

GETTING 'HEAR' FROM THERE:

A narrative describing World War Two radio news reporting

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I. CONTRASTS AND CURIOSITY

Given the relatively primitive communications of the 1930's/40's, how did radio's foreign correspondents get their World War Two reporting back to America's radios? The answers help explain how radio broadcasting was a force in the country's victory.

Radio's role in that success was not uncomplicated. Their offshore journalists lived with battlefield backdrops and wrestled with circumstance in their efforts to "get the story home." (Found in this narrative: *For four days, every one of William Shirer's CBS reports was transmitted as scheduled...but none got through...NBC Engineers had the cool detachment to reroute circuits.*) Reporters dealt with unpredictable transmission problems while they confronted the patriarchal environment surrounding the home team's judgement of their work.

In the 1930s "radio" was no longer 'magic.' Listeners were surviving in a world that was turning upside down. Many looked to radio to help explain the chaos, and radio had to grow to meet that challenge. In response, and to better compete with print media for advertising dollars, the networks committed to adding serious news to their broadcast services.

Then they reluctantly beefed up overseas coverage. Through these commitments and the contributions of foreign journalists, audience surveys revealed a rising *trust* in the medium and listener confidence made radio effective in supporting the war effort.

It was *people* who were responsible for that progress. Stephen Ambrose said: "*History is about people. And there is nothing more fascinating to people than other people, living in a different time in different circumstances.*"

Ambrose might have added: "*Curiosity is a cherished human gift.*" Neil deGrasse Tyson would agree: "*Curiosity is not a distraction-it's a superpower.*" A magnificent word, *curiosity*. Some say it's the last of the protected human freedoms. In this narrative, curiosity will lead you to interesting stories.

To better frame these accounts it's important to understand the cultural and political environment into which radio would try to fit. Research into the life and times of listeners demonstrated that *better-informed citizens could make better decisions*. But how could they be better-informed without the communications technologies we take for granted today? Broadcasting addressed that challenge, to the limits of its capabilities.

This narrative is easygoing and entirely literate, assembled without ChatGPT or other AI Slop. *We promote perception* to the curious; to journalists, media professionals, and today's broadcasters, who can bring up news from anywhere on the planet with the click of a mouse.

A narrative goal is to *keep you engaged*, so you aren't counted among those whom Rose Horowitz writes about in *The Atlantic*. She says: "*The share of Americans who read a book or an article...has fallen by 40% over the past two decades.*"

So to also engage your "*mind's eyes*," we've included hot-linked audio.

Here is some of the research that supports our narrative:

Edward Bliss Jr: *Now the News*

Stanley Cloud/Lynne Olson: *The Murrow Boys*

Ian Toll: *The Pacific War Trilogy*

Paul White: *News On The Air*

Abe Schecter: *I Live On Air*

William L. Shirer: *20th Century Journey; Berlin Diary*

Eric Sevareid: *Recollections*

Tracy Campbell: *The Year of Peril-America in 1942*

Jerome Berg: *On the Shortwaves*

Bill Yenne: *Panic on the Pacific*

Gerd Horten: *Radio Goes to War*

Lynne Olson: *Those Angry Days*

David Halberstam: *The Powers That Be*

William J. Dunn: *Pacific Microphone*

Erik Barnouw: *The Golden Web*

David H Culbert: *News For Everyman*

Life Magazine: April 27, 1942

Edward Pawley: *BBC Engineering 1922-1972*

Hugh Ambrose: *The Pacific*

Charles Siepmann: *Radio in Wartime*

Steven Casey: *War Beat Europe; War Beat Pacific*

Gilbert/Finnegan: *Signal Corps History*

Broadcasting Magazine

I believe you'll find something new in this work...

Mark Durenberger Mark4@durenberger.com

Broadcast, satellite, media technologies: 1955--2026

II. PRE-WAR AMERICA: THE BACKGROUND

Historians find the 1930s a remarkable period. In a little more than a decade Americans had reveled in the flamboyance of the 1920s, were battered by a major economic depression and endured a series of life-shaking events that made them feel they'd lost control over their lives. Life just wasn't very wide. What a time to be raising sons and daughters!

However...the character and attitude of the men and women who engaged in World War Two reflected their upbringing during those bad years. Tom Brokaw wrote: *"living through the Great Depression formed lasting values in their generation."* Thanks in part to radio's influence the 125 million Americans who lived through the time formed the national will to prosecute a major war, endowing their sons and daughters with the ethos, confidence and spirit to win.

America had its rough edges in much of the 1930's. John Steinbeck wrote: *"I can't think of any decade in history when so much happened in so many directions. Violent changes took place...our lives remolded, our government rebuilt, forced to function (with) duties and responsibilities it had never had before...(yet) the most rabid hysterical Roosevelt-hater would not dare to suggest removing the reforms, the safeguards...and the new concept that 'the government is responsible for all its citizens.'"*

That period before World War Two was a time of turmoil. Americans were accustomed to all that had flowed from decades of U. S. primacy, but now lives were upended by financial catastrophes while dictators stormed through Europe and revolution engaged the Middle East.

If there was such a thing as a "typical" citizen he/she/they/them was/were often isolationist, nationalistic and anti-Semitic. (Interestingly, *Racism* was not a significant social issue during the period.) As yet there were no "white-collar/blue collar" distinctions among the working force.

During the years of the Great Depression social and physical isolation eroded community spirit and brought many people down. *Some* survived the period with hardly a ripple in their personal comforts, but in the earlier 1930s the suicide rate for men reached an all-time high.

It's a posit that clued-up people make better judgements, and during the Depression some discovered the value in *sharing* their personal predicaments. Radio began to assume a role that would support such discourse, and radio would sometimes play the role of *"Educator."*

In the early 1930s some cities were still underserved by the electrical grid, and many rural areas had no electricity. Progressive farmers generated their own power, using windmill generators. In rural areas a third of homes had running water or indoor toilets.

The 1930s were also recognized for the way culture thrived (e.g. the embracing of swing music and jazz), while technologists yielded marvelous advances in sciences and skills. Aluminum and steel upstaged plywood. Aviation took great steps forward; aircraft engines were more powerful. And as an instrument for an improbable war, radio's advancements meant *you could now talk to airplanes from the ground!*

Neighbors banded together to share what little they had, though the idea of accepting welfare was humiliating and some folks never would accept community support. Even if Dad was out of work, the idea of Mom working was social stigma. (Speaking of stigma, there was still a “*wrong side of the tracks*” in many small towns. “*Wrong siders*” were poorer, insular, less informed and perhaps more susceptible to rumors.)

During the worst years many poorer children could not avail themselves of even a basic education and, through funding difficulties, some 20,000 schools shut down. Then in mid-decade, the Great Plains states watched their topsoil blowing away. The “Dust Bowl” began in Montana in 1934 and continued for several years. Dust Pneumonia (they called it “*The Brown Plague*”) brought on premature death or scarred people for life. A move west was thought to bring rehabilitation for the “*Lungers*” who could afford it, and sanitariums opened in many western cities. Next came the grasshoppers, ravaging the remaining farmland. And finally...there was the emergent angst over events in Europe and the Pacific.

A great deal has been written about the “*Press-Radio Wars*,” and we can be content with a “lite” version. Through the 1930s radio and print media went head-to-head in a battle for advertising dollars. Radio lacked the newspapers’ comprehensive news coverage, but it had the great advantage of the speed with which it could deliver fast-decay information.

The “papers” invested in a far-flung universe of reporters. Delivery to the registered customer base was a significant operating cost. Radio’s tale was that their signals reached “everywhere” *for free*.

Some newspapers tried to beat radio at *that* game with wireless delivery. The “*RadioFax*” required a thermal printer in each home. It was slow, error-prone and capacity-limited, but the technology *was* used to transmit images in World War Two.



“Radio fax” transmitter and receiver: *The Radio Historian*

The newspapers' "*anti-broadcasting*" strategies never seemed to work. By the end of the 1930s radio listenership was multiplying while movie-going and print subscriptions were holding steady or declining. (The rankings of course were impacted by the progress in wiring the nation for electricity. After all, you didn't need electricity to consume print media.)

1930s "top-down" media, print or radio, could only provide what we'd label as "*passive information-flow*." Such one-way communications could never compete in today's interactive world, but in their time people had no internet, no cell phones, no satellites, no digital assistants. "*App*" was the abbreviation for "*application, appetizer or appendix*."

There *was* one (wired) interactive technology:

"Reach Out and Touch Someone" (AT&T marketing slogan) The telephone was important to the 1930s world (if and where phones were available). The telephone was a tethered device and a conduit for interactive gossip and rumors...especially on "*party-lines*."

Oh: "*Party-lines*"? At first rural telephone companies couldn't afford to run separate wires to each home so they set up customer "groups" where several subscribers shared the same single circuit. A phone call to one home could be heard by all the others in that group.

So all the party-liners didn't pick up the phone whenever there was a call, the phone company used "*ring codes*." Your code might be '*two short rings*' and your next-door neighbor's '*one long and one short*.' Since the ringing and the call were heard on all phones along the line, some neighbors spent their time eavesdropping (they called it "*rubbering*").



Party-line phone: Bell Tel

When you were able to get a private line and you had a tabletop phone, you lifted the receiver "off the hook," put your finger in the hole with the chosen number and spun the dial, number by number.



Dial phone: Bell Tel



Duluth News-Tribune

But even "dialing" was still a new concept in 1930. Instead, you'd jiggle the phone "hook-switch" until you heard the voice of a local operator asking: "*number please*." In the process of asking for a connection you might catch up on neighborhood news with the operator. (Anecdotally, this was how folks shared their community gossip.)



NW Bell Telephone Co.

If your call was long-distance you connected with a “Long-Distance” operator and identified the proposed city and phone number. She (the operator was usually a “she”) would build the call by reaching out to her comrades from town to town until reaching the destination city. You heard each operator relay the call request while you listened to the call volume diminish through all the relays. Finally at the destination city, its local operator connected you to your victim.

Broadcasting Systems For readers not conversant with broadcasting’s “nuts-and-volts,” we’ll swiftly review broadcasting’s regulatory structure as established by 1930. Much of the regulatory framework exists today, subjugated by the demand for more and more stations. By 1930 the *Federal Radio Communication* had licensed 618 AM stations (today there are 4,300). There was no FM. It was AM radio’s “Standard Broadcast Band” with its day-to-night signal differential, susceptibility to electrical storms and poor coverage on poor receivers. It was all they had. And, all things considered, it worked pretty well for quite a long time.

Even small communities joined the clamor for “a license.” Initially, station assignments were meant to provide “*the best service to the maximum number of listeners.*” Authorized power was directly related to the intended service area; towns with smaller footprints receiving lower-power station assignments. High-population cities collected the most station assignments, and a larger number of licenses usually meant specialized programming was possible, including service to the many immigrants living behind language barriers. For them radio was a way to learn a new language. My dear friend Jerry Miller, the son of Greek immigrants, liked to say: “*the only thing that spoke English in my home was the radio.*”

To reach wider unserved areas, “Regional” stations were assigned so as to create minimum interference with one another. On remote farms, a *regional* station might be the only outside voice reaching barns and chicken coops.



NAFMB

This farmer tunes a radio with a “loop antenna” used in searching for distant stations.

With so few farms wired for electricity in the early 1930s, *battery radios* were as important as fresh milk. On Saturday mornings farmers took the radio batteries to town to be recharged while they were picking up supplies.

Several set manufacturers built radios for the barn, as companions during milking. The “*Farm Radio™*” ran on 32-volt DC power from windmill-generators.

Shortwave Radio was a ‘heritage’ technology . Foreign nations had been broadcasting on shortwave since the mid-1920s. By the mid-1930s nearly every major country (except the U.S.) had its national shortwave voice. In 1932 the BBC launched its *Empire Service*, a network fed by shortwave relays in strategic locations around the planet (“the sun never set on a British shortwave signal”). The BBC’s goal was to tie the mothership more closely to her colonies; the broadcast fare was polity-oriented.

While America was an “AM Band” country, it was also a target for others’ shortwave services. Many foreign stations could be heard in America and listeners heard wondrous things from all over the world...including each nation's version of “news.” A measurable number of Americans began calling themselves “*shortwave fans*.”

By the bye, there was little concern Americans would succumb to foreign propaganda. An unattributed newspaper snip reflects:

Fortunately (so far) the American people are not so nationalistic of mind that they will listen with any patience to strictly political broadcasts from foreign countries. Nevertheless, the foreign stations exert an appeal not easily dissolved. There is, for one thing, the fascination of the foreign tongue, the foreign flavor and the complete difference of atmosphere, that is hard to ignore. Then, there is that old saying: “Distance lends enchantment.”



Shortwave will endure further discussion, since it was the technology correspondents needed to reach the American networks from abroad.

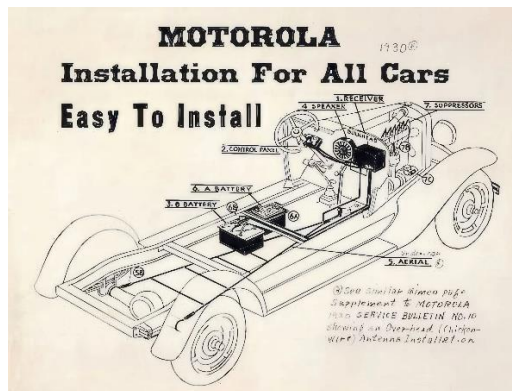
For a time, AM radio tried to spread itself out. A short-lived experiment in a small section of the ‘shortwave’ band offered additional “station-width” for broadcasting in “high-fidelity.” The experiment was called “*Apex*.” It failed, due to a lack of special receivers. Development would remain in the original broadcast band, which at the time reached to ‘1500’ on the dial.

Radio-listener impact was of course directly related to the number of radios in operation. In 1930, 12 million homes were equipped with at least one radio. By the onset of World War Two there were 50 million radios in use, serving a population of 132 million Americans.

“Radioset” Growth In 1930 RCA proudly proclaimed its part in bringing radio to the country, in what they called *“the full measure of public usefulness.”* It was a bully pronouncement in a nation entering a depression. (RCA’s *“public usefulness”* of course included the return to their shareholders from the sale of RCA radios.)

Each new radio replaced one of the cumbersome and obsolete “howler” radios of the 1920s. (“Howling” was a squealing sound created when one radio dial-setting interfered with another.) For fun, watch this video on the burning of [the “Howlers.”](#)

Car Radios were introduced in 1930. They usually consisted of a chassis in the rear, driven by mechanical cables from the dashboard. And “portable” radios with “dry batteries” debuted in the late 1920s. It took two men and a boy to wheel them to the beach.



Motorola Co.



Armstrong Library

Radio’s entertainment and escapism provided much-needed distraction from the hardships of the Great Depression. Radio was *“a diversion from the everyday, a half-hour at a time.”*

Early on, communal radio listening created social opportunities: rural neighbors might gather to listen to a favorite program on one of the few radio sets in town. (This shared-experience behavior was imitated in the youthful days of TV.)

Today’s “communal experience:” *the millions of people each living in his/her own cocoon.*

During its gestation, radio broadcasting provided Americans a variety of comedy and entertainment, some “talks” and a few political events. But starting about 1930, radio’s leaders realized their audiences wanted something more.

Responding to audience demands and determined to share in the print media’s advertising goldmine, the radio networks would enter the news business, leveraging their reporting speed and offering honest and interpretive reporting (and *opinions*).

III. RADIO NEWS COMES OF AGE

While individual stations were lauded for pioneering news services, the networks could bring news to nearly all of America. In the 1930s *NBC (Red)*, *NBC (Blue)* and *CBS* had some miles on them and knew how to deliver entertainment programming. Revenues were flowing, yet few dollars were being directed toward “news.” News coverage had been limited to major talks and events, considered ‘must-carry’ obligations.

In Washington congressional oversight over the network’s business models began to harden, with the goal of reviewing the nets’ dedication to “*public service*.” CBS had long been anxious about such scrutiny, but NBC had its own tickle spot. NBC saw itself as the “*Granddad of Radio*,” and as a subset of the giant RCA and with two networks, the company feared Congress might decide they were *too* influential. Both networks now thought it might be appropriate to make a deeper commitment to “*public service*.” The fact that such a step would be of financial benefit was not acknowledged, but the networks *were* going after the papers’ ad dollars.

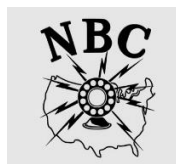
The initial news/events biosphere at NBC and CBS had been occupied by the networks’ “*Special Events*” departments. It would take journalists of good judgment, seasoned in world affairs, to create a legitimate service. Where were these people? At the newspapers.

For several years, informal internal motivation for network news commitment had existed, at least on paper and over beers at Happy Hour. At first there seemed no nobility of purpose in publicly promoting network news. Emboldened advocates now went to the money men where they learned that resources *could* be earmarked. Nevertheless, all new program ideas would mean serious guardianship from risk-averse financial managers, whose frame of reference was the entertainment shows under contract. (Those expenses were knowable. News coverage implied *unpredictable* costs; a concept anathema to them.) The notion of *serious news* endured first-and-second-guessing, and there was little altruism in the Board Room. But the networks also had “*Deciders*” in David Sarnoff and William Paley.

