



The

# Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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## What is This Thing Called Broadcasting? **Who's on First?**

*[May 2012] Words do matter. Trying to talk about something – and understand it – requires that both parties use words in the same way. Otherwise you might as well just enjoy Abbott and Costello.*

This past fall marked the 90th anniversary of the beginning of broadcasting. Or does it?

Whenever broadcasters get together to discuss the beginnings of the industry, it soon seems to sound something like the famous Abbott and Costello routine.

Trying to figure out "Who's on first?" often can easily turn into a frustrating, even maddening attempt to put a label on a moving target.

### WHAT KIND OF FIRST?

Was KDKA's appearance in November, 1920 that of the first broadcast station? If you read most textbooks, you will say yes. But is it really so – or are you simply repeating an industry myth that started 90 years ago?

The question really is difficult to answer, especially as one tries to define "broadcast." Was it operation on a regular schedule? A daily schedule? Was it continuous operation from some early date? Designed to be heard by the general public? Licensed by the US government?

Depending upon the criteria, many stations have strong claims for being first. And like Lou Costello, you may find a straight answer is somewhat elusive. Some of the contenders go way back.

### BROADCASTING BY WIRE

Under one definition, broadcasting might even be said to have started in the 1880s, when the Budapest Cable Company began sending out scheduled entertainment programs via telephone lines.

These broadcasts met several of the possible criteria. The Budapest Cable Company (perhaps called the BBC!) hired people with "specially loud voices" to read out the news. Hotels, restaurants, and other sites paid for the service so their clients could listen.

Of course, RF was not involved, but it was truly a "broadcast" in the sense of programming that went out to the general public at a variety of locations.

### REGULAR WIRELESS PROGRAMMING

Reading the various histories leads one to conclude that few of the men who started wireless broadcasting were concerned with being first. Mainly they were constantly working merely to keep a cranky transmitter, often with a flakey tube, on the air.

KCBS (originally "San Jose Calling", FN, 6XE, 6FX, SJN, then KQW) was built by Charles David Herrold in 1909 in San Jose, California.

Broadcasts of music from Herrold's School of Radio could be heard every Wednesday evening. Lee de Forest proclaimed Herrold's station as "the oldest broadcasting station in the whole world."

Using the link back to Herrold's ArcPhone station, KCBS calls itself "the longest continuously broadcasting station in the world," by a factor of at least a decade.

There were, however, transmissions of music via radio by the Belgian Post Office beginning in the same time period.

Perhaps you are beginning to agree, putting a finger on "who's first" can get complicated.

### **OLDEST IN THE NATION**

For example, WHA, originally 9XM, Madison Wisconsin was constructed by Earle Terry and his students.

The University of Wisconsin claims WHA "the Oldest Station in the Nation ... in existence longer than any other." Wireless experimentation at the University of Wisconsin had been going on from early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (perhaps telegraphy as early as 1902). 9XM was assigned in 1914, as the station experimented with telegraphy and telephony (voice), eventually becoming WHA. It certainly rivals KCBS. But there are other claimants to the title, too.

WWJ, originally 8MK, began its operations on August 20, 1920. The next night it broadcast the results of an election. The station was owned and operated by the Detroit News. It promoted itself as "WWJ Radio One, Where it All Began, August 20, 1920."

And then there is KDKA, originally 8XK.

### **KDKA AND WESTINGHOUSE**

Built by Dr. Frank Conrad of Westinghouse in 1916, it began playing music after the wartime ban on entertainment was lifted.

(Actually, *all* non-governmental stations were ordered off the air until the end of World War I. 8XK was one of the few stations (9XM was another) permitted to transmit from time to time to test military radio equipment manufactured

by Westinghouse. So, the validity of claims regarding "continuous" programming during the WWI period could be said to be a bit flimsy.)

You are sure to read many articles about KDKA in all sorts of publications.

What is not in debate is that the Department of Commerce (DOC) started issuing licenses for what would become the broadcast band as we know it in 1920. Experimental station 8XK in Pittsburgh, which was to become KDKA, was granted the first "Limited Commercial" license. Due to a delay in reception of the license, the station proceeded to broadcast the election returns on 330 meters (909 kHz) on November 2, 1920 under Special Amateur license 8ZZ.

The broadcast itself was hardly unique – a number of other stations did election news that very same night, and even previously (8MK/WWJ). However, the fledgling KDKA was different in that it did inaugurate a regular daily schedule of transmissions soon after. The parent company, Westinghouse, even had plans to start more stations if KDKA proved successful.

Another point: unlike today when it is a synonym for spot, in 1920, "Commercial" or "Limited Commercial" merely meant that a station was permitted to charge money their services. The earliest stations using telegraphy to send/receive messages were "commercial," the same as KDKA, and all the three and four lettered broadcasters and ship-to-shore stations.

### **WHAT IS IT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT?**

However, the full story of how radio broadcasting grew in those days is less than crystal clear.

It is evident that very few – including the government – really had any clue as to the future of the new "wireless" medium. By 1920, there had been an assortment of stations in the seven categories (Public Service, Limited Commercial, Experimental, Technical and Training School, General Amateur, Special Amateur, and Restricted) had already transmit-

ted everything from earlier election returns to music to dramatic readings.

And a whole range of them there were, indeed.

Early stations included Experimentals such as de Forest's "High Bridge" station, 2XG in New York City, and the "California Theater" station, 6XC in San Francisco, American Radio and Research Corporation's 1XE in Medford Hillside, Massachusetts, Technical and Training School station 9YY at the University of Nebraska, General Amateur 8MK from the Detroit News, and 8ZAE, the forerunner of KQV in Pittsburgh.

The term "broadcasting" finally found its way into government publications in 1921. On December 1, 1921 two wavelengths were formally set aside for a special service category within the "Limited Commercial" class of stations.

The regulations read: "Licenses of this class are required for all transmitting stations used for broadcasting news, concerts, lectures, and like matter."

### **I WANT TO BROADCAST, TOO!**

Getting a license in those early days was much less formal than it was after 1927 when the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) was put into place.

Basically, anyone filing a request with any of the nine regional Radio Inspectors of the Department of Commerce (DOC) Bureau of Navigation was given a license, as a matter of registration. Many companies and schools sought licenses to ensure they were not left behind. The year 1922 saw a real flood of applications, fighting for – at the time – a shared time slot on the one national frequency. As a result, some of these early "grants" were never in fact even built.

In 1927 a familiar phrase was introduced by the FRC, licensing stations to serve the public "convenience, interest, or necessity." Additionally more concrete requirements were set out for new stations. The FRC moved to reduce the number of stations operating in many areas.

### **WHO'S ON FIRST?**

So who was on first?

In the end, it does not really matter. What does matter is that Broadcasting started.

And, as we see today, there is plenty of interesting broadcast history to go around. From one licensed station in 1920 to the more than 15,000 on the air today, broadcasting has truly become a major factor in the development of society in this century.

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