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FIRST MENTION

Transistors, 1948

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first time the word “transistor” appeared in print was in The New York Times on July 1, 1948, in a Page 46 roundup headed “The News of Radio.”

The unsigned article opened with a report of two new radio shows, one called “Mr. Tutt,” and the other titled “Our Miss Brooks,” “with Eve Arden playing the role of a school teacher who encounters a variety of adventures.” The column’s last item began, “A device called a transistor, which has several applications in radio where a vacuum tube ordinarily is employed, was demonstrated for the first time yesterday.”

There followed a technically accurate description of the gadget, a small metal cylinder consisting of two fine wires connected to a tiny piece of semi-conductive material soldered to a metal base. The transistor, it said, was used as an amplifier in a radio receiver “which contained none of the conventional tubes.”

But the first transistors did not work well, and it was not until Jan. 1, 1952, that an article — on Page 30, by William Laurence — reported on the development of a new and more practical “junction transistor.” On Dec. 30, 1952, an unsigned article on Page 29 described the first consumer product to use transistors: a hearing aid produced by the Sonotone Corporation.

The transistor radio? “Tubeless Radios Due,” read a Page 35 headline on Oct. 18, 1954, over an unsigned article reporting the announcement of a plan to mass produce transistor radios. The appliance, about the size of two packs of cigarettes, was available in time for Christmas, and sold for $49.95, with an additional $12.60 for the battery, earphone and leather case. Grand total in 2009 dollars: $494.61.

On Nov. 2, 1956, a Page 1 headline read “Nobel Physics Prize Goes to 3 Americans.” The transistor’s developers, William Shockley, Walter H. Brattain and John Bardeen, shared a $38,700 prize.