

David Sarnoff

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Biography

David Sarnoff's vision, inexhaustible energy, and aggressive personality led to the creation of 20th century [radio \(/Radio\)](#) and [television \(/Television\)](#) broadcasting and the roots of our wireless communications today.

Sarnoff was born on 27 February 1891, the oldest of five children, outside Minsk in imperial Russia. He and his family immigrated to the United States in 1900 and settled on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Sarnoff's first job was as a newsboy; the existence of so much information so cheaply available was a revelation. At fifteen, his grade schooling finished, to support his family he found a job as a messenger boy for the Commercial Cable Company. When his boss refused him time off for Rosh Hashanah, he joined the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company of America as an office boy and then a telegrapher.

Driven to have an impact on the information industry, Sarnoff was by 1912 managing the new Marconi station atop Wanamaker's department store in Manhattan. During the sinking of *Titanic*, Sarnoff sent and received wireless messages for 72 hours, gathering names of survivors for anxious relatives. Sarnoff learned about the business, the technology, and the customers, and more promotions followed.

In 1917, [General Electric \(/General_Electric_\(GE\)\)](#) bought American Marconi and combined its radio patents to form a new telecommunications company, the [Radio Corporation of America \(RCA\) \(/RCA_\(Radio_Corporation_of_America\)\)](#). Sarnoff was promoted to general manager of RCA in 1921. Although he had advocated broadcasting entertainment and information since 1915,

his superiors continued to focus on point-to-point communications. That July, he helped promote a boxing match as the first broadcast sports event. Up to 300,000 people listened, helping drive sales of home radios, and RCA became a much larger company than anyone else foresaw.

But Sarnoff was not satisfied with home radio's success. He advocated the merger of radio with the [phonograph \(/Phonograph\)](#), [portable radios \(http://te.ieeeusa.org/2013/Oct/history.asp\)](http://te.ieeeusa.org/2013/Oct/history.asp), network broadcasting (NBC), and development of sound on film for the movie industry. In addition, from 1929 to 1939, as RCA's president during the Depression, he allocated \$10 million to develop an electronic television system, based largely on the work of [Vladimir Zworykin, \(/Vladimir_Zworykin\)](#) who invented a practical electronic camera tube. When other developers and their patents got in Sarnoff's way, he fought them hard. [Philo T. Farnsworth \(/Philo_T._Farnsworth\)](#) was one of the few who stood up to Sarnoff and won, while joining with RCA to advocate commercial TV in 1940-41.

During World War II Sarnoff served as a U.S. Army officer after bigotry kept him from serving in the U.S. Navy during World War I. He served on General Dwight Eisenhower's staff, helping coordinate allied communications for the invasion of Europe, and was promoted to brigadier general. For the rest of his life, he would be addressed as "General." After the war, Sarnoff championed electronic color television in an eight-year battle with rival company CBS, which advocated an electromechanical system. His support of innovation at the RCA Laboratories, renamed the David Sarnoff Research Center in Princeton, New Jersey, led to the establishment of a color TV standard in 1953.

Sarnoff continued to support innovation in communications technologies, including flat-panel displays, satellites, and low-power solid-state electronics with a vision of enabling people around the world to communicate with each other in 2000 by "voice, sight, or written message" on handheld devices. Although he knew he would not see their appearance, Sarnoff enjoyed visiting RCA's labs and attended the dress rehearsal for RCA's introduction of the liquid crystal display (LCD) in 1968. By then he suffered from a mastoid infection that ultimately left him deaf, dumb, and blind, communicating only by tapping Morse code into an associate's hand. On 12 December 1971, Sarnoff passed away and is buried at Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, New York.

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David Sarnoff

Birthdate

1891/02/27

Birthplace

Minsk, Russian Empire

Death date

1971/12/12

Associated organizations

[RCA \(Radio Corporation of America\)](#)

[\(/RCA_\(Radio_Corporation_of_America\)\)](#)