

Sarnoff at Seventy-five

By JOHN TEBBEL



David Sarnoff—"one of the great success stories."

—Karsh of Ottawa.

THERE IS no one quite like David Sarnoff in American corporate life today. Seventy-five years old on February 27, at an age when most hard-driving executives are dead, nursing heart conditions, living in warm climates, or at best serving as honorary chairmen of the board, Sarnoff is still at the helm and in firm control of the largest communications organization in the world, the Radio Corporation of America, which does nearly \$2 billion worth of business annually and employs 100,000 people. The RCA complex is based solidly in radio and television, but it also includes phonograph records, sound film, various kinds of automation equipment, and electronic devices for rockets, missiles, and satellites. At the moment it is adding book publishing, particularly educational materials.

This incredibly complicated worldwide and spacewide network of men and machines is, more than any other comparable enterprise in America, the work of a single man—the man who sits in a vaguely eighteenth-century paneled office on the 53rd floor of the RCA Building in Rockefeller Center. His son, Robert W., became president on January 1 this year, and Dr. Elmer Engstrom, who had occupied that chair, moved over to be chief executive officer and chairman of the executive committee. In this shuffle Sarnoff himself relinquished the chief executive title, remaining as chairman of the board under a new five-year contract. But regardless of what title is on the door of his office, no one is under any illusion about who rules the RCA kingdom.

Last month, General Sarnoff, as he

likes to be and is customarily called, was celebrating not only his birthday but the publication of the first full-length biography of him, titled simply *David Sarnoff*, by the veteran journalist, Eugene Lyons, who happens also to be his first cousin. (See Paul Hoffman's review in last week's issue). Whatever the public may think of it—and there were 20,000 copies of the book in print as of mid-February—the result has not wholly satisfied either subject or author. It is, so to speak, a biography by consensus.

Lyons, a senior editor of *Reader's Digest*, biographer of Herbert Hoover, editor of the *American Mercury* in its better days, and once the United Press's man in Moscow, found himself confronting one of the most difficult assignments in a lengthy career when he undertook the biography of his cousin David. There was, to begin with, the scarcity of printed and documentary source material. As this writer can testify, having written a short biography of Sarnoff for young readers two years ago, the long gray rows of filing cabinets in the RCA executive suites contain precious little that is biographical. When it is all gathered, it barely fills two large manila folders. Contrary to what some of his detractors may imply, Sarnoff has always avoided personal publicity, as those relatively empty files attest. There are, of course, hundreds of speeches, thousands of letters, and innumerable memos. Most of these, neatly bound and classified, are in Sarnoff's own library in his six-story, thirty-room town house on East Seventy-first Street.

That collection, and RCA's own voluminous documents, await the attention of some future business biographer. Lyons's professional instincts, however, told him that in Sarnoff's life he had one of the greatest personal success stories in the history of American industry. Some of its elements were nineteenth-century traditional—the story of the little immigrant boy from a tiny Russian village who comes to the promised land and rises to wealth and fame.

The general is irked by those who use the Horatio Alger cliché to describe his rise, and with good reason. Despite popular belief, Alger's heroes did not climb the ladder by reason of hard work and virtue, but were translated from pious poverty to the beginnings of affluence by fortuitous circumstances, like saving bankers' daughters from runaway horses. Sarnoff readily admits that a few such circumstances, some of them spectacular, shaped his own career, but these are far overshadowed by other ingredients, and he insists that his greatest piece of luck was the day he arrived in America.

To Alger's heroes, moreover, success meant riches and position. Sarnoff has never cared much about either, although he is naturally gratified by what he has achieved. Like his late friend Bernard Baruch, Sarnoff did not even begin to amass the wealth that could have been his if money had been his goal. Neither man's fortune would place him in the list of the major American accumulators.

What *were* the Sarnoff goals, then? As Lyons points out, they were both tech-

nological and sociological. Sarnoff's special genius has been his ability to understand the scientific development of communications, to forecast its progress better than anyone else, and to foresee the means by which technology could be shaped into consumer goods. He has always been at once fascinated by theoretical science itself, and absorbed with devising the methods to convert its laboratory results into a constant pushing back of social frontiers.

In the process of carrying out these aims, Sarnoff's life has been an absorbing struggle to make his intuitive visions into viable realities, and then to defend the results in a bitterly competitive business world against enemies both inside and outside his own business, against tough competitors, at times against the government itself. It was this struggle that Lyons, the professional writer, saw in his subject, and hoped to relate as a fascinating personal story. His long family relationship with Sarnoff placed him in an enviable position to tell it.

But he ran head-on into Sarnoff's own idea of what the book should be. To Sarnoff, his life was in reality the history of electronic communications in America, beginning with the wireless and continuing through short-wave radio, the home radio receiver, network radio broadcasting, and television, in all of which he pioneered. It was the story of this dramatic transformation of the American scene, with all its implications of the past and its promise for the future, that Sarnoff wanted to relate.

