

[Back to Article](#)

## Dirty-Word Filters Prove Costly

Randy Dotinga 07.09.04

Thanks to the federal government's crackdown on obscenity, commercial radio -- already a wasteland of canned programming produced by out-of-town disc jockeys -- is becoming less live than ever.

Since Janet Jackson exposed her nipple jewelry on national television, radio stations have been clamoring for technology that delays broadcast feeds for up to 40 seconds, giving hosts and producers a chance to bleep out naughty words. Long a staple of political-minded talk shows at large stations, delay systems are now being put to work 24 hours a day, even during the weekly gardening hour and the afternoon stock market report.

The typical 7-second delays may sound about as harmless as Bill O'Reilly on mute. But the technology isn't cheap for small stations, which also face a risk of hefty fines just like their huge commercial counterparts in metropolises like New York City and Los Angeles.

The financial risk to the radio industry of even a single four-letter word is hardly trivial. The Jackson incident re-energized the moribund FCC, which had rarely fined broadcasters over indecency in recent years, and the agency began issuing a blizzard of new fines.

In a decision that sent even more chills up the spines of radio programmers, the FCC reversed a ruling that let NBC off the hook after rock singer Bono used an expletive participle during a live broadcast of the Golden Globes. (Vice President Dick Cheney recently used the command form of the same word on the Senate floor when he told a senator to engage in an anatomically improbable activity normally reserved for porn movies. But the word wasn't broadcast, so the FCC stayed mum. And even if it had been aired on C-Span, the word wouldn't have been illegal: The FCC only has jurisdiction over the public airwaves, not cable TV.)

The Bono re-ruling raised the prospect that stations could be fined for airing unplanned expletives, not just scheduled content like George Carlin's famous "seven dirty words" routine, which got a California station in hot water three decades ago.

The fines themselves aren't small potatoes anymore either. The Senate recently passed a bill boosting the maximum fine per incident of obscenity to \$275,000 from \$27,500; the House went up to \$500,000.

In the wake of all this hoopla, stations began buying delay systems if they didn't have them or expanding their use if they did. At San Diego news/talk station KOGO, for instance, programmers began using a 7.5-second delay during innocuous weekend talk shows.

"We don't expect to have indecency in a financial, gardening or car show, but there's always that possibility," said program director Cliff Albert, adding that a single obscene caller could provoke a complaint to the FCC.

With digital-delay systems in hot demand, at least two radio-technology companies are raking in money. Radio stations flooded them with orders for the systems in the wake of the Super Bowl brouhaha.

"We took a couple years' worth of orders in about two weeks," said Jim Latimer, director of sales for Symetrix. The company's competitor, New Jersey-based Eventide is still working through its backlog, said Ray Maxwell, vice president of sales and marketing.

Music stations, which often rely on pre-taped content, are joining the delay bandwagon. A source at an Infinity Broadcasting station said the company, one of the nation's largest radio broadcasters, ordered delay systems to be installed in all its stations, regardless of their format. Todd Little, program director at San Diego classic rock station KPLN/The Planet, owned by Infinity, said the delays are "a nice little safety net in case somebody slips."

And that "somebody" doesn't have to be a caller. Radio personalities can bleep out their own words if they say something they regret a few seconds later. "If you've ever banged your knee, the first thing that

comes out of your mouth isn't Merry Christmas," Little said.

Outside morning drive-time shows and talk shows, however, much radio programming these days is anything but live.

Decades ago, radio stations relied on reel-to-reel systems that taped live content and then played it back a few seconds later. Digital delays came along in the mid-1970s, and the technology has steadily advanced since then.

Now, systems can delay a live broadcast for as long as 40 seconds, giving station employees plenty of time to drop their coffee and stab a kill button when somebody says something inappropriate. If a producer or show host chooses to erase a dirty word instead of bleeping it, the systems are designed to automatically rebuild the delay period, said Maxwell of Eventide.

For example, a station with a 7-second delay that "dumps" seven seconds of obscene material would suddenly find itself live. But the system would quickly resurrect the delay by using an algorithm that chops the tiny bits of silence between words, Maxwell said.

Delay systems can cost as much as \$3,300, hardly chump change for public radio and rural stations.

"For stations that are literally scraping by to serve the public interest, having to buy the equipment is going to mean that they wouldn't be able to air the program" in question, said Margaret Miller, a Washington D.C. attorney who represents public broadcasting stations.

But the FCC may not take too kindly to the "we're too poor to have a delay system" excuse, and the obscenity fines could be the same regardless of whether a station has a few dozen listeners or tens of thousands.

So what's next? The new frontier for delay technology is television, where engineers have been scrambling to develop ways to bleep dirty words from live shows like the Academy Awards. Video delays are more complicated than audio delays, and programmers need to figure out what to put on the air when, say, somebody flashes a breast during a football game halftime show.

One solution would be to use the delay period to blur out the offending body part, said Miami broadcast consultant Joe Feldele. But the potential of human error in video editing, just like the risk of another wardrobe malfunction, will still exist.

