

Full Comcast ownership is latest chapter in long history for broadcasting pioneer NBC

The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) -- NBC got its start in 1926 as the nation's first radio network. Its parent company, the Radio Corporation of America, figured people would buy radios if they had interesting things to listen to.

NBC was the leading radio network in the early years, so powerful in those days that it had two networks: NBC-Red and NBC-Blue. It was forced by the Federal Communications Commission in the early 1940s to divest itself of one network. NBC-Blue eventually became ABC. In fact, all three original broadcast networks can be traced back to NBC. One of its original owners, Westinghouse Electric Co., bought CBS in 1995.

Some of NBC's radio profits were funneled into researching the new television technology. NBC began television broadcasts in 1939 by covering the opening of the New York World's Fair.

RCA's chief David Sarnoff took to the airwaves to introduce that broadcast, and his description of the moment - "the birth of a new art bound to affect all society" - was prescient and maybe even understated.

In 1947 came the first NBC program that's still around today - Sunday morning's "Meet the Press." NBC had television's first big hit in "Texaco Star Theater" with Milton Berle. Many people bought their first TVs, or crowded around the few ones available, to see a comic who'd mine for laughs each week by wearing a dress.

Though it faced fierce competition over the decades, NBC was formidable in the 1990s, with Thursdays declared a "must-see" night of television. The network's run of memorable series including "Cheers," "Seinfeld," "ER," "Frasier," "Friends" and "The West Wing" represented a golden age.

NBC's decline has been slow, steady and sad. Its "must-see" series all ran their course, replaced by nothing comparable. Each of their rivals minted influential, highly popular reality series, including Fox's "American Idol" and CBS' "Survivor." Until this fall, NBC sagged in fourth place, struggling to find a hit. Looking to pare the costs of producing scripted shows, NBC even brought Jay Leno to prime time in 2009, only to reverse course.

In selling a controlling stake to Comcast Corp. in 2011, General Electric Co. began to unravel part of the legacy of former Chairman Jack Welch. In 1986, he had bought RCA and NBC to help his industrial conglomerate get a reliable source of cash while overseas manufacturing competition loomed.

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Under Comcast, NBC did better than expected during last summer's Olympics and began showing clear signs of a comeback, improving ratings after nearly sliding into irrelevancy over the previous decade.

It had a new hit in "The Voice" and a consistent ratings leader in "Sunday Night Football" during the fall and early winter. By last fall, NBC could boast that it was drawing the most viewers in the 18-to-49-year-old demographic prized by advertisers for the first time in a decade.

Overall, NBC still ranked behind CBS and ABC, but at least it was no longer bringing up the rear in fourth place, as had been the case for several years.

With Tuesday's deal, Comcast would get full ownership. GE would end its ties with the network - one that dates back to NBC's origins. Until RCA became the sole owner of NBC in 1932, GE owned the company along with RCA and Westinghouse

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