Engineering Requirements for Program Transmission Circuits*

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Present-day program networks are reviewed from the standpoints of engineering, design, and operation as developed to meet the needs of the broadcasters. The factors requiring consideration in the further development of program networks in anticipation of future needs are also discussed. The presentation of the paper is supplemented by a demonstration of the quality obtainable by transmission over various types of telephone facilities.

Introduction

THE growth of radio broadcasting to the magnitude of a major national industry within the last twenty years has been accompanied by the development of a nation-wide system of wire-line networks interconnecting hundreds of broadcasting stations. Papers have been presented before this Institute from time to time[1,2,3] describing the types of plant used for these networks and discussing important features of their design and operation. With these twenty years of experience as a background, it should now be of interest to review how the various requirements of broadcasting have influenced the development of the networks and to consider some of the factors which have determined the point to which transmission and operating features have so far been carried.

Simply stated, broadcasting is a means by which sounds originated at one place are reproduced simultaneously to large numbers of listeners distributed over wide areas. The simplest possible radio broadcasting system would consist of a microphone, a radio broadcast transmitter and some radio receiving sets. Such a system could serve only the listeners within the comparatively limited service area of the transmitter. To serve the whole nation many transmitters must be established about the country. Furthermore the most desirable sources of program are not usually in the neighborhood of the transmitter to which a particular listener can tune, since talent tends to be concentrated in certain parts of the country, and special events of interest may occur anywhere. To give a true country-wide service so that every listener can hear the programs he enjoys wherever they may

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[1] For all numbered references, see list at end of paper.