The Titans CBS’s William Paley and NBC’s David Sarnoff were two very different men of very similar business ruthlessness. These two leaders could shape the buildup of radio news...and in news as elsewhere, the networks were exceptionally competitive.



David Sarnoff: Historical Images



William Paley: Historical Images

These titans were playing “one-upmanship” as each dug his heels in, committing the resources at his disposal to a never-ending battle to outperform the other.

Sarnoff’s background was rooted in the basics of radio as a *communications technology*. He was a master at creating his own myths and he was ruthless in stomping on advancements which didn’t fit his vision of radio. Facing a news challenge, *Sarnoff The Technologist* would be expected to throw electrons at the matter.

His rival, the entrepreneurial William S. Paley, was accused of buying his way into radio; he had little or no understanding of the business when his father underwrote Columbia in 1927. Paley focused on providing popular programming. “*Paley the Program-Conscious*” wanted star-power in a CBS news effort. His gods were public reaction, prestige and the bottom-line.

But when it came to a news commitment, the rivals were bent on accomplishing the same ends because it seemed in their mutual interest.

The Start of Network News Scheduled newscasting had been tried at NBC around 1929 in the form of scripted narratives, when the flamboyant Floyd Gibbons was assigned to a short-lived half-hour commentary show. CBS launched “Elmer Davis and the News” in 1939 for a short run. Then in 1930 Lowell Thomas replaced Floyd Gibbons at NBC to relate accounts of his worldwide adventures. Thomas began adding news stories to the mix.

After a full-news commitment was made at CBS, Paley began looking for seasoned veterans of the newspaper business who would be willing to take a flier on radio news. His first important move was to hire Ed Klauber from the *New York Times* in 1930. Klauber in turn attracted Paul White from United Press and installed him as manager of the new “*Columbia News Service*.” Together they would build an organization that earned a legendary reputation for coverage of the coming world conflicts.

White took ideas from the efforts of John Shepard’s “*Yankee Network*” in New England. He put in place some 600 “stringers” who submitted reports from around the country; their phoned-in dictation transcribed by “newswriters.” *General Mills* sponsored Columbia’s first regular newscast...with the stipulation it would pay no more than \$1500 per week, regardless of actual costs. Thus, it began.

Over at NBC, Lowell Thomas was “*a star in the making*.” When Lowell’s 1930 debut was announced it involved a rare collaboration between the networks. NBC would deliver Thomas to the eastern part of the United States and CBS would air him in the West.

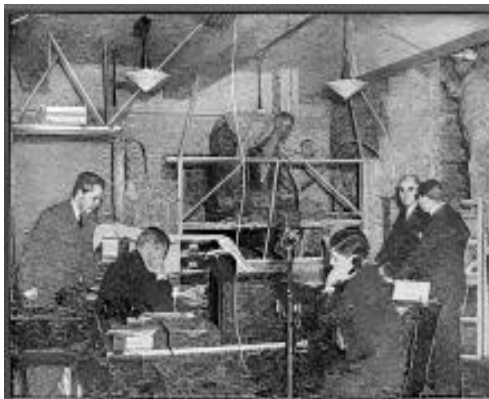
Where would Thomas get his stories? Now say hello to Paul White’s counterpart at NBC. Abe Schechter was striving, energetic, competitive. As News Director he knew how to leverage NBC’s assets, and that meant Lowell. NBC had been gathering its news piecemeal; one staffer spending his time on the phone and rewriting stories. If the item had spice, gossip columnist Walter Winchell would be copied, as a quid pro quo, for any salty tips Winchell forwarded to the network.

Detractors were calling Thomas *"a million-dollar voice without a nickel's worth of news."* The NBC news writer's job was to hand Thomas *some* news to report...without getting caught stealing from the newspapers. (His people *did* steal; cutting and rewriting newspaper copy. In a closing of the circle, some of Thomas's broadcasts would in turn be cribbed by the press wires, to appear a day later in American papers.) Newspapers of course prohibited copy stealing...from American publications. NBC took to grabbing news from other countries' papers. Thus began what was known as *"scissors coverage."* Schechter jokingly called himself *"the charter member of the Scissors-and-paste-pot Press Association."*



Lowell Thomas: NBC

Schechter learned to milk Thomas's popularity. His people learned to use the phones, going right around the newspaper reporters who relied on the wire services. Schechter said: *"we made the discovery that, by saying we were talking for Lowell Thomas we could get practically anyone on the phone."* It worked: Lowell didn't care if they used his name.



A network's news development began with men working around small tables. As they learned the art of acquiring, processing and delivering news content, their working environments grew into purpose-designed space. (As the news services grew, the family-like, affable staff gave way to a more determined and strong-minded bunch.) (And from a corner desk in NBC's newsroom, an ambitious reporter named Max Jordan had raised his hand and volunteered for European coverage.)

Once network newsrooms were built out, they might support a dozen or more writers (NBC was writing for two networks). Their news scripts contained the copy as well as written cueing instructions for any recordings (handled by network engineers).



Inside the Newsroom Did you know the first press wires used “ticker tape” machines on strips of paper? They were read left to right like stock quotations. Assembled copy was a series of these paper strips pasted to a sheet. (The strip-format survives in the “crawls” we see on building displays and at the bottom of TV screens.)



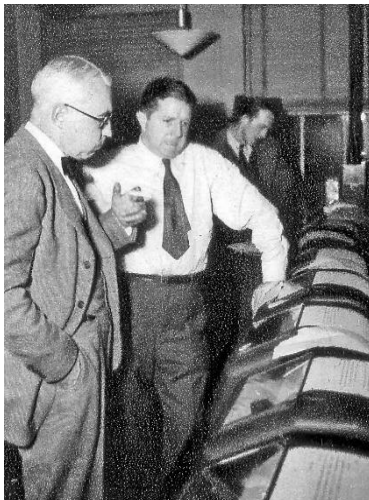
“Ticker Tape:” eBay



Late-model teletype: Assoc. Press

In the 1930s the ticker tape was replaced with the “teletype” machine. News now appeared in page form, and the wire services provided copy for direct reading. (This form of teletype was in service for many decades; eventually replaced by computer screens.)

Network newsrooms of the era had individual teleprinters for each major news provider. There’d also be a weather teletype, a private keyboard/printer for communications with other network locations, teleprinters from shortwave monitoring desks and the “Telex” used by correspondents for coordination. Such a ‘wireroom’ could be a noisy space.



“Wire Room:” CBS News



CBS Radio News at work on the 1936 elections: CBS News

“The Wires” In the 1930s and 1940s the *Associated Press*, *United Press* and *International News Service* were the primary wired services. “*Press Radio*” aka “*Press-Wireless International*” (“*PWI*” or “*P-We*”) began as a *voiced* shortwave news service. A competitor in *wireless news* market was “*Transradio*,” started by ex-newspaperman Herbert Moore who hired some 500 news stringers across the country. *Transradio* used Morse Code over shortwave. Each station had to have Morse Code operators as “decoders.”

The telephone: Phoned-in news reports were rewritten or quoted. At first there did not seem to be an appetite for putting a newsman on-air via telephone because of the quality.

Telegrams weren't trendy for news-gathering due to their cost. A related service was the "**Radiogram**," essentially a telegram sent via wireless. A *Radiogram* could reach newsmakers on ships. They were also used to stay in touch with the various adventure-treks and expeditions so popular in the 1930s.

With the audio alternatives available, network operations often included a "*Preview Station*" where a producer could evaluate the quality of a candidate feed. These studios would play a role in assessing the suitability of shortwave reports.

Shortwave Monitoring With the growing interest in world affairs, the networks "discovered" the shortwave hunting ground, already populated by nearly every developed country. Those signals were wide open for reception around the world. As we noted, nation-originated shortwave was often derided as propaganda but sometimes such broadcasts were newsworthy or contained kernels of information of value.

The networks had so many shortwave signals to examine they built "*shortwave monitoring stations*." Again, it was the BBC showing the way: around 1935 the Beeb set up a listening post to capture radio traffic from the Arab states, after Italy's invasion of Ethiopia.

The BBC efforts were emulated in America when European crises became newsworthy in the late 1930s. NBC and CBS had built "reception rooms" in their news centers but found their radio antennas in downtown Manhattan were interference-prone and inadequate to the task. Outposts went up on Long Island where reception was better.

A makeshift monitor on Long Island quickly provided a "*scoop*:" the news of the surrender of King Leopold of Belgium in May 1940. CBS accompanied the photo with a brag-piece:



Early shortwave Monitoring station: CBS

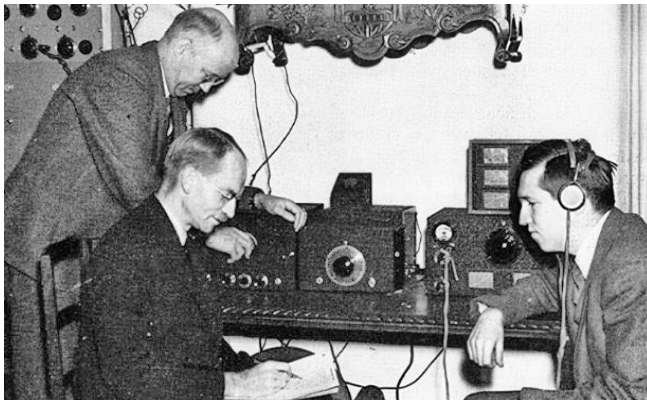
As previously mentioned, we at Columbia have established and have kept in 20-hour-daily operation a shortwave listening center which receives between 100,000 and 150,000 words a day. The receivers themselves are located at a point on Long Island, free from structural steel interference. The foreign programs are then fed by land line to a listening room adjacent to our news studio in the New York headquarters. There they are first recorded and then translated (if in a foreign language) or transcribed (if in English).



NBC Shortwave Monitoring Station: NBC Radio

The monitoring services reinvented themselves as they grew. NBC had the in-house resources of RCA's Riverhead, Long Island "*Radio Central*," with its huge shortwave antenna farm. NBC also established a listening post in Los Angeles. CBS in turn boasted they had some five dozen "*secret located receivers*" (details were never offered).

Monitor sites required a battery of reliable shortwave receive systems and a cadre of qualified translators. At first operators and fast translators were thrown at the project with no idea of how valuable they would become as future intelligence analysts. At the listening posts these analysts became the first line of judgement as to information veracity.



Princeton Alumni Weekly

The Rockefeller Foundation funded the short-lived *Princeton Listening Center* in 1939. Its primary purpose was to feed information of value to government desks, and they also handed stories to the media. The Princeton work atmosphere would inspire a special breed of information analyst who would find work in the government sphere during the war.

When home listeners found their new radios could be clicked to the shortwave bands, a new avocation emerged and the "*SWL*" ("*shortwave-listener*") was born. These dial-scanners began looking for news. In the conflicts to come the magazine *RADIO NEWS* reported:

"It was a shortwave listener who first reported the full contents of the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Pact, General de Gaulle's announcement of the capture of Libreville, Rudolf Hess's flight to England, and the German invasion of Russia."

On occasion, the direct shortwave reception of a nation-state story might require a correspondent in-country to validate the information...or to try to explain how he had missed the story at its source.

Sometimes the foreign correspondent had an excuse. There were times when all circuits from the European continent were in use...or were unusable due to weather conditions.

CBS newsmen got lucky on one occasion when they fired up a questionable transmitter in Bordeaux in time to scoop the world with the news of the dissolution of Paul Reynaud's French government. Their home monitoring station was listening at the right moment.

Network News Recording We know that until the late 1940s the networks enforced their prohibition against program recording and playback, to protect their investment in network-transmission contracts. Some silly reasons were advanced to extend that recording ban to news reporting. This edict would impact the competitive nature of foreign reporting. From the start, the "*all news must be live*" mandate would be challenged by frustrated journalists who couldn't sit around waiting for a reliable shortwave path. The "*news-must-be-live*" directive held until *D-Day* changed the rules.



News reporting: NBC



News reporting: CBS

By the mid-1930s the networks had established the equipment and procedures to do a good job of *domestic* news coverage. There wasn't a great need for innovation in that process; the local stations had paved the way. Nor did network newscasters automatically rise to the position of "stars." Newscasters became names because of the style of their delivery.

Now radio would challenge another newspaper core strength: *international* coverage. Events in Europe began to underscore the need for on-site reporting and the networks found good value in ballyhooing their "foreign correspondents."

There are stories to be told.

IV. WE TAKE YOU NOW...

By the mid-1930s reports of conflict in Europe and Asia were sharing the spotlight with FDR's successes and failures in the United States. FDR was thoroughly covered by the scribes of both media but the newspapers had correspondents overseas. The dearth of first-hand reporting on the *foreign* scene vividly demonstrated radio's remaining mismatch with newspapers.

European Coverage In 1930 CBS had assigned César Saerchinger to be European "*Director of Talks*." His task was to schedule shortwave broadcasts of singing groups for their possible entertainment value, and to arrange for addresses by politicians. It was the extent of CBS' overseas coverage and Saerchinger was frustrated by his limited role.

In the NBC newsroom Abe Schechter had seen Max Jordan's raised hand. Jordan was sent back to Europe in 1931, and reporter Fred Bate joined him in 1932. Max's job was to roam the European continent from Switzerland. His Italian heritage, multi-language capability and relationships with the leaders of nation-states proved of great advantage. Jordan did little to dissuade those leaders from their belief "*NBC*" stood for "*America's National Network*." He leveraged the misunderstanding to solidify access to transmission facilities across Europe.

Maxie was intensely competitive and possessed a severe determination to beat CBS. In 1934 Austria's Chancellor was assassinated and Jordan exercised sole access to Vienna's shortwave, delivering the only news report as a scoop for NBC. CBS spent three days getting the story. Then in 1935 Italy's Mussolini moved into Ethiopia and the networks had to broadcast the Italian government's version: propaganda and all. That was enough of *that*. European reporting would become a game of aggressive NBC/CBS 'one-upmanship.'

The first real taste of *live* war reporting was dished up by the legendary Hans Von Kaltenborn, who hauled CBS mikes and equipment to a farm in Spain to report on the Spanish Revolution. "*H.V.*" hid in a haystack so his mike would pick up the sounds of fighting. An engineer ran a wire from the haystack and connected him as a telephone call into Bordeaux, where it was relayed to Paris and London and on to New York. When Kaltenborn connected with CBS, he was told there were commercial programs on the air, and he'd have to wait in line.



Max Jordan, NBC, Berlin.



H.V. Kaltenborn: Radio Hall of Fame

Kaltenborn's wasn't the first radio account from Spain. NBC's Floyd Gibbons had broadcast from Madrid ten days earlier with a dry reading of his overall impressions. The colorful Gibbons reported without censorship of his copy, though he had been warned if he put a personal slant on his account he would be shot by soldiers in the studio.

In late 1936 Britain's King Edward VIII abdicated his throne. NBC and CBS delivered head-to-head coverage yet NBC provided better reporting. The BBC didn't want to touch the story, so Britons gathered much of the coverage from American media.

While the world was focused on England and reporters were busy in London, Germany annexed the Rhineland. Again, reporters were handed a state-filtered treatment.

By now, when a network missed out on live event coverage they offered *after-the-fact* commentary from the studio. Advertisers saw the actual coverage in *print* day after day; their pressure helped drag radio into doing better at news.

Toward the mid-1930s trade papers, in a report on European radio coverage, noted NBC's professed satisfaction with Bate and Jordan and CBS's support of Saerchinger as "*Director of Talks*." Unbowed by the CBS endorsement Saerchinger continued to ask for reporting projects. New York said *no*, and he left CBS in frustration. His replacement was Edward R. Murrow.

Some historians believe that, had CBS known how the Murrow relationship would develop, they might have hesitated in engaging him. Because Ed Murrow had no intention of "directing talks." Murrow began a search for seasoned, educated newsmen. He wanted knowledgeable people with first-hand reporting chops. The title "*Director of Talks*" became obsolete and Murrow's difficulties with CBS began. Over the coming years he became immensely popular, while causing the network a good deal of angst.

The first of Murrow's hires was William L. Shirer, recently of the *International News Service*. Shirer would be joined by Eric Sevareid, Winston Burdett, Howard K. Smith, Richard Hottelet, Charles Collingwood, Larry LeSuer, Bill Downs, Tom Grandin and Cecil Brown: collectively the "*Murrow Boys*." The only "*Murrow Girl*" was the well-qualified Mary Marvin Breckenridge. Sadly, her work is rarely mentioned, and she doesn't appear in the "*Boys*" photos. NBC for its part assigned John MacVane and John Rich to join Jordan and Bate in Europe. At its launch in 1934 Mutual employed itinerant "stringers."

Bill Shirer kept a diary relating his experiences as an American radio newsman in Europe. During his few years in the field, he managed a few "scoops" and a few got away from him. In his journal Shirer recorded a newsman's frustrations and accomplishments. Our narrative is well-served by sharing some of his reflections.

