

MIKE TOWERS*

NOT JUST A REGION— MORE A MINI NETWORK

INTRODUCTION

The London area, with a potential Independent Television audience of 14 millions, is served by the main u.h.f stations and eight u.h.f relay stations, plus the original v.h.f station at Croydon on which ITV broadcasting began in Britain nearly twenty years ago. Total number of transmitters: 11.

The Wales and West of England ITV area, with a potential audience of four-and-a-half millions, is served by seven main u.h.f stations and 35 u.h.f relay stations, plus twelve v.h.f stations. Total number of transmitters: 54. And the list is still lengthening.

Thames and London Weekend, which share the London area franchise, jointly run a single pro-

gramme service while HTV, which has the franchise for Wales and the West, runs three separate programme services.

The comparisons need not be limited to London. ATV in the Midlands has four main u.h.f stations for nine-and-a-half million viewers; Granada, in Lancashire, has one main u.h.f station for eight million viewers; Yorkshire Television has one main u.h.f station for six-and-a-half million viewers. And all of these companies run a single programme service. Why, then, should one of the ITV regional companies be operating a transmission and programming pattern far more complex than exists in television anywhere else in the U.K? The answer is part geographical, part linguistic, part political and part historic.

The concept began with a single v.h.f transmitter,

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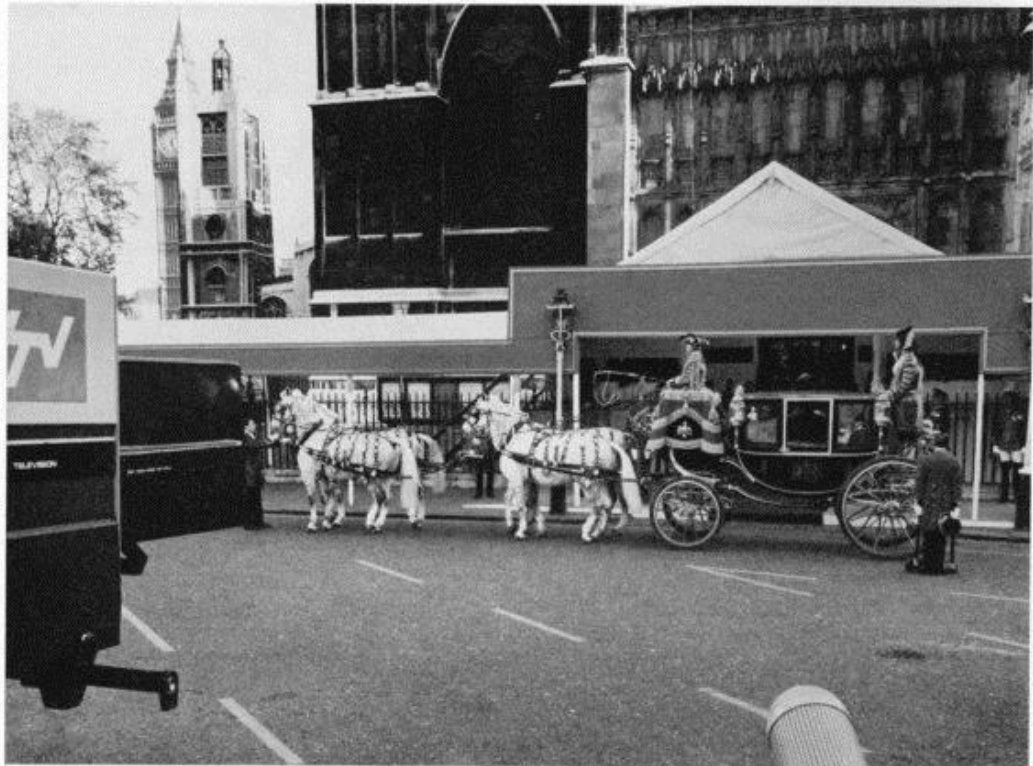


Fig.1 HTV's O.B unit contributed to the ITV network coverage of the wedding of Princess Anne and Capt Mark Phillips.

