

No-Code Plus Five Years: An Assessment

Five years ago this month, the FCC eliminated Morse code testing from all levels of amateur radio license exams. So, on this anniversary, let's take a moment to assess the impact of that decision on ham radio in general and on the use of CW on the air. To start with, the world is still here. Ham radio is still here. CW is still here. Despite the fears of many CW aficionados, the universe did not implode on February 23, 2007.

Back in 2006 when the FCC was still trying to make up its mind, CQ's position was that a 5 word-per-minute CW exam for Extra Class ought to be retained. But we also believed that CW had enough appeal, and offered enough benefits, to stand on its own as an operating mode, regardless of whether a ham had to demonstrate proficiency in order to achieve a certain license class. We still believe that, and we believe history has shown us to be correct. We constantly hear stories of increased activity on the HF CW bands, especially among slower-speed stations trying to build up their skills. On the other hand, Tom Lutz, W0ZR, who's on our cover this month and calls CW "a long-time passion," feels code is "becoming a lost art."

Feelings, beliefs and anecdotes aren't hard facts, though, so we tried to get some of those to accompany our feelings and beliefs. We checked in with a manufacturer of keys and paddles, with the head of an international CW promotion group, with *WorldRadio Online's* Morse code columnist, and with the stats on our own contests as well as FCC licensing statistics. Overall, they paint a very positive picture, plus or minus a few hiccups along the way.

The manufacturer, whom we won't identify in print, said sales of its main line of paddles fell sharply in the two years after the CW test requirement was dropped, but then began a slow recovery that has continued over the past three years. Sales are not yet back to where they once were, but are heading in the right direction. It should also be noted that additional competition entered that segment of the marketplace in around the same timeframe, so dropping the code requirement may not have been the only factor involved. The very fact that the field is growing rather than contracting is another positive sign.

Another factor to consider is that a beginning CW operator is not likely to invest (yet) in paddles for an electronic keyer, so the sales figures shared with us perhaps paint a more accurate picture of those hams whose CW proficiency has increased to the point where a \$100+ investment for sending code becomes worthwhile. This interesting divide between beginners/learners and committed CW operators also showed up in an assessment by Nancy Kott, WZ8C, President of the FISTS CW Club (which, by the way, is celebrating its 25th anniversary this month—congrats to FISTS from all of us at CQ).

Nancy says she was worried that CW would disappear from the airwaves as a result of the FCC's dropping the code test requirement. "Five years later," she says, "I am glad to see I was wrong. The use of Morse code is alive and well." However, she adds that "I've given out literally thousands of free FISTS code course CDs and many of our members are having well-populated code classes, but CW activity (on the air) from the newly-licensed hams who join FISTS is oddly sparse. I don't know if it's cold feet or sunspots or whatever. We keep hearing the same old-timers over and over."

Nancy speculates that "although people have the desire to learn code, they often do not have the incentive to learn it well enough to be comfortable on the radio." On the other hand, Nancy paints a very positive picture, looking toward the future. She notes that "(h)ams with technical curiosity, which led them to discover amateur radio, are finding uses for the code that involve new technologies. For

example, they are incorporating it into videos and creating applications for smartphones, as well as having fun with it on the air."

There are no negatives in the statistics we've gathered, from total licensing numbers to participation in contests. At the end of November, according to the <www.ah0a.org> website, the total U.S. ham population stood at an all-time record high of 701,844, up some 46,000 over the past four years. The previous peak of 685,000 was reached in 2002, in the months after the 9/11 attacks, then slowly declined until 2007, when it bottomed out at just under 655,000. It has been climbing steadily ever since. The only significant event in 2007 that might have a widespread impact on people's decisions to become hams was the dropping of the code requirement. (It didn't really matter that there had been no code test for the entry-level Technician Class since 1991; it was a psychological barrier that was removed.)

One way to quantify CW activity at a given point in time is to look at contest logs and compare activity "then" with similar activity "now." Back in 2006, there were just over 4500 logs submitted for that year's CW weekend of the CQ World-Wide DX Contest. As of mid-December of 2011 (with a couple of weeks still to go before the deadline), 6500 CW logs had already been received for last September's competition. This is a continuation of a steady climb in the past several years, with each year setting a new record, even as we've gone through the depths of an extended solar minimum. Yes, there are operating aids for contesters, such as the CW Skimmer. But the Skimmer alone can't account for two-thousand additional CW logs over the past five years. What can? Only one thing: increased interest and activity; it's highly unlikely that someone who doesn't operate CW 51 weekends out of the year will dive into the CQWW CW! Bottom line: CW is hardly a dying art.

The same trend is seen in Field Day logs. In his Morse Code column this month in *WorldRadio Online* <www.worldradiomagazine.com>, Randall Noon, KC0CCR, analyzes CW activity in ARRL Field Day between 2005 and 2011. His reasoning is that "people who participate in Field Day are at least minimally active hams," and that "hams will likely use the same modes on Field Day as they do when operating at other times of the year." Randy found that both participation in Field Day and the number of CW contacts reported have increased significantly in the past six years, and to a greater extent than can be explained only by the overall rise in licensing numbers. In fact, Randy says, "(t)here were a record number of Field Day 2011 entries, a record number of participants ... and the highest number of CW QSOs in 17 years."

The only real "hiccup" we see is in the conversion of CW learners to comfortable CW operators (who might then be in the market for keyer paddles). The best approach there, as with most other aspects of our hobby, is to team up with a more experienced ham who can provide mentoring, practice and encouragement. Ham radio is not and should not be a solitary activity. If you're trying to learn and practice CW but don't have a partner to work with, contact FISTS at <www.fists.org>. The group's members are dedicated to helping new CW ops and will slow down as much as you need in order to make your QSO a success.

In closing, it is clear that the future of CW is bright. Like ham radio itself, CW is alive and well, despite—or perhaps because of—the elimination of the code test requirement. As KC0CCR points out in his column, "(r)adio amateurs have not used CW because there was a test. CW has been used because it has been, and continues to be, a very useful mode of wireless communication." And, as WZ8C concludes, "Morse code's timeless simplicity ... assures its place in ham radio, requirement or not."

*e-mail: <w2vu@cq-amateur-radio.com>