As an early assignment Shirer was distressed to learn he was to follow the Duke and Duchess of Windsor to Munich in 1937. His sole job was to seek an audience with the Duke to offer him CBS airtime on his upcoming trip to the States. Shirer missed the *real* story involving the Duke. As was later revealed, Edward's sycophancy to Hitler caused Britain real damage.



Murrow and Shirer in later days: CBS

Newsmen on the air? From the start, Shirer felt he was not being treated as a newsman by CBS, and his restiveness was among the challenges facing Murrow. Another frustration was CBS News itself. As Hitler advanced in the autumn of 1937, Murrow and Shirer were increasingly annoyed they were not allowed live on the network. William Paley believed putting newsmen on the air to report developments as they occurred would abrogate CBS's stance against "editorializing." Shirer later confided in print: "*Paley and the rest of the brass in New York simply would not listen to the pleas of Ed Murrow and me to broadcast the news ourselves. The idiocy of it staggered me.*"

At the same time, Murrow and Shirer continued to rail against the "no recording" rule requiring all news reporting to be live. From Shirer's "*Berlin Diary*:"

"The ban on our recording of events...could have dire consequences as I learned that evening waiting for the King of Italy and the Fuhrer of Germany to appear. They arrived 6 minutes ahead of schedule and by the time I (was to go)...on the air...they had driven up in their carriage, entered the palace, come out on a balcony, waved to the populace and disappeared. When my microphone opened there was nothing left to describe.

Had I been allowed to record a few minutes before, New York would have had a first-hand description of the event while it was taking place.

There were...reasons why (recording) was absolutely necessary in trying to report over radio from Europe. The first had to do with atmospherics and their effect on shortwave radio transmissions across the ocean...Because of the difference in time most American broadcasts from Europe originated at night but were received in New York while it was still daylight (and atmospherics might be at their worst)...a growing number of them failed to get through because CBS in New York insisted on having them live. And on any given day...there might be several developments occurring (outside our broadcast-time windows)."

Circumstances endorsed those views in 1938.

Battles with the Newsroom Foreign Correspondents' competitive natures pitted them against their home editors, who sometimes rejected a feed that the reporter considered to be of impact. Reporters "bidding" for inclusion in a broadcast might be vetoed in the news-budget meeting and if you're watching tanks rolling through a village, you'd be forgiven if you lost your cool when you weren't in the lineup. From the journalists' viewpoint, editors' judgments had to be frustrating. But sometimes the reporters forgot there were larger forces at play: the networks were patriarchal and correspondents were but a small component.



Paul White at CBS: The Radio Historian

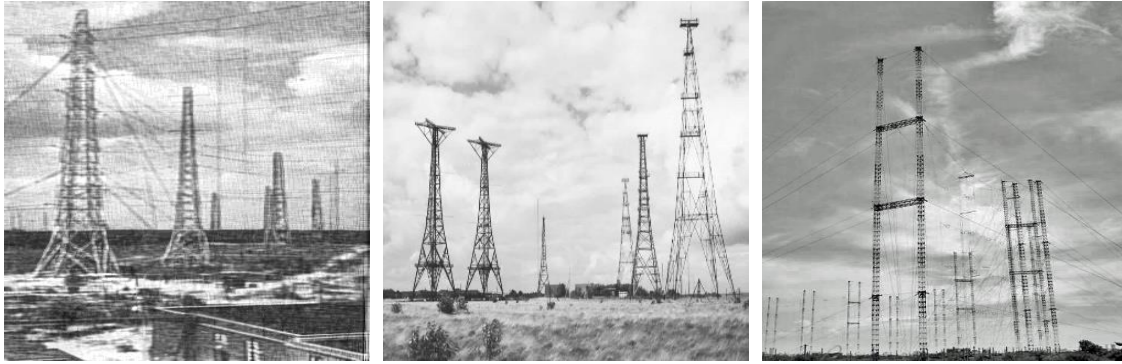
At the same time, Murrow's Boys would learn to tweak New York. Their aggressive, educated, reasoned reporting stood in contrast to the staid output from the "Old Boys Club" occupying the CBS Newsroom. Murrow and News Director Paul White were often in collision and the two became life-long belligerents.

Yet the time came when CBS began to appreciate what their offshore compatriots were doing, and a mantra arose from the wags in the newsroom: *"Give us this day our daily scoop."*

Show Me the Way to Go Home Radio's requirement for reliable voice transmission played a critical role in the European crisis reporting of the late 1930s. Print copy was sent home through normal telephone channels; broadcast voice required different handling. We recall in the 1930s there were no satellites, no mobile telephony, no Internet and no TV. And the Atlantic Cable didn't pass radio-quality signals. The only way to get broadcasts across the oceans was by using the fickle *shortwave*. So we take a knee to explain *how* that medium affected network rivalry. Go get a cup of coffee while we get technical for a few moments. Or stick it out: we promise no one will be injured by the explanation.

Shortwave access The serious players in shortwave were the '*commercial*' carriers, usually *RCA Communications Systems* or *AT&T* through its international subsidiaries. They had landing rights across Europe, and they owned redundant receivers on Long Island. Their services were expensive but the most reliable. Less-costly linkage could be provided by *Press-Wireless International* or by *Transradio Press Service*. Another option, fraught with politics: government-owned transmitters in European capitals, built for their government's news and propaganda. As Hitler swept across Europe, the facilities in subjugated states became progressively unavailable.

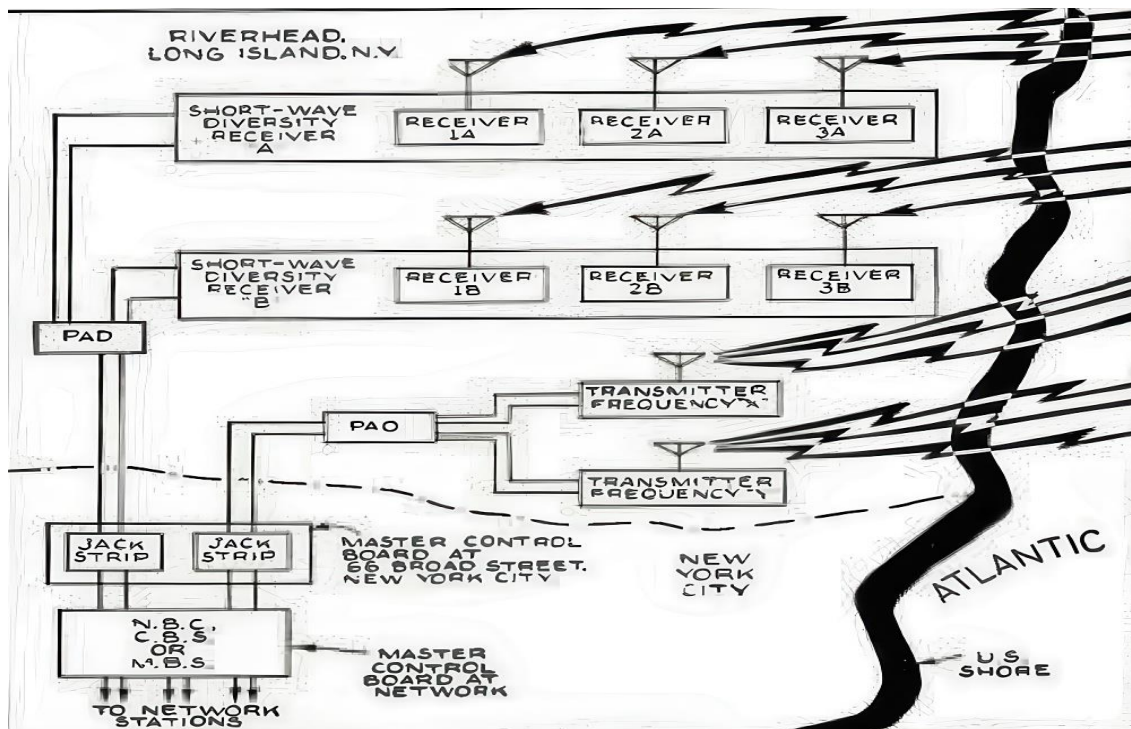
Distance was a factor in a shortwave broadcast. '*Berlin to New York*' was a short hop but reports from the Pacific were less dependable. Here's *Variety* in 1940: *"Advertisers were reluctant about buying news programs from the Far East because radio reception sometimes became hopelessly distorted. Reception from the Far East is still pretty much an in and out Affair."* It's why the networks seldom provided Asian coverage before Pearl Harbor.



International shortwave sites: Various credits

Quality of Service “*Propagation*” was the operative shortwave buzzword. It defined the atmospheric conditions which enhanced or destroyed shortwave transmissions in a matter of seconds. Vagaries in propagation could mean a clean radio report or an unusable connection. Stacking the odds took an operator’s thorough knowledge of propagation science and “weatherman’s luck” in predicting conditions for a specific broadcast time. Their best guesses were to assign *predictable* working frequencies, using their knowledge of solar cycles, magnetic earth currents, seasonal variations and time-of-day.

Redundancy Critical service dictated two transmitters, on two frequencies chosen according to the time of day and the operators’ best judgement. Each of the two transmit channels was captured by three Long island receivers whose antennas were diverse...that’s six receivers for a single broadcast! And even when a simpler non-redundant channel was ordered, it was almost de rigueur that multiple receivers were employed. This *Radio News* image illustrates: (The lower half shows the *reverse* paths for **cueing**:)



Coordination and Timing In setting up a live broadcast, the first step was end-to-end contact among the engineers, called the “*talk-up*.” Even in foreign countries, coordination was usually done in the English language.

The *talk-up* discussed expected shortwave conditions and all agreed on the backup plans. Clocks were synchronized among the network headquarters, the shortwave operators on both ends and the reporter on site.

“Reverse-Cue” Exact time in a European country might not be the same in New York, since clocks weren’t slaved to a universal standard and never tracked precisely. So the plan might include a “*reverse-cue*” feed *from* America, so the reporter could hear New York’s ‘go-ahead.’

And then...sometimes the *reporting* channel was clear and the *reverse-cue* channel didn’t get through. In that event, reporters started their feed by their own clocks and hoped for the best.

“All Circuits are Busy Sir” At times all shortwave circuits were occupied or were unusable. An “*end-around relay*” might bypass the bottleneck. NBC, with its savvy engineering cadre was particularly adaptable; for example, relaying a signal through *Egypt* to get it to New York.

And even when things went well and the audio landed cleanly on the North American continent, there was still *Murphy’s Law*, as Edward R. [Murrow remembered](#).

With this gestalt in hand, we’ve affirmed shortwave’s importance to the narrative.

The Reporting By 1937 the networks had beefed up their commitments to live reporting from overseas. In early 1938 Europe’s state-owned transmitters were still open to foreign correspondents but in a few capitals; particularly Berlin, governments imposed censorship.

Anschluss* in Austria and *The World News Roundup In March 1938 Hitler entered Vienna in the infamous “*Anschluss*” and Austria became the lead story. Now imagine Bill Shirer’s frustration. He had the inside scoop on Hitler’s plans for the invasion of Austria, but he couldn’t get CBS to give him airtime! He was told by the New York newsroom to focus instead on lining up choirs for broadcast to America.

Not understanding his own network’s blame in the matter, William Paley was outraged when Jordan secured the *Anschluss* scoop for NBC. Paley now decided their reporters should be allowed to go the air after all. Shirer, without access to Vienna shortwave, was told to fly to London, to report on Vienna, “*live*” but after the fact.

While Shirer was on a plane to London, Murrow had been maneuvering his way into Vienna by private plane. Germany suddenly released the Vienna transmitters...and Ed Murrow made his *first* overseas radio broadcast...[from Vienna](#).

What Murrow’s gang (and perhaps Paley) hadn’t yet realized was that CBS New York was unprepared to handle *any* crisis news. Paul White and his small staff now improvised wildly. White’s maintenance men quickly hung batten and blankets, to come up with CBS’s first ‘live-news’ studio.

CBS News held a post-game Anschluss-analysis, coming up with a plan for a multi-reporter “radio conference call.” Shirer had by now reached London. We reach again into his diary:

“About five o'clock on March 13th my telephone rang in London. Paul White was calling from New York. “We want a European round-up tonight. One AM your time. We want Ed Murrow from Vienna, and American newspaper correspondents from Berlin, Paris, and Rome. Can you and Murrow do it?” I said yes...(without) the faintest idea how to do it...in less than 8 hours, anyway.

Murrow and I had newspaper friends...in every capital in Europe. Before long my telephones were buzzing in English, German, French, and Italian.

Each city would have to come up on shortwave and since they couldn't hear each other, they'd have to use the clock.... New York would switch its receivers to the different capitals at the time for each report.

Rome was out, I told New York, but our reporter in Rome was on the telephone at that moment... dictating his story to a stenographer in New York who would then dictate it back to me so I could read it from London.

Our part went off all right, I think. Mowrer and Murrow were especially good. New York said...that it was a success. They want another one tomorrow night!!”

The roundup idea wasn't new. Max Jordan had done it as a stunt in 1936 from a group of airplanes. The adaptation of the technique for hard news was an innovation, and it grabbed the spotlight for CBS. With the broadcast of March 13, the “World News Roundup” was born...

...into a problematic postpartum. CBS engineers and traffic managers began doping out the connectivity to enlarge the number of reporting stations in the new roundup, but now Paley dragged his feet again, refusing to commit to a regular schedule. Objecting to the cost, he soon discontinued the project. The roundup's hiatus lasted until events again overtook CBS policy.

Sidebar I: The Austrian *Anschluss* of March 1938 was covered by the state-owned *Gross-Deutscher Rundfunk* and Americans with shortwave radios heard the German news before the American networks reported it. (Where were the nets' shortwave monitoring stations?)

Sidebar II: CBS blamed Max Jordan for the Vienna shortwave lockout. Jordan noted that, after the fact and once Hitler was in Austria, NBC's access was no longer bound by their agreement with the Austrian government. Jordan believed that, if CBS had persisted, Shirer too could have had access to the shortwave system.

Sidebar III: CBS sent a booklet to the printers: “*Vienna, March 1938: A Footnote to History.*” It was written to tell American listeners that CBS was the network that had scooped and dominated the Anschluss story.

Mad Men in Munich While the Germans were settling into Austria, Hitler was stirring the political broth in Czechoslovakia. It was the sort of national-political intrigue that undermined from within: Nazi puppets in Czechoslovakia raising their voices in support of *“relief for the Sudetenland’s high concentration of Germans.”*

The shortwave radio coverage of Hitler’s speeches demonstrated his vehemence. Even if they didn’t understand the language, American audiences were chilled by his voice.

“Peace In Our Time” Through the summer of 1938 statesmen roamed the continent, trying to lower the temperature. Hitler was aware England and France did not want a war. As furies festered, he called the representatives of Italy, France, Great Britain and Germany to Munich in September. In that conference Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland was given to Germany. The Czechs were not represented, and the pact soon proved worthless.

Munich was another huge story for radio. Of course...there was a scoop...NBC’s Max Jordan again. Both networks were up, but Max had been given a draft of the Munich Agreement by a statesman, and he read it on the air before it was signed.

Max Jordan’s is a consequential voice you may have [never heard](#).

CBS and NBC kept busy filing reports from Munich...until the fickle propagation gods became restive. *For four days*, every one of William Shirer’s CBS reports was transmitted as scheduled, but *none* got through the atmospherics. NBC Engineers on the other hand had the cool detachment to reroute circuit paths.

From the interference charts they had noticed propagation was pretty good north and south out of Munich. They relayed NBC’s Munich reporting *south*, to Cape Town, South Africa. At Cape Town’s latitude, it turned out the east-west paths were open. Max’s reports went from Munich to Cape Town to Buenos Aires to New York.

And CBS was again forced to “fill” from their New York studios. Veteran analyst H.V. Kaltenborn was given the chair. He lived with a cot in the studio for 18 days, delivering 85+ news and analysis broadcasts, translating Hitler’s speeches in real-time.

H.V. had a distinctive speaking style and an encyclopedic knowledge of world affairs. Later, he wrote a book called *“I Covered the Crisis.”* It was not self-effacing. Do you recall [his distinctive voice?](#)

Oh...*The World News Roundup?* With the Munich crisis, Paul White brought it back without waiting for Paley. It even gained a sponsor, generating this exchange:

Ed Murrow to Eric Sevareid: *“From now on we’ll be sponsored by Sinclair Oil. You will get 75 dollars each time you’re on the air.”*

Sevareid: *“Ed, we are recording this great human story. Is it right to take money from this oil company?”*

Murrow: *“You’ll get used to it.”*

Hitler Uber Alles In March 1939 Hitler gave the go-ahead for the invasion of the rest of Czechoslovakia. German troops occupied Prague, in the last few months of “*Peace in our time.*”

Meanwhile, Hitler had been inventing Polish atrocities on Poland’s border with Germany. He told the Reichstag “*Poland must answer for its iniquities or face war.*” On September 1, 1939, German troops moved into Poland. On September 3rd, American listeners learned from Adolf Hitler that Europe was [once again at war.](#)

The radio networks in neutral America now wrote a *Uniform Code for War Coverage*, outlining how radio should report the war news to its listeners. (The Code was also published in the hope of keeping government censorship out of the newsrooms.) It became the basis for the future “*Fairness Doctrine.*”

After Munich, CBS News Director Paul White had shut down his shortwave listening posts. He reestablished the operations when CBS was overrun by events at the start of the war. White went to the wire services with an offer: “*We’ll provide you news from our listening posts, in exchange for credit to CBS.*” UPI and INS agreed; AP said: “*we will never accept news heard on foreign shortwave.*” AP soon changed its attitude.

