

# Can Radio Dodge the Regulatory Minefield?

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Just the other day, I received a package from Germany containing what looked like a rather nifty radio receiver. It was, in fact, a radio receiver -- but not like anything I had seen before. The sleek black almost featureless device I held in my hands was a radio enthusiast's dream - an Internet radio receiver (TechniSat InternetRadio 1).

So, what's so cool about Internet radio? Web radio has around for years. We have all succumbed at one time or the other to the guilty pleasure of playing DeSi-RaDiO.com or Radio Paradise, depending on one's personal taste, on our office computers while pretending to draft that important proposal. But the TechniSat is not a computer that happens to play streaming audio. It's a plug-and-play device that does just one thing superlatively well - seek out radio stations on the Internet and play them at the click of a remote.

And it works on WiFi...  
Look, ma, no wires!

I have a large circle of friends - hello Ben, hi Ram - who are seeking the Holy Grail of community broadcasters in India - a WiFi radio as affordable as FM radio. But the TechniSat and its competitors

don't come cheap. They can set you back ten thousand rupees each, give or take a couple of grand. No one who has picked up a Chinese radio set for as little as rupees fifty from a street hawker is likely to turn cartwheels of joy at the thought of a 10,000 rupee Internet radio receiver.

And you need broadband Internet, too, to make it work.

But my black beauty makes an important point that shouldn't be lost on our broadcast regulator. In our Talibanesque radio environment, Internet radio is a free space, an unregulated haven of free speech and limitless, uncensored content. In a country where news is banned on radio and the FM stations are all about cookie-cutter music played by cookie-cutter RJs, Internet radio can pick up literally thousands of channels playing news, talk and every imaginable genre of music.

Thanks to some of the most primitive and draconian laws in broadcast history, our citizens are starving for good radio while surrounded by a veritable feast of great audio content.

The surreal nature of India's radio laws was brought home

forcefully to us at the height of the floods in Bihar last year. Troubled by the lack of good communications in the flood-hit areas, we put forward a modest proposal with the support of the National Disaster Management Authority and UNESCO: could we set up three temporary Emergency Radio Stations in north Bihar, to provide relief and rescue information, health alerts and other public service announcements to the flood-affected people?

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The paper chase that ensued, across seven ministries, went on till the floods had receded and the file was lost - it is rumoured - in the Water Resources Ministry where no doubt some bewildered water expert is trying to figure out why he is being asked to comment on radio broadcasting.

Not only are floods a tragically recurrent feature of life along the Kosi river, but north Bihar also suffers from myriad social and economic ills, apart from poor communications. Outraged by the lack of responsiveness from the Indian government, volunteer organisations on the Nepal-Bihar border have

decided to go ahead with the radio project. But rather than waste their time trying to navigate India's prehistoric radio regulations, they have decided to broadcast from the Nepal side of the border, where radio flourishes in a liberal regulatory environment.

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nals, they have come to believe that asking for permission to broadcast is like seeking a license to launch missiles or own a brace of Kalashnikovs.

My elders in the radio business will remember that when the puritanical I&B Minister, BV Keskar, banned film music from All India Radio in the 1950s, Bollywood music migrated instantly to Radio Ceylon, which gained hugely in popularity among Indian listeners. It took years for Vividh Bharati to woo our listeners back. Airwaves don't stop conveniently at national borders, a fact that helps All India Radio itself to broadcast in 27 languages to dozens of

foreign countries.

The clincher for the legitimacy of cross-border broadcasting came a week ago, when the Times of India reported that politicians from the Mithilanchal area of Bihar are using half a dozen FM radio stations for their poll campaign. It so happens that these radio stations - like Radio Janakpur, Radio Mithila and Mithilanchal FM - are all in Nepal. They broadcast in Maithili, the language of the region, and the

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channels are heard loud and clear in Bihar, in the border districts of Madhubani, Darbhanga, Sheohar and Sitamarhi.

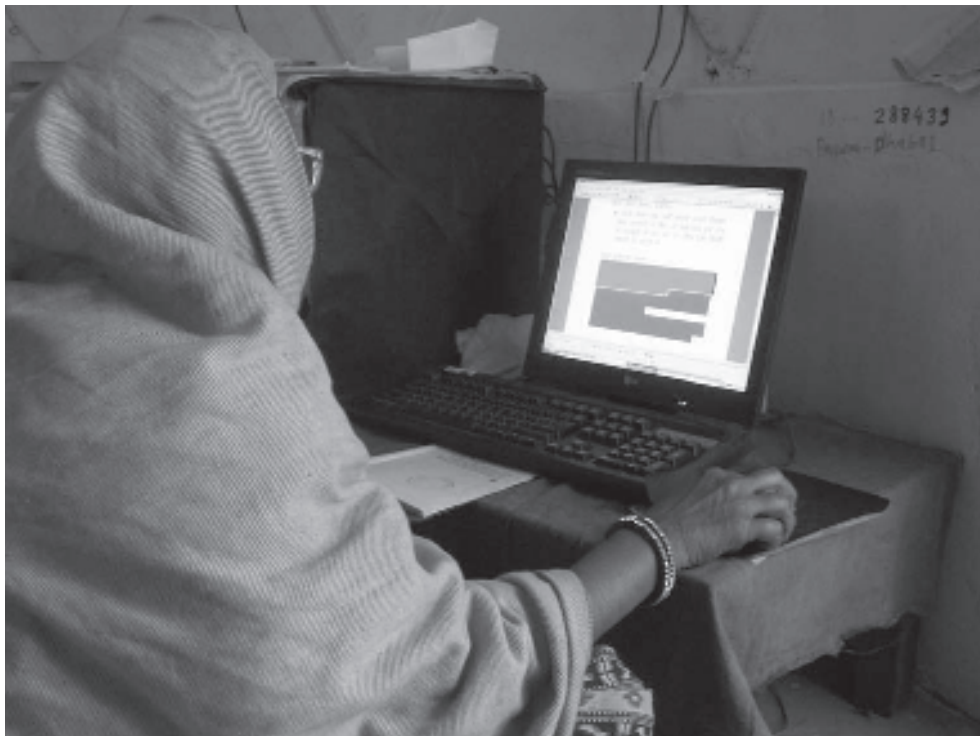
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I only hope when some of these innovative politicians come to power, they'll remember how they had to

skip across the border to a foreign country in order to talk to their own countrymen back home, and liberalise our radio laws a little. Otherwise, our only hope of giving the people a voice is to experiment with unregulated technologies like wifi radio and hope that the government wakes up too late to ban that as well.

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This 60-year-old lady, Smt. Nortti Bai, is no ordinary lady peeping through her spectacles into the computer screen in the picture. Barely 5 years ago, she wasn't aware of a thing called computers or the Internet. She learnt computers at the old age of 55 yrs, became proficient at it and now teaches computers to young kids and does online documentation too.