

In Search of the Sarnoff "Radio Music Box" Memo: Nally's Reply

Louise Benjamin

In 1993, I published an article in the Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media entitled "In Search of the Sarnoff 'Radio Music Box' Memo: Separating Myth from Reality." That article focused on my quest to find the original memo David Sarnoff, the legendary broadcast leader, claimed to have written in 1915 in which he predicted the advent of broadcasting. This article presents evidence I sought then that proves the existence of a "Radio Music Box Memo" written in 1916 and includes confirmation of a reply E.J. Nally wrote to that Memo in 1916. It also describes the context in which both of the documents—Sarnoff's 1916 memo to Nally and Nally's 1916 reply—were written. These materials indicate Sarnoff and Nally were actively involved in developing some type of music service for wireless consumption. They also show that Sarnoff had conceived the idea of a "music box" that would use wireless apparatus as early as November 1916. He should be recognized for that early concept.

INTRODUCTION

In 1993, I published an article in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* entitled "In Search of the Sarnoff 'Music Box' Memo: Separating Myth from Reality." That article focused on my quest to find the original memo David Sarnoff, the legendary broadcast leader, claimed to have written in 1915 in which he predicted the advent of broadcasting. In this often-cited memo, Sarnoff said that he had "in mind a plan of development which would make radio a 'household utility' in the same sense as the piano or phonograph. The idea is to bring music into the house by wireless" (Benjamin, 1993, p. 326). Beginning with a series of articles published in 1926 (Sarnoff & McBride, 1926a, 1926b), Sarnoff claimed that the "Radio Music Box" was among

Louise Benjamin (Ph.D., University of Iowa, 1985) is an Associate Professor of Telecommunications at the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia. Her research interests include broadcast and telecommunications history and contemporary telecommunications law and policy.

his most visionary ideas. The prophetic nature of the Memo later added luster to Sarnoff as his legend grew in the 1930s. In the summer of 1900, at age 9, Sarnoff emigrated to the United States and, by age 39, he had risen through the ranks of the American Marconi Company and its successor, the Radio Corporation of America, to become RCA's president. As an industry executive, Sarnoff was widely acclaimed as a propelling force behind the development of both radio and television (Bilby, 1986; Dreher, 1977; Lyons, 1966). As noted, Sarnoff's life story epitomized the American ideal of the rugged, self-made individual, a "Horatio Alger" of the broadcasting field (Benjamin, 1993).

In pursuing the Memo's origin and the supposed myths behind the legend of the Memo, I concluded that, although something was probably written earlier, "the Radio Music Box Memo reproduced in Archer was actually written in 1920 and that later modifications were made from this memo to the one found in Archer," a reference to the 1938 book by Gleason Archer, *A History of Radio to 1926* (pp. 112–113). This book provided the basis for numerous citations of the Memo found in histories and textbooks related to broadcasting (Bittner, 1991; Gross, 1988; Sterling & Kittross, 1990).

My earlier research found that David Sarnoff actually wrote the Memo mentioned in Archer in 1920 when he was commercial manager of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). It had been part of a 28-page document entitled "Prospective Radio Business" dated January 31, 1920, that Sarnoff sent to his superiors at RCA, including Owen D. Young, RCA and General Electric chief executive officer, and E.J. Nally, then president of RCA and former commercial manager of American Marconi. As noted, pages 13 and 14 of this memorandum contained Sarnoff's discussion on "Sales of 'Radio Music Box' for Entertainment Purposes" (Benjamin, 1993). This part of the 28-page memorandum became the famous "Radio Music Box Memo" and are prefaced with the words:

In 1915 I presented this plan in detail to Mr. Nally, but the circumstances attending our business at that time and since then have not been such as to make practicable serious consideration of this project. However, I feel that the time is now ripe to give renewed consideration to this proposition which is described below.
(Benjamin, 1993, p. 326, citing Sarnoff, 1920)

With modifications, these pages make up the "Radio Music Box Memo" presented in Archer and others (Archer, 1938; Bittner, 1991; Gross, 1988; Sterling & Kittross, 1990).

