

In Internet age, pirate radio arises as surprising challenge

April 27 2016, by By Ben Finley



Jay Blessed, who listened to various unlicensed stations when she moved from Trinidad to Brooklyn more than a decade ago and broadcasted her own online radio show, prepare to update her blog she says will interface with her new podcast program, Sunday, April 24, 2016, in New York. Federal lawmakers and broadcasters are increasingly worried about pirate radio's presence in some cities as unlicensed broadcasters commandeer frequencies to play anything. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

In the age of podcasts and streaming services, you might think pirate

radio is low on the list of concerns of federal lawmakers and broadcasters. You'd be wrong.

They're increasingly worried about its presence in some cities as unlicensed broadcasters commandeer frequencies to play anything from Trinidadian dance music to Haitian call-in shows. And they complain the Federal Communications Commission can't keep up with the pirates, who can block listeners from favorite programs or emergency alerts for missing children and severe weather.

Helped along by cheaper technology, the rogue stations can cover several blocks or several square miles. Most broadcast to immigrant communities that pirate radio defenders say are underserved by licensed stations.

"The DJs sound like you and they talk about things that you're interested in," said Jay Blessed, an online DJ who has listened to various unlicensed stations since she moved from Trinidad to Brooklyn more than a decade ago.

"You call them up and say, 'I want to hear this song,' and they play it for you," Blessed said. "It's interactive. It's engaging. It's communal."

Last year, nearly three dozen congressional members from the New York region urged the FCC to do more about what they called the "unprecedented growth of pirate radio operations." So did the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters, which said pirates undermine licensed minority stations while ignoring consumer protection laws that guard against indecency and false advertising.

The New York State Broadcasters Association estimates that 100 pirates operate in the New York City area alone, carrying programs in languages from Hebrew to Gaelic to Spanish. Many also broadcast in and around

Miami and Boston; FCC enforcement data shows agents have gone after at least one pirate in nearly every state in the past decade.

The FCC has been discussing possible solutions, such as penalizing pirate radio advertisers, and last month urged landlords and government officials to look out for rogue broadcasters.

The alleged pirates include Jean Yves Tullias, a barber living in Irvington, about 15 miles from New York. The FCC claims he appropriated an unused frequency to broadcast his show, which includes church services, gospel music and a call-in program for fellow Haitians.



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Tullias denies any wrongdoing. Cutting hair recently at his barbershop, he said a friend broadcast his Internet radio show without telling him he

used a pirated frequency.

Tullias, 44, started his show because the local Haitian community "had no communication, nobody to help them," he said.

"When you get that radio station, that prayer line, you feel comfortable," he said of older listeners who speak little English and feel isolated. "You feel happy."

Broadcasters are increasingly concerned because the FCC has gone after fewer pirates in recent years. The commission issued more than 100 warnings and fines against alleged pirates last year, compared with more than 400 in 2010.

That number fell despite a "significant increase" in the number of pirate stations, tallied by David Donovan, president of the New York State Broadcasters Association.

Donovan said the signals interfere with the Emergency Alert System, which relies on a phone-tree-like chain of stations listening to one another. Listeners also can't hear the alerts, he said.

In his response to lawmakers' concerns, FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler cited a stagnant budget and its smallest staff in 30 years. Fines and seizures are not enough, he added, because pirates often refuse to pay and quickly replace transmitters and inexpensive antennas.

For about \$750, pirates can buy equipment to broadcast at a range of at least 1 or 2 miles, experts say.

An FCC spokesman said the agency remains dedicated to combating pirate radio and has added agents to its New York office. Meanwhile, lawmakers and FCC officials continue to discuss solutions.

The FCC has tried to encourage more diverse and underrepresented groups to start community stations through its Low Power FM effort , but it has had its limits.

The program has helped spawn 1,500 stations with a reach of about 3.5 miles since 2000. But there have been fewer opportunities in crowded urban radio markets, and anyone known to have pirated the airwaves is barred.

Charles Clemons Muhammad, who started an unlicensed Boston station for black listeners in 2006, is among those banned. The commission fined him \$17,000, shuttering the station in 2014. He continues to broadcast online but must work to bring his older listeners with him.

"I did this to give my community a 24-hour voice," he said.

John Nathan Anderson, director of media studies and journalism at Brooklyn College, said pirate radio remains a "medium of last resort when you have no other way to communicate broadly to a community."

"A lot of people look at radio as dead," he said. "But what we're actually seeing in many respects is a renaissance of radio as it goes into its next 100 years."

More information: Online: FCC enforcement data: [fcc.us/1XWdYiH](https://www.fcc.gov/1XWdYiH)

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