Two days after the Germans invaded Poland, the United States had proclaimed its neutrality. President Roosevelt delivered a “Fireside Chat,” explaining to Americans what he thought what was coming. His words touched the listener at home, demonstrating the power of radio for [clear and personal communication.](#)

Germany overran Poland in four weeks. The Russians joined the feeding frenzy midway through September. The subsequent “*Phony War*” following the Polish conquest was covered semi-factually, by foreign correspondents nervously posted in now-belligerent nations.

Since they now operated at the pleasure of their hosts and were subjected to strict censorship, it was now assumed the only believable European news was going to be those reports sent through London.

When the European war began, NBC and Mutual discontinued coverage from Berlin. They feared by broadcasting from countries in conflict, they would violate the terms of America’s *Neutrality Act*. To its credit, CBS maintained its Berlin coverage, though serious censorship was imposed before broadcast clearances were granted. William L. Shirer illustrates the situation in his *Berlin Diary*:

“To do my nightly broadcast I first have a ten-minute walk down the completely blacked-out Wilhelmstrasse to the subway. It is a rare night that I don’t collide with a lamp post (or) a fire-hydrant.

I finally arrive and write my script. A half-hour before my broadcast I must have my script in the hands of the censors. Then follows a half-hour battle...to save what I’ve written.

A few minutes before scheduled airtime, if they leave enough to make it worthwhile to do the broadcast, I must then dash down many stairs, and out into a pitch-dark vacant lot in the middle of which are hidden steps...I have to be careful not to bump into...sheds lurking in the way or to fall into a snowdrift.

In the course of this journey through the lot, I must get past at least three steel-helmeted SS guards whom I cannot see in the darkness, but who I know are armed with sawed-off automatic rifles...they have orders to shoot anyone not halting at their challenge.

Each must see my pass. I arrive at the studio barely in time, though not always in the sweetest of tempers. If the censors keep me, or the guards keep me, I arrive out of breath, sore and sour.

I suppose listeners wonder why we seem to be out of breath so often through our reports."



Shirer and Berlin censors: CBS

CBS News was now *"full speed ahead"* and there was no turning back due to budget disquiet. Paley ordered a full commitment to European coverage. CBS began hiring more Murrow Boys and the network scheduled its news broadcasts at uniform times each day. (NBC was still airing its newscasts on an irregular schedule.)

"Early" War Information from Washington When the European War began, radio news was still heavily dependent on the White House for information. Press Secretary Stephen Early famously declared: *"you radio folks haven't a clue how news should be managed. So just keep your mouths shut and watch how the Pros do it."*

Early was a newspaper guy who hated radio. He placed radio reporters in the back row at FDR's press gaggles. FDR held almost 1,000 press conferences during his tenure and radio wasn't allowed to air them. Mister Early may have feared radio's influence in public affairs.

There *were* occasional radio news exclusives beyond Europe. Shortly after the start of the war the German pocket battleship *Graf Spee* had to put into Montevideo harbor after exchanging damage in a naval action with the British. The Uruguayans, citing their neutrality, expelled the German ship, whose commander had to scuttle the vessel a few miles offshore.

Once again NBC nailed the story through its inventive transmission arrangements and some pure luck. An NBC stringer happened to be dockside. He was familiar with communications and was able to get the stringer's voice to *Transradio* near Buenos Aires. There it was handed off to a shortwave station for relay to New York.

The difficulties of shortwave continued to frustrate CBS journalists. A 1939 reflection from Shirer's records demonstrates his irritation with NBC, and relates the ongoing difficulties in establishing international communications:

Geneva, December 1, 1939: The Soviet Union has invaded Finland! Since yesterday noon I have been continually on the telephone to Helsinki, Stockholm, Berlin, Bern, Amsterdam, and London, organizing communications from Finland for our broadcasts...one defeat after another...To begin with, Maxie (Max Jordan) tied up the Geneva transmitter, our only neutral outlet, for NBC.

He also got to the Finns and Swedes first and somehow put over the idea that the talks of the Finnish President...and the Foreign Minister...were to be exclusive for NBC! A telephone call to the authorities in Helsinki cleared that up so far as the Finns were concerned, but I had great trouble convincing the Swedes in Stockholm. Searched all yesterday afternoon for a transmitter.

The RRG in Berlin would give me neither a transmitter nor transit telephone lines through Germany. They have orders not to offend Russia. Called Amsterdam and tried to get the Dutch to lend me a transmitter but they were too frightened for their neutrality.

Finally, Ed Murrow...got the BBC to pick up the Swedish medium-wave transmitter which in turn was taking the Helsinki broadcast by telephone line from Finland and rebroadcasting it. The BBC then sent their feed to the Rugby station where it was short-waved to our studios in New York.

The ordinary way to have done a broadcast from Helsinki would have been to bring it by telephone line from Helsinki through Sweden and Germany to Switzerland and then short-wave it to New York through the Geneva transmitter. But Germany's refusal to give us transit telephone facilities and Maxie's tying up the local transmitter balked that.

My telephone bill yesterday and today, including numerous urgent calls to Helsinki, Stockholm, Berlin, Amsterdam, London, and New York, has run over a thousand dollars and my cable and telegraph bill must come to almost half that. But Paul White and Ed Klauber say: "Get the broadcasts."

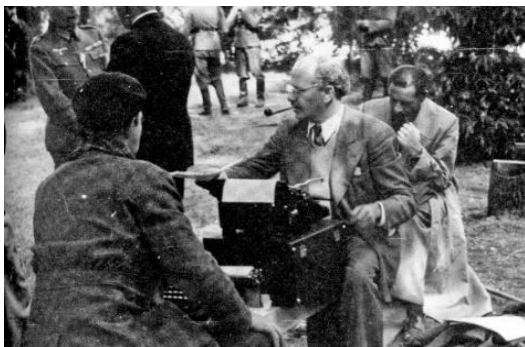
In 1940 the “Phony War” ended and Germany moved through Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and into France. Radio brought these stories to Americans who were increasingly polarized about involvement in a distant war.

La France On May 10, 1940, Hitler launched his war machine against quasi-powerful France...and 44 days later he took the French surrender. France’s rapid collapse was a story of mayhem and mismanagement, dishonesty and treachery, and the tale is well-told, to most French leaders’ discredit. CBS’s Eric Sevareid put words [to his experience](#).

Sevareid reported that in 1940 neither French authorities nor the American Embassy regarded radio news reporting as legitimate. He related that by the missteps, indifference, and poor management on the part of the French, he and other radio correspondents pulled off two days of ‘illegal’ broadcasting before being shut down. And when British and French troops had their backs to the dock at Dunkirk, Ed Murrow and Elmer Davis [took to the air](#).

The French gave up their country at Compiègne on June 22, 1940. The surrender ceremony produced the sort of scoop newsmen dream about...purely by accident. Standing German policy was to *record* all journalists’ feeds for review by censors before the journalist could do his broadcast live. Reports from Compiègne were subject to a 24-hour delay for review, and Hitler had to approve their release.

At the capitulation signing, most radio reporters filed their stories and then left the scene to wait for German transmission approval. Bill Shirer stuck around after the announcement of the signing. When it was his turn to record he got the circuit...and a bit more. German radio engineers had neglected to “pull the patch” to the shortwave, after the German radio had finished an approved live report. Shirer ended up going live uncensored to America.



Shirer at Compiègne: Shirer Library

There followed, to use a technical term, a major brouhaha in Berlin. Shirer nearly lost his credentials. There must have been some nail-biting at CBS about Shirer’s premature bulletin, since the German government didn’t confirm it until much later. (NBC’s William Kirker, Shirer’s companion, evaded the after-effects.)

Coda: In his years as a CBS newsman, Shirer had made his case repeatedly: “*Life as a radio reporter was fraught with danger and wasn’t all that rewarding.*” William L. Shirer left Europe in December 1940, to begin writing his memoirs.

The Resolution of the British Through their radios, Americans began to gain a real understanding of what was happening in Europe. For the British, 1940 was a terrible year. In *The Battle of Britain*, from July through October, its Royal Air Force remained continuously in battle, losing 800 aircraft and destroying 1,400 Luftwaffe planes while defending the country.



Murrow in BBC basement: BBC

In September 1940 Hitler began "*The London Blitz*:" 56 nights of indiscriminate bombing...with an encore of the savagery in April 1941. Details of London's punishment had to be withheld for security reasons but the story that *could* be told was of the behavior of British citizens. Edward R. Murrow's calm, assured reports lent those accounts an objective [realism](#). Through his reporting he demonstrated empathy was a communicable emotion. His accounts were the finest and most noble demonstration of the power of broadcast words that moved many Americans to support the British cause.

Shipping losses in the *Battle of the Atlantic* in 1940 totaled over one million tons of the foodstuffs needed to keep the British Isles from starvation. The continuing story was one of sacrifice and endurance in the North Atlantic during the brutal supply convoys.

Radio listeners heard after-the-fact details from the Atlantic; a convoy was a terrible place to cover. Post-war stories of sacrifice and loss in the Atlantic have filled a lot of books.

Hitler Pokes the Sleeping Bear In June 1941 the Germans attacked Russia, in *Operation Barbarossa*. It was Hitler's greatest mistake. Winston Churchill relayed [the news](#).

With the invasion of Russia, journalists faced new challenges. CBS sent newsman Larry Lesueur to cover the battles. To get to a reporting position on the "*Russian Front*" Lesueur had to spend three weeks on a hazardous North Atlantic convoy and, once he reached shore, two more weeks traveling overland.

Lesueur's reporting was then subjected to heavy Russian censorship. He had to walk several miles to and from the censors' offices and if his submitted copy wasn't approved, he had to rewrite it and repeat the approval process. And even then...after all that...on several occasions his broadcasts didn't get through.

V. RADIO IN THE “ANGRY DAYS”

Historian Lynne Olson has written a marvelously-prescient book, *“Those Angry Days,”* charting the bipolar mood in America in the years leading to World War Two. (The title is appropriate for that period, but one can’t ignore parallels with the divisiveness of the 2020s.)

By 1941 Americans were “listening in” to one or more of the 750 AM radio stations on the air. Networks were broadcasting news and commentary in daily 5 to 15-minute editions. 13 million new radio sets were sold in 1940, along with some 130 million spare tubes. 50 million sets were in use; most powered by electricity as homes were connected to the country’s power grid. And the medium was becoming more mobile and personal. 40 percent of the country had telephones in 1940; some rural customers still sharing “party lines.” A few experimental FM stations were coming on the air and NBC and Dumont demonstrated “Television” at the 1939 World’s Fair. Apex had vanished although its channel assignments would soon be resurrected for the official launch of FM radio.

AM radio was gaining listeners’ trust, keeping them informed on events in Europe and vaguely reporting on what might be brewing in the Pacific. News from that region was still spotty in quality and content, but Pacific reporting was frequently dramatic and intriguing.

In those *Angry Days* practically everyone had an opinion on American war involvement. The prospect of another global war led many Americans to wonder whether the catastrophic losses of World War One were about to be repeated. Ernest Hemingway had written: “...(of) the hell broth that is brewing in Europe we have no need to drink. We were fools to be sucked in once in(to) a European war. We shall never be sucked in again.”

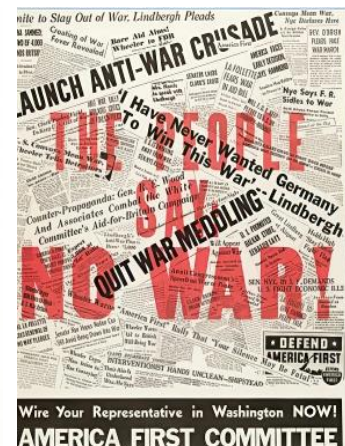
Countless citizens held unassailable opinions about involvement. “Isolationists” were strident about keeping America out of another conflict. Isolationists were deeply Republican; many hated FDR while they looked kindly on the Fascist countries. Some thought Mussolini was okay, backed Franco in Spain and believed Hitler was an effective leader. Among the most popular of the Isolationists was Charles Lindbergh: famous aviator, American hero, and leading spokesman for the *America First Committee*.



Lindbergh: Amer First Committee



Posterazzi



Randolph Mann

Lindbergh's comments as an Isolationist seemed quite benign compared to those of Joseph P. Kennedy: anti-Semitic, father of a future President and America's ambassador to Great Britain. Kennedy was fully under Nazi influence and was unrestrainedly vocal in telling Americans that England's was a losing cause. He believed Hitler could be 'bought' with enough cash. But when bombs began falling on London, Kennedy headed for home.

"Interventionists" were generally more liberal, drawn to the plight of the conquered nations and the struggle of the British to keep going. Many made their judgements based on life experiences, not on what someone told them to believe. Their numbers seemed to be growing.

A third viewpoint was perhaps the most arguable: *"America should help England...though Britain was an aggressive colonial power interested only in preserving its empire."* Besides, *"Britain always got the best of any deal they made."* *"The Brits are...foxy,"* Roosevelt once said.

There were political elements in play. Some Liberals eschewed involvement because the cost of a war meant some of their New Deal projects wouldn't be funded.

Roosevelt had also made a major blunder when he tried to pack the Supreme Court in 1937, and much of Congress began turning against his arguments. FDR took that as a personal rebuff and in a fit of pique he campaigned against some Democratic nominees in the 1938 election.

The President's popularity was now at its lowest point, possibly accounting for his apparent lack of visible energy when he did promote America's involvement. (This subtle shift was not lost on influential radio commentators.)

The Isolationist element lost ground as radio exposed the ugly side of fascism while educating American listeners on the root causes of the conflicts. The most obvious indicator of that shift was the Republicans' nomination of Centrist Wendell Willkie for President in 1940, steering clear of more radical-right candidates.

Great Britain recognized the opportunities in dealing with shifting American opinion and maintained an acknowledged "Fifth Column" in the U. S. to advocate support and to further challenge the naysayers.

Radio for its part tried to explain the disagreements over intervention. They scheduled "explanatory talks" but this was real, often vicious, contention and radio was too distant from "the streets" to do more than report the disagreements. Except for radio's opinion-mongers.

Commentators: *"The Loose Wheels"* A search for meaning in the intervention arguments began to legitimize the *Radio Commentators*...supposedly 'wise men'...who themselves could be either arsonists or fire-fighters.

From the beginning the word *"Commentator"* was susceptible to broad definition. It was probably the wrong title for those who saw an opportunity to share their opinions on a radio pulpit, conveniently ignoring the counseling of news editors. These pundits sometimes 'mis-interpreted' the few guidelines of fairness set forth by the networks and, when challenged by management, professed unawareness of their "misjudgments."

Most radio commentators were liberal in outlook, supported the New Deal and promoted involvement in the European conflict. Their listeners might react with fury (and, yes, anger). And the mail responses suggested that commentators were pinching *some* people's nerves.

Commentator H. V. Kaltenborn had attracted a huge audience with his marathon analysis of the Munich Crisis in 1938, and he had a steady following in American living rooms. Kaltenborn, quite sure of himself, overreached and caused trouble for CBS when he energetically promoted American war involvement.

The FCC reached out to CBS's William Paley. Almost at once the word "*Commentator*" was demolished; the title would henceforth be "*News Analysts*." The distinction escaped most listeners. Kaltenborn henceforth called himself the "*Dean of the Analysts*."

The networks published the following joint statement: "*No news analyst or news broadcaster is to be allowed to express personal editorial judgment...with the purpose of creating any given effect....and no news analyst is to be allowed to say anything in an effort to influence action or opinion of others, one way or the other.*"

In airing war-involvement commentary, the networks faced another sensitivity. They were aware that a significant number of their listeners were immigrant Europeans.

Readiness Meanwhile the United States Government was preaching *preparedness*. Even those who opposed intervention suspected it was probably smart to anticipate the worst.

In the middle of the *Angry Days* and responding to war developments in Europe and tensions in the Pacific, the U. S. Government assembled a working group to play "*war games*." The result was a startling 1941 proposal called "*The M-Day Plan*." It was to come into effect upon America's involvement in war.

In the M-Day Plan the broadcasting industry was to be called "*The Fourth Arm of Defense*." All radio stations in the country would be tied together in order that the government could broadcast its pronouncements "*with a unified voice*." The plan suggested that, in the event of war, broadcasters should be required to affirm a Pledge of Allegiance. The *M-Day Plan* exploded when it landed on broadcasters' desks. The resultant dudgeon was predictable. The plan was scrapped.