After analyzing the original and subsequent versions of the Memo, I ended the article by asking "What is known for certain about the 'Radio Music Box' memo?" I concluded that Sarnoff had presented *something* related to a "radio music box" plan to his superiors in 1915 or 1916, but added, "Whether it was written or contained the detail of the 1920 memo will remain a mystery until misplaced or lost evidence is found. Such evidence could include either the 1915 memo itself or other references to it, such as Nally's reply." During the past decade, questions about the Memo surfaced that kept me looking for the material that I suspected had been misplaced. This article describes that search, and more importantly, it provides evidence I sought then that proves the existence of a "Music Box Memo" written in the mid-teens and includes confirmation of the reply Nally wrote to the Memo in 1916 that was mentioned in Archer's 1938 book, *History of Radio to 1926*. It also describes the context in which the documents—Sarnoff's 1916 memo to Nally and Nally's 1916 reply—were written.

THE SEARCH FOR NALLY'S REPLY

In his first volume *History of Radio to 1926*, Archer (1938) highlighted Nally's involvement in the Memo's evolution and states Nally's reply existed:

In 1916 Mr. Sarnoff embodied in a written recommendation to Edward J. Nally, the General Manager of the Marconi Company, the details of his proposed "Radio Music Box" scheme. Mr. Nally's reply, dated November 9, 1916, is in existence and has been examined by the author. Elmer E. Bucher, at the time an engineer of the Marconi Company, has informed the author that he was with Mr. Sarnoff when the latter dictated the (memo). (Archer, 1938, pp. 112-113)

The Memo written in 1920, with modifications discussed in my 1993 article, then followed that introduction in Archer's book. As this passage indicates, Nally wrote something in response to Sarnoff in 1916, but as I noted in the article, if the original did exist, "it became lost in the shuffle" (Benjamin, 1993, p. 330).

After that article's publication in 1993, any further search for existing documentation on the subject was put on hold as avenues for investigation seemed closed. Still, I was nagged by my inability to find that missing material corroborating Sarnoff's memory. It should exist somewhere. Then, rather serendipitously in 1999, I began electronic mail correspondence with Dr. Alexander Magoun, the new curator and archivist at the Sarnoff Corporation Research Library. In our subsequent

communiqués (personal communications, 1999, 2000), we reviewed my initial conclusions in the 1993 article, and began an earnest search for materials related to the Sarnoff Music Box Memo. In August 2000, Dr. Magoun wrote that he had come across some items related to David Sarnoff's initial radio years that had definitely been misplaced and indicated materials possibly related to my investigation might be within these mislaid documents. With great expectation and hope, I visited the Library again in September 2000. There, to my delight, two large scrapbooks titled *Early Reports on Radio (collected by) David Sarnoff* yielded several letters and various newspaper articles related to wireless demonstrations in the teens. More importantly, these volumes also contained two significant primary resource documents: a short memo Sarnoff wrote to Nally dated November 8, 1916, and Nally's reply written the next day. Both refer to a "music box scheme" devised by Sarnoff.

I was elated as I read the missing memos that Sarnoff had obviously saved, pasted into a scrapbook, and later labeled as his first volume of *Early Reports on Radio (collected by) David Sarnoff*. These notes, which had been "lost in the shuffle," offered new insight into David Sarnoff's prescience regarding broadcasting. In total, the Sarnoff interoffice memo states:

Mr. Nally,

This is a matter which I have given much thought during your absence. It involves my "music box scheme" about which I spoke to you sometime ago. I still believe in it and my faith is even stronger. It is one of the things I am saving up to talk over with you when your time will permit.

The note is initialed "D.S." and contains the following handwritten addendum in David Sarnoff's script:

Here's an opportunity, too, to make a big thing out of the Marconi Publishing Co. as we can work in the Wireless Age on this proposition.

Again, this postscript is initialed "D.S."

Nally's reply of the next day was titled in caps "Re: MUSIC BOX SCHEME", and, in total, stated:

With reference to the attached, I think we should at once take steps to protect our interests. I have some views along these lines and shall be glad to discuss them with you in connection with the

Gramophone [sic] Company's agreement, which I am sending to you separately.

Together, these memos show that Sarnoff had conceived the idea of a wireless "music box" as early as 1916 and that both he and Nally wanted to develop a music service to offer the public.

Accompanying these memos was a letter written in 1925 from a researcher identified only by the initials "T.N.B." He or she was responding to an inquiry from Sarnoff, who, as a rising corporate star at RCA, had requested the original Music Box Memo be pulled from the archive. In 1924, Sarnoff had begun looking for the Memo in preparation for a series of articles he was coauthoring with Mary Margaret McBride for the *Saturday Evening Post*. These articles were on radio's evolution and were to highlight Sarnoff's contributions. In May 1925, "T.N.B." replied to Sarnoff:

Some time ago you asked me about some early correspondence in connection with your "music box" scheme.

