

THE ORIGINS OF COMMERCIAL RADIO IN ARGENTINA: THE CASE OF JAIME YANKELEVICH

*Los orígenes de la radio comercial en Argentina: El caso de
Jaime Yankelevich*


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ABSTRACT *This article explores aspects of the life of one of the creators of the commercial radio model in Argentina. Jaime Yankelevich pioneered developing an entertainment system that included highly popular programs, many of which shaped the history of radio in Argentina, and exported the model to Latin America. We analyze Yankelevich's challenges while building his entertainment industry model and review some aspects of programming and the national government's influence on the radio business. Under Yankelevich's leadership, radio in Argentina diversified and became more professional. He introduced innovations such as varied programming, which included news, music, and live entertainment, attracting different segments of the population.*

KEYWORDS *Broadcasting System – Argentina Radio – Entertainment.*

RESUMEN *Este artículo explora aspectos de la vida de uno de los creadores del modelo de radio comercial en Argentina. Jaime Yankelevich fue pionero en la creación de un sistema de entretenimiento que incluía programas de gran popularidad, muchos de los cuales marcaron la historia de la radio en Argentina y exportaron su modelo a América Latina. Analizamos los desafíos que Yankelevich enfrentó al construir su modelo de industria del entretenimiento y revisamos algunos aspectos de la programación y la influencia del gobierno nacional en el negocio de la radio. Bajo la dirección de Yankelevich, la radio en Argentina se diversificó y profesionalizó. Introdujo innovaciones como la programación variada, que incluía noticias, música y entretenimiento en vivo, lo cual atraía a diferentes segmentos de la población.*

PALABRAS CLAVE *Sistema de Radiodifusión – Radio Argentina – Entretenimiento.*

RESUMO *Este artigo explora aspectos da vida de um dos criadores do modelo de rádio comercial na Argentina. Jaime Yankelevich foi pioneiro na criação de um sistema de entretenimento que incluía programas de grande popularidade, muitos dos quais marcaram a história do rádio na Argentina e exportaram seu modelo para a América Latina. Analisamos os desafios que Yankelevich enfrentou ao construir seu modelo de indústria de entretenimento e revisamos alguns aspectos da programação e a influência do governo nacional no negócio de rádio. Sob a direção de Yankelevich, o rádio na Argentina se diversificou e se profissionalizou. Ele introduziu inovações como a programação variada, que incluía notícias, música e entretenimento ao vivo, o que atraía diferentes segmentos da população.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE *Sistema de Radiodifusão – Rádio Argentina – Entretenimento.*

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1. Introduction

Studies on the radio in Argentina often focus on specific moments in the country's radio history. The academic debate on the consolidation of this medium has seen few comprehensive contributions and some examinations of aspects. Among the general studies, Ricardo Gallo's "La Radio, ese mundo tan sonoro" (2001) explores the internal workings of radio, including its organization, scope, and programming. In contrast, "Días de Radio: Historia de la Radio Argentina" (1995) by Merkin, Panno, Tijman, and Ulanovsky collects anecdotes and stories from the radio world. Robert Claxton's "From Parsifal to Perón: The Early History of Radio in Argentina" (2004) analyzes the development of radio in Argentina, particularly between 1920 and 1945, positing that radio contributed to the consolidation of national identity.

To understand the birth of radio in Argentina, it is essential to consider certain aspects of the medium's history in the United States and England, as these countries significantly influenced Argentina due to economic integration.

Several studies in your research address different aspects of the history and development of radio in the United States and the BBC in London. For instance, Hugh G. J. Aitken's *The Continuous Wave: Technology and American Radio, 1900-1932* examines the role of technology in the development of American radio from 1900 to 1932, exploring how technological innovations influenced the evolution of radio and its impact on American society. Additionally, Gleason Leonard Archer's *Big Business and Radio* analyzes the relationship between large corporations and radio in the United States, detailing how corporate entities became involved in the radio industry and how it affected its development and content. George Douglas's *The Early Years of Radio Broadcasting* is particularly useful for comparison with Argentina, as it examines the early years of broadcasting in the United States, the emergence of radio stations, the technical and regulatory challenges they faced, and their societal impact.

These studies provide detailed perspectives and analyses on the history and evolution of radio in the United States and the BBC in London, enriching your research on the topic.