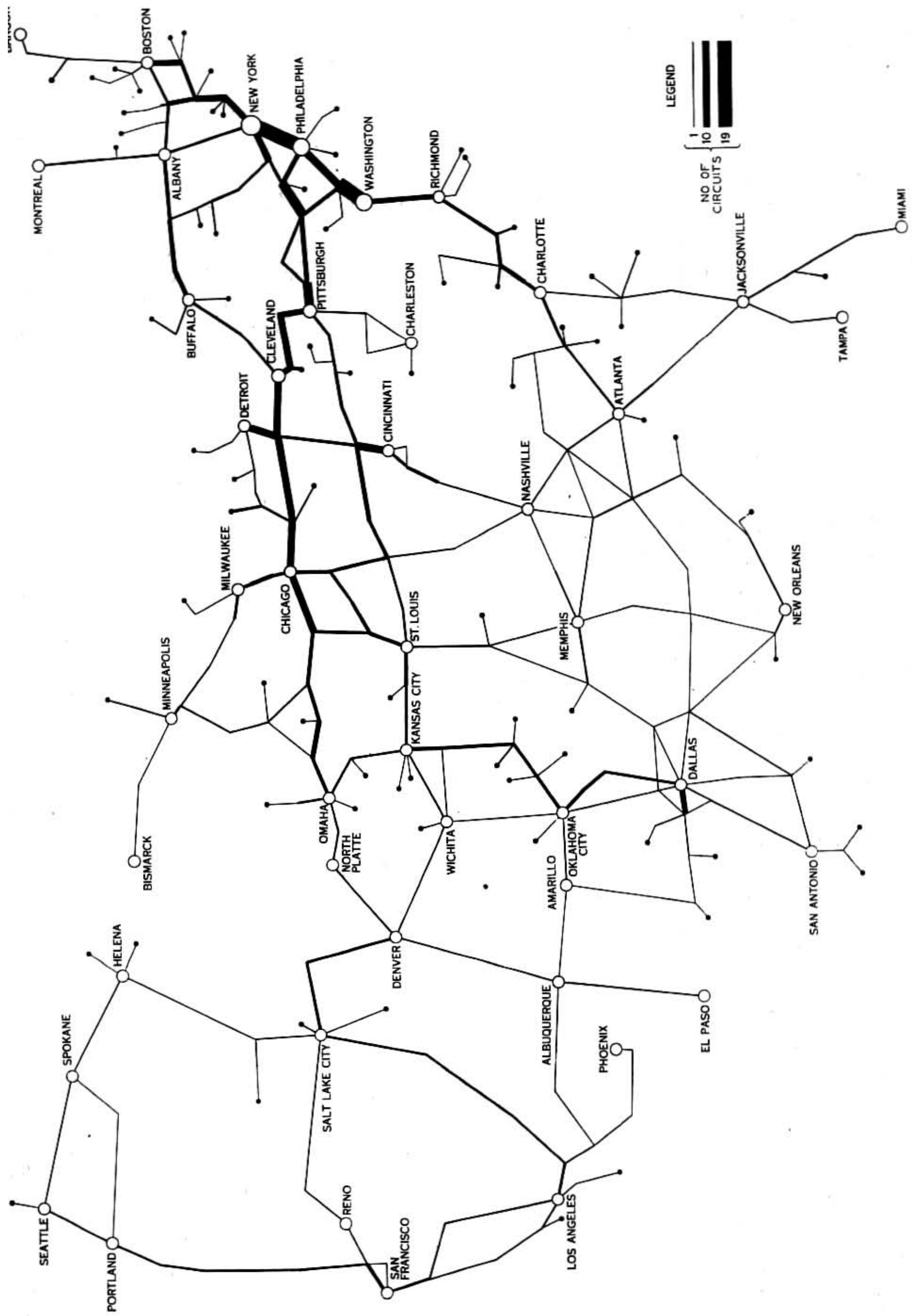

Fig. 1—Major network circuits in the United States

originate, a supplementary transmission system must be provided, interconnecting the many studios and broadcasting stations. The wire networks that perform this function comprise the subject matter of this paper.

The present extent of the wire-line facilities which are associated with the major portion of these networks is indicated in Fig. 1. The width of the lines on this chart has been made proportional to the numbers of circuits in the various sections. The total length of these circuits is in excess of 110,000 miles, and it is not unusual for a program originating at some point on a network to traverse more than 7,000 miles of circuit before being broadcast by the most remote station.

The requirements which the program networks must meet are in the final analysis determined largely by the needs of the broadcasters. The objective of a program network service is to meet these needs in as complete and prompt a manner as possible consistent with reasonable cost. With this objective in mind, it is necessary in planning the plant to consider not only the day-to-day needs, but the possible future needs as well. The importance of this may be appreciated when it is considered that plant provided today for program transmission service will need to be adaptable to the service requirements ten or twenty years hence. As a result of such planning, cables and equipment installed five, ten, and fifteen years ago meet present-day requirements, and, with some rearrangements, will take care of those likely to develop tomorrow.

The detailed planning of program transmission circuits requires consideration of:

1. The numbers of circuits likely to be required, section by section, over each route;
2. The provisions for reliability, flexibility, operation, and supervision essential to a high-grade network service;
3. The transmission requirements, or electrical characteristics, necessary to achieve a natural reproduction of the program.

These three general classes of requirements will be considered in order.

Number of Circuits Required

The circuits which have been established on a full-time basis for continuing use form the backbone of the program networks. Even for these circuits, however, permanence is relative since frequent extensions and rearrangements are made to meet changing requirements of the broadcasters. Aside from these fulltime circuits there are intermittent requirements occasioned by special events and other short-period needs of the broadcasters, some of which involve networks almost as extensive as the full-time networks. In addition reliability of service requires provision for rerouting the networks in the event of trouble. Figure 2 shows the year-by-year growth in

the operated mileage of program circuits for the period 1926 to 1940. Of the more than 110,000 miles of circuits shown for 1940, about 45,000 miles have been provided for the short-period services and as stand-by facilities for protection. In addition to these, there are still other circuits, normally assigned to other services, which are arranged to be readily adaptable to program service to supplement the reserve facilities maintained on a full-time basis.

The time interval necessarily accompanying any extensive construction project makes it necessary to engineer plant considerably in advance of actual service requirements to meet, not only the expected growth, but also the changes in network routing. Figure 3 shows for two typical sections