Throughout those turbulent days, nothing would be more important for radio's legitimacy than rising credibility in the medium. Many newsmakers respected that trust as they influenced Americans' commitment to support of Europe. The clearest voices belonged to Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Edward R. Murrow.

No one did it better than a President who wasn't fond of radio in the first place. From 1939 to 1941 Roosevelt took to radio with five "*Fireside Chats*" on the country's neutrality and its defense needs. Radio and the Fireside Chats had been meant for each other and as many as 60 million Americans heard these addresses.

Roosevelt's *State of the Union* following the outbreak of the European war emphasized that viewing the conflict through a national-defense lens should be a [citizen's obligation](#).



FDR: NBC

As if national bi-polarity wasn't enough, FDR was running for a third term in 1940. He began to offer a subtle *pro-involvement* argument based on his deep knowledge of world affairs. But he was President of *all* the people, and the White House was careful to parse any language that might directly advocate American engagement.

Some who had doubts about England's ultimate fate had only to listen to Winston Churchill. The British Lion had no public doubts about [success](#).

Churchill became immensely popular in his visits to America and his addresses to [Congress](#).

During the horrible months of Britain's suffering, much of America would hear Edward R. Murrow intoning: "*This...is London.*" Murrow's calm and articulate voice respected and reflected the lives of everyday Britons [under fire](#).

These three influencers and the public discourse energized by radio helped Americans better understand the issues. Listeners learned of the administration's "*Lend-Lease*" deal, The Draft, the symbolic "*destroyers-for-bases*" agreement and the expansion of military training. (Not surprisingly many of these actions stimulated intense Isolationist opposition.)

On a horrible Sunday in December 1941, when the United States was bombed into war, its citizens *were* better prepared.

VI. THE PACIFIC CATCHES FIRE

Sunday. The day everything turned. The Opana Hawaii radar warnings were ignored. On the morning radio in Honolulu, you heard self-help programs or perhaps a church broadcast. Then the voice of Webley Edwards breaking into the calm to describe a new reality. Listeners calling the station thought it was a play in progress. Until they heard the explosions.

Radio historians have quibbled for decades over *which American network was first with the Pearl Harbor attack flash*. Big deal: It was the *follow-up* activity that's of interest. It was how the news made it to the mainland, and how the dearth of factual information spun up a cyclone of anxiety, worry and rumors. This section includes diverse recordings of what was heard.

Press Secretary Steve Early gave the news to the wire services. That's how radio learned about it. News flashes were followed by attempts at [contact](#).

That silence created its own images. It's likely the only active shortwave transmitter operating in Hawaii was the FBI's, and it was busy with official messaging for military facilities. The Navy had quickly stomped on all non-essential telephone communications from Hawaii. News punctuating the disasters was now coming in from [elsewhere](#).

Networks quickly called in "~~Commentators~~" (whoops: "*News Analysts*") for their views. They couldn't add much to the basic story. Through most of that December 7th afternoon the White House Press Room was jammed and smoke-choked and "updates," delivered every 15 minutes or so, contained little additional information. The Press Office instead was lecturing reporters about spreading rumors, ordering them to "*get their facts straight before release*."

Nevertheless, rumors were spreading like dandelion pappus in a good wind. Unverified details were broadcast as "fill," along with inconsistent emergency declarations from local leaders. It was not radio's [finest hour](#).

The Pacific Coast stations didn't have a monopoly on rumors. New York radio reported: "*Enemy planes approaching Long Island and Manhattan*." From Baltimore: "*German airplanes have been launched from subs off the Atlantic coastline*." Some of the sillier rumors were hastily debunked but some broadcasts certainly added angst.

Put yourself in your West Coast home, listening to the Pearl "flashes." A lot of listeners weren't even sure where Hawaii was located. Kids were absorbing the alarm of their parents. To get away from the bedlam you went outside, to listen to your car radio. Walking to your car you looked toward the Western skies...as though to spot invading airplanes. You thought: *is this real? Or was it another version of 1938's "War of the Worlds" broadcast? Are we about to be invaded? Is my family safe? What next?*

There was nothing new on your car radio, so you went back inside. You might have tried to call others and couldn't get through the jammed telephone circuits. Your favorite radio station was delivering meager comfort and somber directives. [KIRO Blackout](#)



Long Beach Herald



Statesboro Herald

Information was being rebroadcast to listeners throughout the Pacific by California's station KGEI, the only shortwave station heard by many in the greater Pacific area. KGEI summarized information from the California news organisms.

To help fill the time, radio newsmen reflected on the effectiveness of the [blackout order](#).

Crisis coverage always seems to include some memorable reporting and in the initial days of the Pacific conflict there were several such moments. One was Bert Silen's vivid broadcasts from Manila's NBC station [KZRH](#).

Silen went to the roof of his building and continued reporting until the Japanese showed up. He and his staff blew up the station's transmitter as the Japanese were climbing the stairs. Silen was accused of sabotage by the Japanese. He ended up as a war prisoner.

"We Return to our Regularly Scheduled..." Once the available Pearl news was processed, absorbed and repeated, the networks resumed regular programming, with only 'necessary' break-ins. That drove the newsrooms crazy, but sponsors had paid for their time slots and on a Sunday the networks couldn't reach decision-makers, for permission to relinquish their airtime.



Eleanor Roosevelt: The Radio Historian

That Sunday night Eleanor Roosevelt took to the networks, offering as much encouragement as her [style afforded](#).

On Tuesday her husband broadcast a critical *Fireside Chat*, updating the country and attacking the rumors. It was estimated that 90 million people heard that broadcast of December 9, 1941. And earlier that day came an indicator that normalcy was returning to Washington: "*The Pearl Harbor Blame Game*" had begun in Congress.

"Silent Night" The country's radios stayed on over the next days and nights though on the West Coast the FCC ordered most broadcasters to sign off at sundown.

The official reason: The shutdown order was to prevent Japanese planes from homing in on West Coast signals. Listeners had now been given a reason for the radio silence. Now the night would be consumed in listening for planes coming out of the dark.

Post-sunset station-shutdowns might have made some sense, although not to broadcasters: The coastal radio signoffs meant the big stations from Salt Lake City and Denver and Albuquerque boomed into the coast at night; that *really* vexed the muzzled local broadcasters.

Like other initial censures, that nighttime shutdown law was short-lived. Yet there would surface a small group of broadcasters who believed it was part of a secret government plan to permanently co-opt their radio licenses. It could only happen in America.

"Panic on the Pacific" Author Bill Yenne's fascinating story about the reaction of America's West Coast population doesn't make light of what was real panic in Washington, Oregon and California. True; most of radio's hip-shot misinformation was quickly corrected, though there remained a conviction among some West Coasters that a Japanese invasion of their shores was pending, if not imminent.

The military commander for the area was General John DeWitt. When it came to public relations DeWitt flunked big-time. In public meetings crying for information, his simple response was "*you're apathetic and un-American if you don't shut up and obey orders; if you neglect your duties and believe the rumors*"(not a precise quote). Meanwhile his own command prepared to move inland to Salt Lake City.

In those first days after Pearl Harbor many joined ad-hoc riots that began at sunset with the chant: "*get those lights out, damnit.*" From Washington State to (particularly) California, angry citizens gathered en masse to destroy illuminated nighttime signs.

Some of the invasion panic and related concerns didn't dissipate until well into 1942, and we know that as many as 10,000 people made temporary moves 'for safety,' well into the interior of their states. Meanwhile panic buying set in, as those recalling the depression scarcities now swept through stores, in anticipation of a return to shortages and rationing.

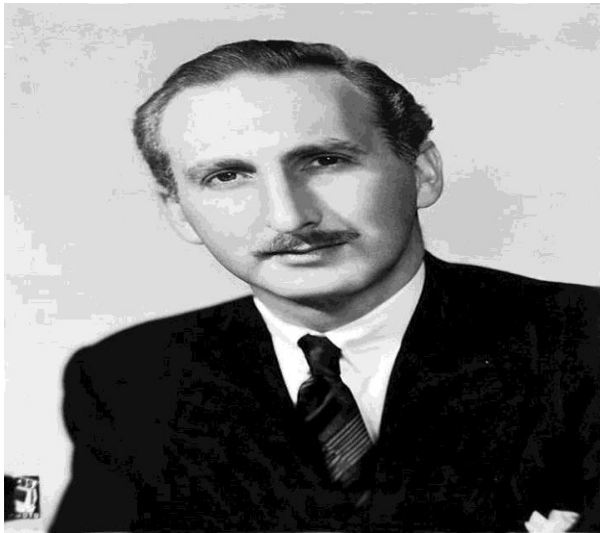
Expectations of imminent catastrophe weren't West Coast-exclusive. Americans watching the skies over New York Harbor should have been looking down...a German submarine in the harbor destroyed eight boats in a matter of hours, a few weeks after Pearl.

Early Pacific news remained one-sided and somber. This was becoming sadly familiar.

A few days after Pearl Harbor the British capital ships *HMS Repulse* and *HMS Prince of Wales* arrived in Singapore. They were known as “The Mighty Force Z.” They fueled in Singapore and sortied forth to show the flag. The ships had no air cover. Japanese planes sank both, in a matter of minutes, on December 10, 1941.

Aside from the blow to British hubris, the disaster was one of those singular opportunities to befall CBS’s spirited Cecil Brown. Brown had a reputation as an outspoken critic of the fighting in Europe. He’d been booted out of Italy and made his way to Singapore to hook up with the British, sensing an emerging story of Japanese expansion and trouble for the Crown.

Ever the adventurer, he signed up for the *Repulse* cruise and narrowly escaped from the Japanese air attack...with a world-class scoop. His voice came through to American [living rooms](#).



Cecil Brown: The Radio Historian



Cecil Brown rescued: The Radio Historian

In Brown’s reports on the loss of the capital ships and the ensuing fall of Singapore he blamed British elitism, arrogance and poor management as principal causes. The British yanked Brown’s credentials and he escaped Singapore just ahead of the Japanese.

By the end of February 1942, the Allies had lost naval battles in the Java Sea and Sunda Strait (for lack of air cover), and the Japanese had landed in Malaya. On April 9, 1942, troops on Bataan in The Philippines surrendered; a few days later those soldiers began the *Bataan Death March*, recounted to American radio by a soldier who suffered through [65 miles of suffering](#).

Early Pacific reporting in 1942 was challenging for radio correspondents. Not only was access to timely factual news constricted by the U. S. Navy for security reasons, but finding workable transmission facilities was challenging. Transmission issues impeded later radio reporting of the American successes in the *Battle of the Coral Sea* and the *Battle of Midway*.

(That reminds me to note again that our narrative does not necessarily follow a timeline; rather it’s focused on illustrating the *difficulties* faced in reporting war from the battlefronts.)

VII. AMERICAN RADIO'S WAR POSTURE

As America engaged in war, radio continued to reinvent itself, playing an outsized role in keeping the “Home Front” informed, educated and supported. Radio’s personal touch enabled emotional connections with listeners and that raised trust in the medium and confidence in its messaging. By 1942, a government-sponsored poll reported that, by a margin of 46 to 18 percent, respondents put more faith in radio than in newspaper reporting.

Radio’s superiority in home-front messaging had additional advantages: The medium now touched 90 percent of American families. Moreover, radio had a regular and predictable schedule and listening time was averaging four hours per day.

The Citizens During World War Two the country’s makeup was roughly 60% urban/40% “rural.” America’s war economy was causing consumer confidence to return, after the long years of the Depression. Defense jobs were plentiful, and income rose. Non-employment fell to a staggering 1.2 percent. Yet for so many, the memories of those hard-scrabble Depression years would inform their outlook: *hope still had to be earned*.

Those who called themselves “hopeful” weren’t discouraged by the early months of war. There was, after all “*a spring every year*.” Yet by late 1943 the hopefuls too were beginning to wonder if there’d ever be an end. Some not on active duty found engagement by being part of the national war effort. The *service industry* upheaval supported a country now on a 24-hour schedule. Some radio stations were broadcasting around the clock.

Before Pearl it was rare to find women working outside the home. By 1944, 19 million women were heading for the job each day. Many had no intention of returning to their former existences after the war, so *that* potential social upheaval was ignored... “*for the duration*.”

During the war years homes became radio centric. Newscast schedules led to social realignments and some families shifted dinner to fit the news-time. The “big radio” still reigned in the living room; FDR’s storied “*Fireside Chats*” seemed almost designed for living room communal listening.



Saturday Evening Post

If Dad had a *man-cave* it would have a good radio. He’d probably be surrounded by maps, and he’d be learning new names for battles. This, he felt, made him knowledgeable about military affairs. (He was hearing ‘*managed-war-news*.’)

Every afternoon kids were drawn to the serial adventure shows and transported to alien worlds or into the lives of their earth-bound heroes. The *villains* were no longer the gangsters and crooks pilloried in the 1930s; now they were the “Japs” and the “Jerries.” And in the kitchen, housewives followed the “Soap Operas” that chronicled the sad, brave, enduring lives of others suffering fear, loneliness, deprivation.



Flickr



Cincinnati Inquirer

‘*Battle Fatigue*’ began growing among radio’s entertainment writers who wanted a break from ‘Soaps’ and war topics. And that opened the door to escapism. The “thriller drama” was born when “*Suspense*” launched in 1942. It quickly gained listeners and writer-imitators.

The Rumors Civilians talked ‘knowledgeably’ about the war as if they were tapped into the real facts. The rumor centers in town included the grocery store checkout line where, a half-century before the bar-code reader, clerks had time to gossip. There was the coffee-table at the hardware store, the gas station, the library, the factory floor, the water-cooler, women on the telephone and in the beauty parlors. Men would engage in “discussions” (aka arguments) at the Elks Club, the barber shop or the corner bar. The loudest voices were often those of the self-styled *war experts*.

Opinions were molded in part by what adults heard on radio, and radio commentators were often unfairly cited as authorities. Radio’s “*virtual opinionizing*” power placed an increasing burden on the medium to help manage the national rumor pools.

Radio was also helpless to arbitrate a significant mismatch of understanding between civilians and G. I.’s home on leave. The people at home believed they knew all about combat and that “*according to what we hear it wasn’t so bad.*”

Civilians’ beliefs had been sanitized by the military’s carefully-parsed news releases. Still, radio endeavored to be a cheerleader for the home folks, who chalked up any misunderstandings to their belief that the G. I. “*was just suffering from “battle fatigue.”*”

Those soldiers who came home to briefly escape the blood-and-guts realities were deeply offended by this attitude, repulsed by the “*billboard patriotism*” and sometimes repelled by the rah-rah viewpoint of their dear ones...who hadn’t a clue about the realities of war.

Such misunderstanding could lead to serious clashes and the rupture of sibling relationships.

Nighttime air-raid drills meant some towns were blacked out, and listening to the radio was about the only thing to do until bedtime. You could take a walk down the street and hear the same popular programs on the neighbors' porch radios. Until you came to a house that was silent and dark. And saw the star in the window. A blue star meant sons or daughters on active duty. A gold star reminded you that the family was mourning one who wasn't coming home.

“Hello, I’m From the Government, and...” Washington regulators saw the growing influence of radio in people’s lives. “Federal oversight” became an attractive endeavor for some legislators who wanted reassurance radio was in full support of its war policies. In turn, broadcasters tiptoed around a government that could threaten their *“license to print money.”*



GI Roundtable

Censorship? When war began, that dreadful word was being bandied around Washington. The radio industry immediately reacted to even the *possibility* of content restriction. After all, the networks had demonstrated trustworthiness in reporting the European crises!

In response to the threat of censorship, government-industry working groups convened and, despite the feeling of the military and some in government, the administration announced the concept of *“voluntary censorship”* for radio.

Those who objected to the voluntary concept were thinking of “uncontrollable” commentators like Drew Pearson and Walter Winchell. So the Feds created the *“Broadcast Division of The Office of Censorship.”* These worthies installed direct-monitoring lines from the networks in order to approve the language of analysts. That *‘approval’* would come after the commentator had broadcast! Wait. What?

With the voluntary plan in place the *Office of Censorship* launched a few trial balloons to test radio’s commitment. Firmly prohibited on radio of course was news about troop, ship, or plane movements, war production, fortifications and casualty numbers. (It was also proposed for a time that weather news be abolished.)

“Man-on-the-street” interviews and other ad-lib programs were discouraged and radio amateurs were silenced, newsreels were reviewed and movie scripts had to be pre-approved. The censorship overseers eventually put on looser-fitting pants; *“Voluntary Censorship”* endured to the end of the conflict. Stations remained careful about their own content and, of course, relied on unit military censorship of live foreign reporting.

In time, government overseers agreed that broadcasting remained a *manageable* war asset; they supposed radio *was* trustworthy... “with only distant oversight.” Broadcasters and regulators eyed each other on this bargain; no one winked.