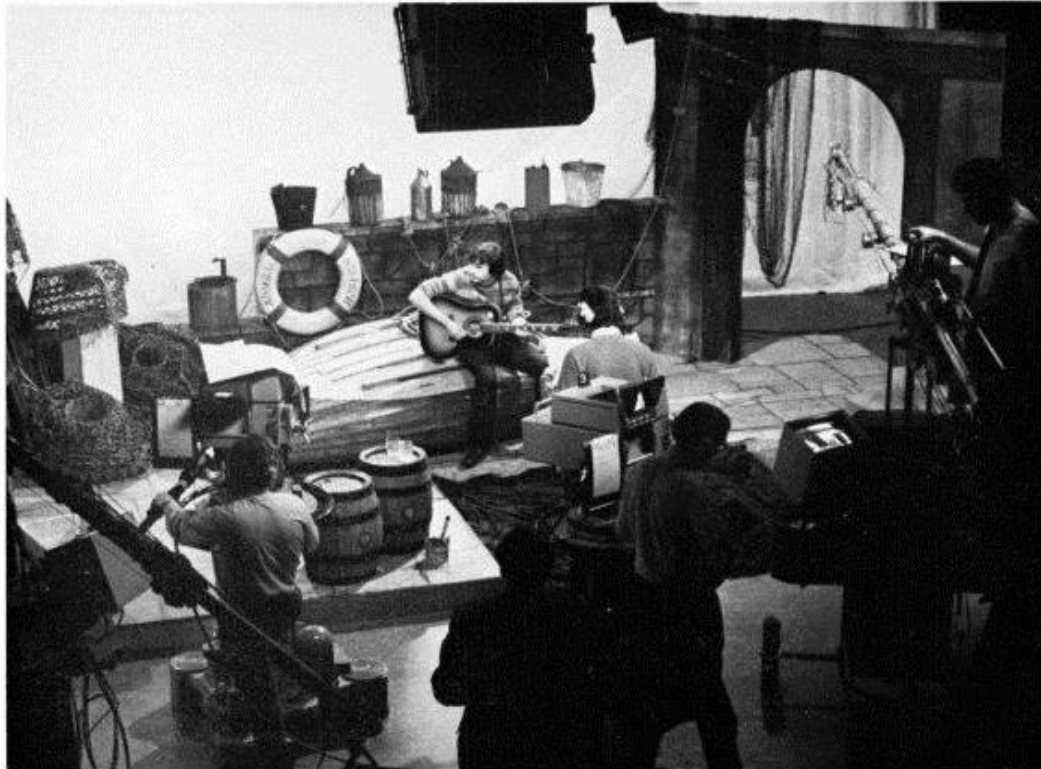


Fig.2 Studio production scene from a recording of the Welsh-language musical 'Blewyn Glas'.

when ITV was introduced in South Wales and the West of England in January 1958. BBC Welsh region and BBC West region were already sharing the same transmitter, and the intention was to duplicate this style of coverage on ITV.

The coverage area stretched from Swindon in the East to Ilfracombe and Tenby in the West; from Brecon in the North to Tiverton in the South. The two biggest population centres were Bristol (half a million) and Cardiff (a quarter of a million), with several other substantial centres such as Bath, Swansea, Newport, Taunton and Weston-Super-Mare, well inside the coverage area.

Selection of the transmitter site was to prove crucial. Various sites were considered – some in the West, others in South Wales. At first, the most favoured site was on Dundry Hill, just south of Bristol but the usual planning arguments took place, and the site finally chosen was at St. Hilary, ten miles west of Cardiff. This location threw all of the early development emphasis on to Cardiff, rather than Bristol.

The programme franchise was granted to TWW Ltd (the initials representing either Television – Wales and West or Television West and Wales, depending on how you felt about it.) And on a site in the midst of civic parkland in the heart of Cardiff, Pontcanna Studios were built.

From the start, there was a requirement by the ITA to produce news and programmes in Welsh for those people in Wales – about a quarter of the population – who understood the language. There

was clearly the need to separate Welsh language programmes from other local programmes but, with only one transmitter, no practical way of doing so.

If, therefore, Welsh-language programmes had to be part of a common service, they would have to be shown at times which did not prevent other viewers from seeing programmes in English. The only answer was to keep them well away from peak evening viewing times.

