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PHONE USERS CITE SERVICE DECLINE

Complaints Increase Across U.S.—Company Aides and F.C.C. Meet in Capital

By WILLIAM K. STEVENS

Cries of frustration over erratic telephone service are being heard from more and more of the major metropolitan areas in the United States.

Although most of the attention has focused on New York, where Federal Communications Commission officials say the situation is the most severe, telephone customers in such cities as Miami, Boston, Denver, Atlanta and Los Angeles are finding themselves inconvenienced and angered by a variety of troubles. They include:

Inability to get a dial tone for minutes, or even hours; the rapid "buzz-buzz" that means all circuits are busy; the recorded voice that informs a customer the number he is calling no longer is "in service," when he knows it is; the line that unaccountably goes dead; the busy signal that intrudes before the caller finishes dialing; delays in getting telephones installed; and assorted misconnections, disconnections and malconnections.

Widespread Complaints

So widespread are the complaints that telephone company officials have been trekking to Washington in recent days, at the behest of F.C.C. staff members, to answer questions about the quality of interstate service. The discussions are to resume this week.

The major reasons for irregular service, as they emerged from interviews with telephone company executives, telephone users, and officials of state and Federal regulatory agencies, are an explosive growth and unforeseen shifting of demand for phone service within parts of metropolitan areas.

Telephone companies in the troubled cities apparently have not been able to forecast expansion and shifting of demand precisely enough so that sufficient telephones, switching centers and cables can be installed, and so that technicians can be hired and trained to service them.

Telephone users long ac-

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Phone Users' Complaints Mount in U.S.

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customed to what is generally agreed, even now, to be the best service in the world have been complaining to the Federal Communications Commission and state utility regulators in record numbers. Some officials of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company acknowledge that the Bell System and the country's 2,100 independent telephone companies have never been under such fire.

The growing chorus of complaints has caused some critics—including some within the F.C.C. staff—to wonder if the telephone companies' management techniques are equal to the job of maintaining the United States' communication network in good order.

Spurred by the complaints, the F.C.C. asked A. T. & T. officials to go to Washington last Friday to talk over the matter of interstate service, informally and off the record.

It was believed to be the first time A. T. & T., which owns 80 per cent of the country's telephones and all of its long-distance transmission facilities, had ever been summoned to account for quality of service. Representatives of the smaller independent companies have also been summoned.

F.C.C. Checks Up

"We want to be satisfied as to the measures management takes to put out fires and to anticipate danger areas," Bernard Strassburg, chief of the F.C.C.'s common carrier bureau, said in a telephone interview after Friday's meeting between his staff and Bell System officials.

"We want to know what measures are employed to keep in touch with system performance at all levels, and we want to know how management reacts to the information."

"And we would like to ascertain at some point just how serious the problem is; whether there is a crisis," he went on. "We know there are some problems around the country, but just how serious it is in the totality of things, we don't know."

He said that after his staff "distills" the information provided last Friday by A. T. & T., "we will come back to the Bell System, and we will see if there's some action we ought to be taking."

Although the F.C.C. is empowered to regulate only interstate service, its concern is focused at the moment on local areas. That is where the trouble is, and, as another F.C.C. official said, "it doesn't do you any good to place a long distance call if you can't get through the first local exchange."

'Fantastic' Increase

In Florida, both the Southern Bell Telephone Company and the General Telephone Company (the largest of the independents) are struggling to catch up with what they call a "fantastic" increase in demand for phone service along the state's southeast Gold Coast from Pompano Beach to Miami, and in the Tampa area.

The Gold Coast actually had its worst problems about a year ago, said T. Mabry Ervin, executive director of the state's Public Service Commission, when there were instances of delays of four months and five months in getting telephones installed. Southern Bell simply could not put in cable fast enough.

Although Florida's difficulties appear to have eased, the P. S. C. nevertheless ordered Southern Bell two months ago to refund \$1.5-million to customers on grounds that the company had failed to bring its service up to standard.

Complaints in the Boston area earlier this year led the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities to investigate the adequacy of service offered by the Bell System's New England Telephone and Telegraph Company.

After a series of hearings in which witnesses testified to a variety of frustrations, the utilities commission last July 10 issued a highly critical report in which it said service had "markedly deteriorated."

