The Future of Radio

Radio Amateur News, vol. 1 no. 4

October 1919

DRAFT: *Please do not share without permission of the author. Typeset versions in web / pdf / doc*

FROM time immemorial, crass ignorance and great scientific discoveries have cheerfully trotted side by side. Whether it was Columbus discovering a new world, or whether it was Galileo who maintained that the world was turning around the sun and not *vice versa*—a stupid and narrow humanity was ever ready to step in and command a threatening *Halt!* to scientific exploits.

It is no different with radio. No sooner has the new art demonstrated its inconceivable boon to the world that some well-meaning but misguided official steps up and frantically tries to shackle it down, hands, body and feet.

We ask ourselves with horror what would have happened to our telephones if our Government had taken control of them in the early eighties, as was the case in most European countries. Today there are more telephones in New York City than in France and Belgium combined. A single New York building—the Hudson Terminal building—has more telephones than all of Greece!

Now Europe needs the telephone no less than America, but it has been proved time and again that it is the Government control which retards development. As soon as the Government steps in, competition as well as the natural development ceases—the art decays.[1]

[1] A similar model of state ownership in Europe emerged for radio with the explosion of a listening public over the next decade. In a 1927 *New York Times* editorial response to H.G. Wells's views on the poor quality of broadcast content, Gernsback not only accuses Wells of a Eurocentric elitism, but also argues that the situation Wells describes in Europe—an emphasis on trivial entertainment over worthwhile news and information—is a direct product of the state ownership of broadcast stations.

> In America no fees are paid by listeners. In Europe fees vary from 50 cents upward a month. Practically all European broadcasting is Government controlled, which probably accounts for the fact that it has never attained the high plane it has reached in America. Furthermore, it is conceded by authorities that

If this is true of the telephone and telegraph, how much truer is it of Radio? And particularly Radio in the United States—the land of enormous distances, where Radio will be more necessary within twenty-five years than the wire telephone is to-day.

We are certain that if the men who now advocate Government Radio control were possest of but a little vision as to the marvelous future and the possibilities of Radio, they would recoil with horror at their preposterous suggestions.[2]

At the present the radio art comprises but two branches: Radio telegraphy and telephony. Before the war the latter was only a laboratory experiment. To-day sets are being sold at a low price that plug into your lamp socket and you can then talk to your friend thirty miles away—be he in the house, his auto, his yacht or in his airship. Soon every farmhouse will boast its radiophone. Every limousine will be equipt with it. How would these developments fare under Government control?

But these two applications are but a small part of the whole art of Radio. Take for instance *Distant Radio Control.* Switches can now be thrown by wireless a hundred miles away. Alarm horns can be sounded without wires from five to fifty miles distant.

Then we have the *Radio Telautomata,* as first invented by Nikola Tesla. This famous inventor has worked out plans whereby it is possible to send as ship across the Atlantic without a human being on board. The entire control is by radio; and the ship is guided unerringly to its harbor by a man who sits in an office building in New York. The ship automatically discloses its position hourly to its New York control office by means of the Radio Compass.

But one of the most important branches of the new art is undoubtedly *Radio Power Transmission.* Nikola Tesla, the inventor of the system, already demonstrated the feasibility of this in his famous colorado experiments in 1898. He was able to light lamps hundreds of feet away without the use of wires, using only a ground connection. To be sure no Hertzian waves were used in these experiments, but the transmission of energy was accomplished wirelessly.

European broadcasting is at least two years behind American broadcasting.

The editorial is a simultaneous defense of the lowbrow ("Mr. Wells . . . evidently hankers to listen constantly to the great, when a simple mathematical calculation would show that this would not be possible. There are not enough great people in this world.") and defense of privatized news and entertainment, since the American model seeks to provide the widest possible audience with diverse programming that is well-funded by advertising. Not only do American broadcast listeners hear the Moscow Art Orchestra's *Pagliacci,* visiting performers from the Metropolitan Opera, and personal addresses from President Coolidge, but they can also tune in to entertainment from comedic acts and popular bands.

Hugo Gernsback, "Wellsian Opinion of Radio Tinged with Provincialism," *The New York Times*, (April 1927).

[2]Gernsback is referring to Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels's suggestions to Congress for a bill keeping radio broadcasting under the control of the Navy. See also **Amateur Radio Restored.**

In the face of these developments in the Radio Act, who can doubt that the future will bring forth still more wonderful achievements, not to be imagined to-day by the most fervid imagination.

And now Washington officials once more threaten this art—a distinctly American art—the eighth wonder of the modern world. But the country at large wants no further harmful radio legislation, we are certain. On page 190 we found a few voices. Radio enthusiasts should read particularly Mr. Manderville's letter to his Senator—and follow suit. Let our slogan be: *"Hands off Radio.*"[3]

Radio Restrictions Off

Washington, Sept. 27—Effective Oct. 1, all restrictions on amateur radio stations are removed. This applies to amateur stations, technical and experimental stations at schools and colleges, and to all other stations except those used for the purpose of transmitting or receiving commercial traffic of any character. These restrictions on stations handling commercial traffic will remain in effect until the President proclaims that a state of peace exists.

Attention is invited to the fact that all licenses for transmitting stations have expired and that it will be necessary for the amateurs to apply to the Department of Commerce for new licenses. So far as amateurs are concerned, radio resumes its pre-war status under the Department of Commerce.

[3] Manderville's letter to his senator reads:

> The writer wishes to appeal to you to prevent, if possible, the control of all wireless telegraphic communication being placed in the hands of the Navy Department. He asks this in a dual capacity; first, as a private citizen who is a wireless amateur and vitally interested in wireless telegraphy, both as an electrical engineer and as an experimenter, and, second, as chief engineer of the T. W. Phillips Gas & Oil company, a public service corporation engaged in supplying gas to 20,000 consumers in Western Pennsylvania. … Navy control of wireless telegraphy spells death to both amateur and business use of this method of communication. Another point is that all wireless installations now are thoroly under government control in the hands of efficient officers of the Department of Commerce and there is no good reason for any change. … In closing I wish to point out that all the great advances in the use of wireless telegraphy and telephony have been made by amateurs or commercial companies.