



COMMUNICATIONS

by Ken Reitz



AMATEUR RADIO/SHORTWAVE

Icom: So Long IC-706MKIIG

Amateur radio manufacturer Icom America released a statement in late March that the company had depleted the existing inventory of its popular 706MKIIG model, consigning it to the realm of the many dozens of other popular transceiver models no longer made. The company called it one of the most popular series of transceivers in amateur radio history. The original model, IC-706 was brought out in 1995 and offered “base station performance in a mobile size transceiver, complete with detachable front panel.”



Icom 706MKIIG (Courtesy: Icom)

Big Sale on Vanity Call Signs

According to a bulletin from the ARRL, the FCC plans to reduce the fee charged for amateur radio vanity call signs. In a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking and Order (NPRM) the FCC wants to reduce the fee from \$13.40 for the 10 year license to (get ready!) \$13.30.

Yes, in typical FCC procedural fashion, uncounted worker-hours will be spent over the next several months anguishing over the move to drop ten cents from the fee charged hams to hold a vanity call. Interestingly, in further typical FCC fumbling, many vanity calls will not be affected, as reported in the ARRL bulletin: “Those holding vanity call signs issued prior to 1996 are exempt from having to pay the ...fee at renewal... because Congress did not authorize the FCC to collect regulatory fees until 1993. Such ‘heritage’ vanity call sign holders do not appear as vanity licensees in the FCC amateur radio database.”

Hi-Tech Blimps to U.S. Military

This spring, tests of a 233 foot long unmanned dirigible being conducted over the vast military reservations of the southwestern U.S., could lead to their use as high-flying, semi-permanent, tethered surveillance platforms in rugged terrain such as Afghanistan, according to a report from Associated Press. Equipped with radar and radio frequency communications systems, the air ships could counter actions by ballistic missiles. According to the report, such ships could remain aloft for a month or more.



Raytheon dirigible in action. (Courtesy: Raytheon)

AM/FM/TV BROADCASTING

NAB Hits Back at FCC

At the National Association of Broadcasters’ (NAB) annual Vegas funfest, NAB President, Gordon Smith referred to the FCC’s new National Broadband Plan as a “great spectrum grab” and warned that the TV band was not a “spectrum ATM,” according to a report in *Broadcasting & Cable*.



NAB President Gordon Smith fights for broadcast spectrum rights at NAB convention in Las Vegas in April. (Courtesy: NAB)

He was just getting warmed up. The magazine, in an interview with Smith later, quoted the NAB leader saying the plan was like an offer from “the Mob that carried an implicit threat.” Noting that the broadcast TV industry had already given up 25% of its spectrum during the digital TV transition, Smith was wary of the FCC’s plan to take an additional 125 MHz of Over-the-Air (OTA) spectrum “voluntarily” over the next five years.



Embattled FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski speaks at the NAB convention in Las Vegas in April. (Courtesy: NAB)

Smith was also fed up with cable-TV taking high profile shows like the Olympics from network TV but not wanting to give broadcasters fair market value for retransmitting the popular

programming.

As reported in the *Hollywood Reporter*, embattled FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski spoke to the crowd at the NAB show explaining that, “...”A real problem looms. At our current trajectory, the demand for mobile access will outstrip the supply, by a lot. Data from multiple sources submitted as part of our broadband record tell us to expect a 40-fold increase in mobile Internet demand over the next five years.”

He advised that, “A broadcaster could contribute half of its capacity and share spectrum with another broadcaster in the market, continuing to broadcast their primary programming streams and more, while lowering their operating expenses and gaining infusions of capital.”

LPFM Bill Might Include Ex-Pirates

Leslie Stimson, in her regular column in *Radio World* online, noted that new language introduced into the senate version of the Local Community Radio Act of 2009 (S.592) could allow former pirate radio operators to apply for the new low power FM (LPFM) licenses that would be made available should the bill become law. Pirate operators have been explicitly prohibited from receiving FCC licenses in previous legislation.