From a general point of view, there is a notable gap in the analysis of radio entrepreneurs and the commercial strategies they employed. This article is the first to approach the key figure in Argentine radio: Jaime Yankelevich.

2. The Early Career

Jaime Yankelevich's story shares many similarities with David Sarnoff's and William Paley's. Sarnoff's entrepreneurial spirit, strong belief in commercial and advertising radio, and Paley's notable association with Yankelevich are evident in his career.

Like many Jewish families fleeing the pogroms of Tsarist Russia, the Yankelevich family sought refuge in neighboring towns near agricultural communities and achieved relative success by establishing businesses there. Toward the end of the 19th century, the Yankelevich family arrived in Argentina and settled in Entre Ríos. Although they did not become part of the settler movement, they established themselves in Paraná, opening a general store serving the entire family.

In 1914, Jaime Yankelevich and one of his brothers moved to Buenos Aires, where he started working as an assistant at a cinema. He held this position for two years before investing his savings in an electricity business he managed with his older brother Jacob. Shortly after that, in 1920, he became independent and set up his own business in the field of electricity and telephony. The store sold washers, wires, cables, and telephone parts, and with the arrival of the radio, it also incorporated radio equipment. At the back of the property was the house where he started his family. In a few years, he became known as the most prominent importer in South America.

In 1923, the boxing match between Luis Angel Firpo and Jack Dempsey demonstrated the enormous potential of radio expansion. This event significantly boosted the purchase of radio devices. Jaime Yankelevich installed a rudimentary speaker at the door of his business and broadcast the boxing match. Thanks to the announcer's commentary, which made the event seem to last for hours (though the actual fight lasted only six minutes), the broadcast captivated the audience. Similar to David Sarnoff with RCA in 1921, Yankelevich used a popular sports event to promote the new technology and showcase its potential uses.

By 1926, Yankelevich had become a successful self-employed entrepreneur with a prosperous business supplying emerging technologies. He sold electrical materials (lamps, bedside lamps, light bulbs), phonographs, gramophones, and telephones, laying the foundation for his venture into the new entertainment medium: radio. During this time, he had already placed advertisements on Radio Grand Splendid and Radio Cultura, in addition to receiving ads from Radio Nacional. He also published a full-page ad in *Revista Telegráfica*. The response was overwhelming; the influx of customers was so great that he had to close his store's doors. According to *La Canción Moderna*, he sold radio materials worth nine or ten thousand pesos. He mentioned in an interview, "At night, my wife and I could not even bring ourselves to count the sales money, such as our astonishment" (1937)

Jaime Yankelevich took over Radio Nacional and swiftly implemented measures to enhance the station. He reduced or eliminated recorded music and player piano performances, choosing instead to feature live performances in front of the microphone. While phonographs and records were ordinary for musical reproduction and provided a simple, inexpensive way to fill airtime, Yankelevich recognized that dynamic and distinctive live performances were crucial for improving the station's appeal and economic viability.

This shrewd business decision encountered a constraint: the station's studio and transmitter were situated in a remote neighborhood, presenting a challenge for expanding the number

and diversity of live performances. The distance posed logistical difficulties, as travel to that area was not straightforward and required considerable time and effort.

Jaime Yankelevich's second crucial decision was to create an incentive system to attract successful artists. Until then, artists performed on the radio for free, as it was understood that the medium would boost their record sales by introducing their latest songs to the public. Yankelevich changed this by implementing a payment system for live performances. Initially, he used a barter system with businesses advertised on the station, and later, payments were made in cash. In an interview, Rosita Quiroga, a local singer, recalled that Yankelevich "paid us with bronze beds and cans of oil." (*La Cancion Moderna*, 1937) Despite these modest conditions, the incentive system made it more attractive for artists to travel to the station, located far from the entertainment hub centered around Corrientes Street, Avenida de Mayo, and their surroundings.

Recognizing the potential of radio broadcasting in its early stages, Yankelevich understood the need to expand the market and improve programming. During these years, radio stations transitioned from an initial experimental model to a more professional one. By 1927, Argentina boasted the most advanced radio system in South America, which the American press considered a remarkable achievement.

The entrepreneur understood the radio as a powerful medium for entertainment and advertising. By attracting talented artists, offering live performances, and improving the quality of programming, he aimed to capture the attention of listeners and advertisers, ultimately driving the success and growth of Radio Nacional.

