will help to correct a condition that has caused some concern. In any event, an America girded with plants owned by its cities will be a fine evidence of civic spirit; a spirit which well may serve to draw the whole nation closer together by the invisible bonds of the air.

#### HELP FOR THE EXPERIMENTER

**A** NEW department will appear in RADIO BROADCAST regularly which contains helpful contributions from readers. We have had many excellent suggestions about little kinks of construction which were proved so helpful that we think all our readers ought to share in them. We invite contributions which must be typewritten and not over three hundred words long. We are not interested in freak ideas but will only consider those which are of decided value. Payment of between \$5 to \$10 will be made for each suggestion accepted.