

# RADIOCONTROL EVALUATED

**Kevin Nice investigates the comprehensive computer control software from SysLabs that provides support for multiple radios. See how Kevin got on with the extensive features.**

It could be said that control of our radios is something we all need, but does this particular program provide all? I was very curious to discover for myself just what *RadioControl* had to offer. We mentioned the new release of this software in *MM* October and at the time of discovering an upgrade, we expressed a desire to examine the updated version to the vendors SysLabs. They were keen to oblige and provided me with a demo copy of their Professional Edition. The one supplied is Version 1 (build 21, Service Pack 1), to be precise.

## Dongle Protection

*RadioControl* is supplied on CD and has a USB dongle for copyright protection. There is no paper manual supplied. For that matter, there is no separate manual at all! I was expecting to find a PDF on the CD, as is so often the norm these days. However, the CD doesn't even contain a 'readme' or help file. Instead the only documentation is provided in the form of sleeve notes contained in the jewel CD case. So I followed the instructions on those notes and I was on my way to discovery. The first English text advised me that the way to familiarise myself with the program was to make use of the help files accessed via the program in the usual *Windows* application manner, i.e. pressing F1 or by clicking 'Help' from the menu.

First though, I needed to install the software, this I attempted to do, but I was foiled. The install failed me on two PCs, firstly my radio Laptop, home of all the try-outs for *MM* and then on my

2.4GHz main PC that runs the shack radios and software. Both were behaving the same way and failing at 98% completion of the install process. It seemed that the dongle appeared not to be present, or that's the conclusion that I came to from the on screen error message. I had attempted this install, both with and without, the dongle inserted in a USB port, neither worked. It seemed that the dongle needed to be installed first, but there was no sign of the driver on the CD, nor any mention of it in the instructions. On plugging in the 'Hardlock' dongle into the PC, *Windows* did prompt for its installation. Having come to a halt I followed the instructions on the card and asked for help via the E-mail address given.

A short while later I received a reply from **Ralf Reiterer** who suggested that I download a file from the *RadioControl* website. This I did and ran the file that turned out to be an installer for the security dongle. Now the installation proper was successful and I was up and running.

## Discovering More

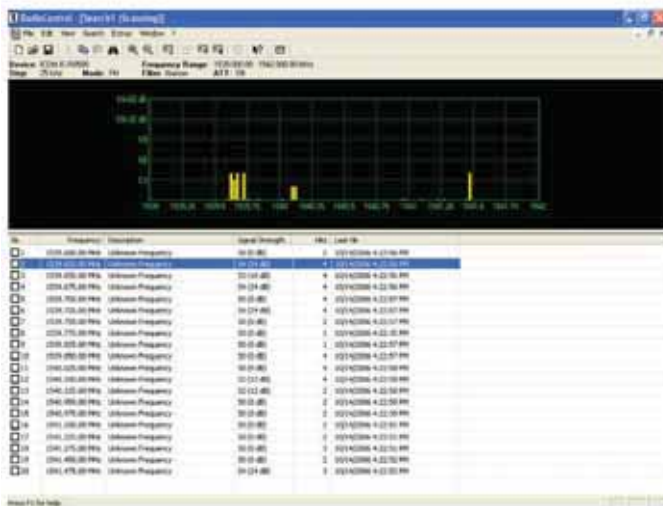
With the program installed, I could successfully consult the electronic help documentation and get a feel for what *RadioControl* can do. The first thing to impress me was that it's possible to run four radios simultaneously and exchange memory data between them. My only limitation was that both of the PCs I was using for the evaluation had only one serial port each. Time to obtain a USB to RS-232 adapter. Fortunately, since I was running close to the magazine deadline, my local computer store had such a device for £10. Once I'd installed the adapter driver and connected up the second radio I was able to more fully investigate the features provided by *RadioControl*. I'll be expanding to more ports in the near future so I can run four radios!

