

Listen to the world on a shoestring, or more if you're game

January 29 2009, By Eric Benderoff, Chicago Tribune

I've been using a thumb-size gadget that is a riveting example of how the Internet has turned our vast planet into a small village.

Plug the USB Internet Radio Jukebox into your PC (Windows only) and a world of sound and opinion awaits.

Sure, you can use your browser to find the Web sites from public and private radio stations from Australia to Zimbabwe, but that's quite a task if you don't know the call letters.

Aluratek's USB radio is a tuner that uncovers these gems. It claims access to more than 13,000 stations - all for \$39, money well spent for an audio world tour.

Tivoli Audio, which makes products for audiophiles, takes a different tack with its device: Its NetWorks radio doesn't attach to a computer to access Web radio.

I love the Tivoli radio, which connects through a home's Wi-Fi network. It's well-designed and easy to use, and the signal is crisp. I found an Indie rock station from Dublin, Phantom FM, five minutes after plugging it in.

But it's a tough sell at \$600.

Still, I recommend both products for different reasons.

- USB Internet Radio Jukebox

Consider the events of Jan. 20, when Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th U.S. president. Using the Aluratek device and my office computer, I listened to commentary from various parts of the world.

On Ireland's RTE Radio - the first station worldwide to play U2's new single, "Get On Your Boots" - there was a tart discussion about Obama's global priorities.

On London's LBC 97.3, the host believed the world's opinion of the U.S. won't change under Obama, even if the new president proves popular. "The world will still dislike America because they have fridges bigger than most of our flats," he said. "It's envy."

In Australia, ABC Radio National host Steve Cannane showed a fine grasp of the U.S. civil rights movement with pointed questions for his guest, American reporter Bruce Shapiro.

Tuning software is built into Aluratek's device (aluratek.com). When you plug it into a USB port, a window opens to guide you. You find stations on the left-hand side: top 10 by genre or region, a broader selection of stations by genre or region, and folders to store favorites and your listening history. The center of the display offers a world map to find stations by region or by genre (hits, public radio, jazz, sports talk, etc.).

I've enjoyed world tunes from Sky.FM, classical music from Spain and folk from Canada's CBC. Some stations have failed to connect at times, but that's been rare. And because the selection is so vast, alternatives are a click away.

- Tivoli NetWorks radio

It may seem ridiculous to recommend a radio that costs \$600, but if you enjoy life's finer gadgets, consider the Tivoli NetWorks radio. You can attach an iPod to this elegant radio or play audio files stored on your computer. But that's not why you would want it.

Once connected to your home's wireless network - mine was identified within minutes - you never have to fiddle with settings again. When you want music, just turn it on like you'd do with any radio.

You can search content by genre or region; you also can select from the podcasts many radio stations now store, something the Aluratek player does not offer. I've been listening to flamenco and jazz in the evening while relaxing with a glass of wine.

There are no dials for tuning. You use a remote control to search for stations, although it's more like discovery. You are, after all, searching content among the world's radio signals.

Stations are displayed across an LCD screen that sits atop a speaker. The design is handsome - the type of product you would find in a doctor's home office.

There are drawbacks.

One, the LCD does not display song information. If you hear something you like, you'd better be paying attention when the DJ comes on, and hope that you understand Spanish when listening to an Andalusian station.

Two, the radio plays in mono. For stereo you need to order a matching speaker. The standard \$600 model also does not include an FM tuner for local stations.

For \$650, you can order a NetWorks radio with FM. For \$700, you can get a stereo model; for \$750, you can get stereo and FM. (For local AM, hope your favorite station streams its signal online.)

Clearly, the biggest hurdle is price.

Yet you will love the Tivoli NetWorks (tivoliaudio.com) if you're a fan of radio and fine products.

But if you just want to listen to the world, Aluratek's \$39 USB radio can't be beat.

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