
A Half Century of Broadcasting in the Church

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"And this is the gospel, the glad tidings, which the voice out of heavens bore record unto us." The words were those of President Heber J. Grant, seventh president of the Church. The occasion: the first broadcast of the Church on the air. The date: May 6, 1922.

KSL-Radio (then licensed as KZN) had begun its first day of broadcasting in an improvised structure atop the Deseret News Building in downtown Salt Lake City.

President George Albert Smith, then a member of the Council of the Twelve, followed President Grant, extolling the wonders of the "wireless telephone." "I am grateful that my lot is cast among a people who look forward to every good thing for the benefit and uplift of mankind," he was reported as saying.

In the beginning there was a great deal of skepticism about the future of radio. Equipment and facilities were primitive, broadcasting range was limited, and technical skills were still in the experimental stage. To many people radio appeared to be an interesting innovation, with no particular attraction beyond the excitement of scratching around on a crystal set with a "cat's whisker," trying to pull in a signal strong enough to be heard above the crackling static. Few persons in that era, half a century ago, could visualize the worldwide potential of radio—let alone the prospect of sending messages and even pictures almost instantaneously from one hemisphere to another and from one planet to another.

To the General Authorities of the Church, however, the possibility of having the message of the gospel broadcast beyond the Salt Lake Valley, of seeing fulfillment of the prophecy that "every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue" (**D&C 90:11**), brought confidence and support for the new media.

The vision of blanketing the earth with gospel principles is still in the early stages today, but it is inching closer to reality. In the 1970s electronic communications have become a powerful influence throughout the world, as men are drawn closer to one another and to peoples in other lands.

In the '20s, the impact of radio grew quickly, and KSL, the Church-owned station, kept pace, with broadcast time expanded from an initial half hour a day to several hours daily, and the 250-watt transmitter replaced with larger ones. (Today, KSL operates twenty-four hours a day on a 50,000-watt transmitter, one of the nation's twelve most powerful clear-channel stations.)

The station joined one of the early networks, but much of the talent and programming was locally developed, and many stars and programs went on to regional and even national fame. Among the personalities whose talents were featured were Peter Spraynozzle and Harry Clarke; Parley Baer, who later became successful in movies and television; Rolfe Peterson, who took his disc jockey talk show to success on the West Coast; Foster Cope and Lowell Durham, conductors of the KSL Orchestra; the KSL Players, who wrote and produced many original dramas; the late Rod O'Connor, who became Red Skelton's announcer on network radio and television for many years; and Ken Sansom, who is now appearing in movies and television commercials from Hollywood.

Perhaps the best-known program that originates through KSL-Radio and Television is the Tabernacle

Choir broadcast, now the longest continuing program on the air.

When the station was just one year old, in 1923, the first broadcast of a session of general conference took place. The following year all of the proceedings were broadcast, a practice that continues to the present time.

But with such progress, there were the inevitable “snafus.” During one early October general conference broadcast, conference-goers in the Tabernacle on Temple Square were startled to suddenly hear, through the public address system, a world series baseball game. Someone at the station had pulled the wrong switch! So for seven minutes the Tabernacle was flooded with the play-by-play action of a second-base steal while Presiding Bishop **Sylvester Q. Cannon** dashed across the street to the studio on top of the Union Pacific Building to reverse the switch and restore reverence at conference.

This year—1972—KSL is celebrating its golden anniversary in broadcasting. In the past half century the communications industry has turned radio from a novelty into a powerful force. In the United States alone, there are today more than 350 million radios.

The growth of the medium is similar throughout the world, particularly since the invention and perfection of the battery-operated transistor, making it possible for persons in even the most remote areas—from Australian sheep stations to Asian rice paddies, from African jungles to outlying mountain areas—to be in daily contact with the world for information and entertainment.

In recent years the Church formed Bonneville International Corporation, which provides management of a network that presently consists of KSL-AM-FM-TV, Salt Lake City; WRFM and WNYW, New York; KBIG and KXTZ-FM, Los Angeles; KIRO-AM-FM-TV, Seattle; WCLR, Skokie/Chicago; and KMBZ-AM and KMBR-FM, Kansas City. These stations have a potential audience of over 40 million people—about one-fifth of the population of the United States.

Reviewing the history of radio and television in the Church, Arch L. Madsen, president of Bonneville International, commented recently: “I look at this golden anniversary celebration as only a warm-up of what the electronics media are going to do in the future.”

He explained that under Federal Communications Commission regulations, the stations of Bonneville International operate “in the public interest, convenience, and necessity.”

“In response to this charter, we are anxious to continue providing programs that provide outstanding service and that win national awards and recognition, such as for community services, editorials, documentaries, and newscasting, and for presenting material of a high spiritual tone.

