

Red and Blue Networks (McLeod)

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Subject: Re: A Red and Blue Primer

Here is a basic rundown on Red and Blue:

Both of these networks were based on networks that existed prior to NBC's formation in 1926 -- the claim by NBC to be "the first network" is true only if one interprets it as meaning NBC is descended from "the first network." The NBC Red network was the direct descendent of the original Red Network operated by the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, which began operation on a part time basis over six stations in 1924, and was running a sixteen-hour-a-day schedule to seven stations and part time service to twelve others by the time the operation was taken over by NBC in November 1926. The AT&T station WEAF, New York originated most of the programming for the original Red network.

There are various stories of how the "red network" was named, some relating to colored lights or patch cords -- but probably the most reliable account comes from AT&T historian William Banning, who stated in his 1946 history of WEAF that the practice originated from the colored pencil lines used to trace the network circuits on the AT&T long-lines maps.

The "Blue Network," meanwhile, is an outgrowth of what was most often called "the Radio Group Network," formed in 1924 by the alliance of stations owned by the Radio Corporation of America -- WJZ, New York and WRC, Washington; Westinghouse - WBZ in Springfield, Mass.; and General Electric -- WGY, Schenectady. Although each of these stations was capable of contributing quality programming to the network -- WGY was the first station in the US to regularly feature radio drama -- the Radio Group was unable to secure favorable telephone circuits for its network, nor was it able to secure paying sponsors to the extent that the Red network did so. WEAF and WJZ were aggressive, bitter rivals during these years -- and this attitude spread over to the respective networks.

The acquisition of WEAF by the newly-formed RCA subsidiary NBC in 1926 changed the situation. The plan had always been to continue both networks under a common corporate control, and the Radio Group network formally became the NBC Blue network on 1/1/27. For the first half of 1927, service to the Blue network was limited -- but on 7/17/27 full time service was offered for the first time on all three NBC chains -- Red, Blue and the west-coast Orange network (Until the early 1930s, Red and Blue extended only as far west as Denver, requiring a separate network to serve the Western stations.)

NBC Red and NBC Blue were never separate parts of the National Broadcasting Company. The networks shared a common sales force, a common production staff, common studio and technical facilities, and in fact only a few "basic" stations were permanently assigned to either the Red or the Blue network full time. Other affiliates could be shifted between the chains at the whims of a sponsor. Some historians have argued that Red was always the "popular programming" network and Blue was always "cultural," somewhat in the manner of the BBC's old "Light Programme" and "Third Programme" arrangement -- but this isn't really true. There was no evident "separate programming philosophy" for Red and Blue before 1938.

Federal regulators began to wonder what the rationale was for having two networks, and whether this could be considered a monopolistic practice. In 1938, the FCC began a series of hearings investigating business practices of the radio networks, and in 1941 published its findings in the landmark "Report on Chain Broadcasting." In this document, the Commission determined, among other findings, that the operation of more than one network by a single corporation was not conducive to competition, and thus not in the public interest. The Commission thus required that NBC divest itself of one of the two chains.

On 12/8/41, the Blue network was spun off from NBC into a separate company under RCA ownership -- Blue Network Company, Inc. -- as the first step in compliance with the FCC ruling. RCA continued to operate the Blue Network until a buyer could be found -- until it sold the network for \$8 million to Edward J. Noble, the founder of Life Savers, Inc., and at that time the owner of WMCA in New York. There were delays in this deal because of allegations of shadiness surrounding Noble's interest in WMCA -- but these problems were resolved and the deal was closed in July 1943. In December 1944, the name of the company was changed to "American Broadcasting Company, Inc," and at the end of 1945, "Blue Network" was dropped from the on-air system cue, leaving only ABC in its place.

The terms "Red" and "Blue" were actually used on-air only rarely during the time in which NBC operated two chains -- for a brief period spanning the latter half of 1936 and the first half of 1937, and again for several months in mid-1941. The two networks did use different sets of chimes during 1929-30 (and possibly earlier) with the Red being signified by a seven-note progression and the Blue by a five-note progression. The terms did turn up in the press, however -- even though it was more common in fan

Most of the system outcues heard are 'generic' as "This is the National Broadcasting Company" with no reference to the Red Network or the Blue Network?

Most of the time, Red and Blue seem to have been largely internal/industry designations -- you would find references to Red and Blue in internal company documents or the trade press, but most of the time civilian publications referred simply to the "NBC-WEAF" or "NBC-WJZ" network. NBC doesn't seem to have been especially interested in drawing attention to its bifurcated structure for most of the time it ran two networks -- and indeed, until 1937-38 there *were* no administrative distinctions between the two networks. There was only one Program Department, only one Sales Department, and so on down the line. This being so, "This is the National Broadcasting Company" was a perfectly acceptable system cue for both chains.

There were two exceptions to this -- the only two periods in NBC's history where Red and Blue were routinely used as on-air designations: 1936-37 and 1941. The 1936-37 period was probably the result of the early rumblings of a Federal investigation of NBC's activities -- and was done to create an apparent distinction between the two networks where no real distinction existed. The 1941 use of Red and Blue was concurrent with the release of the FCC's Report on Chain Broadcasting, and was probably a way of conditioning the public for the upcoming separation of Red from Blue.