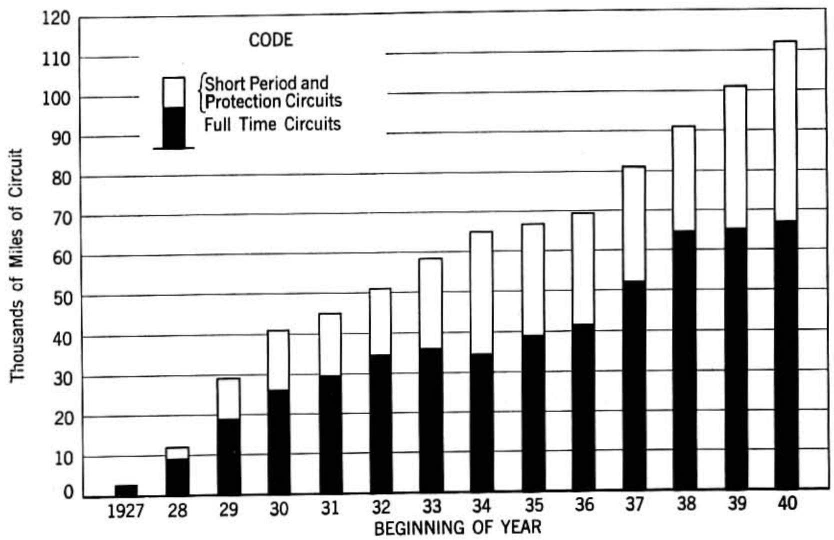

Fig. 2—Growth in mileage of major network circuits

along major routes the variations in requirements for full-time network circuits resulting from growth and rearrangements required by the broadcasters. While, in planning to meet these rapid variations in circuit requirements, advantage can be taken of some latitude which exists in the choice of routes for occasional services and protection facilities, the task of balancing the provision of circuits against requirements is an entertaining and at times difficult one for the circuit engineer.

Operating Requirements

Considering for a moment the variety of programs originating at many different points that can be heard on any home radio set in the course of an

evening without once changing the tuning, it will be apparent that minute-to-minute rearrangements of an established interconnecting network must be possible. For example, studios have to be changed from receiving to originating, sections of the network have to be made to transmit first in

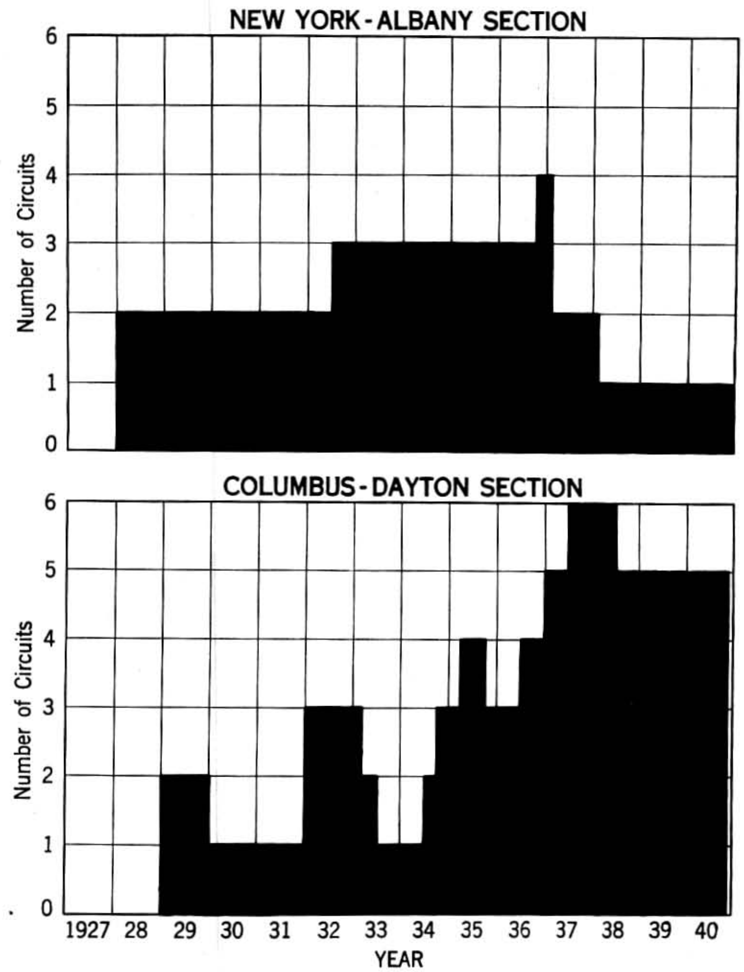

Fig. 3—Variations in full-time program circuits

one direction and then in the other, and branches have to be connected and disconnected. These changes in the network have to be made in the few seconds elapsing between the close of one program and the start of the next on the receipt of selected cue words or sounds. Even during the course of a

single program, switches or reversals may have to be made to change the originating point temporarily. To provide for these rapid changes, special operation and special switching and reversing equipment are required at many points along the network. Much of this equipment is under remote control from selected points.