The expansion of the broadcasting market in Argentina during this period was significant. It shaped the future of the country's industry and set the stage for radio's influence on society and culture.

The relocation of Yankelevich's studios to the city center was a highly successful commercial strategy. While the transmitter equipment remained in the Flores neighborhood, the studios were moved to the heart of Buenos Aires. This decision was not merely a tiny quantity of geographical luck; the new studios were conveniently situated around the corner from the Yankelevich family's residence. There were several advantages. First, it provided more accessible access to the bustling entertainment district centered around theaters, restaurants, and other venues that attracted a large audience. By having the studios closer to the city center, Radio Nacional could attract talented artists and offer a more vibrant and diverse range of live performances.

Secondly, the studios' proximity to the Yankelevich family's home provided convenience and allowed for closer supervision and involvement in the station's operations. This enabled him to stay closely connected to the station's day-to-day affairs and make swift decisions when necessary.

The relocation of the studios to a more central location in Buenos Aires contributed significantly to the growth and success of Radio Nacional. It facilitated the station's ability to attract listeners, advertisers, and talented artists, ultimately solidifying its position as one of the leading radio stations in Argentina at that time.

The radio system was beginning to assemble its parts. The peculiarity of "listening without seeing" extended beyond phonographic reproduction to include live performances (initially without an audience). The commercial aspect had to be considered: turning the radio into a new showcase for selling products. Advertising revenue was the key to the economic sustainability of the broadcasts. In this regard, the development carried out by the new owner of Radio Nacional seemed to emulate the model that William Paley was implementing at CBS in New York. Paley believed that the commercial basis of radio was advertising income, and this policy led to the displacement of David Sarnoff from the circuit. While Sarnoff charged stations to broadcast NBC programs, Paley paid them to broadcast his own, confident that the expansive nature of radio advertising would recoup the investment.

In 1930, a storm knocked down the transmission antenna. This misfortune allowed him to make his first trip to Europe to purchase new equipment with greater power and updated technology. He acquired the latest German technology equipment from Telefunken. Neither the international economic crisis nor the financial crash seemed to undermine the logic of a limitless world and continuous progress. Amidst the crisis, Radio Nacional continued to grow. In 1933, it inaugurated its new building, a refurbished petit hotel with multiple studios and a small auditorium allowing live performances with a live audience.

Another way to expand the radio business was by promoting the acquisition of radio receivers. Understanding this strategy, he managed both sides of the system. Starting in the early 1930s, Radio Nacional (now Belgrano) gave away radio receivers to the public through contests, whether to celebrate Radio Day, national holidays, or year-end festivities.

Radio Nacional was not alone in the radio dial spectrum; Yankelevich quickly acquired stations across the country: Radio Porteña, Radio Mitre, Radio Bijou, Radio Cerealista in Rosario, Radio Nacional in Bahía Blanca, Radio Central in Córdoba, and Radio del Parque in Mendoza, forming 'the first Argentine network,' which was formalized around 1937.

Broadcasting was not only a massive business but also a true craze. Entering the broadcasting business could be cheap and easy, especially for those associated with theater, film, or the record industry. Radio adapted to technological progress and catered to consumers. With radio, people could have entertainment within their homes, alongside the phonograph. The radio industry experienced its most significant development during the interwar period and became the most consumed household appliance in the 1930s, surpassing irons, telephones, and non-electric ice refrigerators. The considerable audience attracted advertisers rapidly, making advertising revenue the most critical factor in program financing.

The growth of broadcasting not only affected newspaper sales but also impacted the film and theater industries. In the evenings, if people did not want to go to the cinema or engage in reading or card games, the radio brought a new world of voices and products into their homes. Moreover, this new medium encouraged the 'gospel of consumerism,' reinforcing ideals well-known in the United States, such as 'you are what you buy' and 'life exists in goods,' along with various suggested advertisements. In the 1930s, a listener could hear the sponsor's name mentioned between ten to twenty-five times in a half-hour program. The popular audiences mostly accepted the commercial role of radio and embraced their identity as consumers in the broadcasting world (Spiegel, 1994).

