

AR Newline Producer Decries Pseudo-Broadcasts, Says "Litigation... Beyond Our Means"

Please permit me to put on my hat as Producer of the Amateur Radio Newline ham radio bulletins.

First an apology to those who are attempting to use 14.275 MHz (and several other frequencies) and find that these frequencies are being monopolized by 24 hr a day / 7 day a week by "news bulletin stations" that in part utilize our material. Frankly, we wish that they would terminate using our newscasts but the cost of litigation to stop this is way beyond our means. And as time has shown, those who indulge in this activity seem to heed no warnings or requests from anyone. Thankfully, the number of people involved in this pseudo-broadcasting is small and I doubt if there will ever come a day when we see frequency after frequency and all of our HF bands tied up with this self-serving activity.

But there is a much larger question that I feel a need to address: That being the rhetorical question if any voice bulletin stations are really needed on the HF bands in light of the proliferation of repeaters who offer the same audio services and their availability using Internet audio -- either streaming or in MP3 downloadable format.

25 or 30 years ago I might have said "yes they do" because there was no World-Wide-Web and few repeaters. But here in 2009 just about every active radio amateur has either a 2 meter or 2/440 radio. Most are also within earshot of one or more repeaters providing the ARRL Audio News. The RAIN Report, our Amateur Radio Newline or all three.

As I have maintained since Jim Hendershot WA6VQP and I began Newline as the Westlink Radio News back in 1976, repeaters are the place where news bulletins belong. Heres why.

First, the news services are there because they are akin to invited guests. Unlike HF where someone unilaterally seizes a frequency and begins to transmit, in the case of a bulletin issued on a repeater its there because those who own the system and those who regularly use it have together decided that replaying one or more of these afore mentioned services is of interest to and welcomed by the majority.

Second is audio quality. I cannot speak for others, but our material has always been produced as close to broadcast quality standard as possible. We produce it with repeater and Internet distribution in mind - not SSB.

In the old days we recorded on audiotape at 7 1/2 IPS using donated studio space and professional recorders bearing names like Ampex, Scully, Otari and others of that quality. When donated studio space was not available we recorded using "prosumer" grade gear made by Roberts, Teac and Sony. Editing was done by hand using EditAll S-3 and S-3 "blocks" and playback into the phone lines was with Automatic Electric and later Broadcast Electronics spot tape players that had been converted to automated telephone feed operation. Microphones have usually held the names Shure and Electro-Voice and until recently our primary microphone was the all purpose Electro-Voice RE-20. Its only been about a year since we moved from the old EV design to the newer Heil Sound PR-30 and PR-40 mics.

About a decade ago we began phasing out the use of tape for newscast mastering moving to the digital domain -- first with a neat little program called Cool Edit and then to Goldwave and of late Audition. Distribution has gone from a once high of 11 regional phone lines down to 1 as the phones were replaced first by streaming audio (Real Audio) and then to MP3 download from our own website (www.arnewsline.org).

It was when we moved to our current web hosting 6 years ago that we finally were able to statistics on how many folks were listening to the newscast and downloading the script text. And the numbers kind of boggled our mind. Just checking as I write this, since about 2 a.m. Pacific last Friday morning when I uploaded the newscast audio, it has been downloaded 3,811 times. (The text version only has 921 downloads to this time.) Our average weekly download -- year to date -- shows as 3864 or close to 4000 people a week downloading our audio.

Granted, its not likely that all of these are hams -- and I would be curious to know how many are and how many are not -- but that's a lot of folks with an interest in hobby radio tuning in via the Internet. To me it says that more people are likely hearing our news bulletins directly from the Internet, from our Podcast or over their local repeater than are tuning in on the High Frequency bands.

Why is that? To me the answer is simple. Be it ARNewsline, RAIN or the ARRL Audio News, people want good fidelity. Listening to a bandwidth restricted SSB signal amidst the noise and din of any of the busy HF bands is at best not easy on ones ears and at worst a painful experience. And I do not know about you, but to me "pain in my ears" is not something that I enjoy. (Well to be honest -- Ill say that with the exception of when I'm attempting to play my Strat electric or my Washburn acoustic -- that "pain in my ears" is not something that I enjoy. Anyone who has heard my attempts at music fully understand.)

I guess it all boils down to this. Back in 1976, Jim Hendershot and I never envisioned what we were starting as a local news bulletin about repeater deregulation as it affected Los Angeles on 220 MHz would grow to the world-wide news and information service it has become. It just happened I think mainly because of the quality of professional volunteer assistance it attracted. Journalists like the late Roy Neal, K6DUE and Alan Kaul, W6RCL, who devoted their time ast work to reporting the news to the masses and their free time to reporting the news of ham radio. I cannot begin to tell you how much I miss them. When each of them passed it was like a little bit of me died with them.

There are a lot of other folks who have been with us from the start and many still with us today. Volunteers all. People like Jim Davis, W2JKD, whom I first met on the old WA2SUR repeater in NYC when I was WA2HVK and he was "Big Bob Evans" spinning the hits on WPLJ FM. Jim now owns his own station group in Florida but after 30+ years hes always available to record our anchor track.

Others include Andy Jarema N6TCQ who not only records but also is the CPA who manages our funds -- both at no cost. Burt Hicks WB6MQV, Robert Sudock WB6FDF, Jim Damron N8TMW, Jeff Clark K8JAC, David Black KB4KCH, Mark Abramowicz, NT3V, Jim Meachen ZL2BHF, Norm Seeley KI7UP, and others to numerous to list here.

Broadcast professionals all and all members of our volunteer family. They and the newcomers like Evi Simons, Jerry Guale, and Becca Bruce are the heart of the Amateur Radio Newslines. I take no credit for any of this. Its those who do the writing and reporting who are my heroes. I'm just the guy who writes stories, voices a few now and then, glues the pieces together and pops it onto the website.

I cannot speak for any other ham radio news service nor will I, but it is my personal belief that between bulletin nets repeaters and Internet audio that voice bulletins on the High Frequency bands serve little purpose. They are heard to discern in the din of HF propagation (or lack of it) and they really do nothing to enhance the overall quality of HF voice operations. I'm not advocating that they be banned, but I do have to ask what real purpose do they serve?

Let me end with this little anecdote from a few years ago when Sharon and I decided to celebrate our anniversary with a trip to Alaska. One of our stops was the isolated port city of Valdez which is the southern terminus of the Alaska oil pipeline. Anyhow, here's a place where only a few buildings in the heart of the town had electric power. Its about 9 PM -- still light out as it was the end of August we are in our hotel room. I had with me my HTX-202 HT. For some unknown reason I turned it on and on 146.34 / .94 found a repeater. I put out a call but there was no response. So I put the HT on the nightstand. About an hour later the HT springs to life with a mechanical sounding voice ID followed by the single word "Newslines." The repeater then proceeds to dial a phone number -- which from the tones I recognized as the Newslines machine at my home -- and then began playing the newscast. It was at that moment -- in a spot so isolated -- hearing the tape in the machine emanating from my home office that I realized two things. First the scope of what Jim Hendershot and I had created years earlier.

Of that second thing? That my home in California was still standing and in good shape.

To those of you who listen to or read ARNewslines, my sincere thank-you for your support. To those of you suffering because of its misuse by a small number of hams who believe that they have the right to play broadcaster on any band, I feel for you and truly wish I could do more to help. My hope is that the current FCC enforcement leadership will find a way to assist you and for what it might be worth, the FCC has my full support.

73,
Bill Pasternak, WA6ITF
ARNewslines