The greater portion of the switching of program circuits is done at about 25 points throughout the country on the major networks. On the average more than 25,000 switching operations per month are performed at these 25 points. During the busy hours of any typical evening there may be something over 500 men on duty at all of the offices about the networks.

At points where switching requirements are simple, the switching equipment consists merely of a few keys. At the larger points where the switching requirements are complex, the switching equipment consists of elaborate relay and control arrangements. These are so designed that it is possible to set up in advance the circuit combinations required for the ensuing program period without disturbing the programs in progress. The actual switching operation takes place at the instant the monitoring attendants signal the the receipt of the last of selected cues, and not before then. This type of arrangement affords a maximum of protection against error, as it is possible to check the presetting for the next switch or make a last minute change if necessary any time before the switch has been made.

Figure 4 shows a picture of such a switching arrangement in use at Omaha, Nebraska for one broadcasting company. At this point 13 circuits used in various trunk and branch sections of two networks are connected to the switching equipment. These are grouped in various combinations to take care of as many as five simultaneous programs. A maximum of five cues might, therefore, be involved in a switch at this point.

The operation and maintenance of the networks are carried out by a special organization under centralized authority and trained in the application of uniform methods and procedures found by experience to be productive of best results. Transmission is monitored continuously at strategic points about the networks. In order to facilitate the activities of this group many thousands of miles of intercommunicating telephone and telegraph circuits are provided full time for their use.

A picture of a monitoring position in the program transmission office at Washington, D. C. is shown in Fig. 5. It will be noted that the monitoring attendant is using an individual headset. This is of a special high fidelity type and is used to avoid the confusion that would result from attempting to monitor a number of different programs simultaneously with loud-speakers. Loud-speakers are available, however, for supplementary checks of quality whenever required.

Accurate transmission measuring equipment is necessary at the various

operating points about the networks to insure satisfactory transmission maintenance results.

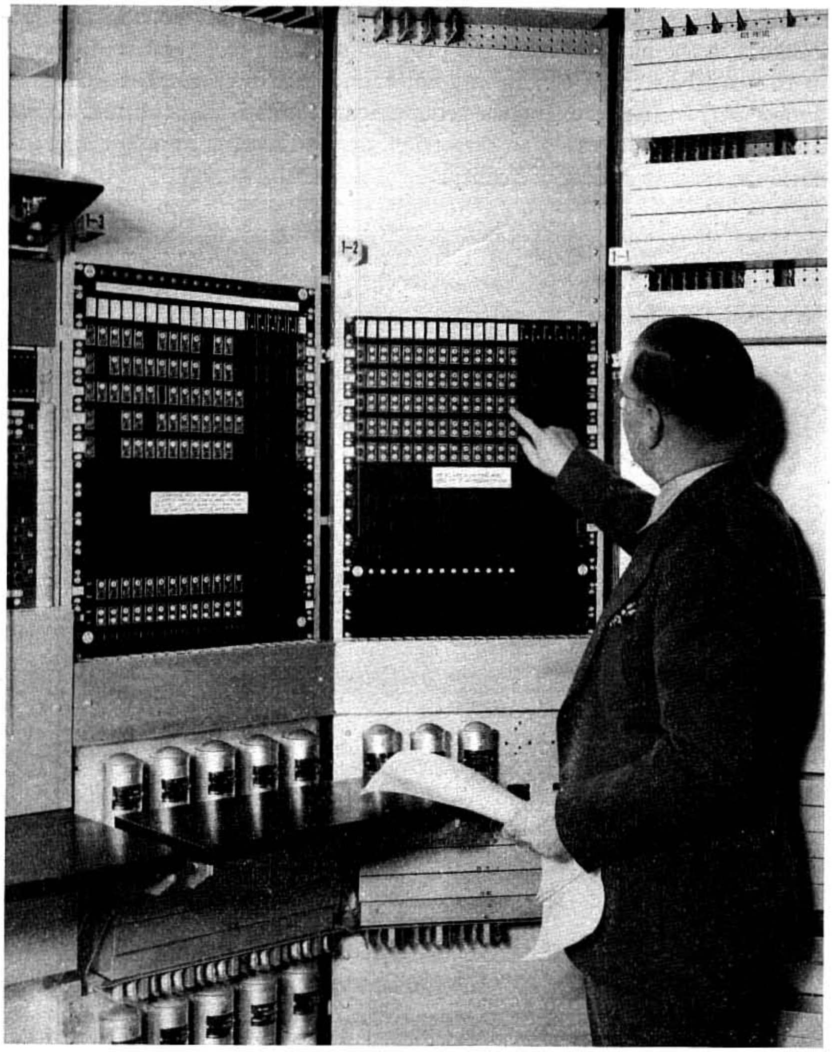

Fig. 4—Switching panel at Omaha, Nebraska

TRANSMISSION REQUIREMENTS

The general transmission requirement for a broadcasting system is that the program material be transmitted with a high degree of naturalness. Although the exact determination of the transmission characteristics which