The capabilities fit the expectation of what a computer control program should offer, but *RadioControl* does provide lots of functionality. The ability to control the tuning and modes directly via an interactive virtual front panel, uploading and downloading memory contents (where the radio allows it), editing them, saving copies on your PC's hard drive, all these things are standard. There are drivers provided for **AOR**, **Icom**, **Kenwood** and **Yaesu** radios. At install time you are offered the opportunity to select as many or as few of the models as you require. Should your requirements change after this initial selection, it's not a problem as you can change the line-up at any time. It's also possible to simply change the properties of each radio driver too. To be able to control a specific radio, you need to connect it to your PC and then specify the port being used and the baud rate of that port. Then it should work. All three of the radios I tried worked faultlessly.

Once you've configured the radio drivers, which *RadioControl* prompts you to do at the first time you start it after install, you are presented with the question "what do you want to do?" as per **Fig. 1**. This is the initial screen presented every time that you start the

● **Fig. 1:** The options offered by *RadioControl* on startup.





● Fig. 2: RadioControl with a spectrum search running on the R8500.



● Fig. 3: Two radio's searching at once.

application. From here you enter the workings of the program. As you can see, there are options to create one of the three types of 'document' that *RadioControl* uses, open an existing file that was either supplied as part of the install, or one that you've previously created and lastly, you can open a virtual front panel for one of the radios you've installed. Oddly, you have to first click the radio button to highlight the category before you can select an option from a list.

The file options allow you to use an existing or new frequency database, edit a memory file, or perform some searching between limits.

### Searching

*RadioControl* provides the capability to have multiple radios running searches between upper and lower limits. As signals are detected *RadioControl* produces both a bar chart style spectrum plot and a table of frequencies active. The process is cycled until you stop it and the table is automatically resorted as each signal is detected, so that channels with newly detected activity are inserted in frequency order. The spectrum display is refreshed each sweep so that you don't just end up with a solid block as the band has activity over time. The table, in addition to a frequency column also has fields for Description, Signal strength total number of hits and time/date of the last detection (Hit). This is a very handy tool for detecting activity. It works well just being left to run for a period, I left a search running for 12 hours while I got on with some other things in the shack. There are some very well thought out options available within the search feature, for instance, it is possible to send a recorded frequency to another connected radio to monitor it while the other radio continues its search uninterrupted. Once you've built up a frequency table as a result of the search you can then save it as a frequency database, edit and annotate it and upload the channels you wish to scan directly into one or many of the radios connected. For that matter, you can easily combine and, or clone the contents of connected radios' memories too.

### Front Panel

The virtual front panel displayed by *RadioControl* is consistent for any of the radios you chose to control via the program. In my view, this is an excellent choice, as it makes operating and interpreting the display very consistent. You can forget the ergonomic differences between the radios and adapt to the standard offering.

Direct tuning is achieved by using the mouse or the keyboard.



● Fig. 4: The cursor display dialogue when you hover over the spectrum chart plot.

On some radios, the Icom R8500 for instance, you can also tune using the real radio's controls too. Though with this radio, any change of the attenuator settings are not passed on to the software. AOR sets don't allow tuning, though with some you can change settings on the radio but the software is unable to detect the change and displays the settings prior to the manual change. This is not a problem as long as you make sure that you use *RadioControl* for changing settings. I suspect that these limitations are all a function of the command sets of the radios themselves. It seems that none of the manufacturers seem to have put enough effort into the remote control capabilities of their sets. I have to say this is most disappointing from my personal view, as I spend lots of time remotely controlling my shack.

It is possible to control four radios at once with *RadioControl*, this is a very handy feature indeed, though you can only view one full front panel at a time. There is a solution to this omission and that is by the use of the '4-device monitor'. This feature allows the simultaneous view of just the frequency display of each set under software control. There is a button provided by each thumbnail display labelled 'Frontpanel', pressing this, switches to that radio's full panel display to the left of the bank – see Fig. 3. It's not ideal, but it is a handy solution and you can see the status of all the radios at once.

I am left wanting more from this software, but that's not because it's a bad solution. Indeed, I believe that *RadioControl* is a well thought out and implemented program. Sadly, it sets you thinking and coming up with a wish list of features such as Internet remote control, integrated audio recording, antenna switching control, to name but three. I certainly like the feature set offered by *RadioControl* and it has enabled me to achieve centralised control of my radios. More information is available from [www.radioctl.com](http://www.radioctl.com)

MM