In the early years of ITV in Wales, all Welsh-language programmes were consequently accommodated in the afternoons, when the only regular loss was horse-racing OBs – a great irritant to horse-racing fans, but only a minor issue to everyone else.

It was also recognised by TWW, of course, that Wales and the West had been made a part of the same ITV franchise area for reasons of economic viability rather than of common outlooks and interests.

The geographical gulf of the Bristol Channel (there was no Severn Bridge in those days) widened the actual distance between Cardiff and Bristol of fifty land-and-sea miles to an apparent separation as wide as the English Channel. The only factor Wales and the West of England appeared to have in common at that time was a mutual disinterest, bordering on distrust.

Nevertheless, given a single programme service and two separate regions receiving it, the only practical policy was to pretend that these two regions had more in common than in fact they had,

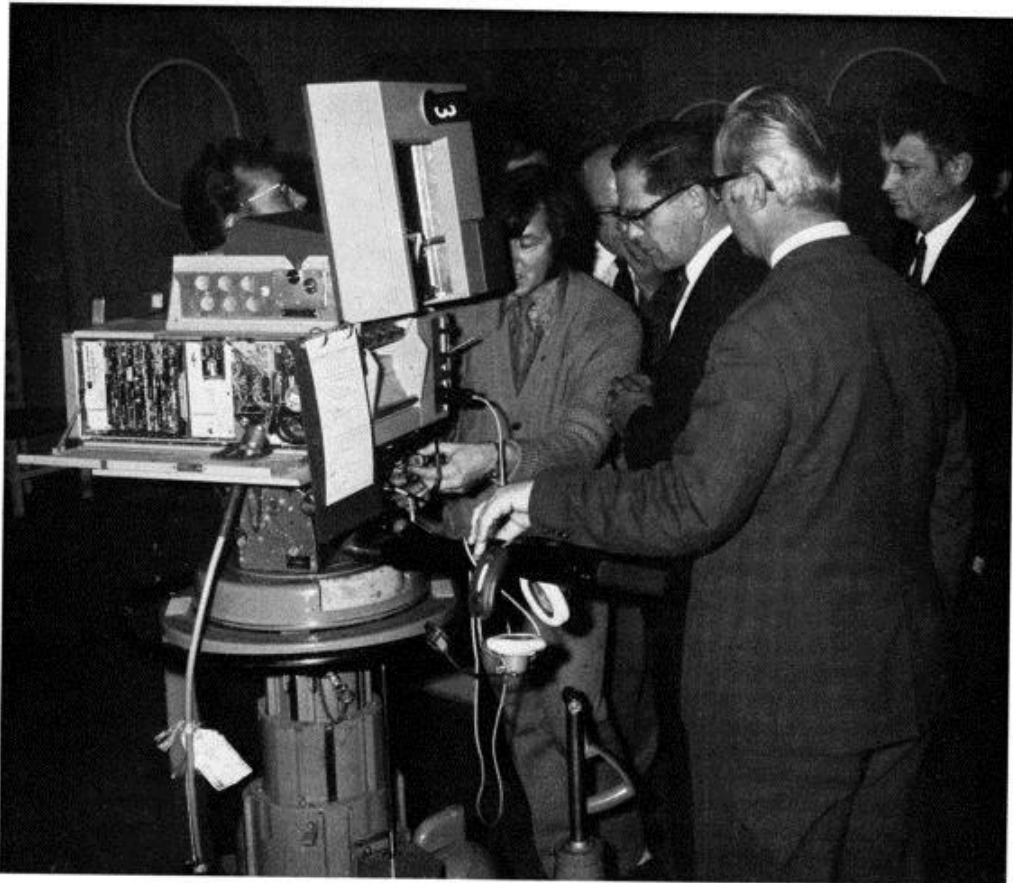


Fig.3 HTV senior cameraman Terry Humphreys demonstrates a Marconi Mark VIII colour camera to a group of visitors from the Czech television service. They later bought 13 of them.

and hope that television would exert an influence towards bringing them closer together. In the event – nudged along by some fortuitous economic factors – that is exactly what happened. As time passed, South Wales and the West of England became increasingly aware of one another – though their mutual attitudes did not become noticeably more trusting!