I also believe that there may have been an early effort to indicate Red or Blue by means of distinctive chime sequences. The three-tone G-E-C chime was not standardized until 1931 at the earliest -- indeed, the earliest known recordings of the three note chime date to March 1932. But there are surviving recordings from 1929, 1930, and 1931 in which a seven-note chime pattern is used on the Red network,

and two different five-note chime patterns used on Blue. (Audio clips of these chimes can be heard on Bill Harris's website.) While no documentation has emerged to support the hypothesis that these chimes were used consistently to designate Red or Blue, it is certainly suggested by circumstantial evidence.

It's also important to keep in mind that there were many NBC sustaining programs that were neither Red nor Blue -- these were programs made available to Supplemental stations not being used by either network at a particular time, and were usually musical fillers, band remotes, and so forth.

I have read in the past, from quite a few sources, that also indicate that NBC's blue network was geared to the more "upscale" and carried a lot more sustaining prestige programming. However, some of the programs that aired on NBC's Blue would seem to counter this statement. How much actual truth is there in the statement? If true, was it a deliberate programming attempt or did the Blue just end up that way while part of NBC?

It depends on the period under consideration. Prior to about 1937, there was no perceptible difference in programming between Red and Blue, nor was there any deliberate effort to direct "popular" programs to Red and "prestige" programming to Blue -- indeed, "Amos 'n' Andy," the most popular program of the first half of the decade, was a Blue feature from 8/19/29 to 7/12/35. Conversely, "prestige" programming like the Atwater Kent Hour, the Voice of Firestone, and Cities Service Concerts, were always Red features.

In all cases, these network choices were the result of advertiser decisions, not any integrated "network programming philosophy." Network decisions were made by advertisers on the basis of the most powerful stations for the best per-station per-hour price for the specific time period desired, and there was very little difference in terms of rates or station power between Basic Red and Basic Blue.

Around 1937, however, this began to change. At this point, as a direct result of mounting sentiment among federal regulators that the operation of two networks by a single corporation was not in the public interest, NBC began to make a conscious effort to differentiate Red and Blue, and for the first time a separate Blue Network sales office was established in order to create the fiction that the two networks genuinely competed for advertising clients. This issue was investigated by the FCC during its 1938 hearings, and the fiction of "competition" thoroughly exposed.

It was also at this time that NBC began to emphasize sustaining "Educational" features on the Blue. These were the so-called "upscale" programs that created the impression that Blue was a more highbrow alternative to the mass-audience Red network. This was a rather overt attempt at convincing investigators that the Blue served a higher purpose than simply ensuring that NBC had a greater number of available affiliates than its competitors. It's also likely that NBC feared federal intervention forcing it to divest itself of one of the two networks, and was taking care to ensure that its big money contracts were lined up on one side of the scale before this happened. (As, in fact, it did with the issuance of the FCC's "Report on Chain Broadcasting" in 1941.)

Elizabeth

Throughout most of the 1930's, it seemed that NBC had separate distinct facilities for distribution of both the "Red" and "Blue" networks only in the northeast and urbanized midwest (including Omaha and Kansas City).

These facilities were "Basic Red" and "Basic Blue." A sponsor planning an NBC program buy was required to purchase time on one of these two units as a minimum. As of 1933, Basic Red was made up of 20 stations, and Basic Blue was also 20 -- although the Blue count is slightly deceptive, since it counts WBZ and WBZA as separate outlets, when in fact they broadcast in synchronization covering the same market, and counts the four Chicago outlets that carried Blue program as separate outlets, even though they usually did not operate simultaneously.

Not all markets in the Basic territory were covered by both Red and Blue. There was no Blue service to Northern New England, for example -- listeners throughout the region had to rely on WBZ/WBZA for Blue programs. Likewise there were no Blue outlets in Philadelphia, Schenectady, Buffalo, or Hartford -- all markets which were covered by Basic Red.

But the rest of the country, such as the southeast, south-central states, rural upper Midwest (rural Minnesota, rural Nebraska, the Dakotas), the mountain states, etc., it seemed that there were single-line "legs" of the network... i.e., there was only one NBC affiliate in all markets, all fed along a single telco line in that region of the US, where all of those stations would be carrying the same NBC program, whether "Red" or "Blue". And it was up to NBC and the sponsor as to whether that part of the country would be "Red" or would be "Blue" at whatever specific day/time.

These were the "Supplemental" stations -- and indeed, there was nothing in their affiliation agreements which would designate them as Red or Blue. Supplemental stations could not be taken on an a la carte basis -- they had to be purchased in groups: Canadian, Southeastern, South-Central, Southwestern, Northwestern, or Mountain. Coast-to-Coast coverage for a program required purchase of the Basic Pacific Network -- which could only be used if the Mountain group was also part of the network, since the link was made via Salt Lake City. Additional western coverage was available via the Pacific Supplemental group -- and NBC also offered "Special Hawaiian Service" via a shortwave link to KGU in Honolulu.

An hour of time on the full Red Network -- Basic plus all available Supplemental groups -- during the 1932-33 season would cost a sponsor \$12,880. The full Blue Network, with three fewer outlets, offered an hourly rate of \$12,270.

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