800,000 U.S. Households “Cut the Cord”

A report released in April by the Convergence Consulting Group, Ltd., titled, “The Battle for the North American Couch Potato,” noted the changes in TV viewing habits in the U.S. and Canada, including online, DVR, cable-TV, satellite-TV and OTA-TV. It said, in part, that by the end of 2009, “...almost 800,000 U.S. households had cut their TV subscriptions (to rely solely on online, Netflix, OTA, etc.). We forecast cutters will grow to 1.6 million households by year-end 2011...”

Online Listening Slumps

It’s hard to grow exponentially without taking a breather and that is what has apparently happened to online radio listening, according to an article in *Mediaweek* from early April. The report quoted Arbitron and Edison Research’s “Infinity Dial Study.”

The number of online radio listeners seems stalled at 43 million, nearly half the number that view TV online. The report also noted that more people (55% of the 43 million listeners) use Pandora or other online music services rather than streamed AM or FM stations (45%). The report said the overall number could jump dramatically this summer when Apple allows third party radio applications to play in the background while users use their phones for other tasks.

PUBLIC SERVICE: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Cleveland Radio System Disarray

The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* reported in early April that the city of Cleveland, Ohio, after a year of looking at proposals to build a new public service radio system, will start over. The original Request for Proposals, seeking completely new systems, was a result of unending technical problems with its current aging system, purchased from Motorola in the 1990s.

But, the city may have nowhere to go. The only two companies that bid last year were Motorola and Morris Communications, formerly M/A COM, both of which have experienced all manner of problems where they've been implemented elsewhere.

D.C. Radio System Flunks Emergency

Most would imagine that a radio system designed to serve a city's police and fire services should be able to pass a simple power outage test. Yet, according to a report in the *Washington Post*, a power outage caused the Washington, D.C. system to shut down.

In the article, the mayor called it a "minor inconvenience" while representatives from the Fraternal Order of Police, the police union, called it a "disaster" and a "fiasco." Police resorted to using private cell phones for dispatch. The fire department fared better, according to the article, thanks to a previous agreement to use nearby county transmission facilities in Maryland and Virginia in case of emergency.

SATELLITE

Big Bonanza for Sirius/XM Top Brass

During the first quarter of 2010 Sirius/XM, the satellite radio monopoly, added more than 171,000 new subscribers compared to a loss of nearly half a million subscribers for the same period a year ago. It's certainly cause for celebration. Champagne glass in hand? *Laissez les bon temps roulez!*

It's time to give CEO Mel Karmazin a well deserved and kingly reward. How about a raise in salary to \$1.5 million/year, a bonus of \$7 million in cold cash, and stock options worth \$35 million? The stock option is for 120,000,000 shares that Mel has the option to buy at \$.43/share. Today the stock is worth about a buck. That would allow Mel to make a \$70 million profit.

But, wait! Let's not leave out the rest of Sirius/XM top brass. Everybody gets a raise! The rest of the officers scooped up \$3.5 million in salary, \$4.5 million in cash bonuses, \$3.6 million in stock awards, and \$21 million in stock options.

Satellite radio must be really profitable, right? Not exactly. The company saw its first quarterly profit this year (it went on the air in 2001) but still founders in a sea of \$3.3 billion in debt; suffers from lackluster auto sales (the source of new subscribers); skyrocketing competition from wildly popular MP3 players such as iPod, rapidly growing Internet radio, slowly



developing (and free) HD-Radio, and now, the iPad, none of which existed in 2001. Ever try to put a champagne cork back in the bottle?

DISH Beats Panarex in Piracy Suit

The Sacramento *Business Journal* reported in mid-April that Dish Network was awarded a judgment in the amount of \$121 million against Panarex, Inc., a company making Free-to-Air (FTA) satellite receivers and OTA-TV receivers. The suit concerned certain FTA receivers offered by the company through 2008 that could be easily reprogrammed to allow illegal reception of DISH Network programming without compensating DISH Network.