In 1933, an executive decree prohibited using the word 'Nacional' in private activities, forcing the radio station to change its name. To take advantage of this restriction, Yankelevich organized a contest inviting proposals for a new name. A new name was selected based on listener opinions, and a gold medal was awarded to one of the participants who submitted the chosen name. Consequently, the station became known as Radio Belgrano. That same year, a broadcast was arranged to cover Admiral Byrd's expedition to the South Pole, which was transmitted to the polar regions via the Transradio International Company. Following the broadcast, Admiral Byrd, through the Columbia company, sent his gratitude and that of his crew to the audience of Radio Belgrano.

During this period, Yankelevich also founded the Argentine Film Production Company Río de la Plata, which went on to produce several films. This new company expanded into theatrical shows and, years later, launched a magazine dedicated to radio and entertainment called *Antena*. The entrepreneur's efforts in vertical integration within the entertainment industry enhanced efficiency: he promoted the sale and production of radio devices, owned one of the most prominent national radio stations, and operated fourteen repeaters nationwide. Additionally, he was a partner in a film company, a show production company, and a magazine focused on entertainment news. Later, he established an advertising agency, which created slogans for companies advertising on his radio station's programs. This comprehensive network allowed him to control many aspects of the entertainment industry.

The broadcasting system was flexible, accommodating various musical, artistic, and even religious expressions. For example, Monsignor Napal, known as the 'first speaker of the republic,' was included in the programming. Yankelevich once remarked, 'If a social upheaval (such as communism) were to disrupt the country and you could no longer continue your priestly activities, you possess a specialty that could sustain you.' Captivated by these words, Monsignor Napal, who enjoyed delivering passionate speeches, joined the station's morning programs. In 1934, during the International Eucharistic Congress, Radio Belgrano played a crucial role in advertising and broadcasting the event. The relationship between Yankelevich, of Jewish origin, and a high-ranking member of the Catholic Church during the rise of fascism in Argentina is indeed intriguing. It reflects a strategy employed by Yankelevich to navigate his business operations with minimal interference from the government and one of Argentina's most influential institutions, the Catholic Church.

3. Radio Drama and soap operas

During the 1930s and 1940s, music took a backseat on radio broadcasts as radio drama emerged as the dominant genre. Like the trend in the United States, radio dramas gained immense popularity in Argentina. The late 1920s saw the debut of the first radio dramas, which quickly captivated audiences. Francisco Mastandrea was a pioneering actor-director in radio drama, joined by Spanish director Andrés González Pullido. In addition to these prominent figures, most radio stations had their own theater companies.

From 1935 to 1945, episodic radio dramas saw significant growth. A notable example in Argentine radio was the episodic novel produced by the Chispazos de Tradición (Glimpses of Tradition) company. Radio dramas featured an ensemble cast performing various storylines over several weeks, sometimes extending up to a month. The show's success was so substantial that schools published and used its storylines for theatrical performances. The company also toured neighborhoods and towns, showcasing the latest hits from their radio soap operas.

This series, which began around 1932, introduced music and sound effects as dramatic elements that recreated a theatrical ambiance in radio format. Many listeners fondly remember how "Chispazos de Tradición" captivated the city. The episodic radio dramas of the gaucho genre drew on national stereotypes, such as the figure of the 'gaucho' set against the backdrop of the pampas. The gaucho symbolized the hybridization that contributed to developing a national identity in Argentina during the 1920s and 1930s.

Radio dramas covered a range of plots and themes, often incorporating multiple elements. While many featured a sentimental-romantic component, this was frequently intertwined with suspense, humor, music, and conflicts between heroes and villains. Radio theater evolved significantly over the years. Initially centered on rural themes, it began to incorporate suspense, leading to the emergence of romantic radio dramas. Some critics believed that radio drama might replace theater as a primary way of entertainment. Despite this, radio drama continued to thrive into the 1950s.

During the 1930s, Radio Belgrano introduced live audiences. The success of this format, including live advertisements, marked a period of significant professionalization for the medium. Radio was transformed from a mix of improvisation and technical know-how into a professional activity. This shift meant that not only were real actors given more prominence, reducing opportunities for amateurs, but technicians and live audiences were also expected to adhere to professional standards.

