

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  
Washington, D. C.

"NATIONAL DEFENSE AND THE FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION"

Extracts from transcription talk by Chairman James Lawrence Fly in Program No. 5 of the "National Defense Series" of the Office of Government Reports over some 250 radio stations during week of September 22, 1940.

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The coordinated program for insuring our national defense has required the Federal Communications Commission to enlarge its activities in some important respects. I might summarize the Commission's main role in the preparedness picture by saying that its particular duty is to "police" the air — and to do it effectively. This, of course, it has been doing on a smaller scale for many years.

This means listening-in and otherwise keeping watch on all forms of radio transmission. It is done by means of what engineers call "monitoring". Stations for this purpose are located at strategic points throughout the United States and its possessions, and are equipped to monitor all forms of radio messages.

The routine work of the FCC covers licensing and supervision of all forms of communication by means of electric impulse. In addition to the familiar broadcast programs, there is commercial point-to-point radio service, and radio transmission by amateurs, aircraft, and aero stations, ships and coastal stations, police and fire departments, forestry stations, various types of experimental services, and, on occasion, by special emergency stations. These and other radio transmissions are all under Commission jurisdiction and subject to being adjusted to meet any emergency. The Commission must continually watch the many different types of transmissions to see that they are in accord with the public interest. It now has the added duty of seeing that these transmissions do not run counter to our neutrality or national defense requirements.

All radio transmission is required to be licensed. It is also assigned certain channels, called frequencies, on which to travel. Hence, the broadcast bands can be likened to highways, and the stations and their identifying call letters to automobiles with license tags. Just as an auto cannot cross the white line without risking collision, a radio transmission can't deviate from its set course without causing interference to other signals. Unauthorized or reckless driving on the ether ways is immediately noted by the Commission's monitoring stations, or reported by other broadcasters.

The monitoring stations determine the bearings and characteristics of unauthorized or questionable transmission. And supplementary mobile equipment, usually autos equipped with direction-finding and field strength measuring apparatus, trace the origin of such signals. Under certain conditions it may be necessary to watch a suspected house or other building for a period of time. In such cases the equipment can be removed from the car and operated from the power supply of a rented room, tourist cabin, or other place used for observation purposes.

The Commission wants to be fully and accurately informed about the hundreds of thousands of persons who operate apparatus capable of farflung and almost instantaneous communication. The Commission, of course, licenses only citizens for all classes of radio transmission. In normal times it has depended upon the applicant's own statement as to that fact. Now, however, it is requiring all radio operators - commercial as well as amateur - to furnish documentary proof of citizenship, as well as fingerprints and photographs for identification record.

With the cooperation of the private wire and cable companies, which handle a considerable volume of official dispatches and other Government messages, it is compiling similar data with respect to their operators. The

Communications Act of 1934 charges the FCC with regulating all interstate and foreign communication by electrical means, and this includes telephone, telegraph, and cable, as well as radiotelephone and radiotelegraph.

In June the Commission issued an immediate ban on amateur radio communication with foreign countries, and further prohibited the use of portable long-distance transmitters by amateurs. At the same time, the Commission warned all ship radio operators to refrain from superfluous conversation on the air.

International agreements specifically prohibit the transmission of "superfluous, unnecessary or unidentified communications." If this is a necessary requirement in normal times you can see how essential it is in a period of emergency. While offhand it might seem unimportant for a ship radio operator with time on his hands to chat with other stations, it takes on a different light if, in so doing, he mentions, say, that he is watching troopships moving on the horizon. This can have serious consequences, particularly if belligerent warcraft chance to be listening in. In addition to augmenting its monitoring and inspection duties, the Commission's field force is required to also watch radiotelephone and radiotelegraph circuits for superfluous messages and, if necessary, record the same for possible use as evidence.

An incidental task of the Commission's field staff is to guard against possible misuse of certain types of electrical apparatus. Even the diathermy devices now employed so usefully in many doctors' offices are capable of sending out signals that, under certain circumstances, might jeopardize the national security. Still another undertaking along these lines is to maintain a check on transmitters that have been manufactured but which have not been licensed for communication use.

In times like these our investigations of alleged unauthorized use of radio have increased tremendously over the thousand or so cases we had last year.

The American public is not naturally "Fifth Column" conscious. Every antenna on a coastal fisherman's shack or a mountain cabin is a potential "spy" outfit in the eyes of some observing citizens under the present situation. It is necessary for the Commission to inquire carefully into every case reported to its field offices, even though these suspicious wires oftentimes lead to harmless receivers. I will say that most cases of unlicensed operation turn out to be acts of thoughtless or mischievous youth.

It is only natural, and logical, that the President is given certain powers to coordinate and utilize important systems of communication during national emergency. For one thing, Section 606 of the Communications Act enables the Chief Executive, if he finds it necessary for the national defense and security, to accord certain communications priority. And, under like emergency, he may from time to time suspend or amend existing rules and regulations pertaining to radio communication, and permit Government use of particular facilities, if need be. Also, stringent provisions may be invoked to prevent sabotage of radio or wire communications in time of national stress.

It seems obvious that program service should continue pretty much as at present. After all, that is the American system of broadcasting, and distinguishes it from the situation abroad, where broadcasting has degenerated to a system of propoganda, and television has been "blackened out", amateurs rubbed out, and research and progress retarded for more years than we may yet realize. Such chaotic conditions as regards communications must not invade the United States. For one thing, our Government does not want to interfere with radio broadcasting any more than is necessary for the national protection. Likewise, it is expedient to preserve intact the present linking up of radio stations throughout the land. This is a large country, and the advantages of efficient and instantaneous communication throughout the 48 States and possessions is essentially important. International communications are likewise

important.

Of course, I do not mean to imply that, under actual emergency, the Government might not temporarily enlist particular radio outlets for military purposes, and in the extreme picture, temporarily shut down, say seaboard transmission which might serve as a beacon to an enemy in event of air raids. Also, in an actual emergency, the Government would undoubtedly require certain periods in which to broadcast official bulletins and other public announcements. But that would not necessitate taking over broadcasting facilities bodily. The broadcasters stand anxious and willing to lend their facilities and give time to the nation at stated periods or on other occasions when such need arises.

A collaborative spirit is reflected in all fields of communication. It not only permeates the broadcasting industry, but extends throughout the commercial fields, and into the domain of the amateurs. The amateurs constitute a valuable source of supply of operators and other experts for the military and other services in time of war. Besides cooperating in every particular with the Commission in normal times, the amateur has been of particular aid in the national defense set-up by policing his own frequencies. It may be interesting for you to know that by voluntary action most amateurs stopped communicating to warring countries long before the Commission imposed its general prohibition respecting foreign contacts.

I cannot over-emphasize the fact that action of the Commission in prescribing certain general curbs is precautionary rather than disciplinary. We are proud of the patriotic and cooperative response of operator and industry both.