The judgment acknowledged the legitimacy of legal FTA receivers which cannot be so programmed. A company official told *MT* it continues to produce legal FTA and OTA receivers as well as a number of other satellite products such as LNBFs.

TiVo Pounds DISH in Patent Suit

Unfortunately for DISH Network, the previous story was the highlight of the first quarter of this year. DISH Network lost its appeal April, in federal appeals court, on a patent infringement charge in a long running case brought by the digital recording company TiVo. DISH was originally found guilty of violating certain patents held by TiVo in a jury trial and continued to appeal the judgment until its last appeal was denied. Now the company is forced to pay TiVo \$300 million in damages and contempt sanctions in addition to the original \$100 million it paid TiVo after the original appeals court ruling.

It could get worse for DISH because TiVo is asking the court to shut down the millions of now illegal DISH Network receivers that have the digital recorders at issue built-in. Such an order might cause wholesale defections of DISH subscribers to cable-TV or DISH competitor DirecTV, whose built-in DVR is not involved in the dispute. Industry rumors suggest that EchoStar (DISH Network's parent company with multi-billionaire Charlie Ergen at its head) may buy TiVo and solve all its problems.

FCC ACTION

FCC Internet Leash Yanked

The U.S. Court of Appeals, in a case widely believed to settle the issue of "net neutrality," ruled in April that the FCC lacks the authority to regulate an Internet service provider's network management practices. According to court documents, the case began in 2007 when several subscribers to Comcast's high-speed Internet service discovered that the company was interfering with their use of peer-to-peer networking applications which lets users share large files directly without going through a

central server, which is said to consume great amounts of bandwidth.

A coalition of public interest groups and law professors complained to the FCC which ordered Comcast to stop interfering. Comcast did so, but challenged in court the FCC's authority to tell it how to manage its service. The result of that challenge led to the current public spanking of the Commission.

But, it's unclear how this decision will eventually play out. Some experts quoted in news reports believe the case signals the decline of FCC powers, especially in the area of emerging technologies, while others believe the case will lead Congress to write new laws narrowly defining Internet rules and thus hampering the, so far, unfettered growth of those same technologies.

FCC Northeast FM Pirate Sweep

The Northeast Region of the FCC's Enforcement Bureau was active in the 30 days prior to this being written, netting nine Massachusetts; five New York; three Rhode Island, and two Connecticut FM pirate radio station operators, as well as a slew of others throughout the U.S. including three AM pirates. All told, the FCC issued more than 40 Notices of Unlicensed Operation (NOUO) for the period.

The NOUO is typically the first message pirate broadcasters hear from the FCC, and the benign nature of the notice and disinterested form-letter quality seems to be interpreted by most as being about as important as that warning tag on the back of your mattress. Those receiving the Notice are given 10 days to respond, but that's usually taken as meaning 10 days to move the operation, which many do.

This month's QRO (high power) prize goes to the pirate FM station in Norwood, Massachusetts which FCC agents measured at more than 336,000 microvolts/meter at 62 meters. The legal limit for unlicensed Part 15 FM transmitters is 250 microvolts/meter at 3 meters.

The three AMers were on opposite coasts and one in Omaha, Nebraska. Still, there's no shortage of replacements for each unlicensed station shut down by the FCC. The availability of inexpensive broadcast equipment and how-to information online makes this a growth industry.

CB Op Cited for Advertising on Ch. 19

As if to prove that no one can escape the scrutiny of the FCC's army of field agents, the operator of a service station in Ohio was sent a Notice of Violation (NOV) for apparently advertising his station's services on CB channel 19 which is, of course, against the rules. According to FCC documents, FCC agents heard the operator soliciting for CB radio repair services, truck washes and tires for sale.

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