4. Yankelevich and the first Peronism

At the beginning of the 1940s, Argentine broadcasters cautiously approached international events. In 1941, Jaime Yankelevich's name appeared in the North American press due to

the Argentine Ministry of the Interior's banned a tribute to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Argentinean president Pedro Castillo had declared a state of siege to suppress pro-Allied propaganda during World War II. When Radio Belgrano requested permission to broadcast speeches in support of Roosevelt, the request was denied. The *New York Times* was puzzled by this prohibition, noting that a pro-Axis meeting featuring Manuel Fresco had also been banned due to the international context (Matallana, 2013).

The so-called 'radio problem' was resolved during the years of Peronism. For Jaime Yankelevich, this resolution had roots stretching back to the late 1930s. Eva Duarte, who would become the wife of General Perón, was one of Radio Belgrano's stars with a highly publicized show, 'La Amazona del Destino' (Amazon of Destiny). 1943, she arrived at Radio Belgrano with her own radio theater company. These radio dramas focused on the biographies of significant women in world history, a popular genre among actresses of the time.

Meanwhile, Jaime Yankelevich was working to strengthen his relationship with the military regime. President Farrell used Radio Belgrano's microphones to address the nation on October 12th. Frequent visits by members of the military government to Radio Belgrano's studios were typical. In late 1943, Perón visited the station, where he was honored by the authorities with a wine reception following a tour of the facilities and a performance by Francisco Lomuto's orchestra. In 1944, Eva Duarte starred in the memorable radio drama 'Hacia un futuro mejor,' a tribute to the June 4th revolution, broadcast three times daily (*La Cancion Moderna*, 1944).

The emerging Peronism sought to take control over radio broadcasting through a series of laws and regulations, primarily outlined in the 'Instruction Manual for Broadcasting Stations.' This manual defined how programming content should be regulated, emphasizing the State's control over the commercial and private interests managing most of the stations. It set guidelines for the quantity of spoken content, the duration of radio programs, and their balance.

Peron's government viewed broadcasting as a powerful tool for promoting its ideology and mobilizing public support. Its goal was to use radio to advance its political agenda, reinforce its control over public discourse, and suppress opposing voices. The 'Manual' aimed to align broadcasting practices with the government's objectives, stressing the importance of content that supported Peronist principles, social justice, nationalism, and loyalty to the Peronist movement.

Through these regulations, the government sought to shift control from private interests to the State, ensuring that radio served to advance the government's agenda and consolidate its political influence.

In the mid-1940s, Peron's government introduced regulations that mandated radio stations allocate a specific percentage (between 60 to 80 percent) of their programming to spoken content and imposed limits on the number of episodic radio dramas that could be broadcast. These regulations significantly restricted the operational modes of the stations.

In 1947, during a radio broadcast by President Perón, Radio Belgrano was interrupted by a voice proclaiming, “Do not believe him; he is telling lies.” The broadcast’s interruption led to the immediate closure of the station and intense pressure on Jaime Yankelevich to transfer his license to the State. The station’s operations were suspended. The suspension was lifted a month later, but Yankelevich’s commercialization licenses expired. In August of the same year, Yankelevich offered to sell the Radio Belgrano network, including Argentina’s first broadcasting chain, to the State for six million pesos. A confidential memorandum from the Minister of Communications to the President of the National Economic Council explained that this acquisition would address a pressing state need based on national defense and spiritual principles. The Ministry’s approach aimed to acquire the physical assets of the stations rather than shutting them down for political reasons, thus ensuring the continued use of the existing broadcasting equipment and avoiding the need to purchase new gear.

The acquisition of Radio Belgrano and its network was formalized in October 1947. In the following months, the government declared the licenses canceled of several stations owned by Yankelevich in the provinces, citing concerns about Radio Belgrano’s perceived monopoly over Argentina’s radio broadcasting system. Consequently, other concessionaires quickly surrendered their frequencies to the government.

After selling his assets to the government in July 1948, Yankelevich took on the role of President of the InterAmerican Association of Broadcasters, with American Gilmore Nunn as Vice President. This appointment further cemented his prominent position in the development of Latin American radio broadcasting but placed him in a challenging position.