would accomplish this involves many considerations it will be assumed in this discussion that an ideal transmittion system is one in which the sound waves impressed on the listeners' ears in the home are an exact replica of the sound waves striking the microphone in the distant studio. Limitations inherent in the human ear, in the program material to be transmitted, and in the usual listening conditions, however, make such ideal transmission unnecessary. In expressing the requirements for satisfactory transmission, frequency range, attenuation distortion, delay distortion, nonlinearity and noise are used as indices of quality.

Fig. 5—Monitoring position at Washington, D. C.

Before taking up the transmission requirements of a program circuit, it is important to consider further the fundamental factors that are involved in fixing the characteristics considered desirable for the entire system. According to Harvey Fletcher,[4] the zone of audibility of the average normal human ear for pure or single frequency sounds is the area within the curve of Fig. 6. The abscissas represent frequency and the ordinates show the range of intensity recognizable as sound, between the lower limit or threshold of audibility and the upper limit where the sensation of pain is felt. It is seen that the extreme frequency range shown on the chart is from about 20

to 20,000 cycles per second. This range is for young people. It is considerably less for middle-aged and elderly people, and varies with individuals.

In addition to the limitation of the ear there is the fact that there is little energy present in most program material in the extremes of this range, particularly in the upper frequencies. The energy versus frequency spectra of music and other forms of program have been published elsewhere.[5] Figure 7 shows the frequency range which must be transmitted for a number of instruments, speech, and certain noises, so that competent observers cannot detect any impairment.[6] For whole orchestras, experiment has

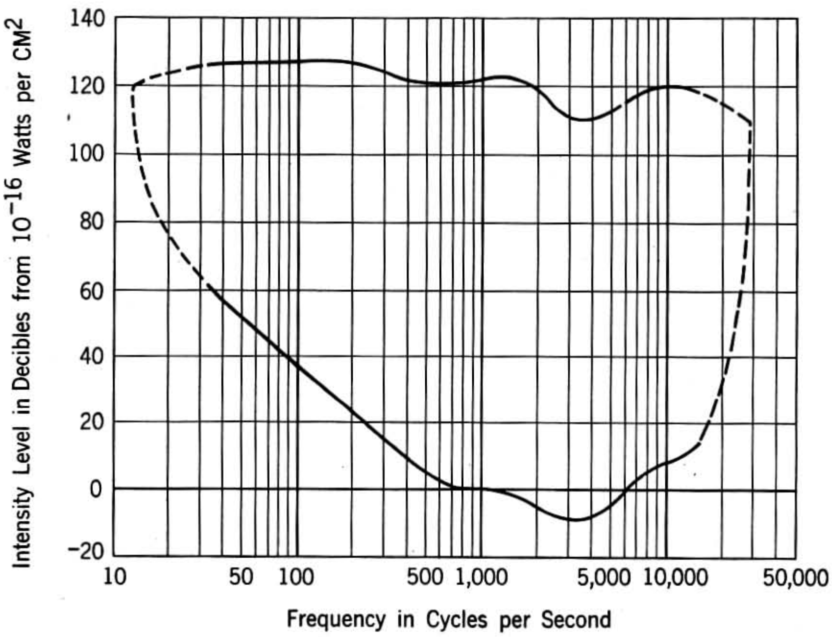

Fig. 6—Limits of audible sound

shown that the elimination of frequencies below 40 and above 15,000 cycles per second is undetectable.[4] It the upper limit of the transmitted frequencies is lowered from 15,000 cycles, the impairment is at first barely detectable but increases at an accelerating rate. When the limit is materially lower than 8,000 cycles, the loss is readily apparent to many people.

Another important consideration is volume range—that is the difference between the maximum and minimum levels of the program. The ordinates of Fig. 6 show that for part of the frequency range, the ear can respond to a range of intensities of more than 120 decibels, with perhaps 100 decibels as a mean. However, the following considerations show that the volume range

which the transmission system needs to accommodate is considerably narrower than the intensity range to which the ear can respond.