The commission concluded that some of the company's practices, equipment and service were "unjust, unreasonable, unsafe, improper and inadequate," and gave the company 90 days to come up with plans for improvement.

The company, however, appealed the issue to the state Supreme Court and on Sept. 3 won a reprieve. The matter is to be reviewed this fall by the full bench of the court.

In Denver, Paul M. Brown, assistant chief engineer of the Colorado Public Utilities Commission, said he was "quite alarmed" at an increasing volume of complaints against Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph Company, a Bell company.

A downtown Denver exchange, for example, is engineered to handle 30,000 calls at once. The exchange gets 40,000 calls during peak business hours.

Mountain Bell executives acknowledge the problems, but contend they are only temporary. Robert Pringle, vice president and Colorado general manager for the company, said flatly there would be no crisis.

"We have a long, long head start on solving the problems as compared with what has happened in New York," he said.

The Georgia Public Service Commission has gotten twice as many complaints this year as last. And those who staff The Atlanta Constitution's "Action Line" column, an ombudsman type of service offered by the newspaper, said they averaged six complaints a day about telephone service, more than on any other matter.

2 Companies Critized

The Georgia complaints have been lodged against both Southern Bell and General Telephone. "Haile Selassie gave better service to his constituents when I was in Ethiopia 18 years ago than we are getting now," Robert C. Pafford, of rural south Georgia testified not long ago during a hearing on a General Telephone rate increase before the P.S.C.

In Los Angeles, both General Telephone and the Bell System's Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company have been the target of increasing numbers of complaints. Installers and supervisors of Pacific Bell say privately that they believe installation delays will get worse before they get better, primarily because of a manpower shortage.

If the California Public Utilities Commission is correct, General Telephone's service in some of the Los Angeles suburbs (Pacific Bell serves the city itself) has been below standard for a long time.

"General has been plagued with service problems for years," said a commission report issued last July. "We agree with the commission's staff en-

gineers that the quality of service is improving, but we also agree that while the trend is in the right direction, by no means has the service reached the level where it could be accepted without further improvement."

An F.C.C. official said that in his experience, where service is below standard in the independent companies' operating areas, it often is attributed to lack of knowledge or, more often, lack of capital to make improvements.

Many of the service problems in the Bell System, such as inability to get a dial tone, busy circuits and the like, are traceable directly to overloaded lines—too many calls coming into a telephone switching center at the same time—according to Joseph H. Hunt, assistant vice president in charge of plant operations for A. T. & T.

Other classes of problems—misconnections, bad connections and dead lines, for example—are likely caused by equipment malfunctions, Mr. Hunt said. The malfunction difficulties are aggravated, he went on, by a shortage of maintenance and repair workers.

Underlying both classes of difficulty, say Bell officials, is the underestimation of demand for service. "If you don't forecast to get the equipment, you haven't forecast to get the maintenance people, either," said Douglas W. Bray, New York Telephone Company's assistant vice president for personnel.

Longer Training Period

Complicating the personnel situation, Mr. Bray went on, is the fact that it often takes longer to train technicians than it used to take. Because of the expanding economy, men with electrical backgrounds can and do find jobs with many other concerns besides the telephone company. "Now we have fewer applicants with that background," he went on. "So our training job is harder than in the past."

New York Telephone is about a year behind in filling its needs for "plant" personnel, said Mr. Hunt of A. T. & T. "We could add 600 if we had them," he said.

In Los Angeles, a Pacific Bell supervisor said there is a nationwide shortage of installers. He blamed it on poor wage schedules, which he said provided a starting pay of \$100 a week and a maximum of \$175 a week after six years.

New England Bell last July 30 refused New York City's request to borrow technicians to meet its telephone service emergency (although New York did succeed in getting 1,500 workers from other parts of the country).

New England Bell said it had to meet an unprecedented demand for new phones and could not spare the workers. Company officials in Boston also attributed their difficulties partly to a four-month-long strike of installers and repairmen last year.

Although Chicago appears generally to have escaped the telephone troubles of some other cities, Illinois Bell Telephone executives said the 157-day walkout of service and maintenance men last year resulted in a chronic list of about 800 persons waiting for telephone installation in the city. For this reason, Chicago lent three engineers, but no technicians, to New York.

Illinois Bell attributes its relative good fortune so far to accurate forecasting of demand and to a "network management control center," which it says is the only one of its kind in the United States.