Silencing America's Wireless

The Electrical Experimenter, vol. 5 no. 2

June 1917

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AS all our readers are aware the United States Government, thru the Navy Department, has issued orders thruout the land to cause the immediate dismantling of all radio stations, whether large or small, commercial or amateur, sending or receiving. All aerials have been ordered dismantled and apparatus packed away.

This action came as a great surprise to all patriotic amateurs, who for years past had been encouraged by the Government and who were certain that in time of war they would be allowed to "do their bit" with their outfits for the country.[1]

That the Government should silence all *sending* outfits was eminently proper, and we have as yet to hear the first complaint on that score. But why the *receiving* outfits should he dismantled by the Navy Department is very puzzling indeed.

President Wilson's Executive Order is based upon the Radio Act of 1912, which act however, mentions nothing about closing receiving stations during the time of war. That purely receiving stations were considered harmless by the framers of the law, is best proved by the fact that such stations do not require to be

[1] President Wilson's executive order not only shut down all sending and receiving stations in the country not yet under government control, it also assumed ownership of all wireless patents so that private firms could cooperate on new devices. "A government-imposed patent moratorium instructed all suppliers to make use of the best components, no matter who owned the patent. The government guaranteed to protect all suppliers against infringement claims and encouraged the inventors not to be oversensitive to relatively free use of their apparatus during the national emergency. Under this arrangement, with the inventors and radio companies concentrating less on marketing strategies and litigation, and more on research and development, significant advances in continuous wave technology were achieved. Civilian-military cooperation produced apparatus more ideally suited to the navy's special needs." Susan J Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922*, Johns Hopkins Studies in the History of Technology, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 278.

licensed as do all sending stations. Moreover, in President Wilsons's Executive Order of April 6, no mention is made of receiving stations. Indeed, the following passage strikes us as very significant:

> —and furthermore that all Radio Stations not necessary to the Government of the United States for *Naval Communications may* be closed for radio communication.

The italics are ours. Particularly the one word MAY. In the same paragraph the President uses the command SHALL, while the word *may* does not imply that every radio station should be taken over by the Navy Department. Indeed, the longer we study the third paragraph of the President's Executive order, the more we become convinced that the closing of every amateur station, or even commercial stations, was remote from President Wilson's mind when he issued his order.

EXECUTIVE ORDER

WHEREAS the Senate and House of Representatives of the States of America, in Congress assembled, have declared that a state of war exists between the United States and the Imperial German Government; and

Whereas it is necessary to operate certain radio stations for radio communication by the Government and to close other radio stations not so operated, to insure the proper conduct of the war against the Imperial German Government and the successful termination thereof

Now, therefore, it is ordered by virtue of authority vested in me by the Act to Regulate Radio Communication, approved August 13, 1912, that such radio stations within the jurisdiction of the United States as are required for Naval Communications shall be taken over by the Government of the United States and used and controlled by it, to the exclusion of any other control or use; and, furthermore, that all radio stations not necessary to the Government of the United States for Naval Communications may be closed for radio communication.

The enforcement of this order is hereby delegated to the Secretary of the Navy, who is authorized and directed to take such action in the premises as to him may appear necessary.

This order shall take effect from and after this date.

The White House, 6 April, 1917.

(Signed) Woodrow Wilson.

In conformity to the Radio Act of 1912, the President in time of war, may authorize any department of the Government to close all radio stations. But the President's order of April 6, was not to the Department of Commerce, which in the past controlled the nation's radio affairs, *but to the Navy Department.* Why? Because the President, it seems to us, had only the radio communications of the

Navy in mind. If, therefore, the Navy Department had caused the closing of all radio stations, particularly sending stations along our sea borders, such action would have seemed perfectly logical. But why the Navy Department should wish to close stations a thousand miles removed from the sea borders, seems to us very puzzling. Furthermore, why all college radio stations, and those belonging to radio apparatus manufacturers as well, should be dismantled seems far fetched. Then there are cases like the one of the Lackawanna Railroad, which is one of the pioneer railroads in the United States to use wireless for train dispatching. Is it wise to dismantle such stations on which the safety of passengers depends?[2]

We certainly have no quarrel with the Navy Department; quite the contrary. We wish to help, but we sincerely hope that its officials will soon find a way to modify its recent sweeping order.

There are, indeed, encouraging signs already. Certain commercial stations on the Pacific Coast have recently resumed operation, and it is to be hoped that amateurs will be allowed to operate their receiving stations, at a not too distant future.

[2]While the presence of local stations and a well-trained citizenry were important, Jonathan Reed Winkler argues that the Great War necessitated a holistic understanding of the United States's strategic interests within an increasingly global communications network:

> It was only during World War I that the United States first came to comprehend how a strategic communications network—the collection of submarine telegraph cables and long-distance radio stations used by a nation for diplomatic, commercial, and military purposes—was vital to the global political and economic interests of a great power in the modern world.

Jonathan Reed Winkler, *Nexus: Strategic Communications and American Security in World War I*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), 2.

The airwaves were thus increasingly seen as another territory to be defended in war and peacetime, especially at a moment in which the available broadcast spectrum—thanks to primitive tuning circuits—was thought to be limited to no more than twelve long-distance stations in the world at a time. See Ibid., , 251-3.

Also relevant here is Markus Krajewski's media archaeological account of attempts to configure and conceptualize the globe as a single system around the turn of the twentieth century. Markus Krajewski, *World Projects: Global Information Before World War I*, trans. Charles Marcrum II, (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2014).