

Be careful what you wish for

BY DAN ROACH



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I've always thought that our means of policing the spectrum in Canada was a heck of a lot more civilized and grown up, at least as far as broadcast communication goes, than the way the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) works in the United States.

On those occasions when something was wrong, a friendly phone call from your Industry Canada inspector generally got things fixed in short order. The FCC technique of issuing citations and exacting fines always seemed a little barbaric to me, especially since there doesn't seem to be any possibility of a dialogue with the FCC types in the event that, ahem, *they've* made a mistake.

And the FCC preoccupation with picaresque details like colour burst frequency, NTSC timing intervals, and even exposed AM site ground wires (yes, they will fine for that!) feels downright extreme.

I mean, what hazard, other than that of tripping over it, does a bit of exposed ground wire present?

Broadcast site inspections are from a bygone age. Many can't remember ever meeting an Industry Canada inspector, except perhaps for a NAV/COM check-out with a new FM transmitter, or Safety Code 6 Rule enforcement. Aside from those two areas of interest, Industry Canada seems to have largely disappeared from the broadcasters' horizon. They always leave me with the impression that they have other, perhaps juicier, fish to fry.

Well, the problem with that is that the broadcaster is now expected to be self-policing in technical matters and, let's face it, some of us are better at that than others.

Many AM sites have gone for years without changing patterns, or perhaps only going to night pattern from 10 PM to 3 AM.

FM stations, many of which used to nudge the regs a bit by modulating up to maybe 120%, are now running up to 150% and even 180%. And while that's damned loud, anybody who thinks that level of modulation doesn't present arti-

facts, and doesn't cause potential problems for others, is kidding himself.

And what are we to think of consulting engineers who will perform and file a supplemental proof for an AM station with broken antenna-monitoring equipment, as if everything was okay? Up until recently, if a consultant arrived and all the equipment wasn't working and calibrated, he dropped tools and came back when the patterns could be confirmed properly. Many consultants included a clause in the proof, stating that the monitoring equipment was in proper repair. I don't see how they can be including that clause any more.

We're in a period of unprecedented change, and with change always comes the rule of unintended consequences. Industry Canada's hands-off policy to broadcasters has resulted in an opportunity for an unscrupulous few to try to get an (illegal) advantage over their brethren.

In my part of the world, an MMDS (wireless cablevision) licence was granted a few years ago. Now MMDS faces much greater competitive pressures than formerly, and I can sympathize with these latecomers to the marketplace. Traditional wired cablevision, direct-to-home satellite, not to mention the efforts of the wireline telephone companies, are making this a pretty cut-throat proposition.

But rather than trying to run a viable operation, or handing back the licence to the Canadian Radio-television & Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), we have an operator that is running a sham company for a few dozen subscribers, and parking its butt on that valuable spectrum until it can be repurposed, and probably re-sold to the highest bidder.

In present times spectrum can be worth gazillions of dollars. These guys were granted public airspace to provide a public service. Is it right for them to profit in something that belongs to all of us, by continuing to hold that licence while making no real effort to operate it?

So you think that can't happen here? The CRTC quietly renewed their licence for another term just last spring.

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