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SINCE THE introduction of local commercial broadcasting in this country the "radio phone-in" facility has become increasingly popular. Recently, however, a new variation on this well-tried theme has begun to command attention.

Known as tele-radio, it began on Merseyside as an idea to stimulate telephone traffic, by making a local radio service available over the public telephone network. It has since spread to Manchester, Plymouth and Swansea and several other centres are actively involved in preparations to launch similar services in their areas.

At first all services were derived from independent local radio stations but late last year Liverpool achieved another first when Radio Merseyside became the first local BBC station to be just a phone call away.

The thinking behind the scheme is that even in these days of the ubiquitous transistor, regular radio programmes, especially news broadcasts still have a healthy market via the telephone. In Liverpool the first approaches were directed to Merseyside's own local radio station "Radio City", and response was enthusiastic.

Radio City 194 (Sound of Merseyside) was ideally geared for such a service. The programme content is largely "pop" music with news broadcasts every hour together with other regular features. The news, of course, is particularly local and the station – broadcasting 24 hours every day – claims to be the most popular local radio station in the country.

Detailed examination showed that there would be no technical problem in setting up a service and it was decided to go ahead in the Liverpool Director (051) area for a trial period of six months. The dialling code "194" was spare except for minor use at Christmas so, as it was Radio City's medium waveband, it was a natural choice for the new service. Estimates of likely traffic were very much guesswork and the only acceptable plan, therefore, was to provide as much equipment at the outset as could be made available.

In fact the whole job was relatively small both in terms of cost and man-hours. After various grading re-arrangements to make available a tandem level with the relay sets and meters as well as provision of director translations, an amplifier was designed, built and connected to a feed from the broadcast studio. An early decision was to dispense with standard forced release as it seemed unacceptable to



The Radio City studios in Liverpool.

It's radio by phone...

B W Fielding

disconnect a caller in the middle of a news bulletin.

The philosophy, therefore, was to let people listen, at the local rate, for as long as they wished: a decision reached after careful consideration of

the possible consequences such as congestion, as almost certainly main demand would come during the day when people did not have access to a radio.

A few small and potentially critical



Technical officer Colin Dullaghan checks the Radio City amplifiers at Liverpool Tandem Exchange.



A Liverpool Area engineering van spreads the Radio City message.

routes were augmented at little cost and a fall-back arrangement of fixed-time forced release was incorporated, on keys which could be operated if necessary. To avoid routes being swamped by tele-radio calls, it was also arranged that traffic would only have access to a proportion of the total circuits on the route.

Finally, financial agreement was reached to pay royalties to Radio City and to the two record societies for extended use of "needle time" on the basis of a percentage of metered call revenue. The service opened in 1977.

In the first four weeks calls poured in

to the tune of 128,000, 107,000, 89,000 and 76,000. As expected, initial curiosity traffic gradually declined until it settled down to 60,000 calls per week which has been the steady average now for many months. Excluding the Speaking Clock, calls to tele-radio exceed by a substantial margin the total calls to all the other information services combined, including Dial-a-Disc — in itself a very popular service — which has not been affected by the introduction of tele-radio.

The news has proved most popular. Typical peaks of interest were re-

flected during the Jubilee visit of the Queen, the start of the football season, the mini-budget in October 1977, delays and disruptions to local transport, aircraft hi-jackings, evening football matches and notably, the 1978 budget when 4,400 calls were recorded in an hour during the live broadcast of the Chancellor.

It is, of course, uneconomical to provide sufficient equipment to meet full demand during the five minute news bulletins, particularly when there is something important occurring. Some congestion inevitably occurs on the 194 relay sets at these periods but because of the Post Office's route restriction measures and incomplete overflow readings it is not possible to determine demand with accuracy.

Prompted by the success of the Liverpool venture, Manchester were quick to appreciate the value of the service and soon opened negotiations with their Independent Radio station, Radio Piccadilly, broadcasting on 261 metres. A service was successfully opened on "261" for Manchester (061) area telephones late in 1977 and this has attracted about the same quantities of traffic as in Liverpool. Plymouth opened early last year (1978) with their "Plymouth Sound" and Swansea Sound followed soon afterwards. In both cases the station wavelength was able to be incorporated in the number.

In its first year of operation Liverpool "194" clocked up 3½ million calls with no interference to the public network, no failure of service and superb transmission.

What then of the future? Radio stations have the journalistic and broadcasting expertise, the Post Office has a distribution facility and from the successful start so far it looks highly probable that a combination of the two can produce much more traffic than any of the other information services.

There are some problems with codes but none of which is insurmountable. The three digit code reflecting the station wavelengths attracts attention, and consequently traffic, but it is often in ranges which cannot be used in non-director areas. With a little ingenuity, however, such codes can be incorporated ... as Plymouth and Swansea have already shown.

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