

Trying New Things . . . and More New Things to Try

One of the wonderful things about amateur radio is that there is a virtually endless list of different things to try. For example, a month or so ago, I had my first non-radio Echolink QSO (after registering as a licensed user, which you must do before you'll be allowed to connect). I'd been using my laptop in my dining room to remotely operate a Ten-Tec Omni-VII in the basement, and decided to try Echolink while I had the computer set up with a headset/mic. I had a very nice talk with a couple of mobile stations on a repeater in the Washington, DC suburbs.

I also came up with my personal answer to the "But is it radio?" question about Echolink—Yes. Proximity has become irrelevant in the age of the internet. I was also able to control the Omni-VII from my hotel room in Florida while I was down there in February for the Orlando Hamcation®. If using the computer to operate the radio from my dining room to my basement is still "radio," then so is using the computer from Orlando to operate the radio in my basement. And then, so is using the computer in my dining room to operate a repeater transmitter in Virginia. As is getting on a linked repeater network, be it linked by RF or the internet (such as D-STAR), to extend my communications range from the car.

The bottom line is that there is no longer a technological dividing line between what is and isn't "radio," based solely on the path used to carry the signal. So it now has to be redefined ... and my definition is that if I'm talking into a microphone and communicating with another ham, then it's ham radio, and the "purity" of the path involved no longer matters. (It does still matter, of course, for awards, most of which specifically—and legitimately—require that only the RF portion of a contact is eligible to qualify. Even though I was in Florida operating the Omni-VII, for example, any hams I contacted still would get award credit only for contacting my station in New Jersey, the end point of the RF path.)

Digital Alphabet Soup

Speaking of Orlando, at the hamfest I ran into Mel Whitten, KØPFX, one of my HF digital voice (DV) mentors, who asked me if I'd tried the latest and greatest in DV yet. Mel's been after me for a couple of years now to try WinDRM, the ham radio version of the digital short-wave broadcasting protocol, Digital Radio Mondiale. I said no, but assured him that WinDRM is still on my "to do" list.

"Oh, that's old," he said. "I'm talking about FDMDV, Frequency Division Multiplex Digital Voice." It seems that while I was off paying attention to other parts of ham radio, WinDRM became doubly-obsolete in the HF DV world, being supplanted last May by a variation known as DRMDV (Digital Radio Mondiale—Digital Voice) and then this past December by FDMDV. So far, I've only downloaded the user guides for these new modes; and it looks like I'm going to have to invest in either a second soundcard or a USB headset/mic in order to try them out. But at some point, I'm sure I will.

This month's "Magic in the Sky" column by AA6JR touches briefly on a related topic, and I wanted to add my two cents. Jeff offers a commentary about his view that the FCC has been compromised in recent years to protect business interests ahead of the public interest.

His opinions are not necessarily those of CQ, but on the main point, we are in complete agreement. There is, however, one minor issue on which we disagree. At one point, in discussing the FCC's abdication of its traditional role of setting technical standards in favor of "letting the market decide," Jeff says he believes that the growth of digital voice communications in amateur radio is suffering from the lack of a single standard. "In this case," he says, "the market is *not* deciding and as a result, technology is at a standstill."

While we agree that uniform technical standards are desirable for the consumer electronics industry as a whole, amateur radio is a realm for experimentation and we think that setting standards beyond such basics as bandwidth for still-evolving modes would stifle rather than encourage development. The pace of development of these soundcard DV modes is one example. If the FCC had settled on WinDRM, or an earlier effort, the G4GUO protocol, as a DV standard, would DRMDV and FDMDV have been developed? Clearly, it is difficult, and financially risky, for a commercial manufacturer to press ahead with products when there is no clear standard—as AOR has done on HF with its G4GUO-based DV modems and as ICOM has done in a major way on VHF/UHF with D-STAR. But it is the nature (and purpose) of amateur radio to encourage experimentation, and as much as we admire these companies for sticking their necks out with new technology, we would not want the FCC to set standards that will stand in the way of progress (as earlier limitations on digital codes to Baudot and ASCII did for many years). Despite our tradition as technological innovators, the ham radio mainstream has always been slow to adopt new technologies, starting with the "spark forever" crowd nearly a century ago.

My To-Try List

The pace of technical change in the DV world may be confusing, but from my perspective, it only makes my list of new things to try a bit longer, even as other things fall off it. In addition to trying out Echolink, over President's Day weekend I had my first-ever QSO on 60 meters, a very pleasant and unhurried chat with WA3MIX. Other things on my personal "to try" list include:

- Meteor scatter using whatever is the current version of K1JT's WSJT software by the time this reaches the top of the list (this is another area in which software development seems to progress more quickly than you can keep up with it if you're not an everyday user);
- On-foot QRP operating (at Orlando, I also ran into W1REX, whose tuna tin transmitter I built and described here about a year and a half ago; he gave me a matching receiver kit, so once I get that built and running, I'll have a complete portable QRP station waiting for me to try from the woods someplace), and
- Who knows what else ... foxhunting, balloons, mobile HFing, county hunting, and so on... the main point being that it is virtually impossible to run out of new things to do and try in ham radio, and anyone who says he's getting bored in the hobby just needs to open his eyes and widen his horizons. It always helps, of course, to be able to call on experienced operators as mentors ... so if you happen to have a specialty, don't keep it a secret from your fellow club members and other local hams, who might get interested in your favorite activity and need your help in getting started. 73, W2VU

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