

These notes are from a segment of the multi-media presentation: "Radio In World War II"...without slides and audio (available elsewhere on this web-site).

(From the segment: Radio News Development: 1920—1940)

EARLY NEWS EFFORTS

When William Paley lit up CBS, he had but a single teletype machine; the "Press-wire" ticker...the sole source of CBS Radio news information. In the day, an announcer simply reading the news...usually in the newspaper...would have seemed unthinkable dull. No live reporting, no telephone calls, no interviews. As for overseas news? Forget it!

To jazz up news delivery, broadcasters tried "audio newsreels". One of the earliest and most popular was the dramatic "march of time". This show used acting, sound effects, and music to reenact news reports, introduced by announcer Westbrook van Voorhees.

RADIO MARCHES ON

While radio had not been considered much of a threat to newspapers, in the early 30's, radio variety shows began soaking up advertising dollars at a rate the papers found alarming.

The newspapers reacted in the only way they could: they'd stop promoting radio...and they'd try to choke off radio's news sources. Thus began the infamous "Press-Radio Wars". The main weapon was the press-wire services controlled by the papers. A strict embargo was placed on the use of wire services on radio. Radio could not use wire stories until newspapers were on the streets....and radio program schedules would be dropped from newspaper entertainment pages.

And then came the 1932 Presidential election... radio's first hard news story. (The crime of the century...the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby...had occurred just a few months earlier, but radio wasn't ready for it. But this was the last time they'd be left behind by the newspapers.)

Radio covered the 1932 election end-to-end... there was widespread embargo-jumping...the election results were on radio stations hours before newspapers could print them. At that moment...the newspaper "extra" became an anachronism.

The newspaper-radio feud became all-out war. "They don't speak to us...and we don't answer" ...was the comic assessment by NBC news chief Abe Schechter. Like his CBS counterpart Paul White, Schechter had come from a print background...he had been a reporter for newspapers, the associated press, and the international news service.

In a real sense, the print media had trained its new enemy, and in Schechter and CBS's Paul White, the print media had armed radio with two formidable competitors who worked to elevate radio to the role of preeminent medium.

Well...after about a year of this silly feud, the newspapers wanted to compromise. The "Press-Radio Bureau" was established to feed wire-service bulletins to the networks. However...this 'service' came with a rigid set of rules:

- >Radio could do two newscasts a day, at 9:30 AM and 9 PM, after newspapers were off the presses.
- >Radio could sell no advertising for news programs.
- >No legmen with microphones could be sent to scenes of breaking news.
- >Newscasts had to end with a disclaimer: “for further information consult your newspaper.”

NBC's biggest asset in the Press-Radio War was Lowell Thomas. They called him “a million-dollar voice” without “a nickel’s worth of news.” The NBC news writer’s job was to get Thomas some news to report... without getting caught stealing from newspapers. (Press associations had hired stenographers to monitor radio newscasts, in the hunt for even the smallest bit of cribbing.)

SCISSORS COVERAGE

But the ban against newspaper clipping actually applied only to American newspapers...so NBC and others took to grabbing news from other countries’ papers...starting what became known as ‘scissors coverage’. Schechter...who received by air various foreign newspapers...jokingly called himself the charter member of “the scissors-and-paste-pot press association.” He cut, pasted, and rewrote, and each night handed Thomas a script that bore the illusion of freshness...and with an occasional scoop. Those scoops would be in turn cribbed by the press wires...to appear a day later in American newspapers.

THE END OF THE WAR

The Press-Radio Wars went on for 2 years before the broadcasters retaliated by forming their own radio news bureaus. This worked so well that the Press Association pragmatically set up an outfit called press-radio news. All users contributed; they would feed the networks a certain of canned news daily.

But regardless of what the Press-Radio Bureau could provide...the real competition was in the trenches...where the networks did daily battle. NBC’s Schechter learned to milk Lowell Thomas’s vast popularity: he had his people using the phones...going right around the newspaper reporters who relied on the wire services. Schechter says “we made the discovery that by saying we were talking for Lowell Thomas, we could get practically anyone on the telephone.” If a court case had interest, Schechter called the judge, who was usually impressed. After all if Lowell Thomas was calling all the way from New York, the least a judge could do was talk to him. The judge became “a reporter for NBC.” It worked... because Lowell didn’t care if they used his name. And when you touched people personally by long-distance telephone, they opened up.

The telephone was the primary tool but Radiograms were also in use. They were used to reach out to newsmakers on ships at sea...well before they arrived in port to face the inevitable press conference.

The Press-Radio War had begun with a bang...and went away with a whimper...with Radio the clear winner. Before long the wire services began selling news to radio. At the same time, newspapers invested in their own radio stations.