Both men plainly were right. It would be impossible to tell one story without the other. But the major question of emphasis, in a book which, as far as Sarnoff was concerned, was to be the definitive biography, led to constant differences of opinion. The book, as they say in the trade, was hammered out, first in New York and finally during two weeks in Florida, during which the hammering was fairly continuous on both sides. Strong wills run in the family. In the end there emerged a volume which is not quite the one either subject or author had in mind.

Sarnoff has been engaged for some time in getting RCA into the book business (it recently acquired the Random House enclave), but when his biography was published he found himself subjected to a new experience (for him) in that business—the publisher's promotional interview at publication time. Sarnoff consented to be interviewed by a fairly representative gathering of writers about books from magazines and newspapers. He wanted to talk about his favorite subject, the future of communications, but his questioners had read about that. They wanted to

talk about television, and a few appeared to hope that they could pin responsibility for the medium's sins on him. Affable at the beginning, Sarnoff shut off this line of questioning with the chilling acerbity he reserves for the business world.

There were worried questions about the future of the book itself as a communications medium, in an advancing era of microfilm and instantaneous sight and sound communication, with the prospect before us of huge information storage and retrieval centers that could be tapped by a man in his own home, equipped with a list of code numbers, a dial, a television receiver, and a copying device that would enable him to take off in printed form anything he saw on the screen. The implications for the publishing industry are, obviously, staggering.

But at his press conference, and in a later conversation, Sarnoff exhibited an optimism about the book trade befitting a man who had just bought into it. Far from disappearing, books would become part of a single integrated communications system reaching a global audience, he said. Microwave channels, satellites, and high-capacity cables have eliminated distinctions among means of communication, he believes. Technologically, they have all become identical pieces of energy that can be transmitted over any distance and converted at the receiving end into visual, aural, or printed forms. The man of the foreseeable future, sitting at his electronic console in whatever privacy remains to him by that time, will be able to choose from the riches of the world whatever form he desires.

RCA, which got into the computer business a bit late, is currently making some giant strides in research and development likely to affect all the print media profoundly. Now on the drawing boards is a giant electronic photocomposition and makeup system that forecasts a startling advance in typographic computerization. It is a digital scan generation system (in computer language), capable of handling text composition at 5,000 characters per second. That, however, is almost the least of its capabilities. It will also produce half-tones, from 65- to 200-line screens, and screened color separations. Instructions may be fed into it from 50 to 100 associated keyboards. Moreover, it embodies an electronic proof printer that appears to mean the end of the proof

press. It will also display text and page makeup by means of a cathode ray tube. In its final output, the machine will turn out a standard, complete newspaper page every minute.

The revolution this contraption suggests is not likely to occur overnight. Its cost will be prohibitive initially for all but a few publications; the first systems, to be tested next year, may cost as much as \$1,500,000. Nevertheless, one expert predicts that by the end of 1967 two American newspapers will be fully computerized through this new system.

To David Sarnoff, sitting serenely in his Radio City office, such marvels are already history. His mind is on the future, as it has been since the day he got into electronics by way of the telegraph. His detractors continue to minimize or to scoff at his prescience, but he is supremely confident about who has been right, and the record bears him out. His admirers, who are numerous, regard him as something of a national monument.

There is something monumental about him at that, although it does not emerge at once. When he leans back in his leather desk chair, relaxing, he looks like everybody's uncle, a well-groomed businessman who appears ten years younger than he is, a stocky five-feet-eight-inches, fighting to keep his weight at the 185 which his doctor and his devoted wife, Lizette, insist he maintain. Sarnoff has been able to curb his food intake, and lately he has been doing a great deal more of what he has never had time to do before—exercising. But he cherishes one small excess, his ever-present cigar. (For the information of connoisseurs, he smokes Monte Cruz, perhaps the last cigars available in this country that bear any resemblance to the late, great pre-Castro Havanas.)

Leaning back and drawing thoughtfully on his cigar, Sarnoff lets his real qualities emerge as the talk goes beyond pleasantries and he begins to discuss matters he regards as important. Then the powerful, driving elements in his personality that have carried him through seventy-five rugged years coalesce and the steely, brilliant interior of the man is displayed. If Sarnoff were given to looking backward, he could without modesty sum up his career as a major contribution to American life in a half-dozen different aspects. But amazingly, at seventy-five, he insists on thinking and talking like a man in mid-stride, whose work is still ahead. It would not surprise his friends and well-wishers if he turned out to be the first active centenarian chairman of the board in business history. Cousin Gene may yet have to bring out a revised edition of the biography, merely to bring it up to date. By that time, perhaps, Sarnoff will let him do it his way.



When the Tail Wags the Dog

By JACK KINKEL

WITH THE REGULARITY of the sunrise, the three major networks present the news, Monday through Friday, all facing common dilemmas, all burdened with similar limitations, all aware of their unmatched opportunity to inform.

Their opportunity is clear, and they seize it. No printed media can capture the Irish anger of the late President Kennedy when Big Steel raised its prices; or the contorted hate on the faces of the New Orleans "cheerleaders" as they spat on Negro youngsters going to school; or the grime and sweat of a platoon in the Vietnam jungle; or the ugliness of the Berlin Wall.