“Since the early days of radio there have been many changes in communications as a whole. Who would have dreamed years ago of a satellite up in outer space? The word orbit was hardly in our vocabulary even twenty years ago. I think you would have been called insane if you had said you were going to put an object into space and that it would remain up there, steadily, reliably, relaying sounds between cities and continents on the earth.”

Why is the Church engaged in so significant a role in the communications media? “Because of its commitment to reach as many people as possible with interesting material relating to the significant issues of our day,” said Elder Madsen. “If we are going to talk with someone, we must first get his attention; to get his attention, we may have to inform or entertain him. We could broadcast the Book of Mormon and the Bible for twenty-four hours a day. Or we could read the Constitution, or the classics.

But listeners would not be there for long. But if we can program for mass audiences, then bit by bit we can make vital information palatable. The greatest challenge we have in the world today is to take the communications media and put them to the best use."

An important area in Church broadcasting is a division of Bonneville International known as program services, which produces and distributes programs of general interest. The division develops radio spots and programs, motivational and teaching aids, and sound tracks for pageants and theatrical productions. It produces recordings for the Utah Symphony, the Mormon Youth Symphony and Chorus, general conferences, and other special events, often in several languages. It also manufactures cassette tapes and distributes audio tapes, records, and printed matter to approximately 2,000 radio and television stations in twenty-seven countries.

A current example of this public service is a campaign of thirty-second radio spots entitled "Homefront," which are distributed throughout the United States to encourage involvement of parents to a greater degree in the lives of their children. The closing line of one of these spots carries a great message in itself: "Next time you give your child a present, give him your time—it's what he's always needed." This campaign is currently being carried on more than 700 radio and 150 television stations, including two stations in New York, where the potential audience is sixteen million. Stations in the Los Angeles area are also broadcasting "Homefront" to a potential listening audience of seven million.

The messages all close with these words: "A thought from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

Among the most popular programs of Bonneville program services are TV films of Brigham Young University basketball games, which appeal particularly to Latin Americans. Announcers at Cougar games call the play-by-play action in Spanish and in Portuguese.

The names of two Latter-day Saints are prominent on the list of scientists who have made great contributions to the growth of radio and television.

One is Philo T. Farnsworth, born in Beaver, Utah, who was in his teens when he first envisioned the fundamentals of television. By the time he was twenty-three he was able to demonstrate his theories on a crude, homemade box invention. The figure of a little man, cut from paper by the inventor's wife, appeared dancing on a small screen.

Inventions to which Philo Farnsworth contributed basic concepts include electronic scanning (involving the cathode ray tube and photoelectric cell) used in TV broadcasting, and the astonishing feat of picking up celestial starlight and transmitting it to a receiving screen.

The other scientist is Dr. Harvey Fletcher, a native of Provo, Utah, who is noted for his many electronic inventions, including the audiometer, high fidelity, and stereophonic sound. Today, at 87, the noted physicist is still deeply involved in the mysteries of sound.

Thus, we see that the Church was in on the birth of the electronic age. The wide coverage of the recent April general conference sessions is indicative of the progress that has been made since President Grant gave his first broadcast message.

While it is impossible to accurately count the number of listeners and viewers of the conference, some 125 radio and 235 television stations carried portions of the proceedings through direct broadcast and telecast, satellite relay, telephone circuitry, shortwave radio, oceanic cable, video tape, audio tape, and

closed circuit transmission. Portions of the conference—ranging from the probable minimum of one address up to the entire conference proceedings—may have been received by an audience numbering into the millions.

Areas in which portions of the general sessions were received include sections of Mexico, Central America, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Ecuador, the Caribbean, the Pacific, Africa, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Holland, and France, as well as the United States and Canada.

The Saturday evening general priesthood session was also heard in 724 chapels in the U.S. and Canada via closed circuit radio transmission.

Rebroadcasts of conference, ranging from portions to all sessions, were carried over many other stations, including the Armed Forces Radio and the Voice of America.

And while electronic communications cannot replace the person-to-person relationship, the proceedings received by non-Mormon listeners and viewers help increase and broaden general knowledge about the Church, and they reach many who might not otherwise hear about its message.

When the Prophet Joseph Smith spoke of the gospel's being taught on every continent, he must have believed that there would someday be means of accomplishing this objective. With each advance in technology, the Church is further able to fulfill this great commitment.

“For verily the voice of the Lord is unto all men, and there is none to escape, and there is no eye that shall not see, neither ear that shall not hear, neither heart that shall not be penetrated.” (**D&C 1:2.**)

Gospel topic: media

[map] Map shows areas where parts or all of April general conference sessions were broadcast throughout the world

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