The government shutdown is driving users to illegal router settings

On Thursday, the Federal Communications Commission closed the majority of its operations, a result of the ongoing government shutdown. The FCC enforces the rules for all the wireless broadcasts in the United States, and many of most of its important enforcement mechanisms are now closed for the duration of the shutdown, which President Trump recently warned could last months or even years.

This means that – hypothetically! – if you wanted to illegally broadcast in violation of someone else's spectrum rights, this would be the perfect time to do it.

There are a bunch of channels on a standard router, corresponding to overlapping portions of the 2.4GHz band. Generally, it's recommended to set your devices to 1, 6 and 11 to maximize throughput and minimize interference. There are a couple higher channels though, with routers in Canada and the EU going as high as 13, and routers in Japan going all the way up to 14. Those channels are illegal in the US because they interfere with the next highest frequency bands, but getting your router to broadcast on them is often as simple as changing a "Country" drop-down from "US" to "Japan." It might even improve your signal, if you don't mind breaking the law.

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Under normal circumstances, doing this sort of thing would get you thrown in jail, or at least fined! As one user put it on Stack Exchange, "avoid channel 13 and 14 unless you like the idea of prison, being a prisoner, living the prison lifestyle,

etc.” All of that is still true in the abstract. As Ajit Pai is quick to remind us, the statute of limitations will last beyond the end of the shutdown, even in the most pessimistic scenarios, and there’s nothing to stop them from taking you to court after the government reopens.

But in practical terms, the greatest concern is that someone will report network interference coming from the general direction of your router, and it will be much harder to do that while the shut down is still in effect. As the FCC’s official shutdown notice makes clear, both the Consumer Complaint Center and the accompanying Consumer Complaint Data Center are among the divisions closing up shop, and they’re exactly the divisions you’d be most worried about. If you look up the FCC’s official guidance for submitting complaints online, it will direct you to that same shutdown notice, an implicit acknowledgement that the the service is down for the count. Someone could still hold onto their complaint and submit it after the shutdown ends, but that would require an awful lot of planning and make it much harder to catch black-market routers in the act.

We should say at this point: none of this is a very good idea. It could theoretically make your Wi-Fi work better, but you’re just as likely to run into some weird interoperability issue as your black-market router settings run into manufacturers like Apple that hard-code US-bound products not to work on channels 13 or higher. Even if it does work, is a little less interference really worth the small chance of a legal fight? As the IT underground says, don’t do the router crime if you can’t do the router time.

But if you were wondering how the slow creep of federal incompetence is affecting the basic functions of technology, this is a pretty good example. For 100 years, no one seriously challenged the federal government for control over the wireless spectrum. But if a couple more weeks go by with no FCC enforcement, riding dirty on your router suddenly doesn’t

look like such a risk!

https://www.theverge.com/2019/1/5/18168660/government-shutdown-illegal-router-channel-13