

It's (Not) the Network . . . Or Is It?

The “bones” of this editorial have been clattering around inside my head for several months, but until now, I hadn't gotten around to fleshing it out. It's a good thing, too, because now that I am, it's going in a completely different direction than I first thought it would.

Chances are you have seen the ads from a certain wireless phone company, in which the user is followed around by about 100 company workers, making sure he always has reliable service. “It's the network,” says the ad copy.

My first thought when this theme began appearing in the company's ads was, “Here's where ham radio is different. We don't need *the network*. On the rare occasions when *the network* goes down, we hams can fire up our rigs and continue to communicate.” The fixed infrastructure of *the network* is what makes it vulnerable to overload or failure at the times of greatest need. Ham radio's flexibility, on the other hand, is what makes our service stand out in those same times.

But the more often I've seen these ads, the more I've realized that my initial impression was wrong, as the pictures tell a different story than the words. While the words talk about the network, the pictures are of *people*. More than repeaters and antennas, *the network* is kept reliable by the *people* who build and maintain it. This visual message, as any television producer will tell you, is at least as powerful as the verbal message. And in this sense, ham radio is *no different*. It is not our transceivers and repeaters and antennas that give our service its legendary reliability “when all else fails.” It is our *people*. People who have the right equipment, knowledge, and training to meet the needs of the moment. People who can set up and operate communications networks on the fly, and keep them running for as long as needed. Depending on what we need to do, we can use HF or VHF; make contacts direct or via relays; and use code, voice, text, or video to get our messages through.

A growing number of these options require a physical infrastructure—a network—in order to work. Repeaters and satellites need to be built and maintained; satellites need to be built, launched, and controlled; repeater networks need to have links established and maintained. This network infrastructure is a large part of what makes ham radio work on an everyday basis (keep in mind that 99% of the time, we are *not* responding to an emergency or disaster, but it is these everyday contacts that keep us prepared for that other, critical, 1%). Also, of course, we have our own network of people—like in the TV ad—who design, build, and maintain the components of our physical networks. And the growth of this infrastructure is expanding the horizons of our everyday operating.

Stretching the Network

On VHF and UHF, the basic unit of our infrastructure is the repeater. These automatic relay stations allow us to use handhelds and relatively low-powered mobile radios to keep in contact with each other over a wide area, such as a city or a county. Sometimes, though, this isn't quite enough. There may be dead spots that limit coverage. In response, some repeater owners have added remote receivers, along with “voting”

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Welcome, WorldRadio Readers

As a result of last year's purchase of *WorldRadio* magazine by our parent company, CQ Communications, Inc., *WorldRadio* subscribers as of this month are also *CQ* subscribers. Welcome. Details of how your *WR* subscriptions have been converted to *CQ* subscriptions are in the January 2009 issue of *WorldRadio*, on our website, and in the note from Publisher Dick Ross, K2MGA, on page **XX** of this issue.

WorldRadio has *not* gone away. While it is no longer being published on paper, it continues as an online-only magazine, something that is at the leading edge of the publishing industry. Each monthly issue—starting with this month's issue—is being posted online in PDF format, accessible to all to either read online or download to your computer to read later. We have established an e-mail alert list to notify readers when each new issue is available, along with highlights of that issue. You may sign up by going to <<http://mailman.sunserver.com/mailman/listinfo/worldradio-l>>, or by following the link from either the *CQ* or *WR* websites. Being on the alert list is free. So is online access to the new *WorldRadio Online*.

Meanwhile, we would like to extend a warm welcome to *WorldRadio* readers. We hope you will find our pages to be enjoyable and educational while you continue to read *WR* online. We would also like to extend an invitation to all *CQ* readers to check out *WorldRadio Online* for its great ham radio stories and the unique perspectives of its columnists.

devices that automatically select the receiver with the strongest signal to be relayed to the transmitter.

To stretch further, a growing number of repeater owners are linking their systems, expanding their range to cover entire metropolitan areas, large semi-rural or rural areas, or even multiple cities. This has been common practice for many years in some parts of the country, but has recently been expanding elsewhere. There's one network of linked repeaters in New York City that covers all five boroughs plus Long Island and New Jersey suburbs. There is another in New Jersey that connects much of the state. The next logical step is to link together multiple linked systems. This has resulted in wide-area networks in some parts of the country, and in the rise of internet-linked networks such as IRLP (Internet Radio Linking Project) or Echolink.

The capabilities of these networks are simply astounding. Example: I was recently asked to be a guest on a net in New England that covers much of that region through a traditional linked repeater network. It is also connected to both an Echolink conference node and an IRLP reflector, which together allow check-ins from all over the world (see www.tipsnet.org). On the night I visited this net—via Echolink from my computer since I wasn't close enough to make a direct RF connection—we were joined by hams from all over the United States, including several coming in from a repeater in Alaska, as well as two hams from Scotland and one from Australia. It was a worldwide linkup on a scale that I had never experienced before, and it brought a whole new dimension to my hamming. It was, indeed, *the network*—both the equipment and the people—coming together to add to my enjoyment of this great hobby. I look forward to using Echolink and IRLP more often to keep in contact with hams around the world, especially while waiting for those danged sunspots to start showing up again in sizable numbers.

73, W2VU