There were many moving parts in the government/broadcasting relationship. The administration was aware radio communicated on an emotional level unmatched by print, so the government began producing quasi-emotive messaging and published a broadcast schedule for radio, dubbed the *National Allocation Plan*.

The goal of the plan was to ensure administration messages were spread across the *entire* radio day, in comedies, soap operas, and all other programs. New shows were produced by the War and Treasury Departments.

War supplied a series of shows describing, for example, “*a challenging life for your son in a military training environment!*” *Treasury* launched its highly successful defense-bond sales programs. At the end of the day the Allocation Plan was executed in a way that did not diminish listeners’ faith in radio.

Radio as a Business Radio’s revenues exploded in the war years. Ratings showed NBC Red continuing to lead the ratings, followed by CBS, ABC (*nee NBC Blue*) and a distant Mutual. Ratings on *newscast* popularity had the order as: CBS, NBC, Mutual, ABC.

Revenues may have “exploded” but operating costs were up as well. Radio during war could be an expensive proposition. Men and women leaving for the service depleted hard-to-replace operating staffs. Equipment repair and replacement parts became scarce and costly.

As businesses will do in reaction to rising costs, broadcasters raised advertising rates. But the advertising universe would tolerate only a modest increase. And commercial inventory time was constrained by the requirement to make enough room for government messaging. There seemed to be a practical limit to revenue growth.

Fortunately for radio, Congress modified an earlier “*excess profits tax*” to allow defense contractors to mitigate their tax burdens. In the purchase of radio time the adjustment was as high as 90 cents on the dollar...but it had to be for “*good-will*” radio airtime.

“*Good-will*” programs usually had low commercial yield. More symphony orchestras were sponsored on radio during that war than at any other time in network history. And as a defense contractor, you could underwrite classy programs, have famous people to dinner and impress your friends at parties.

“We Do Need Those Stinking Badges” Meanwhile, the FCC’s *Radio Intelligence Division* (RID) had been searching for illegal operators, saboteurs’ messaging and intelligence signals. In full bloom the FCC’s monitoring service included 11 or 12 “*Primary Monitoring Stations*” across the country, connected to an additional several-dozen “*search stations*” and equipped with direction-finders run by a battery of white-lipped Inspectors.

Here are views of the FCC's Monitoring Services from *Radio News* magazine October 1944:



Photos from Federal Communications Commission

Did you know the FBI set up its own radio stations? Historians don't agree on the operating frequencies or whether they were voice or telegraph stations, but apparently the FBI operated a couple of dozens of these outlets during the war. They transmitted bogus messaging as deliberate disinformation; the listener-targets were secret Nazi networks operating in the U. S. The FBI and FCC also searched for "*Fifth Column*" stations and monitored the content of the country's 100 foreign-language outlets. (This last was a tightrope, since a significant number of loyal Americans were first-generation immigrants comfortable in their legacy language.)

"Hang Onto Your Radio." In April 1942 the *War Production Board* ordered all civilian radio production be discontinued so set manufacturers could build military equipment, (including the revolutionary "walkie-talkie" that reinvented battle tactics.) Purchasing a new radio became as difficult as obtaining a new car. Replacement radio tubes and parts became black-market items. In true American tradition, entrepreneurs aimed at the issue. Hugo Gernsback wrote in *Radio Craft* magazine:

"Young men between the ages of 12 and 17...have time on their hands, which they now can turn into cash by building sets not only for their friends and relatives—yes, but even sell(ing) them to radio stores. It is certain that if a number of boys gang together and manufacture a few sets every week...and providing the sets are made right, they can be sold to the trade."

The record shows minor success from such enterprises, though it probably did keep some kids off the streets. Meanwhile, the radio shops dug into their bins of discarded radios, with the aim of rebuilding them. Today in the computer world we call it "*refurbishing*."

"Turn In Your Radio" In January 1942 Resident Aliens were required to surrender *radios capable of receiving bands other than the U. S. "Broadcast Band"* ...all those magnificent shortwave-capable radios! The edict created a market for radio-repair shops which (for a fee) modified Resident Aliens' radios by removing coils and associated parts tuning those "other bands." The "*Alien Registration of Radios*" law was a bust.

“For This Relief, Much Thanks” In 1942 the *Board of War Communications* began to relax certain FCC radio-station rules; among them the requirement for minimum hours of operation. ‘For the duration,’ on-air hours were up to the Licensee. In acknowledging the manpower shortage, requirements for radio engineering staffs were also relaxed. Stations were asked to inventory their spare tube stock, donating “extras” to a national parts pool (*sure they would*).

The FCC also ruled new stations were authorized only if they were constructed from parts available from pre-war stock. Copper usage was prohibited. Transmitter power was to be slightly reduced, to extend tube life. And larger stations added guard towers and antenna-illumination, to protect against sabotage.

There were a couple of technical schemes seeing the thankfully brief light of day. Remember the concern of the West Coast broadcasters they’d be silenced at night? Early in the war, the Navy suggested stations below 600 on the dial “*might interfere with ship communications along the seacoasts and would have to shut down*” (didn’t happen).

A related ill-fated proposal was to swap those marvelous long-reach lower-frequency assignments along the coasts with higher-frequency (shorter-range) stations farther inland (didn’t happen).

Radio’s Messaging: Recruiting was an important part of radio’s messaging...especially later in the war when patriotic fervor was wearing thin. To stimulate enlistments some stations created “*hometown heroes*” out of soldiers returning from active duty.

Rationing became the primary weapon against hoarding and black-market purchasing. Rationing of sugar, tires, gasoline, meat, coffee, butter, canned goods and shoes was instituted.



Mileage rationing was an effort to conserve rubber for the war. Radio delivered dry written copy to promote this conservation or...what radio did best...wrote the message into the dialogue of its highest-rated shows like [Fibber McGee and Molly](#).

In those pre-microwave days the government asked housewives to prepare “*only what their families consumed in one sitting*” and to “*try to provide balanced meals*” (their words). Advertising called for “*meatless days*” while suggesting imaginative recipes using leftovers.

"Scrap drives" were organized to recycle rubber, tin, paper, lumber, steel and many other items. A popular phrase heard on radio was "get some cash for your trash".



Vintage Map Shop

Radio was singularly successful at selling **war bonds**. Listeners were urged to "put at least 10% of every paycheck into bonds." In the first three years of the war, over a quarter of a billion dollars in advertising for bonds was donated by radio.

As part of its war effort, radio was not above using competitive media to promote its services, including the individualizing of a government-aided publication called the "Station War Book." It displayed patriotic efforts with station promotion. Here are some covers, from WorldRadioHistory.com:



Radio's Messaging: Civil Defense Almost from the beginning radio tried easing Americans' angst by promoting government advice on defense at home. Blackout drills were basic and some cities even conducted air-raid drills. Homeowners were "ordered" to prepare and maintain survival kits. (People who didn't comply with radio's blackout orders or keep the required supplies on hand could be jailed; arrests on such grounds were rare.)

Finally, radio tackled social issues as best it knew how. It tried to back the proper horses in resolving labor problems and worked to educate and help protect the public from continuing rumors. Beyond its news-delivery capability the radio in the home would touch and engage entire families, supporting the war efforts while it continued to build listeners' confidence.

With this view of radio at work on the Home Front, we can now turn to the journalists who spent years...and sometimes their lives...reporting from the war zones. To create part of a simile, they formed the "front end" of the war-news-reporting channel to America.



Alamy



Dorinda Balchin



University of Kentucky



Ernie Pyle: Warfare History Network

VIII. THE REPORTING

When Germany declared war on America, journalists were rendered *Persona Non Grata* and ordered to exit the German sphere. The expelled “expats” may have been sent to the Balkans, North Africa or the Near East...where they again would work with the forbearance of authority.

Journalists adopted the label: “*War Correspondent*.” Most got their feet wet, and would practice their craft, in military environments quite different from that of their former work milieus. They were accredited to individual field units, dependent on the military for stories and for their support and protection. Today they’d be called “embedded.”

Reporters were granted ‘officer’ privileges and issued armbands to distinguish them from soldiers.



Army commands set up “press camps” for the scribes, who shared tents and stood in the mess lines with GIs (keeping their ears open for scuttlebutt). They ate the same grub, dodged the same bullets, inhaled the same dust. And to their continued frustration their work product was closely vetted by the military censors.

Newsmen were individualistic and competitive, coming to their postings with differing levels of experience. Many were young; a few had been in their profession for decades. Some appeared to radiate a swashbuckling charisma: in popular lore they were “*rooted in traditions of glamour, danger, self-confidence, coolness, with the prospect of fortune and fame always just ahead.*” They were the “*courageous danger-seekers, dropped into the action.*”

War scrubbed a lot of that away. In the military ecosystems reporters found their lives circumscribed by authorities who held in their hands the ultimate weapon: *access to stories*.

Ego Sum Veritas The “*U.S. Office of Censorship*” had been established after Pearl Harbor, ostensibly to protect military information. Its guidelines assumed some form of self-censorship by war journalists. After all, newsmen *were* free to write and voice the truth as they saw it. But of course their reporting had to get past the censors.

News releases (endorsed by military commands) were delivered to the media by the Public Information Officer (“PIO”). The PIO’s briefings were usually not enough for the scribe tribe who were trained to *question, always question*. Things could get gnarly between the correspondents and the PIOs, making for some noisy press conferences.

Commanders insisted censorship was only to ensure that “*the facts*” be reported. The “*Public Information Officer*” (“PIO”) was rebranded as the “*Public Relations Officer*” (“PRO”) and some reporters to calling them “*Public Concealment Officers.*” Journalists began to believe ‘being misled’ would be par for the military course. (And something that got a PRO bent sideways was to learn a newsman had a channel to someone inside the command structure.)

Censorship: A Conflict Writ Large Control over news content remained a consequential concern. A news story might be “deep-sixed” without even notifying the author. The work would simply disappear. Censorship was, officially, “*critical to the war effort.*” (It was true that less-than-encouraging news *had* been making it home, especially from the Pacific during the disastrous early war years.)

The specific mission of the military censor was to approve the content of *all* communications leaving a command. Senior officers were reminded they were responsible for the facts in the stories leaving their units, and some commanders took to reviewing journalists’ daily output. Perhaps the most egregious abuse of unit-information releases was Douglas MacArthur’s almost-daily “*Communique*,” which never failed to feature the general’s accomplishments. Censors seemed to be a little less harsh if the journalist was savvy enough to include news favorable to the SWPA Commander-In-Chief. There were other military leaders who learned to rework their unit’s news releases for their own betterment. Notable among them were Admirals Nimitz and Halsey and Generals Patton and Clark. They recognized the rank-enhancement advantage of positive comments in the American media.

The path of (least?) resistance Several post-war memoirs characterized reporters’ approach to censoring: The “*go-along-to-get-along*” correspondents were content to simply transmit the information from the daily PRO handouts. As human nature predicts, some also found it easier to get on the air if they just hung around headquarters, covering the war second-hand. “*Much easier, they said, than getting involved with some lost battalion in the boondocks.*” Some had a more cynical view: “*if we did go to the front in France or Belgium or Guadalcanal, there was a better than even chance that our stories would never make it home anyway.*”

Few radio correspondents were labeled “*g-a-t-g-a*” although the temptation is understandable. It had to be particularly frustrating for a reporter to try to file from the battle...to discover later a colleague in London or Hawaii had aired the *same* story, reading from an official briefing. Sometimes in the field, where undependable transmitting facilities exacerbated the problem, radio newsmen felt “*they were carefully writing and voicing a script and dropping it into the nearest foxhole and that was the end of it.*”

Then there were “*Those Who Got It.*” These pragmatists understood the need for tight censorship: they found ways to work within the system and learned to gain the military’s confidence in their work. As a result, they were selected for “ride-alongs” and were given closer access to operations because they had proven to be “*honest and fair and willing to work within the system.*” They were risk-takers who were sometimes rewarded with a scoop. Not a few of them turned out to be “*Bang-Bangs,*” addicted to war action.

The “*Young Turks*” never gave up gnawing at a story and looking for ways to do factual reporting. Eric Sevareid and Charles Collingwood of CBS typified newsmen who felt their listeners could stand the truth. They did their best to report the real action; particularly from the Italian campaign, and they shared their grievances with the censorship system.

Oh...have we been saying *newsmen* again?

Women Journalists “*Get that Broad the Hell out of There*” (U. S. Marine Corps General). It was not just a man’s war. 127 female war correspondents had been accredited. It wasn’t a cakewalk; wherever they went they had to hustle harder than their male colleagues.

They faced not only the enemy but an unspoken war against the chauvinist system with its red tape, condescension, disdain, outright hostility, and lewdness. Still, for many of them, the words “*you can’t go there*” had no meaning.

In print, there was famed *Life* photographer Margaret Bourke-White. She was there when the Germans invaded Russia and was an observer and hero in the Italian Campaign. There was Helen Kirkpatrick (who had to stow away on a boat to cover D-Day) and Dickey Chapelle, famous photojournalist, who would be a veteran of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Other famed writers included Martha Gellhorn and Lee Miller. Some of them “pinch-hit” for radio reporters.

We noted Mary Marvin Breckenridge was one of the “Morrow Boys” for a short while. She was the first woman foreign correspondent hired by CBS and was active in pre-war Europe until the network declared its preference for all-male war reporting. She worked out of Amsterdam, London and Berlin and did 50 broadcasts for CBS.

Breckenridge was joined in Europe by Betty Wason. Wason had covered events in Europe for Transradio until Bill Shirer hired her for CBS field reporting in Scandinavia, the Balkans and Greece. Wason did good work, yet faced the CBS preference for the male voice.

From *Wikipedia*:

“Everyone made a fuss over me but CBS,” Wason wrote. “When I went to see [news director] Paul White, he dismissed me with, “You were never one of our regular news staff.” Then what, I wondered, had I been doing for CBS all that time in Greece?”

NBC fielded two outstanding women correspondents, Margaret Rupli and Helen Hiatt. Rupli was a courageous and innovative journalist who scored from unique reporting venues. Hiatt had been NBC’s last reporter in France before the surrender.

The most-experienced female wartime radio journalist was Sigrid Schulz, who reported for Mutual with the benefit of 20 years of newspaper reporting.

It’s impossible to tell all their stories. They did their best, not only because they were exceptional women but because they were great journalists. Yet NONE of these women were allowed into France until two months after D-Day...

Before we move on, 90 seconds about **reporting tools**.

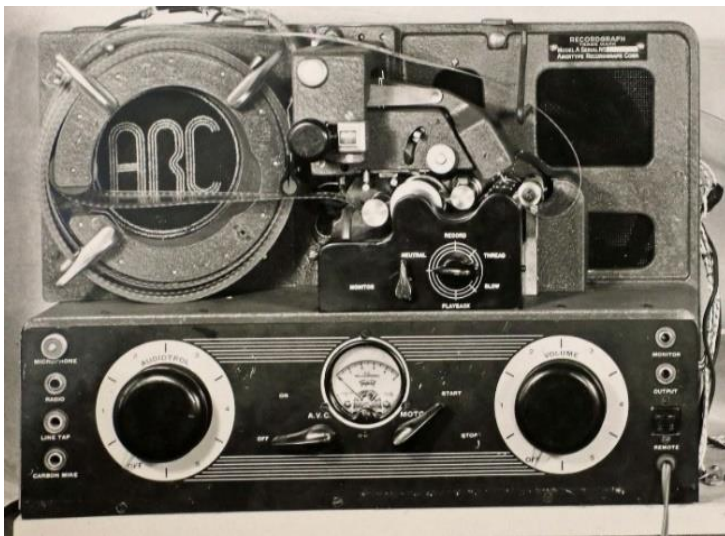
Recorders As Shirer had noted, *recording* could have allowed the reporter to wait out bad-propagation periods and more news feeds would make it home intact. But the networks just weren’t having it. The BBC however embraced recording, to the betterment of their coverage.



"Mighty Midget:" BBC

BBC newsmen began using discs recorded at 78 rpm, on a "portable" device called the *"Mighty Midget."* At 35 pounds, the *Mighty Midget's* recording time was two minutes. Its real disadvantage was that it was a stylus-and-groove disc system.

Disc recorders weren't practical on moving vehicles, ships or aircraft. The stylus just wouldn't stay in the groove. The *"Recordgraph"* solution embossed grooves in 35mm cellulose film. It was used in the famous George Hicks D-Day recordings from the relay ship *Ancon*.



Recordgraph: Stern Collection

The Recordgraph's bulk made it impractical for field work and it required household power not available in your everyday foxhole. Charles Collingwood of CBS carried a Recordgraph on his back and did some landmark D-Day reporting, but the machine was ill-suited to rapid mobility.

