

Obeying the Law

Purpose: The objective of this activity is for students to confirm for themselves that users of wireless technology and the radio spectrum are serious about obeying the rules that govern the use of our airwaves. The students will also discover that complying with these rules is often very subtle and unobtrusive to the use of the airwaves.

Overview: During class discussions, the students have studied the need for certain rules and regulations to maintain order and efficient use of wireless technology and the radio spectrum. Without these rules there would be unacceptable interference and chaos making the airwaves virtually useless to all. Additionally, commercial broadcasters depend on an audience to make money through advertising. To connect with the audience, the listener/viewer needs to be able to easily find the station they want to tune in. To find the station, a specific frequency and mode of transmission must be assigned to the broadcaster that the end user knows about and can find on the radio/TV dial. What we are talking about is order dictated by government mandated rules, rules not designed to necessarily restrict operations but designed to facilitate the connection between the broadcaster and their audience.

Time: One class period to review some of the rules that commercial broadcasters need to follow. One class period for students to present in-class presentation of what they observed while listening to their favorite radio station.

Skills Required:

- Listening
- Observation
- Writing
- Mathematics

Materials and Tools:

Home entertainment receiver radio (AM or FM), TV

Preparation:

- Obtain a listing from a local broadcast station listing call signs, assigned frequencies, power and broadcast restrictions, public service mandates (see below).
- Condense and simplify these rules and discuss them with the students.

Background: The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is responsible for regulating the activities of broadcast stations within the United States. The FCC publishes and enforces the rules that broadcasters must follow. The following FCC web site provides a summary of the rules applicable to broadcasters. The teacher should

review these rules and extract those that he/she believe would be meaningful and of interest to her/his students.

http://www.fcc.gov/mb/audio/decdoc/public_and_broadcasting.html

For this activity, three rules stand out for students to look for and see if their favorite station is in compliance: station identification, obscenity content, and airing telephone calls. Station identification rules are straightforward and should be easily interpreted and monitored for compliance. Obscenity content on the other hand is a much different matter because of potential infringement on Constitutional rights. Obscenity content (defined below) has the potential of stimulating significant cognitive interpretation and spirited debate in the classroom. Students may find the rules covering airing of their telephone conversations enlightening.

The following are extracts from the FCC web site providing summary descriptions of station identification and programming content (obscenity) rules.

Station Identification. Stations must make identification announcements when they sign on and off for the day. They must also make the announcements hourly, as close to the hour as possible, at a natural programming break. TV stations may make these announcements on- screen or by voice only. Official station identification includes the station's call letters followed by the community or communities specified in its license as the station's location. Between the call letters and its community, the station may insert the name of the licensee, the station's channel number, and/or its frequency. However, we do not allow any other insertion.

Obscenity and Indecency. Federal law prohibits the broadcasting of obscene programming and regulates the broadcasting of "indecent" language.

Obscene speech is not protected by the First Amendment and cannot be broadcast at any time. To be obscene, material must have all three of the following characteristics:

- *an average person, applying contemporary community standards, must find that the material, as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest;*
- *the material must depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by applicable law; and*
- *the material, taken as a whole, must lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.*

Indecent speech is protected by the First Amendment and cannot be outlawed. However, the courts have upheld Congress's prohibition of the broadcast of indecent speech during times of the day when there is a reasonable risk that children may be in the audience. Broadcasts that fall within the definition of indecency and that are aired between 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. are subject to indecency enforcement action by the FCC. Indecent speech is defined as "language or material that, in context, depicts or

describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory organs or activities."

[Broadcasting Telephone Conversations](#). *Before recording a telephone conversation for broadcast, or broadcasting a telephone conversation live, a station must inform any party to the call of its intention to broadcast the conversation. However, this does not apply to conversations whose broadcast can reasonably be presumed (for example, telephone calls to programs where the station customarily broadcasts the calls).*

Loud Commercials. In surveys and technical studies of broadcast advertising, we have found that loudness is a judgment that varies with each listener and is influenced by many factors (such as an announcement's content and style). We have also found no evidence that stations deliberately raise audio and modulation levels to emphasize commercial messages.

Broadcast licensees have primary responsibility for the adoption of equipment and procedures to avoid objectionably loud commercials. You should address any complaint about such messages to the station(s) involved. You should identify each message by the sponsor or product's name and by the date and time of the broadcast.

Students may find the information contained in this web site interesting:

<http://www.collegebroadcasters.org/webcastingp3.shtml>

This web site provides some insight into how much radio stations must pay the artists for the songs they broadcast. The music really isn't free!

What to do and how to do it:

1. Discuss with the students the rules that broadcast stations must follow and why. Focus on those rules chosen for the students to monitor while listening to their favorite radio or TV station.
2. Assign the students to monitor their favorite radio or TV station for one week, one hour each day.
3. Task the students to specifically look how stations comply with the specific rules discussed. The students should create and maintain a log of the times they monitor the station, the time of any significant event (i.e., station identification, broadcast of telephone calls), and provide anecdotal comments about what they observed.

4. If possible and with parental permission, students should attempt to call into their favorite radio station during a call-in segment and see if the station is compliant with the telephone broadcast rules.
5. The students will then share their observations with their fellow students during classroom discussion after completing the activity.
6. If possible, asked the students to individually, or as a class field trip, visit a local broadcast facility for a tour. During the tour, ask to inspect their file of public service activities.

Data Analysis:

The success of this activity will be determined by the quality of the student logs, the thoughtfulness of their observations, and the cognitive level of their interpretation of what they observed.

Some statistical analysis of the station identification time information could prove to be interesting. By consolidating student observations of the time of the identification, a distribution of compliance can be graphed to get an overall picture of compliance among the observed stations.

Activity questions:

1. Were the stations in compliance with the FCC rules? Why or why not?
2. How often did the stations identify themselves? What words did they use? When did they identify (minute during the hour)?
3. Did you find any of the program content offensive or potentially obscene? How did your parents feel about the program content? Did you and your parents agree about the acceptability of the program content? Whose responsibility is it to monitor and dictate what is broadcast?
4. If you called into a talk show, what were the questions that the call screener asked you before your call was put on the air? Were you informed that you were being tape-recorded? If they had not told you they were tape recording your call, was there some sort of noise or clicking sound that would lead you to believe your telephone call was being recorded? How do you feel about a requirement to tape record your telephone calls while they are being broadcast?
5. If you called into a talk show, was your telephone call broadcast without any delay? Why do the broadcasters sometimes tell the callers to turn down their radios? If there was a delay, how long was it? Why do you think broadcasters want to delay your telephone call slightly before it is put on the air?

6. Are there any other activities that you observed that you think may be required by the FCC rules?

Adaptations for special needs: There should be no need for accommodation for this activity.