In the first place, the range of program volumes to which the ear can respond is much less than the range of single-frequency intensities shown by the curve. Program waves are in general very irregular in shape, and even at constant volume contain large and small peaks differing in amplitude by many decibels. The range between the volume at which the highst peaks reach the maximum instantaneous intensity which the ear can tolerate and

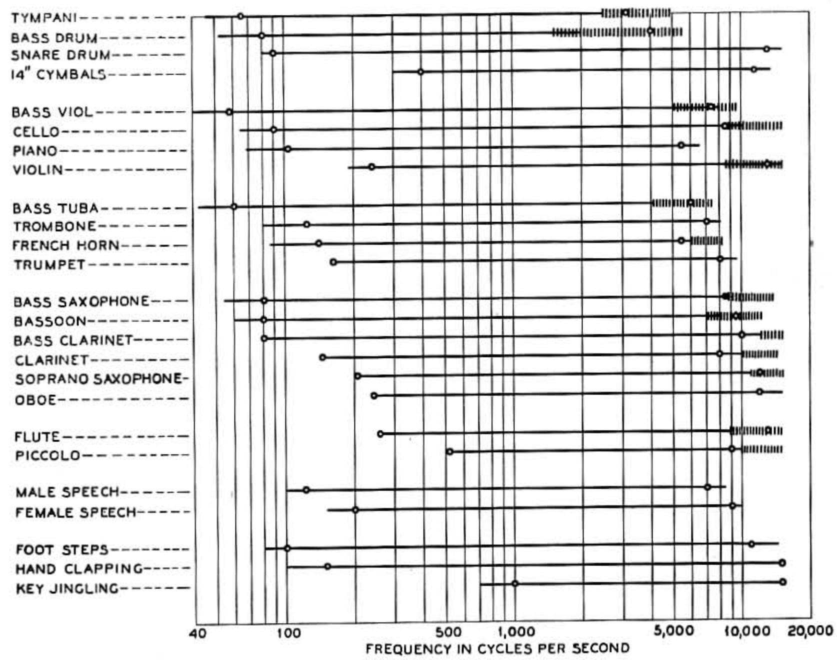

Fig. 7—Audible frequency ranges of music, speech, and noise

Observers voted for entire band by ratio of 60 to 40 over band shown by extremities of lines, and by ratio of 80 to 20 over band indicated by circles. Broken lines show range of noise accompanying music.

the volume at which the smallest peaks are just above the threshold of audibility is therefore less by a number of decibels than the intensity range of the ear as measured by single frequencies.

In the second place, the volume range of the usual program material has definite limits. Measurements have shown that a large symphony orchestra produces a maximum volume range of about 70 decibels.[4] The volume range of most other types of program is considerably less than this, for example, being only about 25 to 30 decibles for dance music and as little as about 15 decibels for much of the dialogue of actors in radio drama.

In the third place, the usual listening conditions impose a definite limit on the useful volume range. The loudest passages in the music of a symphony orchestra correspond to a sound level of about +95 decibels at a point, say one-third the way back in an auditorium, but most people in their homes prefer a level which is lower than this by 5 to 10 decibels. Figure 8

