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America Evolves Unity from Chaos

THE consolidation of wireless interests which has recently taken place in the United States, and of which some news has been already published, proves to be of somewhat greater magnitude and import than at first realised. It constitutes a very interesting evolution in the direction of unity from the welter of competition which obtained in recent years, and provokes the reflection that America, by one path, is reaching toward that state of unified development which Britain attained by the more direct and logical path of a national system of broadcasting under Government establishment. This development is of particular value to New Zealand in its endorsement of the wisdom of the policy laid down by the authorities at the inception of broadcasting in this Dominion.



HE American consolidation was effected in the last stages of the dying year, and to celebrate the occasion of the inauguration of a complete trans-Continental system there was broadcast on December 24 (Christmas Eve) a continuous 24-hour national program: from all stations in the colossal national link-up. This makes the largest network of associated wireless stations in the world, and brings into daily contact the Atlantic and Pacific seabords of America. This outcome is a triumph for the National Broadcasting Company of America, working in co-operation with the American Broadcasting Company and the Columbia Broadcasting System. By it, distant reception of national programmes will become local reception for all listeners from the Canadian North-West frontier right down to sunny California.

Fifty-eight affiliated stations, situated in various parts of the United States, are affected in the new combination. The first section of the new system was completed on June 1, when the line from Omaha (Nebraska) was extended to Denver (Colorado) and to the eastern seaboard. The final link between Denver and San Francisco involved intensive work for more than a year, and constituted the final stage in the linking by special land wires of the whole of the associated transmitting stations. It is estimated that the cost of maintaining this 2,200-mile circuit, operated on land lines, will cost the National Broadcasting Company £45,000 a year, and will involve the use and upkeep of 4,500 miles of wire.

BY the combination now effected, it is estimated that direct contact will be made with 82.7 per cent. of the total wireless listeners of the United States. Main programmes from New York stations will become national in importance and scope, as transmitted through the affiliated stations. It is not intended, however, that the affiliated stations will lose their entire individuality. For them there is planned an extensive campaign of public service, in addition to providing concerts and other popular features. Individuality will be retained, and their own particular policies maintained in development. The national link-up, of course, will be most effective and valuable in the transmission of outstanding events or programmes. A further benefit of the combination lies in the broadening of the field of talent. New York will not necessarily dominate the national ear. Talent from the Pacific coast will be fed back to the eastern centres, and every effort made to let the nation hear those whose talent entitles them to that honour.

NATURALLY so important a development in the radio world as this combination has not passed without keen discussion and criticism. Certain critics have professed to see in the development a danger to radio and a menace to the future of broadcasting. Their stand is based upon fear of a monopoly of the national ear, as governed from a central organisation. With old-time American independence they take their stand on a preference for independent stations operating as at present. Economic facts are, however, against them in the full application of their theory. Independent

competitive units are not economic in the modern sense. This has been, and is being proved in every aspect of modern business. In the world of motor-car manufacture the course of business has been to kill and absorb small units into large units, thus forcing a steady reduction of the number of manufacturers. This has proved a benefit to the car user, not a penalty. Competition failed to give the economy in manufacture that combination is giving. So in radio the same principle broadly applies. The scope of modern life demands big scale efficiency. Under economic pressure the independent broadcasting station is doomed. The weak units are doomed. Efficiency, from the listener's point of view, will be attained only by big-scale central organisations into which are consolidated all reasonable available revenue and administrative capacity to give the standard of service demanded by the public.

Some American critics of the new combination deplore the passing of the competitive element. Just as in other fields similar trepidation has been proved unfounded, so it will prove in this case. Critics must never overlook the fact that, however big any organisation may be, the public is always bigger, that in modern life it is the spirit of service that counts, and that through an extraordinary, but inevitable, combination of self-interest and public service, steady pressure is always maintained by public opinion for efficient attainment. America is not yet at the goal attained in Britain, but the recent development takes a long stride towards it, and provides a most interesting object-lesson for this dominion.