

"A Very Big Tent"

There's an email reflector to which I belong whose members share a common interest of publicizing and promoting amateur radio. Recently, there was an interesting discussion there that seems worthwhile sharing. It started with a post by a group member stating:

I did a search in the FCC license database for my Zip Code™ ... and seven other nearby towns. Found 90 licensed hams. In 31 years operating from this QTH, I have only heard two of them, possibly only one time. I operate 160 through 2 meters SSB and CW. I am quite active. I have asked a few people to do a similar search in their own Zip Code™ and those within 15–20 miles of them. They have reported exactly the same thing as I have found ... Based upon my initial non-scientific findings, it seems there may be a very small percentage that are actually really transmitting and making QSOs....say at least one hour a week.

The initial responses seemed to back up his point of view. The first came from a very well-known ham (and member of the CQ Communications family), pointing out that in Southern California, where he lives . . .

We have lots of hams who have gotten licenses strictly for EmComm (emergency communications) and Search/Rescue work and have absolutely no other interest in the hobby. They won't come to club meetings if invited ... It's very evident that they simply do not want to be a part of the traditional ham radio community as we know it. So in essence, we now have two distinct forms of ham radio, "EmComm/SAR only" and the rest of us.

Another ham wrote that "(t)he general rule of thumb is that about one third of FCC licensees are active (have been on the air in the past year)," adding, "There are similar ratios for other types of licenses such as pilot licenses."

We've now changed the definition of "active" from an hour a week to once a year. But what is the basis of this "general rule of thumb"? Where are the statistics to back it up? I'll tell you where: Nowhere. They don't exist. It is nothing more than a guess. Perhaps a guess with which a number of people agree. But it is a guess nonetheless. With nothing objective to support it.

Now Wait a Minute!

At this point, back on the reflector, the "now, wait a minute..." replies began. Bill McIninch, KA1MOM, joined the discussion by noting that:

Among the members of the three clubs I'm active in, there are people whose operating is *exclusive* to: Charity event support; sports event support; EmComm; DX; QRP; special event stations (both running them and "collecting wallpaper"); satellites; weather; exotic propagation; digital; SDR; homebrew (design, build, use once, start next project); antenna design (design, build, test, try something new); awards collecting; SAR; mountaintopping; rag-chewing; foxhunting; restoring and duplicating antique equipment; education; ham-related PR; technological history (and) troubleshooting other people's gear. There are even *steampunk* hams <<http://bit.ly/12po0xJ>> working in the framework of an alternate history where the first licenses were issued 30 years earlier because several technological dead ends didn't happen ... (and) "hamfen" <<http://yhoo.it/Tz5n5h>>, hams whose operation consists of keeping track of each other at huge science fiction conventions on the scale of the Dayton Hamvention®.

In summary: while there may be some sparseness in a specific category of the above (and more), there's no real reason to assume this means all the other licensees are inactive.

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Mike Langner, K5MGR, added:

I'm a part of a typical example here—after over 50 years of hamming, most of my activity is restoring great old boatanchors, not holding a mic or a key... You won't hear me on the bands so very much anymore, but I'm literally "up to my elbows" in ham radio for some part of nearly every day! Just another example of the many branches of interest amateur radio offers us radio buffs! ... We're a "some size for everyone" public service and hobby—with a very big tent!! Life in amateur radio isn't all conducted on 20 meters!

My Two Cents

I finally added in my own two cents, in a post that is too long to reprint here, but my main points were:

1) As illustrated above, it is impossible to quantify what constitutes "an active ham." Is it operating an hour a week or once a year? What if your "activity" is mostly at your workbench? By the standard in the original posting - on the air at least an hour every week - I would not qualify as active.

2) The question of "are they active?" is really a politically-correct rephrasing of a question that goes back nearly 100 years: "But are they REAL hams?" At various times in our history, "real hams" needed to transmit with spark instead of CW, use code instead of voice, build *all* of their own gear, build *some* of their own gear, be able to pass a code test in order to use voice ... and on and on. It was a question intended to exclude as many people as possible from the ranks of being "real" in order to make one's own status that much more exclusive.

Today, the question has changed but the basic answer is the same: If they didn't have to clear the same hurdles I did, and don't enjoy the same aspects of the hobby that I do, then they're not "active," not "real." There is one and only one valid definition of what constitutes a "real" ham: A person who is licensed by his or her government as an amateur radio operator. Period. How that person chooses to use the privileges granted by that license is irrelevant. As K5MGR put it, "We're a 'some size for everyone' public service and hobby—with a very big tent!!"

Ham Dealers

I recently had the opportunity to spend time visiting two different ham dealers—KJI Electronics in New Jersey and Ham Radio Outlet in New Hampshire. In addition, CQ Kit-Building Editor Joe Eisenberg, K0NEB, visited R&L Electronics in Ohio around the same time. We both came away with a renewed appreciation for the value of in-person shopping at a real "brick-and-mortar" ham radio store.

When you visit a ham store in person, you talk face-to-face with a knowledgeable sales rep who can help you figure out what will best meet both your needs and your budget, remind you of accessories that may be necessary for getting the most out of your purchase, and make sure that everything you're buying will work properly together. Ham skepticism aside, these guys are not out to wring every possible dollar out of your wallet, but rather to make sure you get the best possible value for your dollar, so you'll be happy and will keep coming back.

Not all of us are lucky enough to have a brick-and-mortar ham radio store within easy reach, but for those who *do*, we strongly recommend taking advantage of this wonderful ham radio resource. —73, Rich, W2VU