Within three years, a studio centre had been custom built at Bristol. In production terms, it roughly matched the centre already in use at Cardiff – one main studio and a news studio. Along sound and vision lines, the output from Bristol (all live at that time) was fed through the Cardiff studio centre, where it was blended with South Wales items, then passed through a straightforward master control system out to the transmitter at St. Hilary.

In news and programme terms, the Bristol Channel was treated as a unifying rather than a dividing factor. The news (and test marketing) area of Severnside was established, and everything possible done to strengthen it. Items in the local news programme were alternated between Cardiff and Bristol, in order to hold the attention of viewers in both South Wales and the West.

Where similarities could not be demonstrated, rivalries were exploited instead – a well-worn

journalistic device. Competition for docks facilities between the two sides of the Bristol Channel, for instance, was manna to an eager news editor. The inducement was clear: if you can't join 'em, beat 'em! Then, in 1966, came the first of the important technical developments which were to lead, by steady stages, to the complexity of programme services which exists today.

A second ITV company in Wales, called WNW, had been set up in 1962, primarily to serve West and North Wales (hence the initials) and the mid Wales coastal strip. It also had a transmitter in South Wales, giving an alternative programme service to that already provided by TWW.

The story of WNW was both short and sad. The company failed financially and closed down – leaving the ITA with four v.h.f transmitters in Wales without a 'host'. (From the inception of WNW onwards, the number of ITV transmitters in Wales has always substantially exceeded the number in any other region of the U.K. Of HTV's present total of 54 transmitters, 49 are in Wales; and even so, a large area of central Wales is not yet covered by ITV. This is, of course, entirely due to the hilly, folded nature of the Welsh countryside.)

At the request of the ITA, TWW agreed to take the four ex-WNW transmitters under its wing, and to operate them as a separate service. The trans-

mission area at the Cardiff studios was completely rebuilt, to give 'dual' control facilities in each section – presentation, telecine, v.t.r. The small announcers' continuity studios were built adjacent to their respective master control positions, so that the two services could benefit from separate announcements.

For the benefit of advertisers, a further technical development was introduced. It was made possible, through an additional switching system, to feed the ex-WWN transmitter in South Wales with either the same commercials as those going out on the other three ex-WWN transmitters; or, alternatively, with the same commercials as those going out on the original TWW transmitter. This enabled a continuing development of the important South-Wales-and-West test-marketing area, without feeding the commercials to other areas where the product being tested was not available.

From a programming standpoint, the value of these developments was enormous. For the first time, Welsh language programmes could be separated from English-language programmes in the most populous areas. And – equally important for

those who wished to watch them – Welsh-language programmes could for the first time be given favourable placings in the transmission schedules: they need no longer be banished to an afternoon ghetto.

From this time onwards (save for freak reception conditions), viewers in the West of England did not have to suffer Welsh-language programmes; and viewers in South Wales could choose between an ITV service which included Welsh-language programmes, and one which did not.

This was one major programming handicap removed. But the differences of identity and outlook between Wales and the West remained – and so did the policy of largely ignoring these differences so far as English-language programme production was concerned. Two years later, in 1968, came the re-allocation of ITV franchises. TWW lost its licence, and Harlech Television (now known as HTV) replaced it.

The new company had been formed by the merging of two separate broadcasting groups, one based on Bristol and the other on Wales. Their declared policy was to give Wales and the West



Fig.4 A hospital intensive care unit was created in the studio for the HTV drama series 'The Inheritors'. Some of HTV's ten Mark VIII colour cameras were used in this production.

two separate ITV programme services as soon as technical provisions allowed, and to start moving towards that aim right from the start.

Joint Wales/West programmes were abandoned from the time of the change-over of companies. As the new Director of Programmes put it: 'We can't go on producing programmes exclusively for the lighthouse keeper on Steep Holm (a tiny island in the middle of the Bristol Channel). He'll have to decide from now on whether he's a Welshman or a West Countryman.'

For two years, this policy produced some uneasy situations. In the early evening, for instance, a twenty-minute news programme for the West of England would be immediately followed by a twenty-minute news programme for Wales – an open invitation for viewers to switch away from the programme which did not cover their particular area.

But these problems were short-lived, and in 1970, the separation policy came into its own with the advent locally of u.h.f and colour. Throughout the rest of Britain, as u.h.f services were introduced they duplicated the v.h.f services already existing. In the HTV area they did not.

