



Group Two: The Golden Age of Radio in the 1930s

Radio came into its own as a major force in American society and culture in the 1930s. Dramas, comedies, concerts, variety shows, and broadcasts of baseball games, boxing matches, and other sporting events regularly drew huge audiences. Radio created its own set of entertainment superstars, such as singers Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor and comedians Jack Benny and the husband-and-wife team of George Burns and Gracie Allen. Americans adjusted their schedules to listen to popular series such as *Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy*, *The Goldbergs*, *Dick Tracy*, and *The Chase & Sanborn Hour*, a popular music and variety show. During the Great Depression, radio offered free entertainment to those who could not afford movie tickets or music hall admission.



Radio listening was often a group activity, and radios came to occupy a central place in many homes, as shown in the picture above. It required the active participation of listeners, who employed their imaginations to build upon the sounds of radio broadcasts. Believable sound effects were a critical element of radio shows and were created in a variety of ways. For a demonstration of how these sound effects were created, watch the video clip from a short film called "Behind the Mike," which shows of a boy listening to an action drama about the efforts of a small community to catch a gang of thieves.

Radio also gave rise to many political, religious, and news personalities, such as gossip columnist Walter Winchell and newscaster Edward R. Murrow, who would go on to report to the American public throughout World War II. Father Charles Coughlin, a controversial priest who held anti-Semitic views and preached against the dangers of communism, effectively used radio to build a mass following. And Franklin D. Roosevelt became the first U.S. president to speak directly to the American public through mass media when he created the "Fireside Chats," a series of evening radio

broadcasts that began in 1933. FDR initially used his Fireside Chats to promote the policies and programs of the New Deal—which were aimed at combating the effects of the Great Depression—directly to the American people. Listen to the clip of one of FDR’s 1933 Fireside Chats.

Perhaps no broadcast better demonstrates the power of radio in this decade than the 1938 dramatization of H. G. Wells’ novel *War of the Worlds*, performed by actor/director Orson Welles’ Mercury Theater of the Air. The broadcast was so realistic that many listeners mistook it for a live news report of a Martian invasion. A headline in *The New York Times* the following morning read “Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact.” Listen to a short excerpt from the program, in which a “reporter” describes the alien creatures emerging from their spaceship, which has landed somewhere in New Jersey.

Discussion Questions:

1. Being as used to video as we are today, are you surprised at the extent to which an audio-only medium such as radio became so popular in the 1930s? Why or why not?
2. Watch the clip from the film “Behind the Mike.” What is the difference between what is actually happening in the radio studio, and what the little boy imagines is taking place? Do you think the sound effects make the listening experience more enjoyable? Why or why not?
3. Do you think radio required more creativity and imagination on the part of its audience than television and movies? Do you consider the need to imagine visual images to be an advantage or a disadvantage?
4. Listen to the clip from FDR’s Fireside Chat. What topic does Roosevelt discuss? How might listening to this chat on the radio be different than listening to a policy speech at a public event? Why might a radio broadcast be a good way to promote a new policy?
5. Listen to the clip from the 1938 *War of the Worlds* broadcast. Remember that this was an entertainment program, not an actual alien invasion! How did the creators of the broadcast use sound to make the events sound real? What might the audience have been visualizing as they listened to the program? Why do you think so many listeners so readily succumbed to fear of an invasion in 1938? What other events were going on in the world at the time, particularly in Europe, that might have made many Americans fearful at this time?