

Westinghouse Radio Stations During WWII

By Brian Belanger

Among the myriad of obscure materials in the museum library is the book *The Story of the Westinghouse Radio Stations in World War II*, published in 1946. (Most of the illustrations in this article—unfortunately, many are of poor quality—are from this Westinghouse publication.) As the war began Westinghouse owned six AM broadcast band stations: WBZ (Boston), WBZA (Springfield, MA), KDKA (Pittsburgh), WOWO (Fort Wayne, IN), KYW (Philadelphia), and KEX (Portland, OR). All were affiliated with the NBC networks at the beginning of the war. Westinghouse also owned international shortwave station WBOS in Boston. All contributed to the war effort.

Before describing war-time activities, the book begins by reviewing the history of how Westinghouse created pioneer Pittsburgh station KDKA in November 1920, established other stations, and expanded its broadcasting activities during the two decades preceding WWII. Of course, radio broadcasting to homes had not been in place during WWI, so there was no precedent for how radio broadcasters should gear up for war.

The description of the company's efforts to inform the public during the war begins with this summary of broadcasting just prior to the war:

The story of radio's and particularly our station group's part in the war effort can perhaps best begin at the point in 1938 when on September 12 our stations by means of their network affiliations brought a complete coverage to their listeners of the Sudetan crisis, starting with Hitler's Nuremberg address and continuing until the Munich Peace Pact was signed. It might be said that at that time the American public became fully conscious of the tremendous possibilities inherent in radio for bringing the news of world-shaking

events directly to them without the loss of any time. Again, in 1939, during August and September, our stations, by means of their network affiliations, covered the mounting war crisis through correspondents in Europe's capitals, heard at frequent intervals. The first declaration of war ever heard by radio was carried on the networks, as Prime Minister Chamberlain of Great Britain replied to Hitler. These events were followed in December of that same year by graphic eyewitness accounts of the scuttling of the German Battleship GrafSpee, broadcast from Montevideo, Uruguay, by James Bowen.

From that time on through the period when the United States was engaged in its National



This famous WWII morale poster was developed by Westinghouse's J. H. Miller in 1943. Today we would say "it went viral!"



Soon after the war started, the government began urging people to save and contribute key materials like scrap metal, paper, and fat. With Asian supplies cut off, rubber was a critical material. Westinghouse's Philadelphia station KYW held a one-day rubber drive that salvaged 19,000 pounds!

Defense program and later after we had actively joined the war against both Germany and Japan, up until the final declaration of peace following the defeat of Germany and Japan in 1945, radio played a tremendous part in bringing to the American people swift and authentic news broadcasts, and in promoting the various government enterprises in connection with, first, national defense and later the war effort and in countless other ways.

Westinghouse argues (and I think they are right) that radio coverage of the bombing of London increased sympathy for aiding England, and convinced Americans that our nation needed to prepare for the possibility of being drawn into the war. The dramatic radio coverage of the bombing of Pearl Harbor with the associated huge loss of American lives no doubt helped unite the public behind the war effort.

Both NBC and Mutual rushed to beef up their news coverage as the war began. But most broadcast historians give CBS (and its news department head, Paul White) credit for having the best WWII news coverage thanks to newscaster Edward R. Murrow and his team of European correspondents.

Within days of Pearl Harbor, Westinghouse and other radio broadcasters modified operations to put them on a war footing, in some cases with orders from the Federal government, and in other cases, due to company decisions. Radio stations were deemed strategic assets for fighting the war and so the potential for sabotage had to be considered. Prior to the war Westinghouse stations encouraged visitors, but once



Blood drives were another way to contribute to the war effort. This one at Fort Wayne station WOWO was broadcast live, with the announcer urging listeners to “come on down and roll up your sleeves.”

our nation entered the war, only visitors with a reason to visit were allowed, and they were required to show an official visitor card. State Police increased patrols of transmitter sites and some station personnel carried small arms. Floodlights were often installed at transmitter sites to discourage sabotage.

Meetings were held to develop new procedures to prevent stations from being used by anyone disloyal. “Man-on-the-street” interviews and requests to play particular songs were prohibited lest they be used by spies as a code to transmit information. Weather reports were limited to warnings of hurricanes and floods so that an enemy could not use weather forecasts to plan an attack. Programs were urged to avoid using sound effects such as air raid sirens or battle noise, and after the uproar about Orson Welles’ “War of the Worlds” broadcast that frightened many who believed the invasion from Mars was real, stations were told not to use any scripts that might sound like an actual attack was taking place. Advertisers were told not to use any commercials that use the war or sufferings of troops to sell products.