The central transmission area at Cardiff was again re-engineered, to provide for a new and

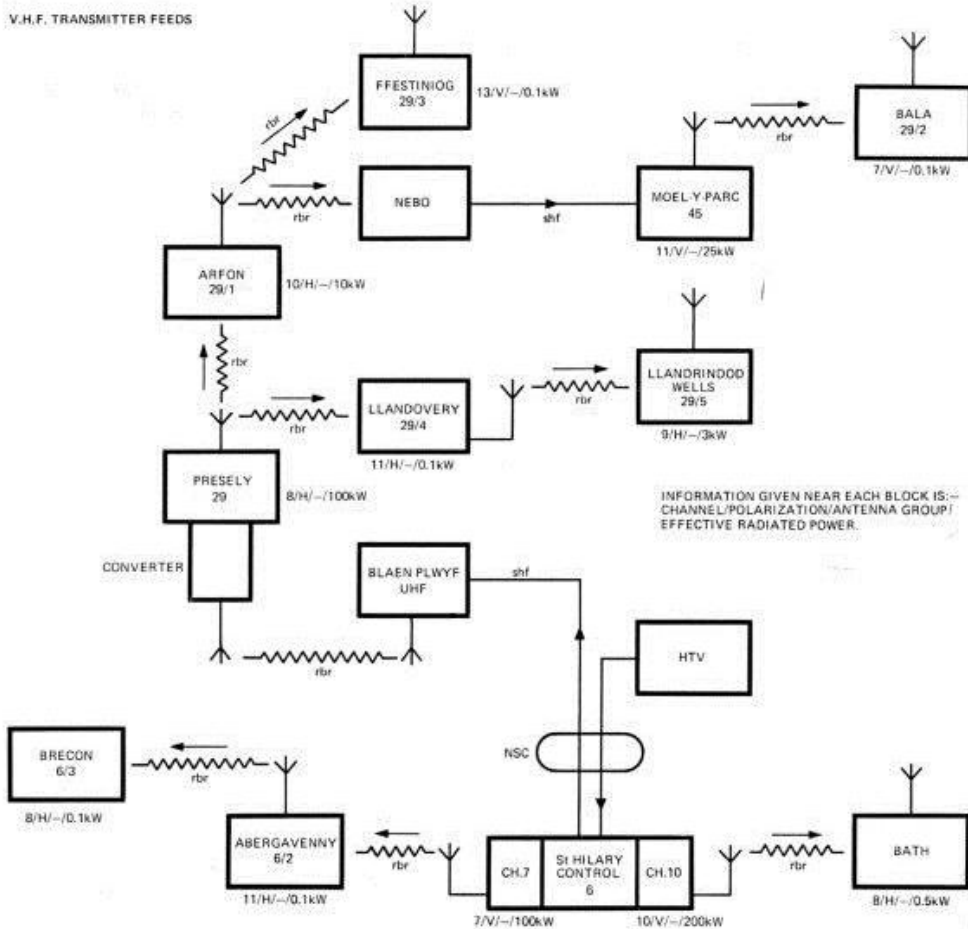
even more complex pattern of transmitter splitting. The first main u.h.f station was introduced at Wenvoe in Glamorgan; the second on the Mendip Hills in Somerset. At last, after ten years of local Independent Television broadcasting, it would be possible to provide separate programme services for the West of England and Wales.

Two programme controllers, one based in Cardiff and the other based in Bristol, had already been established with their separate programme staffs. Even the company's board of directors had been divided in half to oversee the activities of the two separate programme services – HTV West and HTV Cymru/Wales. From this structure, the company's present pattern of programming has evolved.

