

David Sarnoff

1891–1971



WHY HE MADE HISTORY David Sarnoff was instrumental in developing technologies that completely changed the way people spent their time and viewed the world.



As you read the biography below, think about what David Sarnoff created. How did national radio programming change Americans' lives? What changes did television bring? How did videotape and the VCR affect the media?



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David Sarnoff was born in Russia into great poverty. He came to New York with his family when he was nine years old. Six years later, in 1906, he took a job as an office boy in a telegraph office. Fascinated by the possibility of communication over the airwaves, Sarnoff worked his way up to a job as telegraph operator for the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company in New York.

On April 14, 1912, news came over the wire that the *Titanic* had hit an iceberg and was rapidly sinking beneath the cold waves of the North Atlantic. For the next 72 hours, Sarnoff stayed at his post, receiving and relaying information and messages with the tapping keys of his machine, trying to give answers and hope to the frantic families of those aboard the ship. Later retellings of this story have Sarnoff working single-handed through these hours, though it is likely that others were there as well.

This feat launched his career, first with the Marconi Company and then with the newly formed Radio Corporation of America (RCA). For the next eight years, he promoted the creation of a “radio music box.” Sarnoff predicted that with radios, music and news could be brought to every household in the country.

By 1920, KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, had become the first licensed radio station in the country. To demonstrate to RCA the potential of radio, in 1921 Sarnoff arranged for the live broadcast of a heavyweight title boxing match between Jack Dempsey and Georges Carpentier. Hundreds of thousands of listeners tuned in to this special event.

In 1922 Sarnoff began trying to convince RCA to create a broadcasting network that would provide programs to the entire country. Four years later, RCA created the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), the first radio chain in the country, which sent programs to hundreds of

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interconnected stations. By the end of the decade, most American homes had radios.

In the 1930s, now president of RCA, Sarnoff turned his attention to the possibility of television. He continued pushing and inspiring engineers and scientists to create and perfect this new technology. Almost as soon as black-and-white televisions hit the market, he predicted and encouraged the development of color. As president of NBC he oversaw production of the first videotaped telecast as well as the first made-for-television movie. Before his death in 1971, he predicted the development of the VCR.

The rest of his life was equally full. He served in the U.S. military in World War II, overseeing the communication systems used in the D-Day invasion. But Sarnoff was far from perfect. He was known to be ruthless with competitors, and he supported and even took some part in the boycotting of suspected Communists in the 1950s. His vision of the electronic media age, however, never faltered. No inventor himself, he allowed inventors the space, time, and support to create this new age.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** Name two events that allowed young Sarnoff to demonstrate his abilities to his superiors in the telecommunications field.

2. **Draw a Conclusion** Why do you think the U.S. military chose David Sarnoff to oversee the communication systems for the D-Day invasion in World War II?

3. **Evaluate** If Sarnoff had done nothing after 1930, his contribution to society would still be enormous. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

ACTIVITY

With a partner or small group of classmates, do some research into the history of radio programs. Possible topics include how live radio shows worked; the introduction of storytelling to radio in soap operas, adventure and mystery series, and popular movies re-created for radio; and the smaller, local stations that broadcast for specific audiences, specializing in one particular kind of music or programming. Share your findings with the rest of the class.