

Interception and Divulgence of Radio Communications

Federal and state laws make intercepting and divulging radio communications illegal and punishable by severe criminal penalties, with certain exceptions.

What kinds of interception and divulgence of radio transmissions are legal?

The FCC and the Communications Act do not forbid certain types of interception and disclosure of radio communications, including:

- Mere interception of radio communications, such as overhearing your neighbor's conversation over a cordless telephone, or listening to emergency service reports on a radio scanner (although intercepting and/or recording telephone-related radio communications may be a violation of other federal or state laws).
- Divulgence of certain radio communications that were transmitted for use by the general public (such as over-the-air radio and television broadcasts).
- Divulgence of broadcasts related to ships, aircraft, vehicles or persons in distress.
- Divulgence of transmissions by amateur radio or citizen band radio operators.

What kinds of interception and divulgence are prohibited?

Section 705 of the Communications Act prohibits a person from using an intercepted radio communication for his or her own benefit. Examples of this include:

- A taxicab company intercepting radio communications between dispatchers and drivers of a rival taxicab company in order to gain competitive advantages.
- Unauthorized interception of signals from pay television services, such as cable or satellite television.
- A person selling or publishing a recording or contents of someone else's wireless phone conversation.

What about equipment used to intercept radio communications?

The Communications Act prohibits the FCC from authorizing radio scanning equipment that:

- Can receive transmissions in the frequencies allocated to domestic cellular services.
- Can readily be altered by the user to intercept cellular communications.
- May be equipped with decoders that convert digital transmissions to analog voice audio.

It is illegal to manufacture, import, sell or lease such unauthorized equipment in the United States.

Filing a complaint

You have multiple options for filing a complaint with the FCC:

- File a complaint online at <https://consumercomplaints.fcc.gov>

- By phone: 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322); TTY: 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322); ASL: 1-844-432-2275
- By mail (please include your name, address, contact information and as much detail about your complaint as possible):

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

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