Two days after Pearl Harbor, Lee Wailes, the manager of Westinghouse’s broadcast operations, sent the following letter to all Westinghouse station managers:

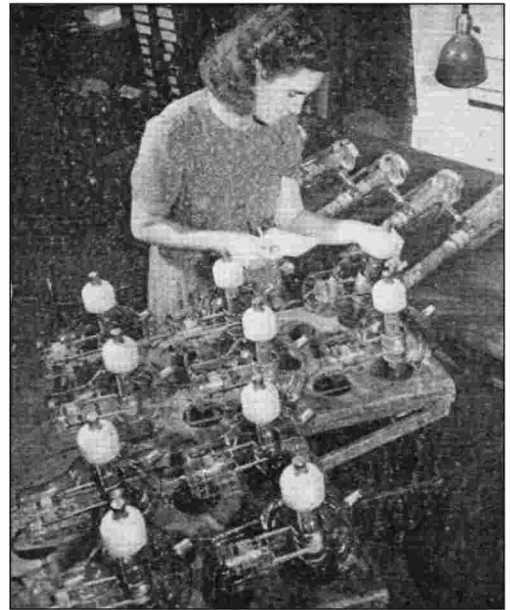
The following confirms in some aspects our telephone conversations of the past two days, and supplements such conversations. Please be guided accordingly.

It is important at all times, but particularly so now, that each station be organized in such a way that the extraordinary demands that may be anticipated during the time of this emergency will find us shipshape. I would like for you to select two men and designate them at this time as the number 2 and number 3 men in the station. These men should be instructed by you as to their responsibility and authority, should occasion arise for either of them to act as Manager of the station. The personnel of your station should be notified of the selections. Please see that this is done right away and send me the names of the individuals selected. Also insure that at all times, either you, the number 2 or number 3 man is present at your station during the business day. Arrangements should be made so that any one of the three top men may be contacted 24 hours a day.

These are times completely unique in the history of radio broadcasting. Every effort must be made to insure strictest discipline, attention to duty and undivided loyalty. I believe it is desirable that you call a general meeting of the entire station staff including artists. At this meeting you should deliver your instructions, clarify the organizational set-up of the station and call for intelligent co-operation on the part of every individual active in the operation of your station.



KDKA teamed with the U.S. Marine Corps for a "Free a Marine" recruiting night, encouraging women to enlist thereby freeing men for combat jobs. This swearing-in ceremony involved 40 new recruits, and was broadcast live nationally.



While Westinghouse radio stations were doing all they could to win the war, Westinghouse factories were working around the clock to turn out war materiel, such as the transmitting tubes shown here.

The activities at all 6 of our broadcasting stations must be thoroughly coordinated during these times, and I must be informed immediately by each of you of any developments of an unusual nature affecting your operations. I must know immediately of any contacts by the Army or Navy or civilian bodies of other than routine nature.

The most intelligent use of news bulletins must be made, and while complete service must be rendered our listeners, it is desirable that we refrain from putting bulletins on the air, the authenticity of which we have reason to doubt, or the nature of which might cause undue alarm on the part of our listeners. Every effort should be made to retain the smooth programming characteristic of your station in normal times.

Although the War Department, in a bulletin this morning, stated that it will supply casualty lists to radio stations, I feel that broadcasting such lists would be very inadvisable. Upon contacting NAB by 'phone this afternoon, I am advised that the NAB after conversations with the War Department today, are suggesting to all radio stations that casualty lists should not be broadcast. A special NAB bulletin is being issued and should be in your hands tomorrow or the next day on this and allied subjects.

The FCC announced today that radio broadcasting stations are placed under the authority of the Army

Interceptor Command. You will therefore look to that command for government orders affecting your operations during this emergency.

If requests or instructions are received from other than the Interceptor Command, they should be complied with if, in your judgment, they come from official sources, and in all such cases you should procure the name of the individual transmitting the request to you. A call back by telephone to the office of the individual will enable you to confirm the request. Be on the alert for Fifth Column activities, particularly in the form of requested announcements.

Property at each station must be adequately protected, and if necessary, the commanding officer of the Corps area in which you are located should be contacted to arrange for any additional protection which you feel is necessary at this time. I don't believe that it is necessary to refuse admittance of visitors to your studios, but alert watch must be kept in and around your control room so that access to it may not be forced.

The competitive nature of broadcasting remains unchanged. It is essential, therefore, that every employee at Westinghouse Radio Stations operate in a heads-up manner, and that each Westinghouse Station shall preserve and even improve its competitive position in its own locality.