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PIRATE RADIO

In San Francisco, guerrilla broadcasters using a simple homemade transmitter are challenging the big-media monopoly of the airwaves



Tetsuo Kogawa wires up his mini-FM transmitter (complete schematic diagram at top of page) for Mission District Radio.

By JESSE DREW

ON AN UNUSUALLY WARM San Francisco night several weeks ago, a new radio station went on the air in the Mission District, at least for a few hours.

"This is KXXX, Mission District Radio! Broadcasting from ... somewhere in the neighborhood."

The impromptu radio station KXXX-FM was the first venture of a pirate radio project that plans to start broadcasting regularly, though illegally, in early June.

The pirate-radio crew — a conglomeration of artists, political activists, and radio enthusiasts — launched its project after a meeting with Tetsuo Kogawa, a founder of Japan's Free Radio movement.

Over dinner with about 20 Mission District activists, Kogawa described Japan's low-wattage FM stations, which had grown in number to between 3,000 and 5,000 before a government crackdown in the late '80s put some of the stations out of business. (See sidebar on Page 14.)

Political activists started some of these stations to promote their views, avant-garde musicians used others to broadcast tapes ignored by mainstream radio, groups of housewives organized

stations to discuss neighborhood issues. These stations, Kogawa said, are the modern equivalent of the leaflet or newsletter, grassroots communication for the electronic age.

Although most governments, including the U.S. government, allocate space on the airwaves and forbid unauthorized broadcasting, the pirate radio movement is strong in Europe as well as in Japan. *TV Digest*, a media trade journal, reported in its March 9, 1992, issue that the Netherlands has as many radio stations as the United States, but that most are illegal. The same article described Italy, where Kogawa first learned about pirate radio, as the "mother of pirates," with about 4,500 illegal radio stations.

These stations, Kogawa told the San Francisco activists, provide a good antidote to the monolithic, corporate-controlled mass media, even as that control is being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. The Teledemocracy Project of Ralph Nader's Public Citizen organization recently reported that, in 1983, 50 corporations controlled the U.S. mass media. Now the number is down to 23.

THINK GLOBALLY, BROADCAST LOCALLY

Pirate radio stations give the power to communicate to anyone who can assemble a few dollars' worth of hardware into a simple electronic device. As the Mission District activists watched, Kogawa soldered a handful of common electronic parts into a one-watt FM radio transmitter. The copper plate with soldered parts was then hooked via a length of cable to an antenna hastily taped to the side of the house. A cassette player with a built-in microphone was plugged into the transmitter and KXXX was on the air!

The first evening's program ranged from excited talk about the possibilities of pirate radio to tapes of music by local groups to a live clarinet performance by an 11-year-old.

Kogawa seemed pleased at the excitement over his transmitter. He champions small, neighborhood stations like KXXX, as opposed to high-power pirate stations, because he says they help build community and alleviate the alienation many people find living in large cities.

As one activist observed, the one-half- to one-mile radius the transmitter covers is about the size of a voting precinct. Neighborhood groups could use these stations to discuss political issues and report on local events not covered by Bay Area and national news shows.

Local interest in pirate radio also stems from increasing dissatisfaction with mainstream music programming, which has mostly narrowed to album-oriented rock. The first Mission District broadcast featured tapes from groups whose music had never before been heard on the air.

Pirate radio even sounds different. The programs are often obviously being broadcast from someone's living room. You hear life — people walking around, a toilet flushing. When the Mission District radio crew begins regular broadcasts next month, the station will operate from a different household each Sunday evening from 9 to 11 pm, for diversity of content as well as security. The host whose home becomes "radio station for a day" will have extra input into that night's programming.

Security precautions are necessary, the radio pirates say. The Federal Communications Commission says even these low-watt broadcasts are illegal because they use space on the airwaves (KXXX will be at about 89.9 FM) without an FCC permit.

Advocates of mini-FM stations, on the other hand, argue that the airwaves are public space, and broadcasts too small to interfere with others should be permitted as an important avenue of expression. ●

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Jesse Drew, a producer for Paper Tiger Television and Deep Dish TV, also writes on media technology.