

Illegal broadcasting:

How pirates harm broadcasting

Illegal broadcasting is a serious criminal and anti-social activity. The pirates who broadcast without a licence risk causing harmful interference to communications services used by the emergency services and are a nuisance to legal broadcasters. They can also have a negative impact on the local communities to which they illegally broadcast.



What is Ofcom?

Ofcom is the UK communications regulator. One of our duties is to protect and manage the airwaves, or radio spectrum, which we rely upon without always knowing it.

A vast range of devices and services use this spectrum, including our mobile phones, broadcast TV and radio, as well as communications networks for the emergency services.

But spectrum is a finite and valuable resource that needs protection from interference. This includes taking steps to address illegal broadcast stations and the harmful effects they cause.

Unless an exemption applies, using spectrum requires a licence from Ofcom. Ofcom issues spectrum licences to more than 300,000 individuals and organisations for business, social and safety applications, which they use legitimately.

We also monitor the airwaves 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and take swift action to protect critical services, such as aircraft, fire and police, which depend upon radio communications. We will investigate and take enforcement action against people who transmit illegally.

What is illegal broadcasting?

Broadcasting as a radio station requires a licence. Illegal broadcasting, otherwise known as pirate radio, is the operation of an unlicensed and unregulated radio station. There are about a hundred illegal stations in the UK with around three quarters based in London. Their apparatus is often installed on high-rise local authority owned residential buildings.

Illegal broadcast facts

- Ofcom responded to **26** cases of interference to critical radio communications in 2013. We received **344** other complaints about illegal broadcast stations.
- Those involved in illegal broadcasting have used violence and intimidated Ofcom staff, local authority workers and tenants.
- Pirate radio risks public safety with hazardous installations and practices and causes damage to properties.
- Illegal broadcasters can exploit aspiring DJs by enforcing a 'pay-to-play' policy. They also avoid paying taxes and royalties to artists.



Damage caused by rooftop transmitter installation

Why is illegal broadcasting a problem?

Illegal broadcasters use homespun radio transmitters, which are frequently installed by forcing entry. This can cause **thousands of pounds worth of damage** and can be extremely upsetting to residents.

Not only does illegal broadcasting disrupt and harm legitimate licensed stations, but it also **interferes with other types of radio communications**, including those that are involved in protecting safety, such as **emergency services and aircraft systems**. This is particularly dangerous when aircraft communications and navigation systems are compromised.

NATS (UK's air traffic control service provider)

“Due to the nature of our business, handling in the region of 5,000 flights every day, safety is our top priority. We therefore cannot overstate the importance of maintaining clear and reliable radio voice communications between air traffic controllers and pilots.

“Anything that compromises this can cause an increase in controller and pilot workload, raising the risk of flight delays imposed to maintain safety margins.

“NATS does suffer occurrences where its radio frequencies are adversely affected by pirate broadcasters, sometimes necessitating controllers and pilots to coordinate a change to alternative radio frequencies. NATS works in partnership with Ofcom to minimise the impact of interference caused by illegal broadcasting.”

What does the law say?

Ofcom takes enforcement action against illegal broadcasters, including raiding studios, seizing equipment and prosecuting offenders.

Illegal broadcast is a criminal offence; those convicted face a maximum of two years imprisonment and/or a fine (up to £5000 in the Magistrates' Court or unlimited in the Crown Court). In addition any apparatus is liable for seizure and confiscation. Those convicted are also the subject of a five year ban from involvement in any legitimate broadcast station.

Are pirate stations linked to other crimes?

Sometimes there is also a link between illegal broadcasting and more serious crime. Illegal broadcasters sometimes resort to violence against caretakers, council workers and local residents in an attempt to locate their transmitters in public buildings. Raids on illegal studios have uncovered drugs and weapons, including firearms.

There have also been reports of violent acts committed by members of rival illegal radio stations, including serious assaults and shootings.

Lewisham Homes

“Lewisham Homes has worked in partnership with Ofcom for many years to remove illegal pirate radio stations. These stations cause interference to our tenants' TV and radio reception, and the pirates can endanger safety by threatening our staff, fitting dangerous booby traps and making electrical circuits unsafe. They often damage properties to gain access, which amounts to tens of thousands of pounds of damage each year.”



A legitimate alternative to pirate radio – community radio

Ofcom offers a number of ways to get on the air without the risk of conviction. Over the past 10 years we have been issuing community radio licences with great success. These licences are an ideal way to broadcast legally and offer emerging talent the opportunity to get on the airwaves.

Fuelled by the hard work and enthusiasm of volunteers, these stations reflect a diverse mix of cultures and interests and provide a rich mix of mostly locally-produced content.

There are now over 200 community radio stations on air in the UK. These legitimate stations have the benefit of broadcasting on a protected frequency which can help in attracting greater audience loyalty, and being able to legitimately apply for grants and other support. Most are also able to generate some funding from advertising.



Kane FM (former unlicensed station)

“Becoming a community radio station has enabled us to reach out to thousands of people who share a taste in forward thinking music, culture and society. We are working with youth groups who have often seen radio as an out-of-reach medium.

“It has also helped with sustainability, securing revenue streams from charitable donations, trust funds and local businesses.”

The cost of applying for a community radio licence is kept at an affordable level, which has helped to encourage a wide range of applicants. Stations are not-for-profit and are asked to show how they would deliver social gain and other community benefits, such as training. Research by Ofcom has shown that community stations have an average of 85 volunteers involved with their radio programmes and management.

For more advice about getting involved or applying for a community radio licence please visit our [website](#) or contact our community radio team (community.radio@ofcom.org.uk).

Community radio stations include Rinse FM of London and Kane FM of Guildford, which were formerly unlicensed broadcasters. Both successfully applied for Ofcom community radio licences.

If you require any further information on illegal broadcasting, please contact Ofcom’s Advisory Team on 0300 123 3333

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Makeshift aerial rigged up to a South London apartment block

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