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The Battle for Color Television - II

Lead: In the 1940s two corporate giants, NBC and CBS, fought over the means of broadcasting television in color.

Tag: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: After World War II, NBC under its chairman, David Sarnoff, had begun commercial black and white television broadcasts and was selling TVs by the truckload. Its great rival, William Paley's CBS, was producing Black and White shows such as Ed Sullivan but at the same time was experimenting with color television in hopes of getting a jump on the competition. The problem was the CBS color system used a spinning wheel

with color filters in the camera and in the TV set and produced a signal which could not be received by existing black and white TVs without a relatively expensive converter. Sarnoff had too many sets out there to give up his advantage and began a campaign to smear the CBS system. NBC was working on an all-electronic color system, without the cumbersome spinning wheels, but which they thought would not be ready for years. By 1950 CBS was ready and had applied to the Federal Communications Commission to designate its system as the only standard. Both sides were at it now. Secret meetings with congressmen, lobbying, accusations in the media. Millions were at stake. Finally, the FCC approved CBS color in October 1950 and the courts struck down NBC's court challenge. The problem was,

not a single CBS color set had been sold, just a lot of useless black and white sets.

Sarnoff responded to this setback by whipping his scientists into action and within months had solved most of the basic problems of all-electronic color TV. The public resisted buying the CBS converters and soon CBS surrendered. It would still be 1954 before the first color sets went on the market. They cost \$1000 - more than a quarter of the average worker's salary - and NBC's parent company, RCA, didn't make a profit on color television until 1960, but the great battle over color TV was over. Sarnoff and NBC had won.

There is an interesting sideline to the story. By the late 1960s the RCA system was still very bulky. When NASA wanted

to send a color camera to the moon, it had to be very light, therefore the space agency rejected the all electronic RCA system, and the first color TV pictures from the moon surface used a camera delivered by *Apollo 12*, with a spinning tricolor disk.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Fisher, David E. and Marshall Jon Fisher, “The Color War,” *American Heritage of Invention and Technology* 12 (3, Winter 1997): 8-18.

Lebar, Stanley. “The Color War Goes to the Moon,” *American Heritage of Invention and Technology* 13(2 Summer, 1997): 52-54.