DIY MASS MEDIA

Tired of selective and biased coverage of the news in your area? Bored with the same old top-40 radio stations? Tired of tuning up and down the FM band to find something worthwhile? Ready to take matters into your own hands, but don't have an extra $100,000 to finance your own radio station? Have no fear, the micro-power radio movement is here, and it's time for you to get involved!

Micro-power radio has been called "freecasting," "pirate radio," and more recently, "sandbox radio." Throughout Europe and Africa, it has played an important part in informing and entertaining the public with alternatives not available from government-controlled media sources. Now in the United States, micro radio is becoming increasingly important. Large corporations are buying up every last independent broadcast media outlets and pressuring the government to increase regulations to keep new players out of the game. This has stifled alternative thought on the airwaves.

Micro-power radio is true community radio because its signal only reaches a small geographic are. Depending on the power output, a micro-power station can reach from 1/4 of a mile to 10 miles or more. Coverage could be an apartment complex, a college campus, or a small town. And because of the capture effect of FM and the low power of micro-power broadcasts, another micro-power station in a neighboring community broadcasting on the same frequency would cause little interference. Micro radio is to commercial radio as newsletters are to slick magazines.

IS IT LEGAL?

Well...no, if you want to be technical about it. The FCC tightened up its licensing requirements in 1980 because of the lobbing efforts of commercial broadcasters and The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (your 'public radio' friends at NPR). Since then, the minimum price to get on the air has risen to $50,000--not counting operating expenses. These costs make broadcasting too expensive for individuals. Micro-power has changed all that: a compleat station can be assembled for a few hundred dollars, or a bare-bones station for less than a hundred.

One goal of the micro-power movement is to force the FCC to reinstate low-power radio licenses. Similar actions in Europe and Canada have been successful: Canada now issues micro-power licenses; Italy has totally deregulated radio, permitting anyone with a transmitter to broadcast; and England now allows non-government stations. All these gains were made by micro-power stations and their ever-increasing listenership.

Groups like San Francisco Liberation Radio and Free Radio Berkeley have been running high-profile stations, openly challenging the FCC to take them to court. So far the FCC has done little but file notices of apparent violations. In Springfield, Illinois, Black Liberation Radio has been broadcasting for five years, 3 of them after the FCC fined the station $750 (which has not been paid).

Many other micro-power stations have been running for years with little interference from the FCC. Not to say that the FCC doesn't frown on these broadcasts; but in most cases, they won't go after a micro-power broadcaster unless there has been a complaint, usually about