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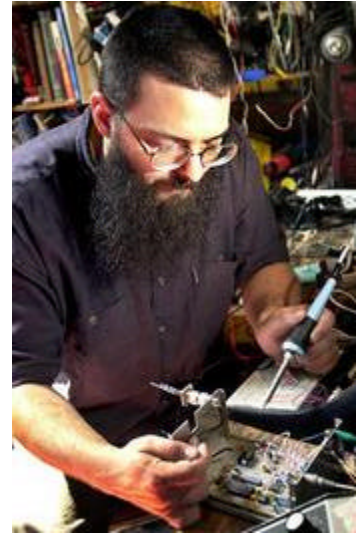
Ex-Radio Pirates Enjoy Win Against FCC

By DAVID B. CARUSO

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PHILADELPHIA (AP) -- It's been five years since the Federal Communications Commission broke down the door to Radio Mutiny's pirate broadcast studio in West Philadelphia and hacked apart its unlicensed antenna.

Now a group led by Radio Mutiny veteran Pete Tridish has exacted revenge on their old nemesis. Last week, they persuaded a federal court to temporarily block the FCC from relaxing restrictions designed to prevent big media companies from monopolizing public airwaves.



The delay will give the group, the Prometheus Radio Project, time to argue that the new regulations decrease the public's ability to get on the air, a difficulty apparent in Philadelphia, which has no public access radio or television.

The ruling also galvanized congressional opposition to the regulations, which would allow single companies to own newspapers and broadcast outlets in the same market, and let an individual TV company reach up to 45 percent of the nation's viewers. The FCC says the changes are needed to help broadcasters compete in an industry changed by cable television and the Internet.

The court victory is being savored with some trepidation by the folks at Prometheus, who are battling to convince regulators that there is enough room on the nation's radio and TV dials for amateur broadcasters.

"I'm always cautious about getting too excited about court victories," Tridish said. "Eventually, the weight of the system always seems to wind up catching up with you."

A dose of pessimism is probably to be expected from activists who named their group after a mythological character who stole fire from the gods and gave it to man, only to be punished by eternal torture.

Tridish, 33, was born in New York as Dylan Wrynn but took a pseudonym inspired by the petri dish, a container for culturing bacteria, in 1996. That was the year he became one of the founders of Radio Mutiny, a pirate station that broadcast from secret locations in West Philadelphia.

Radio Mutiny didn't last long. The station had been on the air for less than a year when there was a knock on the door.

"FCC, open up," Tridish recalled the visitors saying. "The girl who went to the door said, 'Yeah, right,' because there were always people coming to the door and making jokes. But then she looked out, she saw some guy she didn't know and a couple of cops. She told them she wouldn't open the door unless they had a warrant, so they went away."

After a few months of political theater, and a protest in which pirate disk jockeys broadcast live from Independence Mall, the FCC got a court order, broke down the station's door and shut it down.

After that, Tridish said, he put his pirate days behind him and helped found Prometheus, a nonprofit group run from an office beneath the Calvary United Methodist Church that is trying to help hundreds of low-power FM stations set up legally around the country.

In the past two years, Prometheus has had some success, mostly in rural areas underserved by commercial broadcasters.

Last year the group helped build KOCZ 103.7 FM in Opelousas, La., a 100-watt station that plays zydeco music, does some local news and is owned by a civil rights group. It had another successful radio "barn raising" in Anne Arundel County, Md., where it helped found WRYR 97.5 FM. Another station start is planned this autumn in Spokane, Wash.

Prometheus staffer Hannah Sassaman, 23, said the startups may be unpolished, but are a relief from a fast-consolidating industry (one giant player, Clear Channel, already owns 1,200 stations) in which she believes it is difficult for people with different viewpoints to get their opinions on the air.

"They need to be curtailed in how far they can spread their arms over the countryside," Sassaman said. "It will change the way broadcasting sounds in America if it is all centralized out of the big cities."

FCC officials said the ownership rules blocked by Prometheus' suit would do nothing to increase the likelihood that a radio market would become dominated by just a few big companies. FCC spokeswoman Michelle Russo said a series of other rule changes have recently expanded the number of licenses for lower-power FM stations.

Prometheus' claims were also rejected by the National Association of Broadcasters.

"We don't buy into their claim that radio has somehow lost its local flavor. The reality is that the most successful stations today are highly committed to serving their local audiences," said the association's senior vice president, Dennis Wharton.

He said close to 4,000 companies own radio stations, and, while the industry has seen a proliferation of stations specializing in formats unavailable a few decades

ago, including Spanish-language broadcasting and business news, it's still the most community-oriented of any mass media.

"We're still where you turn for announcements about school closings," Wharton said.

On the Net:

Prometheus Radio Project: www.prometheusradio.org/

Federal Communications Commission: www.fcc.gov/

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