



Overview of the Early History of Radio



A farming family listens to the radio in Michigan, c. 1930

Before the Internet, and before television, there was radio. Building on the research and experiments of earlier scientists, the Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi was able to complete the first documented transmission of wireless radio signals across the Atlantic Ocean in 1902. Radio quickly came to have many industrial applications, and played an important role in military communications during World War I.

At first, radio technology was primarily used for direct communication between individuals. But entrepreneurs quickly realized its enormous commercial potential. Manufacturers of radio devices sought new markets for their products, and by the early 1920s, commercial radio—which allowed ordinary citizens to sit in their living rooms and listen to programs broadcast over the airwaves—began to take hold.

By the middle of the decade, there were hundreds of radio stations throughout the nation. They broadcast news, live sporting events, live music, and dramatic shows. Networks, such as NBC (founded in 1926) and CBS (founded in 1927), connected dozens of stations and offered coast-to-coast programming. By the end of the decade, Americans had spent an estimated \$850 million on radios, and the major networks could charge advertisers thousand of dollars to sponsor their programs.

By 1930, an estimated 40 percent of U.S. households owned a radio; by the late 1940s, that number had grown to more than three-quarters of U.S. households. Radio remained the center of the American broadcasting world until the rise of television in the late 1950s.