

The Golden Age of Radio

In the darkest hours of the Great Depression, reassurance and a little distraction came from a surprising place – out of thin air. Radio, invented by the Italian physicist Guglielmo Marconi at the end of the nineteenth century, had developed into a viable broadcast medium by the third decade of the twentieth. America’s first radio station, KDKA in Pittsburgh, went on the air November 2, 1920. By 1923 the first radio network had been set up, and by 1926 the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and Westinghouse had created the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), whose Blue and Red networks would come to dominate America’s airwaves.

During the 1930s, radio became an essential part of the country’s daily life. Through local and network programming, radio allowed the general public access to news, music, and other entertainment at the flip of a switch, free of charge so long as one could afford the cost of a receiver. For the first time in American history, people from all walks of life and in every region of the country found themselves participating in the same experience at the same time, whether they lived in rural communities or big cities.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, president from 1933 to 1945, used radio to deliver “fireside chats” that edified and inspired the public. Nothing in the nation’s history had prepared its citizens for the economic hardships of the Great Depression or the international crisis of the late 1930s, when Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese pushed the world toward war. President Roosevelt spoke simply

about issues relevant to the lives of all Americans: unemployment, the economy, national defense, and, ultimately, the need for America to enter World War II. Americans gathered around the radio and listened.

Radio sought both to educate and to entertain. Musical variety shows were popular, as were serial comedy shows like *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, which had a national audience estimated at 40 million – one third of the American population. Radio dramas were popular too, and the power of the new medium to persuade was thrillingly demonstrated on October 30, 1938, when the young Orson Welles produced a radio adaptation of H.G. Wells’ novella *The War of the Worlds* and delivered it in the style of a live news report. Thousands of Americans who tuned in late panicked, believing Martians were really attacking America.

During this golden age of radio, broadcasters maintained a strong commitment to “high culture” in their programming. In 1937, after the celebrated conductor Arturo Toscanini stepped down as music director of the New York Philharmonic, NBC created an orchestra especially for him to lead, and began a series of regular broadcasts from Studio 8H in Manhattan’s Rockefeller Center. For 17 years, until the maestro retired, these broadcast concerts were among the most listened-to programs on American radio.