# LIVE

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# CONTENTS

## DEPARTMENTS

### 17 Rants & Raves Feedback.

### 25 Start Technology. Business. People.

Little Brother is watching, via digicam

28 A monorail freak's one-track mind

30 Men's fashion: Stop bullets with style!

44 Trip Hawkins reinvents himself (again)

49 Infoporn Raw data.

Explaining why everything in the universe has limits, and plotting China's emergence as a tech superpower

PLUS: Jargon Watch, Pulse, and more ...

### 55 Play Culture: Gear. Obsessions.

56 They Might Be Giants get a MoveOn

62 Mythbusters: TV's urban legend slayers

64 Inside the world's bomb shelters

79 Fetish Technolust.

B&O's curvaceous cordless phone, Cassina's rockin' Philippe Starck sofa, Samsung's dual-action digicam

86 Test Consumer reviews.

Ultralight laptops, online music services, heavy-duty oven mitts, and a Shopping Cart filled with staff raves

PLUS: Games, Arts, Reviews, and more ...

### 95 View Opinion. Ideas. Provocations.

Outsourcing goes micro-multinational

96 Hot Seat: Harlan Ellison on his AOL suit

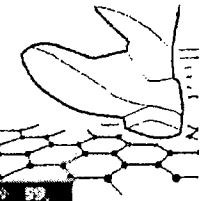
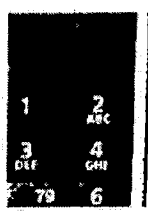
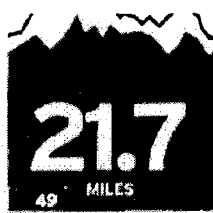
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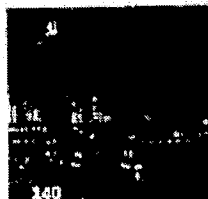
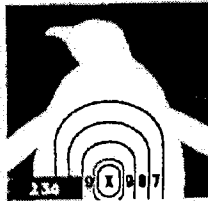
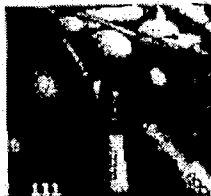
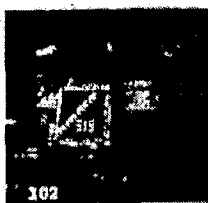
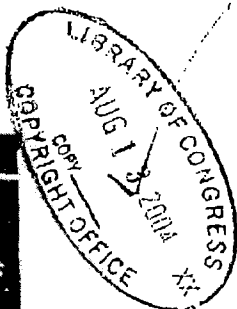
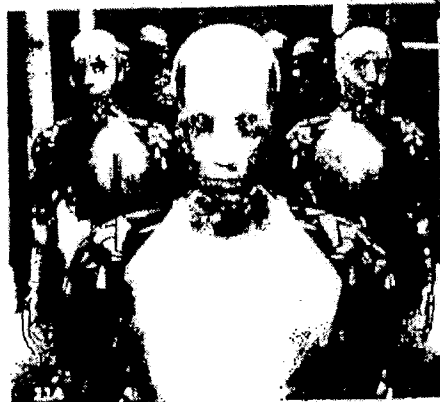
99 Lessig

How irrational politics are stamping out good science

### 168 Found Artifacts from the future.



# CONTENTS



## FEATURES

### 114 Rise of the Machines

Isaac Asimov turned androids into pop culture icons – and invented the science of robotics in the process. Now his classic *I, Robot* hits the big screen. by Cory Doctorow

**PLUS:** The coolest movie bots of all time

### 120 Will Smith, Hollywood Geek

The star of *I, Robot* raps about busting bot outlaws, his secret geek past, and the future of thinking machines. by Jennifer Hillner

### 123 The Humanoid Race

Machines are getting more and more like the rest of us. A piece-by-piece guide to the globe's most advanced bots.

### 102 The Trillion-Barrel Tar Pit

Who needs "oil independence" – our friendly neighbor to the north is sitting on a black gold mine. by Brendan I. Koerner

### 106 Copy This Article & Win Quick Cash!

Is Bill Gates offering big bucks to track your email? On the trail of the most forwarded hoax in Internet history. by Jonathon Keats

### 111 Cocktail Hour

Part antipsychotic, part antibiotic, this pill will knock tumors for a loop. Get ready for the era of mix-and-match medicine. by Chris Mooney

### 130 The Seismic Underground

The perfect place to build the ultimate earthquake science lab happens to be 2 miles straight down. by Brendan I. Koerner

### 134 Linux Killer

They call him the most hated man in high tech. SCO's Darl McBride wants to strangle the open source movement – with help from America's best trial lawyer. by Brad Stone

### 140 The Road to Tech Mecca

Open markets and oil, satellite nets and Islam. Welcome to the city-state of Dubai, the new media capital of the Middle East. by Lee Smith

### 146 Tour de Lance

The hardware that makes Armstrong an unstoppable cycling machine. by Ben Hewitt

### 150 Attention, Shoppers!

Radio-frequency chips are retail nirvana. They're the end of privacy. They're the mark of the beast. Inside the tag-and-track supermarket of the future. by Josh McHugh

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