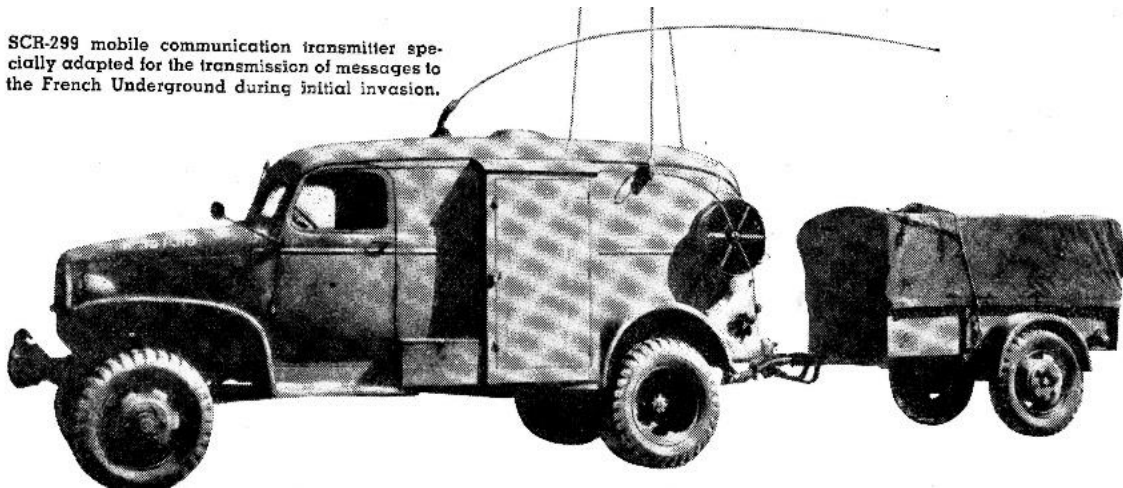
The U.S. Army Signal Corps had tested the *"Memovox."* It used a disc that looked like a CD. In 1943 SigC introduced a field version of the venerable wire recorder. It held up better but it required electrical power available only when the Signal Corps provided mobile generators.

There were other attempts to build machines that could stand up to battle conditions and worked when needed. Few were successful.

Meanwhile, the Germans were quietly deploying the revolutionary tape recorder.

Mobile Shortwave Transmitters The U. S. Army Signal Corps had the mission of connectivity for military (and media) operations. Mobile audio equipment and mediumwave/shortwave transmitters were integrated into a truck assembly towing a trailer with generators. The onboard transmitter was capable of long reach.

SCR-299 mobile communication transmitter specially adapted for the transmission of messages to the French Underground during initial invasion.



Radio News Magazine

The Signal Corps provided news transmission on a first-come, first-served basis. Their priority was support of the military mission, and heavy military traffic sometimes left little capacity for the media.

When the Signal Corps couldn't help, entrepreneurs might get into the act. Various histories relate the efforts of *Press-Wireless* and *Mackay Radio* in providing shortwave transmissions from the field. The *Press-Wireless* station "PX" followed the Allied advance through France and Belgium. American radio networks now had sophisticated shortwave receive antennas and they could often hear signals directly from PX.

The Stories: From 1942 on, radio coverage of the European war continued to get better.

American and British forces invaded **North Africa** in 1942, and the Allies began the long frustrating grind to clear the Germans from the territory. NBC's John MacVane and CBS's Charles Collingwood were there. The cumbersome reporting hoops they had to leap through revealed the need for better Signal Corps support of the correspondents.

Some news from North Africa did make it through a "back door" to CBS. News Director Paul White had assembled a coalition of amateur radio operators who were urged to scan the dials, listening for signals sent "*in the blind*" by reporters transmitting without a schedule in the hope *someone* would hear them. "Blind broadcasting" was more successful as the war progressed.

Americans first saw the print byline of Walter Cronkite from North Africa. He worked for *United Press* and was stationed on an attack support ship. The story goes that later, as he headed for home, when his boat was a day out from home port he talked the Navy into flying him in, so he'd beat his rivals with coverage of the "*Torch*" invasion.

The Mediterranean First-hand reporting followed the cleanout of Germans from North Africa and the "*Husky*" invasion of Sicily. The campaign in Italy would be long and drawn-out. In Southern Italy in 1943 NBC's Merrill Mueller scored a different "first."

Mueller took receipt of an NBC transmitter sent overseas *“in case someone can use it.”* He figured out how to fire it up and was able to contact New York directly. To his credit he proposed a coin-toss arrangement among the correspondents who wanted to share the transmitter (NBC came second to CBS). The broadcasts were the war’s first live reports from a repatriated location in Italy.

With the invasion of **Anzio** in early 1944, the networks found ways around front-line censoring. Success at Anzio had become problematic and the military tried to keep its failures from the media. But Eric Sevareid found a Signal Corps transmitter on the beach that could reach London. John Daly of CBS and Chester Morrison of NBC agreed *all was not well at Anzio*.

When he heard these reports, Churchill exploded, ordering his General Alexander to *“put a lid on radio reporting.”*



Alexander and reporters: National Archives



Mark Clark: National WWII Archives

Alexander did his best to bring peace to the briefing room while reporters remembered the best way to get a story through might be to compliment the commanders. Through the Italian campaign, General Mark Clark abused this approach by generating his own headlines. His Fifth Army was also reportedly confused by his changing military goals; reporting on this issue *might* clear the censors...if the story included kind words about Clark.

Normandy The Allied Invasion of France was the best- and the worst- kept secret of the war. In those early days of June 1944, American radio listeners who read between the spoken-news lines concluded an invasion would be coming *“soon.”*

Here’s an excerpt from my 80th-Anniversary report written for *Radio World Magazine*, May 22, 2024. It speaks to D-Day planning and invasion coverage:

***“Media Matters** (Among the massive military communications necessities)...the relatively (miniscule) requirements for the media were not lost in the planning. Fortunately, key military leaders remained aware of the need to keep the world informed.*

Media support had failed somewhat sadly in the North African Invasion of 1942 and it was clear the Army Signal Corps “(SigC”) had to do a better job of supporting the media.

David Sarnoff of RCA was appointed by General Eisenhower to coordinate media-communications planning. Sarnoff's efforts resulted in the establishment of a media route through the "London Signal Center," itself the hub of SigC communications. And Sarnoff was able to leverage his high-level relationships to induce the British to establish additional shortwave paths to America.

In the months preceding the invasion American news folks had been facing implied and actual opposition from the British who didn't understand Americans' incessant demands for information. As an early demonstration of how the show would be run, SigC established "FAX," its own full-duplex shortwave channel direct to the United States.

FAX would become the official channel for communiques from SHAEF ("Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force"). FAX would also cue the radio networks tied to it in a "party-line" arrangement.

In turn, the media had to accept certain ground rules. Given very few journalists were authorized a seat in the initial show, radio reporting would be pooled (coordinated by Edward R. Murrow). Print copy had to be shared among all competitors and recording of radio news was for the first time allowed by the American networks.

America Waits for the News *In anticipation of the invasion and in the spirit of pool coverage the radio networks came together in temporary harmony to prepare for "the biggest news story of the decade." Rival news directors met to coordinate coverage and to help one another with planning difficulties.*

The ultimate vigil began early on the morning of June 6th when German Radio announced "an invasion of France." The network newsrooms turned up the volume on the FAX circuit and waited for confirmation. The first official communique came through about 3:30 AM (EWT). From then on, it was ...watching the teletype and waiting for pool reports.

Observing the invasion, some correspondents aboard ships or aircraft would make their recordings or write their copy en route; they'd disembark back in England and make a beeline for Britain's Ministry of Information (for transmission clearance).

From the battleground itself, radio reporters spoke into "transcription machines." The recordings were then shipped to London on naval transport (and often subjected to unforeseen delay). Some reports made it to London via air on the "SHAEF SHUTTLE." Once cleared by the censors, the recordings and any live reporting from studios in England were forwarded to shortwave transmitters.

"The written media would soon find a pipeline to America direct from the beaches. Two selected commercial companies, Press Wireless and Mackay Radio, were to establish circuits from the Continent to the United States.

Press Wireless was to become operational on D+60 and Mackay Radio on D+90 but under serious pressure from the press and through a "test-arrangement" with SigC the Press Wireless transmitter came up early. The Press Wireless "direct-to-America" capability at first created a censorship ruckus but eventually, under press pressure, the military cleared the way for the hundreds of thousands of words destined for American newspapers. The radio reports contributed color and meaning to the legacy of wartime journalism.

D-Day coverage was known by journalists as “The Biggest Beat” and history records its success. In truth, the valor and sacrifice of the soldiers landing on those beaches would be the biggest story and would far outstrip the work of the deskbound planners.” -30-

The early hours of “*The Longest Day*” became known as “*The Longest Night*.” The overnight news vigil June 6th was challenging for the networks; they had to fill airtime to keep their affiliates on the air until invasion confirmation finally arrived. Then news arrived in New York from the pool reporters. The most-famous, complete with drama: George Hicks’ on the [Ancon](#).

As radio reported the Allies were on French soil, audience surveys recorded U. S. tune-ins. The audience grew to the West as the story spread across the country, following the sun.



D-Day press-pool radio engineers



Martha Gellhorn was the only woman reporter on the beach: Nat'l WWII Museum

Post D-Day Correspondents followed the military onto the continent. On the ground in France, once pool reports were no longer needed, they resumed the chase for *the scoops*.

“Operation Dragoon” in Southern France in August 1944 was covered by the first direct broadcast from an invasion craft. Chester Morrison of NBC had the mike...for 90 seconds...until a transmitter fuse blew. Other [recordings were made](#).

Into Paris CBS’s Charles Collingwood and others reported prematurely that the city was open. CBS blamed the false news on the military PROs. Collingwood was disciplined.

The Slow Slog From the subjugated countries, correspondents reported on the increasingly bitter fights for liberation. Ground progress was sometimes at speed...often at a turtle’s pace, as the Allies drew closer to Germany and whittled away at the Germans in Italy.

Through the fall and winter of 1944/1945 journalists followed the crossing of the Rhine, the entry into Germany. Aachen, Arnhem, Remagen. *The Bulge*, Bastogne and [General McAuliffe](#)

Through it all, the reports that did get through to the 'States were generally dramatic while respectful. At home some listeners continued updating their "situation maps" while wondering if the war would ever end. The rumor had spread: *"it'll be over by Christmas."* The *Battle of the Bulge* in December 1944 reset those hopes.

Following the entry into Germany, radio was the only medium that could convey the horrors found in Buchenwald and other camps. In mid-April 1945 that job fell to [Ed Murrow](#).

Finally on May 5th, 1945, Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force ("SHAEF") held a press conference, informing the media of the surrender of the German armed forces. The information was to be held until the public announcement was made. This time it was the *Associated Press's* Ed Kennedy who got into trouble with a premature announcement.

AP London's shortwave receiver heard a signal: *"Paris calling; Ed Kennedy. Germany has surrendered unconditionally."* The voice went on with details. AP forwarded the information to New York where a battery of white-lipped executives pondered its distribution in the absence of any other confirmation...no other sources confirmed the announcement.

Given Kennedy's reputation they agreed it was likely a valid report and they released it to the country's media. It was an accurate story but *"For breaking the story,"* NPR later reported, *"Kennedy was expelled from France and the AP condemned his actions; he was fired."*



AP's Ed Kennedy: Assoc Press



German surrender signing: Associated Press

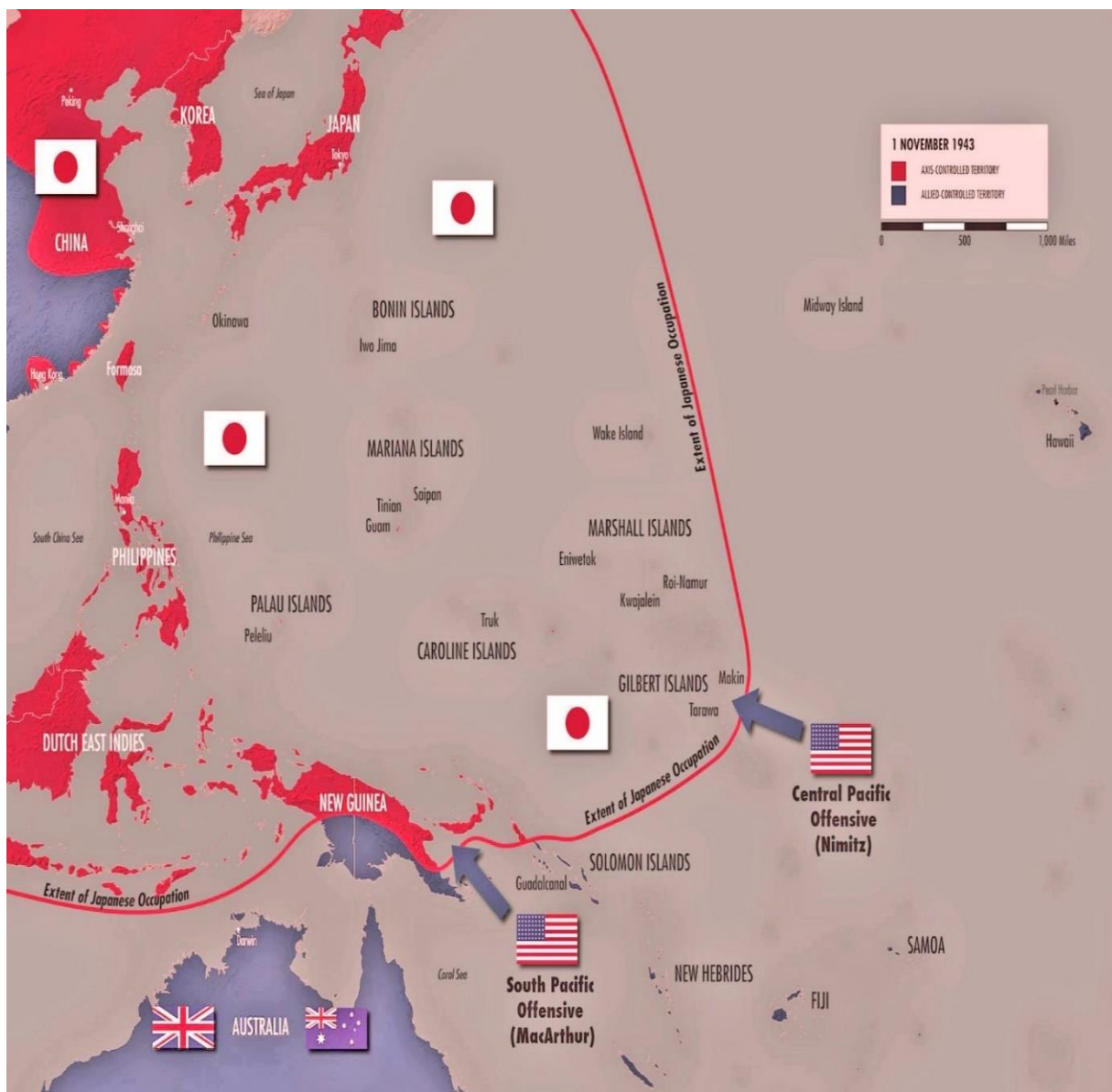
Victory in Europe was made official on May 8th, 1945. The German surrender was documented in Charles Collingwood's [dramatic reporting](#).

All eyes turned westward.

IX. THE PACIFIC

The depravity had ended in the European theater while far worse horrors were playing out in the Pacific, in bloody and dehumanizing conflict. Correspondents asking for Pacific assignments had blended their professionalism with a belief their success demanded access to the current action. Little did they know what they would witness on decimated ships, on the bloody beaches, in the vicious jungles.

Pacific warfare was primarily in the hands of the Americans. The areas of responsibility had been divided after a good deal of political maneuvering. Admiral Chester Nimitz ran the *Central Pacific Command* ("POA") and the *Southwest Pacific Area* ("SWPA") was assigned to General Douglas MacArthur. Books have been written about their personality conflicts.



National WWII Museum

Reporters assigned to Nimitz' POA reported to Hawaii for assignment. There they might be posted to one of the capital ships involved in naval operations. Those larger ships of the POA provided support facilities for newsmen, access to official communiques and the implied protection offered by such larger assets.

Journalists detailed to SWPA covered the Army/Marine island-hopping from ground level. They were sent to Australia to be accredited through MacArthur. Some asked to be included in initial landings. Some great stories...and notable reporter casualties...came out of their valor.

Within the exceedingly large conflict area newsmen had to be on the *move*. The age of the average reporter was beyond 30, so physical stamina became a factor for journalists who never got to "enjoy" the G.I.'s bootcamp training for survival and physical conditioning.

"The Unbearable" The character of the Japanese soldier was completely new to Americans. The Japanese mindset could probably never be understood by the Occidental. The Germans had fought tenaciously, and defeated troops were willing to surrender to the Allies. The Japanese ethos forbade surrender, and each soldier was expected to fight until he died...for the glory of the Emperor. This *fight-to-the-last-eyeball* mindset was completely alien to every human value the journalists recognized.

Battle reports were of course filtered by officialdom before transmission to the homeland. The radio could help families pronounce unfamiliar island names, but the reports didn't mention the staggering casualties the islands claimed: *New Guinea, the Solomons, Guam, Tarawa, Kwajalein, Saipan, Peleliu, the Philippines, Iwo Jima, Okinawa*. History could only estimate how many lives were lost in combat; hundreds of thousands of Allies perished and the Japanese casualties remain uncountable.