I have not, to date, been able to locate anything earlier than 1916, and enclose herewith the original of your memorandum of November 8 of that year to Mr. Nally and the carbon of Mr. Nally's reply of the 9th. Note that your memorandum carries the file reference number "A-22." This may give you a clue to the correspondence.

In your letter of August 2, 1922, to Dr. Goldsmith on the subject of "Individual Radio (Radiolette)" of which you sent a carbon to Mr. Nally with the penned notation "Another brainstorm" you quote from a letter of 1915 to Mr. Nally [exact date not given]—

*"I have in mind a plan of development which would make radio a household utility in the same sense as the piano or phonograph
*****[sic] The idea is to bring music into the house by wireless."*

I have not, so far, been able to locate this letter of 1915 but shall continue my search.

Sincerely, [Initialed] T.N.B.

As this letter indicates, Sarnoff wanted to locate the memo as a part of the story of early radio development and his involvement in that evolution. This letter also provides other clues as to the 1915 memo in its citation of the correspondence with Goldsmith in 1922. Of course, this letter to Goldsmith was written well after the 1920 28-page memorandum Sarnoff wrote to his superiors at RCA (Benjamin, 1993). Further analysis of the letter from "T.N.B." began a search for file A-22, but

either it does not exist at the Sarnoff Library or it has been "lost in the shuffle."

THE CONTEXT FOR THE "MUSIC BOX SCHEME" AND NALLY'S REPLY

With this letter from "T.N.B." and the important correspondence between Nally and Sarnoff were several letters and newspaper articles that provide the context for references made in these memoranda as well as the circumstances in which Sarnoff approached Nally with his "music box scheme." These items reveal more about experiments conducted by the Navy, communication companies, and inventors in the teens in wireless telephony, or transmission of voice and music via radio. The picture painted is one of a complex, dynamic investigation of radio's potential, its possible future commercial markets, and its usefulness to government agencies.

In May 1914, for instance, music was sent from Wanamaker's department store in New York to ships at sea. Sarnoff was among the passengers who heard these transmissions (Kaiser, 1924; Wells, 1924). This experiment and others conducted from 1915 to 1920 carried voice and music from transmitter to receiver and illustrated the fact that many organizations were engaged in early demonstrations of radio's potential (A Concert by Wireless, 1917; DeForest Wireless Telephone, 1917; "Marconi Wireless," 1916; "Marconi's Wireless," 1915; NAA Message, 1916; Parnell, 1915; "The Wireless," 1915; Phonograph Music via Wireless, 1920, January 7). Sarnoff was well aware of these tests, as I mentioned in my earlier article, and through Sarnoff's scrapbook collection of letters and newspaper articles, an even richer picture emerges of Sarnoff's understanding of the potential of wireless telephony.

Sarnoff knew of individuals experimenting with wireless telephony, such as Lee DeForest and Edwin Armstrong, and two newspaper articles published in November 1916 underscore the reasons why he may have written Nally at this time to remind Nally of their earlier conversations. One article reviews DeForest's use of recordings from the Columbia Graphophone Company for a wireless telephone musical concert from the Hotel Astor in New York ("Air will be," 1916); the other, published a few days later, touts DeForest's coverage of the 1916 election via wireless to amateurs within a 200-mile radius of New York City ("Returns," 1916). Both present perspective for understanding Sarnoff's short note to Nally reminding Nally of their earlier communication. DeForest's company was a business competitor to American Marconi, and both Sarnoff and Nally naturally wanted to protect their company's potential business as indicated in Nally's short reply (Nally,

1916). Correspondence such as these notes could also provide the beginning of a paper trail, which might be needed if any litigation arose later between DeForest and American Marconi. Written at the same time the newspaper articles appeared, the memos also indicate that Sarnoff and Nally were aware of the importance of the experiments for further wireless developments.

In Nally's response, his reference to the "Gramophone Company agreement" highlights American Marconi's own experiments with radio telephony and Nally's hope to use Gramophone's recordings in their own music service (Nally, 1916). In 1916, Gramophone was a competitor to the Columbia Graphophone Company used by DeForest for his transmissions. Their competition ended when the two merged in 1931 to form Electric and Musical Industries, Ltd., or EMI (Martland, 1997). Although this agreement between Gramophone and American Marconi is not in the Sarnoff Library collection, other sources refer to the Gramophone Company's development and cooperation in wireless experiments (Jolly, 1972; Martland, 1997).

