



Searching for Network Steamed about Jamming

Radiohead generally enjoys poking at people and topics to provide humor in a field that's often serious. After all, we impact lives. But this month, I'm taking on a serious subject.

Suppose you're driving along and see a car crash. You whip out your cell phone and see "Searching for Network." Zero signal, a dead phone. Looking around, you see cell towers, and you *know* you should have reception. You're outside the local jail.

New scenario: You're in a movie theater when the guy in front of you collapses. You grab your cell phone, and, again, it's "Searching for Network." *Next:* You're in a restaurant, and someone starts choking. The waiter tries to give him the Heimlich while you grab your cell phone. Again, "Searching for Network."

These scenarios have one thing in common: In each case, someone used a device to jam cell phone frequencies because they: a) wanted to prevent prisoners from making illegal cellular calls; b) didn't want cell phones interrupting the movie; or c) didn't want to disrupt their quiet dinner.

But what happens when a corrections officer in a cellblock gets into a fight and tries to call for help, and the radio doesn't work, or when a paramedic tries to get medical instructions, and the radio doesn't work, all because they're being jammed by the same device?

The 1934 Communications Act clearly makes it illegal to jam any radio signal. The FCC Web site also states, "See 47 U.S.C. Sections 301, 302a, 333. The Act prohibits any person from willfully or maliciously interfering with the radio communications of any station licensed or authorized under the Act or operated by the U.S. government. 47 U.S.C. Section 333."

Effects of jamming devices: Several years ago, the FCC issued a warning when mall kiosks were selling those cute little RF-activated cell phone antenna lights that flash when a call comes in.

Their demo boxes had transmitters to activate the lights on display. At that time, our agency received complaints from police and fire that the 800-MHz radios either weren't working or were very noisy in certain malls. After perusing local malls, I noticed a kiosk's transmitter and told the salesperson to shut it off. (It helped to flash a badge.) Sure enough, the interference disappeared.

But that was *unintentional* interference. Now, it's *deliberate*. Salesmen are trying to convince prison officials and businesses that jammers will eliminate problems with prisons and clients.

Just a few months ago, one vendor tried to demonstrate a jammer in a D.C. jail. Fortunately, the public safety community got wind of it, and the FCC cancelled the effort. The vendor insists the product won't harm radio communications outside of the jail, but he *hasn't* explained how it prevents interference from passing through the jail's walls. *By the way*, the D.C. jail is across the street from a major area hospital and is on the access road to RFK Stadium, where tens of thousands of fans watch sporting and other events. Imagine the chaos if police, fire and EMS radios and cell phones were affected by the device.

This vendor filed for a temporary FCC license to demonstrate its jammer at another prison. The Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association filed a formal Petition to Deny with the FCC, and most public safety associations, including APCO, filed protests. Ultimately, the test was denied. But this vendor still "brags" online about other demonstrations he's performed without permission.

Google *jammers*, and you'll find many companies that openly advertise these devices. The Act also states, "The manufacture, importation, sale or offer for sale, including advertising, of devices designed to block or jam wireless transmissions is prohibited. 47 U.S.C. Section 302a(b).

Parties in violation of these provisions may be subject to the penalties set out in 47 U.S.C. Sections 501–510. Fines for a first offense can range as high as \$11,000 for each violation or imprisonment for up to one year, and the device used may also be seized and forfeited to the U.S. government." And yet, here they are, clearly being advertised and sold.

Earlier this year, a school principal purchased a jammer online to prevent his students from using their cell phones. *The result:* He shut down a sheriff's department radio system.

Congress is now considering HR 560, the Safe Prisons Communications Act, which would authorize jamming equipment in prisons under certain conditions and with FCC-approved devices. If done properly, with the FCC establishing standards to protect all other users, we won't have a problem. But unless the FCC shuts down illegal Internet sales, the problem will still exist. Just like they do now, these vendors will sell non-type-approved equipment to anyone, telling them that FCC approval isn't necessary. (That's already done today with cell phones amplifiers and bi-directional amplifiers, which create havoc on the 800-MHz band.) Without the certainty of being able to stop improper sales, well, in the words of WOPR, "The only winning move is not to play."

I generally don't get involved in politics, but this issue makes me mad, and I'm not going to take it. Contact your U.S. senators and representatives, and let them know how public safety feels. **||PSC||**

EDITOR'S NOTE: The opinions expressed herein are those of the columnist and do not necessarily reflect the views of APCO International.

TELL IT TO RADIOHEAD ~

Got a question for Radiohead? Wanna sound off about an issue? Put it in an e-mail to PSCeditor@apcointl.org.

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