Even had they not been censored, reporters couldn't imagine telling parents how it felt as they waited for the landing craft to open its doors or saw a buddy's face disappear ten yards to the left...while in turn they tried to be brave for others. Warfare on the seas could also be ruthless: how describe those moments when your ship took a torpedo and began to list...or when you watched another vessel blow up, swallowing hundreds if not thousands of lives?

Journalists were expected to be dispassionate about the horrors they witnessed. It was a challenge not all of them could meet. Like their soldier-comrades, they carried the images and memories home. And they couldn't just put them away in a box. It should have been no surprise that those who made it home refused to talk about their war.

Dunn and the Pacific Shortwave Radio sent top-notch correspondents to cover the Pacific. NBC had Martin Agronsky, John MacVane, George Folster et al; Mutual employed Frank Cuhel, Fulton Lewis Jr. and Paul Manning among others. CBS had posted Eric Sevareid to China and Cecil Brown to Singapore with backup scribes in Australia.

William J. Dunn made his mark on Pacific war reporting. He worked for CBS and had been the first editor of the 1930s' news buildout. News Director Paul White sent him to build a CBS presence in the Southwest Pacific, "just in case."

Dunn was swept up by developments and his “90-day assignment” lasted a half-decade. He wrote a bulky memoir of the experience: “*Pacific Microphone*.” Much of what we know about radio war reporting from the Southwest Pacific has his touch.

Since his experiences weren’t atypical, he provides a portrait of some of the challenges faced by Pacific newsmen.

Show me the Way to go Home A good reporter, Dunn placed *the story* first, of course, but he was also consumed by *how* to get his accounts back to America. He was keenly aware shortwave feeds from the Pacific were more difficult than those from “nearby” Europe.

It wasn’t that shortwave had limited range (some signals were heard around the world). The problem was that the greater distance increased the vulnerability to atmospheric disturbance. The solution was to find those few facilities with the power to smash through.

To qualify such transmitters, he made the rounds of East Indies cities, making test broadcasts to California. What he *didn’t* expect was he’d soon lose access to those facilities.

It’s a measure of the man that he even did a broadcast from Tokyo before hostilities began. An anecdote survives, regarding a failed morning wake-up call and a missed broadcast while he was in Tokyo in 1941. Dunn arrived late to the studio to find a Tokyo engineer, as a courtesy, reading his copy to fill the airtime. The circuits from New York erupted: *CBS thought Dunn had been captured and the Japanese were counterfeiting his work.*

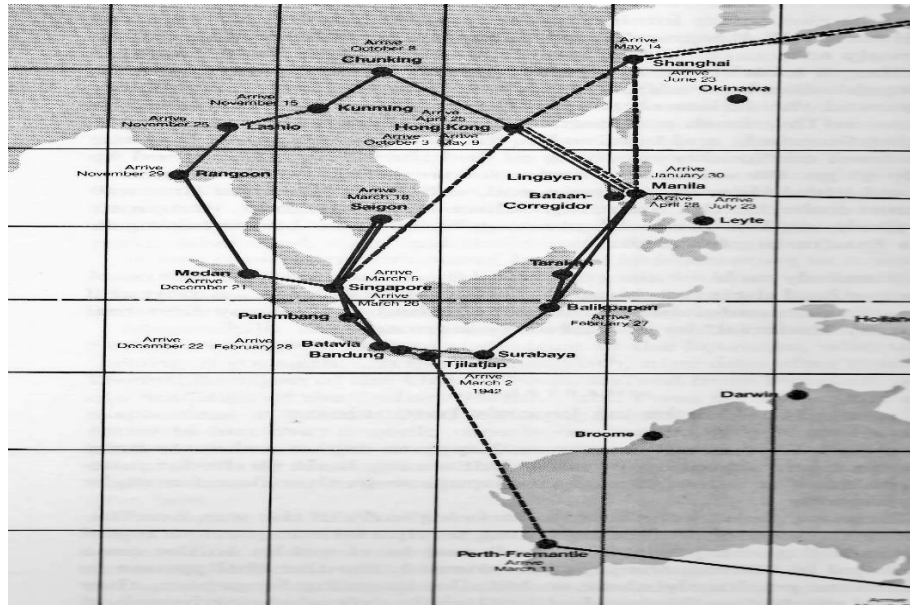
In the days following Pearl Harbor Dunn remained just ahead of the Japanese sweep of the East Indies. Among the dozen stops to set up new CBS news posts, he had expected British Singapore would have excellent facilities. The British told him their transmitters couldn’t reach California. Java would have the necessary muscle, they said.

He headed to Java (via a long and complicated trip detaining him for a time in Burma). Java/Batavia (*Jakarta*) boasted superb shortwave gear and Dunn was finally able to get some reporting [back to CBS](#).

The enemy was now approaching and Dunn had to escape Java. Five boats made a break for it; Dunn’s was the only vessel not blown up. He landed at Perth, in Western Australia....

...where he discovered shortwave signals from Perth didn’t make it across *Australia*, much less to America. He moved across the continent to Brisbane. Its shortwave facilities were no improvement (the nearest useful transmitter was in distant Sydney).

Finally, Dunn followed South West Pacific Area headquarters to Melbourne...and found a powerful shortwave transmitter. In Melbourne he gained the confidence of Douglas MacArthur. That personal relationship put him in the strategic picture; he no doubt absorbed military context useful to his reporting.



Mr. Dunn's "90 days:" Dunn archives

Relays? Dunn knew military operations would move to island areas far removed from large transmitters, so he began examining the idea of shortwave *relays*. The relay was a form of “signal booster” improving the signal path from a remote broadcast location to the nearest long-reach transmitters. Using relays was a move that could break wind at any point in the route. (Coordination required the newsman, the relay engineers, the long-reach transmitters, the California receivers and CBS New York to be in contact during the “line-up.”)

As the island-hopping began and the action moved farther from Australia, the need for some sort of shortwave relay became increasingly critical. As a partial solution the U.S. Army Signal Corps eventually offered access to the famed SCR-299, the intermediate-power towed transmitter (see Chapter VIII).

Once the fighting crossed the demarcation between SWPA and POA, the Navy could provide transmission from ships to the relay station on Noumea in contact with the United States. The Navy’s transmitters could also make Hawaii and, once Guam was retaken in 1944, a Navy relay went into operation on that outpost. (Guam signals sometimes made it direct to New York.)

West-East-West Skunkworks Before we proceed, we need to recognize another issue dogging the broadcasts coming to America from the West. The California shortwave stations were geared up to receive and relay all Transpacific communications, and one of their roles was to hand off such news reporters’ traffic to the radio networks. *How to feed California shortwave reception to a national network is its own short story:*

In the United States, the radio networks connected their affiliates via AT&T telephone wires. Each line was distance-limited and required a spaced string of “*repeaters*” (one-way amplifiers inserted at spaced intervals). For a national network the feed to these repeaters began in the East and ended in California. The one-way amplifiers meant networks were east-to-west and programs fed to the entire network had to enter the chain at the East end.

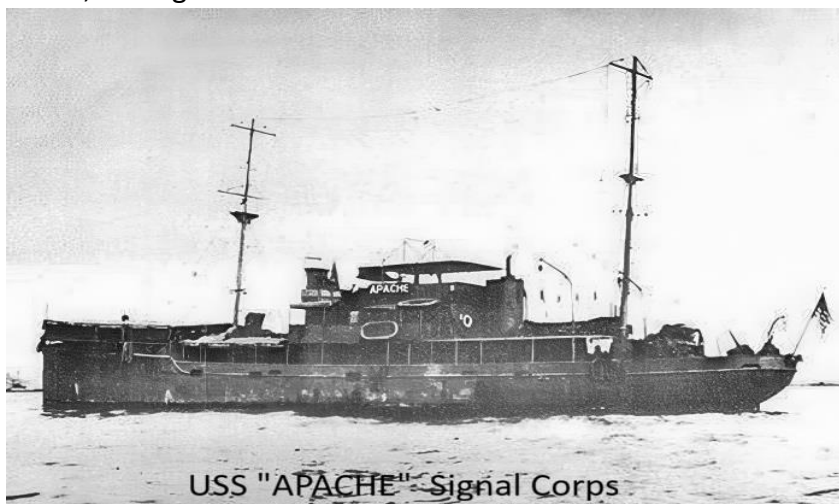
It wasn't just a news-feed problem. By 1936 all networks had built entertainment studios in Los Angeles. The networks needed to get their Hollywood shows back east for insertion. AT&T came up with a solution. It was 'simply' a matter of *reversing the direction of all the one-way amplifiers on the network*, so programs entering from the west would be fed back across the country toward the east. This network U-turn had to be done at the same moment at every repeater. The mass-reversal was tightly coordinated, with all hands across the country responding to a "GO" cue heard on their repeater "*party line*." 15 seconds were allowed for reversal of the network. Here's what it sounded like, and you heard it with Dunn's report. You'll hear the clicks as AT&T engineers reversed their [amplifiers](#).

Reaching New York directly from the Pacific would obviate the switch problem. Eventually the Signal Corps modified their truck transmitters to reach Long Island directly. But the military was on the move from island to island and the truck didn't float very well. A high-power *shipboard transmitter* provided a better solution...as long as you had a *link* from the island to a nearby vessel equipped with such a transmitter. Once that was worked out, Pacific-area radio reporting took a major step in a good direction.

Navy sailors and engineers had also been collaborating on long-range shortwave tests from their big ships. They were so successful the Navy built broadcast studios on the battleships *Missouri* and *Iowa*. "*Live-from-aboard-ship*" was no longer a novelty. However, those big boats weren't always assigned in support of every island invasion.

The Signal Corps thus worked up their own ship-board solution. They converted several commercial vessels into *radio relay ships*, anchoring them off-shore and building *shore-to-relay-ship* radio links. (This same technique was used in D-Day operations with the *Ancon*.)

The most notable of the Pacific version of the *Ancon* was the *Apache*. The former Presidential yacht was rebuilt in Sydney in 1944, with high-power transmitters reaching New York from the islands without the need for a relay. The *Apache* was fully-equipped to support newsfeeds and while floating off-shore during island invasions they maintained contact with correspondents ashore, through "link" transmitters located on the beach.



USS "APACHE" - Signal Corps

If transmissions from the inland sites out to the Apache weren't feasible, reporters queued up at the docks for a boat to take them out to the vessel. (After reporting, they were sometimes stranded aboard, waiting for a return boat to the beach). The Apache provided sleeping quarters and workspace for those on board. Once the fighting moved off the beaches the Signal Corps extended connectivity to the *beach-to-Apache* link by extending wire from inland battles to the beach. The Signal Corps even provided radio "studios" near battle sites.

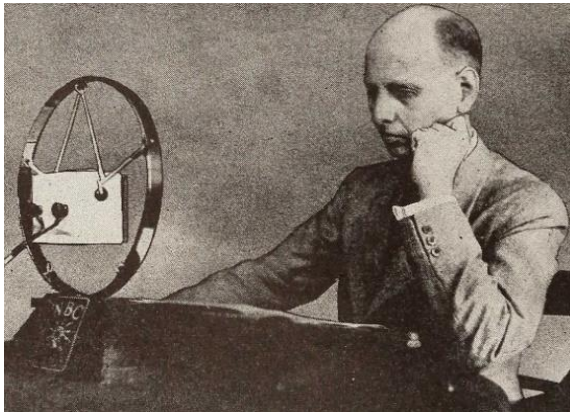


Dunn in a Signal Corps "tent studio:" Signal Corps

The "Island-Hopping" That summer of 1944 American attacks began on Guam, Saipan, and Tinian in the Marianas islands and on Chichi Jima and its sister island...a strip of land named Iwo Jima. James Forrestal, Secretary of the Navy, was an eyewitness to the [Iwo Jima flag-raising](#).

Allied fleets continued to decimate Japanese warships, bringing an end to Japanese sea-power. Then America committed the world to the Atomic Age. Across the planet the world listened for surrender news. On August 12, 1945 the Japanese government requested peace terms...insisting on retaining the emperor. Rumors began; the situation was perfect for another premature '*end-of-the-war*' scoop. Now it was Mutual and CBS, [two days early](#).

And our old friend Max Jordan did it one more time. The Japanese surrender was being negotiated through the neutral Swiss, and Jordan was in residence there. He was able to see international wire traffic and was on the air with the story three hours before it was confirmed. Jordan had pulled off one last scoop. He went on to join the priesthood.



Max Jordan: NBC



The V-J Day wire flash: CBS

The Surrender: “Live...But Not on Radio” The surrender ceremonies were “broadcast” from the Battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on September 2nd, 1945. Military authorities wouldn’t allow live radio coverage...“so radio couldn’t beat the print media!”

NBC’s Merrill Mueller (representing MacArthur’s headquarters) and CBS’s Webley Edwards (for Admiral Nimitz) jointly *recorded* the signing ceremony on both wire and disc. The disc version was sent to Radio Tokyo for delayed broadcast and the wire recording went to the relay ship *Ancon* for deferred transmission via its own paths.

That day there was heavy rain in much of the U.S. but as the last Japanese signature was affixed, the sun broke through over Tokyo Bay.

As we close our narrative, the words of two great broadcasters: Edward R Murrow and Eric Severeid.

69 correspondents gave their lives to report World War Two.

A few *Afterwords* will follow.

X. AFTERWORDS AND EXTRA CREDIT

A narrative is permitted a brisk conclusion. Let's see how we can do.

Radio was there for Americans before and during World War Two. It was never perfect. It stumbled through important events and sometimes spread rumors, but for the most part it could be trusted, and it was.

Unlike the military, correspondents did not demobilize in 1945. The journalists who risked their lives for their stories went on to write books and....in many cases (particularly CBS) become elder on-air statesmen who for the most part espoused the Murrow principles.

Post-war American radio pulled back on much of its foreign coverage and paid attention instead to economic and local stories. The trend toward shorter newscasts pinned to the hour and/or half-hour would come later, and then even that faded...and now CBS Radio News itself has been shuttered after a century of public service.

The potential of radio's social impacts never fully materialized. Radio didn't produce a nation of anesthetized drones. Nor did it create a 'startling new age of engaged citizenship.'

The need to create your own mental images all but disappeared. Somewhere between then and now...perhaps about the time of Howdy Doody and Milton Berle...we became a society which began to gather its information visually. Today it's no longer a novelty to see folks carelessly walking through intersections with heads bent to the tiny plastic screen.

Three decades after the war's end, CBS's Robert Trout and Charles Collingwood wondered whether their work would mean anything to later generations. Collingwood can't resist the concept of a [morality play](#).

One of the toughest things for us children of television is to try to let the spoken word create a picture. It can be a powerful and compelling experience. We hope our sidesteps into audio reminded you of that power.

"WHAT SAY YOU?" Mark4@durenberger.com

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FOR EXTRA CREDIT

A separate document is under construction. It contains several stories deemed valuable to our narrative though not relevant enough to consume space. These additional anecdotes may be of interest to the curious, however, since they were part of the continuum. **E-mail a request:**

THE COASTWATCHERS: The story of the Australians and islanders who volunteered to report Japanese naval movements. They were executed when discovered.

THE MOSQUITO NETWORK: American soldiers in the Pacific were kept informed and entertained by mini-radio stations built on recaptured islands and informally known as the “Jungle” or “Mosquito” networks.

RADIO LUXEMBOURG: This high-power heritage station served music and information to both allied and enemy soldiers across Europe and played a role in wartime espionage efforts.

SHORTWAVE IN AMERICA: America didn’t have an official shortwave voice until 1942, but many broadcasters embraced shortwave for internal uses and relay purposes.

THE CINCINNATI LIARS: Crosley Broadcasting built an international shortwave station beamed to Europe with American war messaging. Broadcasting in German, announcers could mimic Hitler’s voice. In 1944 Hitler gave them their legendary title.

ASPIDISTRA: The BBC employed an undelivered transmitter (ordered by WJZ for the ill-fated ‘500,000-watt’ project). They used it to power an automatic-switching system fooling German radar that was looking for incoming bombers.

MAXIM GORKY: In the 1930s Russia deployed a huge eight-engine flying propaganda platform with loudspeakers aimed toward the ground, and projectors sending “videos” reflected by clouds and self-generated fog banks.

THE HAIKU STAIRS: 3,922 steps to reach the *Haiku Radio Station*, Hawaii’s top-secret facility used to transmit radio signals to Navy ships operating throughout the Pacific.

TOKYO ROSE and ORPHAN ANNIE: Female Japanese propaganda broadcasters who targeted lonely servicemen in the Pacific.

RADIO ROW: Opening in 1921, several blocks of radio stores catered to the emerging technical field of “The wireless.” Some 30,000 radio salesmen were ‘your best friend’ in finding a critical part or tube for your home-built receiver.

WIRED RADIO: Almost a commercial success, limited in reach by its technology, *Wired Radio* did reach some listeners when conventional AM radio couldn’t.

...and...ADDITIONAL STORIES...JUST SO YOU KNOW

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