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The phone-in phenomenon

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THE ADVENT of commercial radio in the United Kingdom has firmly established a previously little known broadcasting phenomenon – the phone-in programme. And as interest in audience participation has grown, it has been quickly recognised that such shows fulfil a genuine demand for which Post Office Telecommunications needs to cater.

Although the BBC and Radio Luxembourg had on occasion previously made use of phone-in facilities, the Post Office had not encouraged its further use since it was concerned to protect other customers using the telephone network from interference which could be caused by the high level of calls involved.

The main problem with phone-in programmes, in fact, lies in the ratio of calls made to those that are answered. In the end, the number of callers who are successful in getting through must depend on how many calls the radio or television station can handle. All the Post Office can do is adapt the telephone network to cope with the extraordinary demands made by such programmes.

The more attractive the programme, or wider the coverage, the more calls will be made, but whatever the response, the studio only wishes to receive a certain number. In many cases, particularly in local radio, the number of calls can be easily handled by the station. In the case of television and some of the larger local radio stations, however, the presenters are concerned with attracting large numbers of callers, to reflect the popularity of their programme.

One of the conditions of allowing phone-in programmes is that the



Capital Radio girl Liz Goodacre notes the name and telephone number of a caller to the "Love-line" programme.

broadcaster must rent enough lines to give calls a reasonable chance of being answered either by the studio staff or by an answering machine in the studio. As phone-in programmes frequently generate hundreds of thousands of calls it is quite impossible for many of them to be answered even if the producer so wished. Thus congestion is created in the public network to the detriment of customers generally. So while it is operationally desirable for the broadcaster to rent sufficient lines to handle the calls, in practice it is generally unrealistic.

In an attempt to overcome this problem companies who use the phone-in

technique on a large scale are allocated special exchange codes and calls to these exchanges are kept separate from normal telephone traffic in an attempt to reduce interference. This arrangement is called the TV and Radio Audience Participation Programme facility (TRAPP) and the most recent user has been Capital Radio, broadcasting from London.

This popular station, with some four million listeners, encourages audience participation by telephone in many of its programmes. Response was so great that some of the automatic switching equipment in the local exchange which serves Capital had become worn out by



Disc-jockey Dave Cash prepares to deal with another romantic dedication on Capital Radio's "Love-line".

the constant wear of calls which could not be connected. Furthermore other customers on the same exchange had difficulty in receiving incoming calls because listeners wanting Capital Radio were blocking the lines, or mis-routing to them.

It was decided therefore to provide Capital Radio with the TRAPP facility and they were given their own special exchange code 01-484. . . . All phone-in callers were asked to use only that code. By using this special number the telephone switching equipment at various stages in the routing of a call would recognise it and limit the total calls it extended to Capital Radio to the number which could be handled.

If the programme generated few calls, all would be connected but if the programme aroused great interest the number of calls would be automatically limited and engaged tone connected to those which could not get through. In this way the funnel of calls which previously caused so much damage and congestion was replaced by a steady stream of calls which would be answered.

Unfortunately this does not solve all the problems, however. As with all telephone calls some are misdialled by the caller and a few are misconnected. When several hundred thousand calls are made in a short space of time to one number, the percentage mis-routed, however small, will cause unnecessary problems to other customers.

An example is the fact that at one time the BBC was using the special exchange code 01-288 . . . and any



Post Office technicians John Elliott and Tom Fagan check the key and lamp unit in a room adjoining the main control area and studios at Capital Radio.

caller who omitted the digit 1 was mis-routed to Bude in Cornwall (STD code 0288). Needless to say the customer in Bude was not pleased to receive hundreds of calls. By very careful selection of numbers this problem can be minimised although never entirely overcome.

By giving Capital Radio its own exchange code therefore with a well chosen number, the Post Office has

adapted the network to cope with the problem, and prevented possible frustration and nuisance for many other customers.

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