Lessons we can take from Farnsworth 100 years after his birth

In Florida and California, other states with similar climates, thousands of jobs in other states already exist. And when these new jobs are created, they will provide hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs in Asia. Farnsworth’s television invention created those jobs, but not in Utah.

The first question, then, is why? For those planning their research and innovation will play in Utah’s economic future, there are important questions to consider.

Regardless of where innovations occur, they will quickly gravitate to regions with the most efficient and productive use of the innovation. Economists call this concept comparative advantage.

Consider a hypothetical example: Several research universities at the University of Nebraska discovered a method to economically double the output of an orange tree. Even though the research was done in Nebraska, Utah’s climate would not turn the Great Plains into acres of orange groves.

Instead, the innovation would likely increase the productivity of orange growers in Florida and California, other states with similar climates. Regions with the potential for an innovation to create significant economic growth, but those seeds will only sprout in regions where the ground is fertile and planted.

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Farnsworth was able to receive a patent on his invention in 1927. He did not have the financial backing of a large corporation, but he was able to attract the attention of David Sarnoff, who served as president of RCA in the 1930s and 1940s. The tale of Farnsworth and Sarroff is one of competition to shape the future. By the end of the 1940s, RCA and Sarroff had control of the television industry, and they would use the technology to bring television to the American public.

Utah’s business and government leaders consider plans for technology to bring television to the American public.

The second conclusion is that the invention of television: The first is that innovations are mobile. In fact, innovations are much more mobile today than in Farnsworth’s time. An innovation developed at Princeton University is likely to create more jobs in China and India than Princeton, New Jersey. Farnsworth’s television innovation fosters worldwide economic development. This conclusion isn’t an argument against basic research. Countless innovations have come from basic research enrich our lives.

The point is that regional economic development is not the raison d’etre of basic research. The potential for an invention to create significant job growth within a 50-mile radius of the discovery is an uncertain proposition.

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