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RENEGADE SOUNDWAVES

A local pirate station adds moxie to a crowded radio market, but the FCC isn't impressed.

By Ben Fulton

If you can't afford the $100,000-plus pricetag required to start a standard radio station, if you've tired of commercial alternative stations that play Bowie's "Suffragette City" ad nauseam, don't fret. It's easy for you to take matters into your own hands.

Try this recipe for making your own radio waves: 1) Know the right electronics equipment dealers in town, they'll hook you up with parts to make a transmitter (about $50 per 5 watts: you'll probably want at least 20 watts); 2) Buy an antenna, a microphone, maybe a filter, a mixer and a CD player; 3) Round up your friends, vote on a format, choose a frequency, boost your power, then -- oh, so snidely -- snub your nose at the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). You owe it to yourself. After all, you broke the rules -- or, more exactly, the law.

This rebellious, and, when you add music, romantic heisting of the airwaves was played out by Christian Slater in 1990's "Pump Up the Volume." In Salt Lake City recently, it's become radio reality on Saturday nights at 11:30, sans the "young-man-with-something-to-say" attitude of the Hollywood movie.

Promoting itself by way of flyers in Salt Lake City coffee

shops, KZAR, or Zion Alternative Radio, prides itself as a breed apart from "those commercial money-grubbing giants." That explains its "measly" output power of 35 watts.

"After extensive research and help from listeners," so says the station's voice mail, four areas were scouted for best reception. Guaranteeing that Salt Lake's upper-class won't be deprived of pirate radio, KZAR comes in best in the Olympus Cove and East Benches area. The other three are the Murray Area, the West Valley Area, and, naturally, the higher North Benches and Capitol Area. If you want to listen to KZAR in domestic comfort, you've got to wire up your receiver and string an antenna out the window. Otherwise, KZAR is radio for the road.

Nestled between KBYU (89.1) and KUER (90.1), KZAR seats its throne at 89.5 FM. Station manager Dmitri Baughman (a pseudonym) chose a lower band because, reportedly, the FCC is more lenient on pirate (unlicensed) broadcasters using the educational frequencies, as opposed to the higher frequencies of commercial radio. Pirate radio is not a violation the FCC takes lightly. "They [pirate stations] are illegal. The FCC has sole jurisdiction over airwaves and broadcast signals for the public domain," said Tom Hora, public affairs officer for FCC's eastern California field office, which regulates Utah airwaves.

Recently, in California operators for the station Free Radio Berkeley were apprehended and fined $20,000. Federal regulations governing radio stem from the Communication Act of 1934, which ruled that the airwaves, unlike print media, are public, not private property. The United States isn't alone, as Italy is the only country that doesn't crack down on free radio operators. Hora makes the point that pirate broadcasters interfere with other stations' legitimate

use, cost consumers money, and even endanger lives.
"What if a commerical airline can't reach the control tower because of a pirate frequency? It has to turn around and try again. That costs the airline fuel, which is passed on to consumers," Hora says. "What if the pirate frequency jams communication between police and firemen and they can't respond to an emergency?" he says with a wild voice.
The FCC isn't even the least bit curious about why people broadcast illegally. Pirates are just a pain in the neck. "Why do people shoplift? Why do people do things they shouldn't do? It's impossible to determine," says FCC engineer Bill Zears.
Nationwide, the motives are as varied as the U.S. population. Until recently, an Illinois man used his homemade station to broadcast jazz and black nationalist news and opinions on such topics as police brutality. In Michigan, one couple used a transmitter to broadcast anti-gay propaganda, and, of course, Neo-nazis get in on the act.
Overseas, the aim is more about music. English pirate station Caroline even led directly to the country's first popular music station, BBC's Radio 1.
Baughman's motives are personal and political, not overtly malicious or sociopathic. His first introduction to the idea was through the computer network, Internet. Since then, he's been broadcasting on-and-off since late June. Undertstandably, Baughman declined an in-person interview and photos.
"To be honest, I like to play DJ. It's a small movement and I wanted to be part of it. I'm pretty much anti-government anyway," he says. Baughman and his group of "sandbox" radio enthusiasts, as he puts it, have enough power to broadcast over the entire valley, but need a higher antenna, an item that's next in line for purchase.

The listening menu is a loose "alternative" format that, disappointingly, often veers on the commercial, especially on Chloe Devereaux's "Blood, Death, and Roses" segment of the broadcast. The The, New Order and INXS are probably the last bands you'd expect to hear on a pirate station. They're easy pickings on commercial radio, but KZAR is proud to bring them to you. Broadcasting into 4 a.m., however, the mix became more subversive: Meat Beat Manifesto, Sex Gang Children, and techno-rave beats.

The best feature of KZAR is its news segment, chock full of enough conspiracy theories to make Oliver Stone look like an amateur. News item: "The U.S. Government is using closed-captioned decoders installed in TV sets to obtain classified information about American homes."

Pirate radio's national agenda reaches far above mere music, though. According to Baughman, its true goal is to obtain FCC rights for micro-broadcasting licensure, more reasonable licensing costs, and get FCC bureaucrats to tune in to the positive effects of small stations serving the community.

That will be a long time coming. Until then, Baughman and crew will turn on the transmitter every Saturday night and claim a small piece of turf among Salt Lake City's 40-odd radio stations. Other stations have yet to complain to the FCC about any signal interference.

"I really don't give it [pirate radio] much legal thought," Baughman says. "When something does happen and I do get caught, I'll worry about it then."