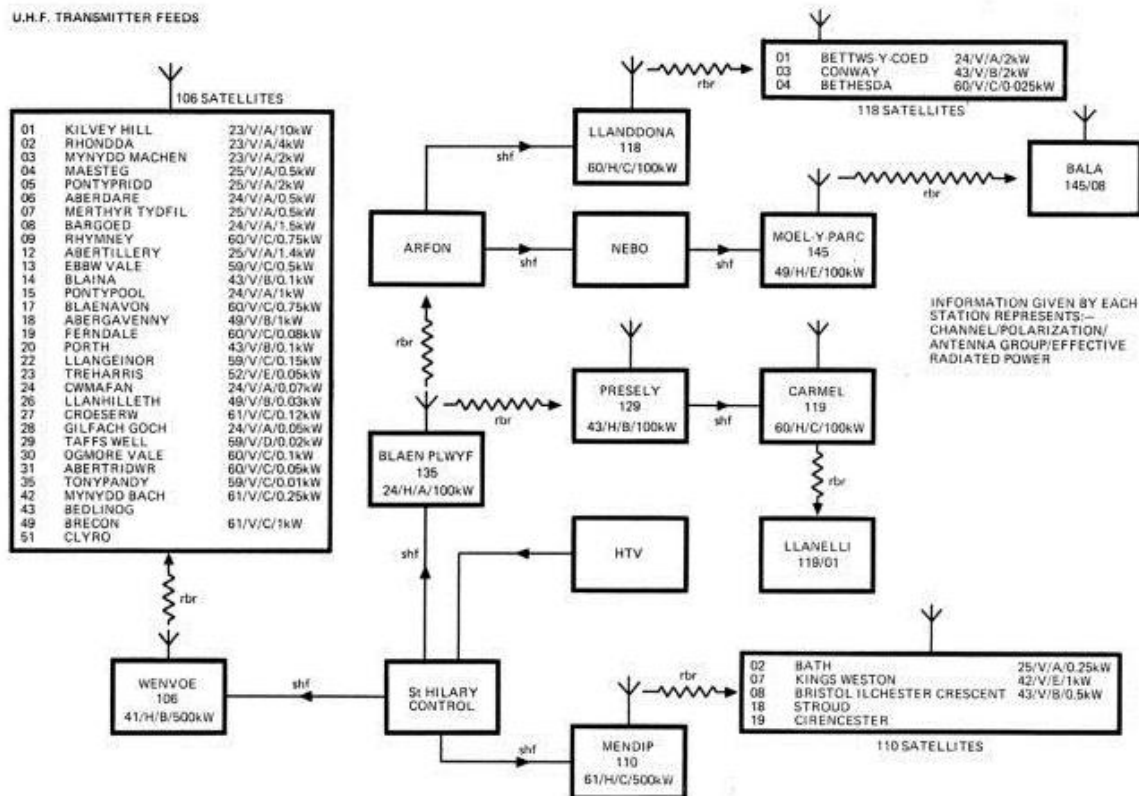
HTV's total output of local programmes now averages 14 hours per week. Five-and-a-half hours of this comes from Bristol, and eight-and-a-half hours from Cardiff. Of the Cardiff output, five-and-a-half hours are in Welsh.

Although the two programme and press departments are separate all of the operational departments are centralized – production, film, programme planning, promotion and presentation. The servicing functions are also centralized – contracts,

V.H.F. TRANSMITTER FEEDS



U.H.F. TRANSMITTER FEEDS



scheduling, accounts, labour relations, personnel, administration etc. Operational staff are exchanged between Bristol and Cardiff as necessary. (It might be thought daunting for an Englishman to work on a Welsh-language programme, but in practice this is no great problem, as all of the operational instructions are given in English by bilingual directors and production assistants.)

The production facilities in the two studio centres are similar: at Bristol a main studio of 6,000 square feet and a secondary studio of 1,500 square feet; at Cardiff a main studio of 5,000 square feet and a secondary studio of 1,800 square feet. In addition, there is a four-camera outside broadcast unit which operates between Wales and the West as required.

The main studio at Bristol, which was equipped for colour first, has four EMI 2001 cameras, plus a 'hot spare'. In addition to handling the bigger of HTV's West of England programmes, this studio also produces most of HTV's output of programmes for the ITV network - a growing factor in the company's production activities. The main studio at Cardiff has four Marconi Mark VIII cameras. They led the Mark VIII production line, and were the first to be brought into operation anywhere. These cameras were soon followed by three more Mark VIIIs in the secondary Cardiff studio.

