

"HALOES" and "SNOWBALLS"

The Curious Phenomena of Listener Research

Written for "The Listener" by
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WHEN Tommy Handley bursts on to the startled air at 8.30 on Thursday nights he has the uneasy, yet in some ways reassuring knowledge that if ITMA isn't as bright as it was last week, there is a back-room department at the BBC which will be quick to say "Don't look now, but your programme's slipping." The same department will be able to tell the producer of a programme of poetry reading almost to the hundred thousand how many listeners he will have. Not that Mr. Handley shows any sign of losing his phenomenal grip, or that the poetry readings man would care a jot for popularity in the grosser, material sense of the word, but it is always handy to be able to assess and survey radio audiences.

The back-room boys who attend to this sort of thing at the BBC comprise the Listener Research Department. Their headquarters are in a solid, impressive stone building in Portland Place, a quarter-of-a-mile from Broadcasting House, and they are attracting some attention at the moment by an exhibition which explains their methods, summarises their results, and draws certain Significant Conclusions. The exhibition occupies one small room, and is intended for the instruction of people working in broadcasting, not the general public. However, a friend of mine in the BBC's Overseas Publicity Department showed me around. It certainly can't compare with the "Britain Can Make It" show in scope or popularity; and on the two occasions I visited the exhibition the only other person I saw was a disappointed little man who, I conclude, was the man who plays the pips, and was disappointed because Listener Research pays absolutely no attention to pips. From my first visit I emerged with my head in a whirl of statistics and graphs, but the second time I sat down quietly, studied and digested, and found it made a whole lot of sense.

The Reliable Miss Press

Listener Research started in 1936 (this is by way of being an anniversary exhibition), and the guiding brain throughout has been R. J. E. Silvey, who was an expert in the mysterious business of market research. Mr Silvey's secretary then was a bright young woman named Miss Press, and she is still there, and if you have any doubts as to the reliability of Listener Research methods and the accuracy of the results, just try to trip up Miss Press. From the start, market research technique, as distinct from Gallup Poll and Mass Observation methods, was used, and though everybody is polite and complimentary about these, I gathered that Listener Research consider themselves more scientific. The outbreak of war brought the department increased stature and importance, and several surveys were done for the Ministry of Information before the M. of I. started making its own surveys.

Listener Research is based on a continuous survey of listeners, 3,000 of whom in different parts of England, Scotland, and Wales are asked every day to name the broadcasts they heard the day before. Sixty per cent. are female, 40 per cent. male; 75 per cent. "working-class," 20 per cent. lower-middle-class, 5 per cent. upper-middle-class (I was interested to note that for the purpose of this type of survey there is no longer an Upper-Class in Britain); approximately 40 per cent. are between the ages of 30 and 49, 40 per cent. are 50 or more, 15 per cent. between 20 and 29, and 5 per cent. 16 to 19 years; 60 per cent. are "unoccupied," and 40 per cent. "occupied." The interviewing is done by 200 interviewers who work part-time for the BBC, and who represent a nice blend of educational and occupational backgrounds. In addition to nominating the programme listened to, the interviewee comments briefly on BBC programmes (Completely satisfied, Moderately satisfied, Thoroughly dissatisfied, or Undecided), and furnishes certain other information about his listening habits.

Coming to Conclusions

The questionnaires filled in and certified as true and faithful interviews in accordance with the department's requirements, they are then handed over to the statisticians, who tear their insides out, add weighted figures here and estimate percentages there, and punch

holes in cards and run the cards through machines until it is finally possible to inform the Director-General of the BBC, should he wish to know, that on Sunday, September 29, 1,764 red-headed Scotswomen between the ages of 30 and 49 were listening to "Rocky Mountain Rhythm" with Big Bill Campbell. It seems almost as precise as that.

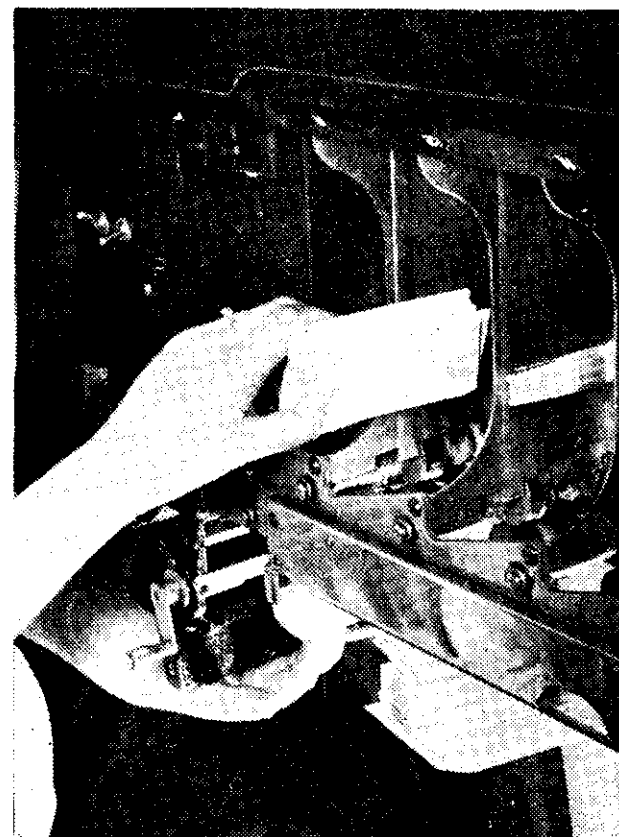
Listeners are divided into their regions, and a percentage is struck for the whole of Great Britain, which is estimated to have an adult population of 35,000,000. Thus one day in June, ITMA attracted 30 per cent. of the total, but the proportion of listeners which the programme pulled in varied in different regions. The obvious reason is that a joke which bursts a Londoner's buttons may scarcely raise a smile from a Lancashire typist.

"Duty Listening" Discouraged

Next comes the question of finding out how a programme is received. Listener Research has organised listening panels of 600 supposedly "typical" listeners in each of the regions. They receive questionnaires covering some 250 broadcasts a month, and select those dealing with (continued on next page)



IT GOES DOWN HERE: A BBC interviewer records the previous day's listening by a housewife in the suburbs



—AND IT COMES OUT HERE: Left—Records of interviews in the Survey of Listening being punched on cards for subsequent tabulation. Right—Electrical counter-sorter in operation. This machine counts the number of times each broadcast has been heard by the persons interviewed