One can strongly suspect that both Nally and Sarnoff were interested in the potential business of carrying music via wireless to listeners. Not only did Sarnoff mention *Wireless Age* in his handwritten postscript on his interoffice memo (Sarnoff, 1916), but he also participated in wireless experiments in the summer of 1916 ("Marconi Wireless," 1916). American Marconi was seeking ways to make its magazine more profitable, and integrating advertising and notices to the public of wireless concerts and coverage of events with other articles were ways of developing readership (Benjamin, 1993). Through increasing circulation, more listeners and potential buyers for a radio music box could increase company revenues, as Sarnoff's 1920 memo indicates (Benjamin, 1993, citing Sarnoff, 1920).

This investigation also confirms, first and most foremost, that Sarnoff had presented *something* to his superiors in 1916. Sarnoff's short memo states he "spoke to you [Nally] some time ago" (Sarnoff, 1916). Whether he also *wrote* something at the same time he spoke to Nally is debatable but likely, as Sarnoff typically followed verbal discussion with written memoranda.

Second, the documents cited in this article reveal that this *something* Sarnoff presented was far more fleshed out than I had indicated in the earlier article. The phrase "music box scheme," which both Sarnoff and Nally mentioned in their 1916 correspondence, demonstrates that they were building on their own as well as others' ideas of carrying music to the public via wireless, a point Sarnoff reiterated in his 1920 memo to his superiors at RCA.

Third, Sarnoff called his plan a "scheme" in his memo, but this term should not be perceived as pejorative. In 1916, the word's connotation meant "strategy" and its use here indicates that Sarnoff had thought about his "music box" idea enough to conceive a design for its implementation. Nally's mention of an arrangement with the Gramophone Company indicates he had also thought of how a "music box scheme" could benefit American Marconi.

Fourth, the use of the phrase "music box" confirms Sarnoff's vision of some type of encasement for a reception device for wireless signals, another point Sarnoff restated in 1920 in allusions to making "radio a household utility in the same sense as the piano or phonograph." This "box" could be sold to consumers at a considerable return. How any profitability was to be realized and how much income might be achieved are not spelled out in these 1916 documents, but the later 1920 memo certainly restated and probably expanded on ideas Sarnoff had in mind earlier for radio set profitability.

Fifth, in his 1920 memo, Sarnoff also repeated references made in the 1916 postscript to making *Wireless Age* more profitable through the music box. In 1920 he stated that secondary sources of income for the company would come from increased advertising and circulation of *Wireless Age*. Archer (1938) also made these points.

Consequently, these short memos written in 1916 and accompanying newspaper articles about wireless illustrate that Sarnoff and Nally were aware that some type of music service for wireless consumption could be developed. They also show that Sarnoff and Nally were actively involved as early as 1916 in a "music box" scheme that would use wireless apparatus.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this article clarifies, expands, and amends the work I published in 1993. As an historian, I find it exciting to play detective in pursuing work that revises and reassesses prior conclusions. These new conclusions then become an integral part of the ever-continuing evolution of communication history.

As I noted in the 1993 article, the memo, which may have been written in 1915 or 1916, is still missing, but the short memos presented in this article reference several of the main points of pages 13–14 in Sarnoff's 1920 memorandum to his superiors, the draft used by Archer (1938) as the famous memo. Thus this present research reveals that Sarnoff *did* present a radio music box plan of some kind to his superior, E.J. Nally, in 1916. Although Sarnoff's short memo was not as fleshed out as the famous "Radio Music Box Memo" printed later in Archer,

Sarnoff's 1916 memo had mentioned several of the major points or concepts presented in later renditions of the Radio Music Box memo.

Consequently, Sarnoff should be given credit for developing the idea of a "Radio Music Box" and delineating some of its most important points as early as November 1916. Although the predictions and experiments of others in wireless telephony in the mid-teens should temper accolades accorded Sarnoff, his foresight should be recognized. He envisaged receipt of wireless signals via a radio music box as early as 1916. Sarnoff was prescient in foreseeing radio's development in broadcasting, and broadcast history should afford him that recognition.

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