Until a few months ago, it was necessary to use the O.B unit on a temporary 'drive-in' basis, in order to achieve maximum studio production. Recently, however, the secondary studio at Bristol

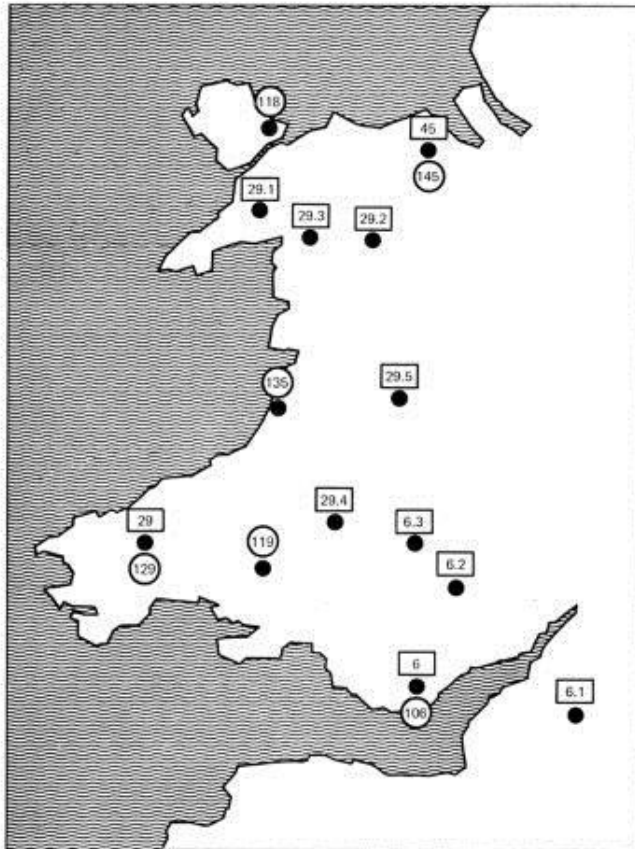
has also been equipped with three Mark VIIIs. This means that - staff availability permitting - HTV can produce programmes simultaneously from four colour studios and a colour O.B unit.

VTR facilities are being extended. At present the company has six Ampex 2000 colour machines, one of them capable of being installed quickly in a custom-built vehicle for O.B use. One Ampex ACR 25 cassette v.t.r machine has recently been delivered, and a second is on order.

Telecine facilities consist in total of three Rank-Cintel flying spot 35mm channels, three flying spot 16mm channels, two multiplex 35mm/16mm/slide channels, (one Marconi, one EMI), two flying spot slide scanners, and four separate sound followers.

The composition of HTV's local programmes relates closely to that of any other ITV region - except, of course, that in most cases these programmes are duplicated in production and transmitted separately on the two main services.

In the early evening news segment, for instance, Bristol transmits 'Report West' while Cardiff transmits 'Report Wales'. It is illuminating to switch back and forth between the two - for although the editorial 'brief' for both is very similar, the whole style, outlook and personality of the two programmes is quite different. That mythical lighthouse keeper on Steep Holm would recognize neither of them as being an offspring of the cross-channel news programmes he used to know! The variety of local production is as wide in Welsh as it is in



English. There are drama productions, light entertainment shows, children's programmes, women's magazines and quizzes, as well as news, current affairs, documentaries and discussion programmes.

In transmission terms, although most emphasis is naturally placed on the two u.h.f services these days, transmission on v.h.f will continue for several years yet. The group of v.h.f transmitters in Wales are now permanently linked up with the Welsh u.h.f transmitters. The original v.h.f transmitter at St. Hilary, serving South Wales and the West, takes the more general interest programmes from the two u.h.f services; no Welsh language, but some Welsh news, some West news, and a cross section of the remainder.

Three programme services already – and what of the future? Well, the rest is speculation, of course. If, as they hope, the present ITV companies are allowed to operate Britain's fourth u.h.f television service, this could increase HTV's own 'mini-network' from three separate services to five.

Wales is pressing for a second ITV service of its own. Our transmission pattern in the future, therefore, could be: (1) HTV West (u.h.f); (2) HTV Wales (u.h.f and v.h.f); (3) HTV General Service (v.h.f); (4) ITV2 West (u.h.f); and (5) ITV2 Wales (u.h.f).

And other television companies think *they've* got transmission problems . . . ?