The InterAmerican Association has been actively criticizing the Perón government’s press freedom encroachment since 1945. However, Yankelevich, who had previously supported the government until they acquired his station license, was in a difficult situation. Additionally, he was appointed Director General of Broadcasting by the government, responsible for overseeing all national stations. This led to a significant clash of criticisms in 1948 between the InterAmerican Association and the Association of Argentine Broadcasters (ADRA), both presided over by Yankelevich. He refused to support a complaint against General Perón, resulting in a rift between the InterAmerican Association and ADRA, with the latter demanding Yankelevich’s resignation.

Amidst the ongoing tension between broadcasters and the government, Jaime Yankelevich turned his focus to a new frontier: the emerging television technology. In 1951, news spread that television technology, described as a “modern miracle” of image transmission, was arriving from the United States. This new medium aimed to take the central role in family life that radio had previously occupied. Yankelevich, with his extensive experience from Radio Belgrano, was uniquely positioned to spearhead the introduction of this revolutionary technology. His role involved analyzing costs, procuring the initial transmitting equipment, and navigating the technical and economic complexities of the medium. Newspapers and magazines of the time highlighted this technological advancement as a significant milestone in media evolution.

Plans were made for a television broadcast on October 17, 1951, with regular programming slated to begin in early November. Despite the anticipation, media coverage was sparse, except for the notable event of Eva Perón's highly publicized reappearance on October 17. Mirta Varela's book emphasizes the impressive transmitting equipment, including a towering antenna erected at the Ministry of Public Works, which captured the press's attention (2005).

The televised Loyalty Day celebration featured Eva Duarte and Juan Domingo Perón addressing the working-class crowds gathered in the square. Enrique Susini, a prominent figure in the early radio industry, oversaw the technical operations for this historic event.

At that time, television sets were still relatively scarce in Argentina, with only between 400 and 5,000 circulating. However, this marked the beginning of a transformative era. Within two years, the number of television sets in Argentina had surged to 33,000.

In February 1952, Argentina bid farewell to Jaime Yankelevich, the visionary who had pioneered radio in the country. His death in Buenos Aires marked the end of an era. Radiolandia magazine honored him in his obituary, highlighting his legacy with the statement: "He leaves us his greatest achievement, television." The New York Times echoed this sentiment, announcing his passing on February 26 and acknowledging him as a pioneer of Argentina's radio industry.

Yankelevich's life story is a testament to his remarkable journey in the entertainment industry. From a modest business on Entre Ríos Avenue to establishing an entertainment empire in 20th-century Argentina, his contributions to radio and television left an indelible mark on the nation's media landscape. His ability to adapt to changing political landscapes and form strategic alliances, including one with Eva Perón, allowed him to effectively navigate the challenges of his era and cement his legacy as a true trailblazer in broadcasting.

Recognizing the immense potential of radio and television as powerful mediums for communication, entertainment, and advertising, Yankelevich actively promoted their expansion and professionalization. However, his career was not without controversy, particularly during the Peronist era when government control over the media intensified. His collaboration with the government and the state's subsequent acquisition of his broadcasting stations highlighted the complex interplay between media, politics, and business interests in Argentina.

The histories of broadcasting in Argentina and the United States reveal notable similarities and distinctions. Radio broadcasting in Argentina began in the early 1920s, with influential figures like Jaime Yankelevich playing critical roles in its development. Radio quickly emerged as a significant medium for communication and entertainment, though it faced considerable government regulation during the Peronist era, impacting its independence. Yankelevich was also at the forefront of television's introduction to Argentina, which was marked by innovation and technological advancement.

In comparison, the United States saw the launch of its first commercial radio station, KDKA, in 1920, marking the start of rapid expansion in the industry. Key figures like David Sarnoff and

William S. Paley were instrumental in shaping American radio. While the U.S. implemented regulations such as the Radio Act of 1927 and the Communications Act of 1934 to ensure fair competition and frequency allocation, content was primarily left to market forces. Television development in the U.S. began in earnest in the late 1930s and early 1940s, with innovators like Philo Farnsworth and RCA contributing to its growth.

Both countries experienced the profound societal impacts of radio and television, which influenced popular culture and provided news and entertainment. While Argentina faced significant government intervention at certain points, the U.S. maintained a tradition of independent broadcasting, emphasizing freedom of speech and industry competition.

As one of the pioneers of Argentine broadcasting, Yankelevich drew inspiration from the models established by American figures such as Paley and Sarnoff, navigating an Argentina increasingly open to global influences.

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