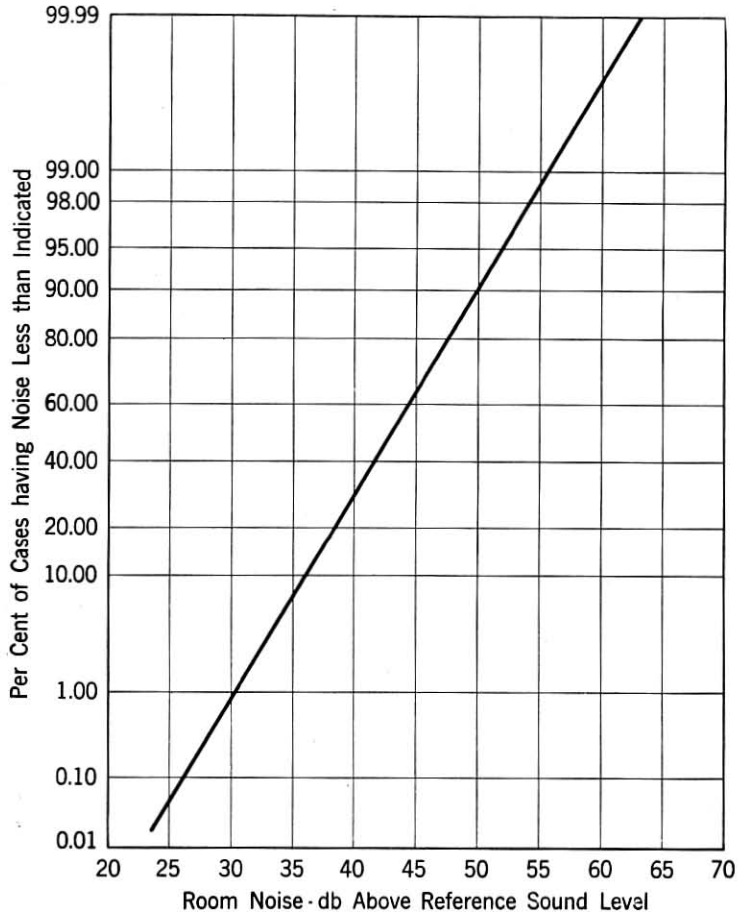

Fig. 8—Residence room noise with radio sets silent
Average 43 db. Standard deviation 5.5 db.

shows the results of an extensive survey[7] of acoustic room noise in homes. It will be noted that the average noise level is +43 decibels on the sound-level scale, and that few homes are quieter than +30 decibels even in the suburbs. The signal-to-noise range inherent in the listening conditions, and allowing nothing for the noise contributed by the transmission system or the room noise where the program is being produced, is therefore

seen to be somewhere between 45 and 65 decibels. There is, therefore, no advantage to the listener in providing a permissible volume range materially wider than this in the transmission system.

The above discussion applies primarily to the transmission of symphonic and similar high-grade program material. Much program material is less exacting in its requirements, but on the other hand some sound effects such as the tearing of paper require the reproduction of higher frequencies for complete naturalness.

With these broad considerations in mind, the requirements of high-quality program circuits may now be taken up. As has been noted, the program network is but one part of the over-all broadcasting system which, in addition, includes microphones and studio equipment, radio transmitters, and the home receivers with their loud-speakers. It may be taken as a goal for the program networks that their transmission be nearly enough distortionless so that the over-all performance in regard to naturalness of reproduction will not be limited by them.

To meet such a requirement for short program circuits having only one or two sections is not difficult technically and does not in general require costly types of plant. However, the vast country-wide program networks are made up of many sections of circuits in tandem, which as mentioned before may total in some cases as much as 7,000 miles. This makes it necessary to design and operate the individual circuits to very close limits so that the cumulative discrepancies in the whole network will not exceed tolerable values; and to consider carefully the types of plant employed lest by virtue of sheer numbers of units involved, the total cost be out of line with the over-all grade of service being given the listner. These two conflicting factors are important ones in the consideration of transmission requirements for networks. The determination of the practical working characteristics of program networks involves a consideration not only of the physical and cost factors discussed above but also of such other factors as cost of studios, broadcast transmitters and receivers, and the limitations of the frequency allocations of broadcast stations.

From the standpoint of frequency band the consideration of all factors has resulted in the major present-day program networks being set up to transmit a frequency band with an upper limit of about 5,000 cycles. All program facilities installed in the last ten years or so, however, have been designed to be adaptable to the future transmission of frequencies up to 8,000 cycles. Operation on an 8,000-cycle basis, however, requires the release of additional frequency space now occupied by other services in much of the plant and a general readjustment of the program-circuit characteristics. In 1933, experimental wire circuits were set up between Philadelphia and Washington to transmit frequency bands up to 15,000 cycles. These were employed in a

demonstration of stereophonic transmission and reproduction of music.[4] Studio-transmitter loops have been provided to transmit wider frequency bands than the 5,000 cycles currently provided on the nation-wide networks. At the present time, many of the studio-transmitter loops are being set up to transmit bands up to 15,000 cycles. A demonstration will be given at the close of the paper of the transmission of programs over cable circuits about 1,200 miles in length with frequency bands extending to 15,000, 8,000, and 5,000 cycles. The 5,000-cycle circuit is of the type in present commercial use. The 8,000-cycle circuit is of a type to which much of the present program plant can readily be modified. The 15,000-cycle circuit consists of a standard carrier system to which has been added program terminal equipment now under development.