Their limitations are as clear. Some news cannot be told in pictures. A Supreme Court decision on reapportionment requires interpretation and probably cannot be explained briefly, no matter how skillful the writer. Someone, then, must face the camera and tell the story without the filigree of production props. If his analysis is too long, viewer interest may flag. If his version of the story is an oversimplified capsule, he has shortchanged a subject of significance.

That is the common dilemma: whether to play the news for its importance, or for its visual value. It is not the dilemma faced by a newspaper, which has a set policy on whether it wants to be a publication of sober record, a screaming tabloid, or a diluted combination of both. In the case of the television newscast the most important story of the day may also be the best picture story—or it may not. It depends on the day. If two airliners collide over New York the television newscast has it made. Camera crews rush to the wreckage and the graphic artist circles on his map the point of collision. Those days don't come often.

Suppose instead that one day, shortly before air time, Britain devalues the pound; or on another day the Pope decrees that, after all, he finds artificial birth control acceptable. Here are stories to delight any thoughtful editor.

But while the wire services and the *New York Times* begin to pour out their thousands of words of copy, the reflex of the television newsmen may border on panic. Does he throw out his films of a stockyard fire and of G.I.s teaching Vietnamese children to play baseball? Or does he perform the duty that any serious newspaper would perform, explaining and interpreting the pound devaluation, the papal pronouncement? Through conditioning he is obsessed by picture values. Yet he knows there is no time to obtain a film interview even with the handiest financial expert or with a local theologian grabbed at random. Therefore, of necessity, he must cover the newsbreak without any visual production crutches. He can react in two ways: forget the production pace of the newscast and play the news for what it is worth; or have his newscaster tell the bare bones of the devaluation or the birth control decision and salvage his films of the stockyard fire and baseball in Vietnam.

EITHER choice will have built-in hazards. A prize share of the viewing audience will care nothing about a devaluation of the pound sterling and will fret as the on-camera report of the newscaster unfolds. Another segment of the audience will feel its intelligence insulted if the news on birth control or devaluation is minimized, pictures or not pictures.

So whatever he does, the TV newsmen cannot really win. He is tempted to let the nonvisual news slide. In a sense this may be legitimate. It surely

is understandable. Big money rides on the network newscasts. Ratings are ever in mind, although pressure or intervention from sponsors on news content is almost nonexistent. The question persists: how long can a newscaster, team of newscasters, or commentator hold the average viewer's attention? An Eric Sevareid may be the very model of taste, style, and clarity, but might not the viewer prefer to watch the fire raging in the stockyards? And there are too few Sevareids capable of lengthening the attention span.

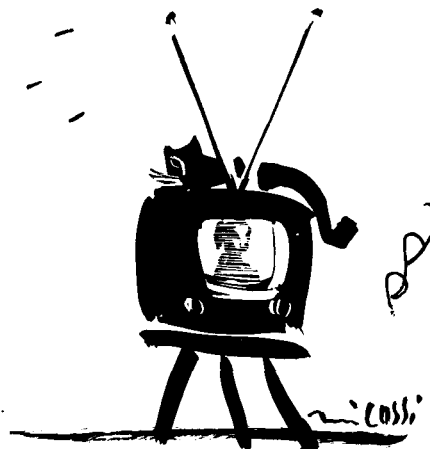
If a newspaper reader has no interest in a story, he skips it. If he has exceptional interest he slows his reading pace, perhaps scans the report again. That lack of time flexibility perplexes the TV newsmen. He is anchored to eleven minutes of actual news, or twenty-three minutes, or whatever. He is speaking the truth when he says a newscast, even a CBS or NBC half-hour program, cannot cover all the news.

Nevertheless, the TV newsmen too often doesn't try to cover enough of the hard, vital news. A tendency on the three networks has been to rely on a comparatively few stories. Take Vietnam. On a given day the report may be accompanied by first-rate combat film. But on many days the report will include tired film of truck convoys or helicopter flights or pointless interviews with G.I.s. Take a hypothetical domestic story. A Southern sheriff may be locked in a running battle against the Klan. Chances are the film of the anti-Klan campaign will be effective and illuminating. It may well be a network exclusive. But because of the minutes spent on this feature report, however worthwhile in itself, hard news will be omitted or barely touched. The newscast may evolve into a grab-bag of pocket-size documentaries.

Such tendencies would have more legitimacy were the public a different breed. In theory, a happy balance could be struck if the public used its newspaper as the basis of daily information and its television set as a valuable supplement.

Then, without qualm, the networks could concentrate on the kind of reports at which they excel: film and video tape of disasters and civil rights marches, of dramatic speeches and debates, of Vietnam hamlets and Appalachia ghost towns. Unfortunately, television news is not a supplement. For millions who don't have the time or who won't take the trouble to read, television is the primary source of what is happening in the world. Moreover, the theory of the happy balance is weakened further by the fact that many communities have inferior newspapers, and network TV becomes the

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