

A Decade in the Rear-View Mirror

Ten years ago this month, CQ Publisher Dick Ross, K2MGA, introduced me in this space as the magazine's new Editor. So it seemed appropriate, a decade into the job, to take a look at how ham radio has and has not changed in the past ten years.

I started by pulling the November 1999 issue of CQ out of the archives and taking a close look at the articles and the ads. But the first thing that caught my eye was the masthead. While there have been changes in many of the names that appeared there then, there has also been remarkable consistency. Five of our columnists from 1999 are still going strong today, including (alphabetically) Contesting Editor John Dorr, K1AR; World of Ideas, QRP, and How it Works Editor Dave Ingram, K4TWJ; VHF-Plus Editor Joe Lynch, N6CL; Washington Editor Fred Maia, W5YI; and Awards Editor/USA-CA Award Manager Ted Melinosky, K1BV. In addition, CQ World-Wide DX Contest Director Bob Cox, K3EST; CQ DX Awards Manager Billy Williams, N4UF; and WPX-man Steve Bolia, N8BJQ, then WPX Contest Director and now WPX Awards Manager, are still on board, as is our wonderful behind-the-scenes team, including Publisher Dick Ross, K2MGA; Managing Editor Gail Sheehan, K2RED; Art Director Liz Ryan; Associate Art Director Barbara McGowan; Production Director Dottie Kehrwieler; and Production Manager Emily Leary. This amazing level of consistency on our staff, both out-front and behind the scenes, corresponds directly with the consistent quality of our magazine, month after month, year after year. Thank you to all of you.

Looking beyond the masthead in the November 1999 issue, it was interesting to note that the outward appearance of our radios and antennas has not changed much in the past ten years. This is deceptive, since the technology on the inside has advanced dramatically. Digital signal processing is standard on virtually every HF transceiver today, and much of what goes on "inside the box" today is done in software. In 1999, the Kachina and the Ten-Tec Pegasus were pioneering radios for which a computer was not an add-on but an integral part. Their spiritual successors, today's line of Flex radios, are light-years ahead in sophistication, and many radios in traditional boxes are software-defined on the inside. Being able to download software updates on the internet has become commonplace for today's radios, and the internet is the other major way in which ham radio technology has changed in the past ten years.

Influence of the Internet

Yes, we had a website in 1999, and e-mail. But broadband access was not yet common for homes or small businesses (ours included). There was no IRLP, no Echolink, no D-STAR. PacketCluster was still primarily on packet. The November 1999 issue featured K1AR's annual contest survey results, and one of the questions was "Should multi-op stations be allowed to use the Internet to access other spotting nodes outside their local area (i.e., via TELNET access)?" While the TELNET protocol is still used today to link the 475 separate DX Clusters around the world, the typical user may never have heard of it. Another fascinating question in John's survey asked respondents to look toward the future and to predict the technological advances they see emerging in contesting that didn't exist in 1999. The respondents batted around .500, predicting:

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- "Improved DSP/filtering technology" (2009: yes)
- "More pervasive robot operation/remote control" (robots no, remote control still emerging)
- "Adaptive antenna technology that can adjust to signal angles, etc." (not yet)
- "Tighter integration of the Internet and amateur radio products; integration between station transceivers and computers (hardware and software)" (bingo!)
- "Speech recognition/Morse decoding" (Morse decoding yes; speech recognition no)
- "More real-time products (i.e., propagation tools)" (yes)

By the way, while 95% of John's 1999 respondents had a dedicated computer in their ham shacks, only 70% had Internet access there.

Licensing Changes

One of the biggest non-technical changes in ham radio between 1999 and 2009 has been in our licensing structure. In 1999, there were six classes of amateur licenses, three levels of Morse code exams, and roughly 676,000 licensed hams (according to the AHØA website). About half were Technicians, whose privileges were limited to VHF and UHF. In 2009, there are three license classes (although existing Advanced and Novice Class licenses are still being renewed), there are no code exams, and all hams have at least some HF privileges along with VHF and UHF. Amazingly, the total number of hams right now is virtually identical to what we had at the same point in 1999 (a difference of 177!). That is somewhat misleading, though, as our numbers peaked in 2003 (when the grace period began to run out for those folks who got Tech licenses in 1991 when the code test was removed for that license class, but found ham radio wasn't for them), then bottomed out about two years ago and have been climbing steadily ever since. In fact, we've seen approximately 30,000 new people entering the hobby each year, and our overall numbers have increased by 20,000 since mid-2007 ... even though we're in the midst of the longest sunspot minimum of the radio age. Those growth numbers are actually very impressive.

Another big change has been in FCC enforcement, which had been dysfunctional since the mid-1980s when I became CQ Editor. Just a few months later, Riley Hollingsworth, K4ZDH, was put in charge of cleaning up the ham bands, a role he performed admirably before retiring and passing the baton to Laura Smith, who's been on the job for about a year and is still learning to negotiate the minefield of dealing with hams on rules matters.

All in all, I would say that ham radio is on a more solid footing today than it was ten years ago, growing solidly, and continuing to embrace and enhance new communications technology. Now, if we can just get the economy to follow our example, we'll all be in much better shape!

73, W2VU

New Kit-Building Column

We are pleased to introduce a new column and a new columnist this month. "Kit-Building," conducted by Joe Eisenberg, KØNEB, will replace "The Weekender." Joe will write about kit-building techniques, look at cool kits out in the marketplace, and offer tips on encouraging our fellow hams to give kit-building a try and become part of the great ham radio tradition of hands-on electronics. You'll find his column on page 68.