In the consideration of transmission requirements for program circuits other than nominal frequency band, the variation in performance with length and type of circuit is important, since the factors tending to impair transmission are in the nature of small amounts of distortion or noise which accumulate over the length of the circuit. If these effects varied in some definite manner with length, transmission requirements could be fixed on that basis. However, good engineering practice frequently requires choosing for the various sections of a long circuit, different types of facilities whose contributions to the total effects are not in proportion to their length. Even the determination of the maximum permissible distortion and noise on a circuit is influenced by outside factors such as are involved in the broadcasters weighing operating flexibility and cost against the frequency of occurrence of unfavorable network routings and the number of stations affected. For example, in order to secure operating flexibility with a minimum of total network mileage, most of the networks employ the so-called "round robin" principle for a part of the network. In this arrangement the circuit follows a route from station to station forming a continuous loop which returns to its starting point. This naturally results in increased circuit mileage between the program source and the more distant listeners with an attendant increase in undesired transmission effects. For these reasons no exact or specific transmission requirements can be stated for even the over-all performance of program transmission service.

Volume Range

The permissible volume range for a program circuit is determined by the maximum volume which can be transmitted as limited by nonlinear distortion or crosstalk, and the minimum volume which can be transmitted without impairment from the noise present on the circuit.

In connection with their design the various types of program circuit are subjected to listening tests in which the transmission of program over a

long loop of the circuit is compared with transmission over a local distortionless circuit. Each type of circuit thus is rated as to the maximum volume it can transmit without noticeable distortion. The highest volume which can be permitted without excessive crosstalk into other program or message telephone circuits is also investigated, and whichever limit is the lower determines the maximum allowable working volume for service. The range between the maximum permissible volume and the noise level on very long lengths of the present program circuits is about 45 or 50 decibels, except under some conditions on certain open-wire sections. On the individual links making up the long circuit, the range is 10 or 20 decibels greater than this.

Attenuation and Delay Distortion

Another important consideration is the amount of attenuation and delay (or phase) distortion to be permitted within the transmitted frequency band. It is the practice to equip program circuits with adjustable attentuation equalizers. By means of these once the desired frequency band has been chosen the deviation in attenuation at any frequency within that band, compared with that at 1,000 cycles, can be adjusted within close limits. On very long circuits, however, experience has shown that even with automatic regulating features and careful operation residual variations which may amount to several decibels may develop as a result of changing temperature and other conditions. These variations are kept within tolerable limits by readjustment of the equalizers from time to time.

Associated with the attenuation distortion is another effect detrimental to program quality, namely, differences in time of transmission for different frequency components of the signal. In practice, circuits tend to have a lower velocity of transmission near the edges of the frequency band than in the middle portions. This results in frequency components near the edges being delayed as compared to the middle portions of the band. This difference in time of transmission is called delay distortion of the circuit. Careful listening tests have shown that it becomes noticeable if, at the highest transmitted frequency, the delay is more than eight milliseconds greater than at 1,000 cycles, and if, at 100 cycles, it is more than about 15 milliseconds greater than at 1,000 cycles. It is controlled by careful attention to the design of loading systems, amplifiers, repeating coils, and all other elements of the circuit. Since such small amounts of over-all delay distortion are detectable and since networks frequently have 100 or more amplifiers in tandem between an originating point and the broadcasting stations on the more distant portions of the networks, it is necessary that the delay distortion of all individual components of a network be held to exceedingly close limits. Accumulations of residual delay distortion

which cannot be entirely eliminated in design are reduced by the use of delay equalizers along the circuits when they are set up.

Conclusion

From this discussion it is seen that the program networks are comprised of many parts, each of which must meet exacting requirements in order that over-all results will be satisfactory. It is seen that equally important with transmission are the requirements for plant flexibility, adequate reserves, uniform practices, and centralized supervision of the networks.

The features discussed have been those found desirable for present-day network service. As indicated earlier, consideration of the needs of the future as well as those of the present is an essential feature of the design and engineering of the plant for program-network service. As a result of having done this it will be possible to provide with present plant, and with new plant currently being installed, adequate network facilities as the broadcasting art develops toward higher standards of performance. With the past experience as a guide, it appears that there should be no fundamental difficulty in meeting all reasonable requirements, always remembering that in the long run, requirements and costs bear definite relations to each other.

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