

Welcome to the “Hamosphere” Ham Radio’s Rebirth in Popular Culture

What do Duracell batteries, Velveeta macaroni and cheese, and the ABC-TV comedy “Last Man Standing” have in common? Well, isn’t it obvious? Ham radio, of course!

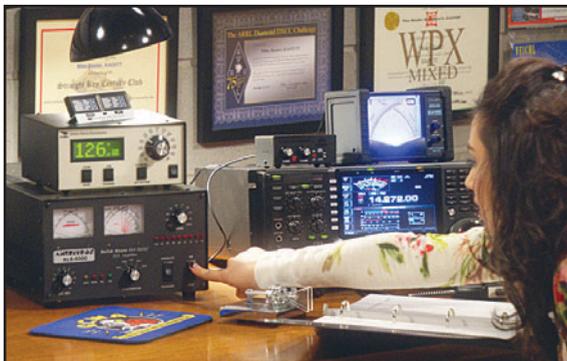
From the 2009 Duracell commercial featuring the ham station at the National Hurricane Center to the currently running Velveeta “Liquid Gold” shells and cheese commercial about “that guy with the ham radio in the basement” and a recent episode of “Last Man Standing” featuring ham radio as a major component of the storyline, amateur radio is experiencing a rebirth in popular culture, and not as something geeky but something cool.

The Duracell commercial highlighted the important work done by amateurs to keep the National Hurricane Center informed about conditions on the ground during hurricanes and tropical storms. The Velveeta commercial talks about “that guy with the ham radio in his basement” who “can talk to China, Mongolia and all the Koreas” and asks, “So who you callin’ amateur?” Of course, he also eats Velveeta shells and cheese and the commercial urges viewers to “eat like the guy you know.” And the episode of “Last Man Standing” features Mandy (Molly Ephraim), the middle daughter of Mike Baxter (Tim Allen), using her dad’s ham radio to talk with her boyfriend and get help with a school paper. My favorite line from the episode was Mandy’s comment that “ham radio is just like Twitter, only more advanced, since you don’t have to type.” Thank you to the writers, who also coined the term “hamosphere.” (Speaking of commercials, “Last Man Standing” Producer John Amodeo, NN6JA, will have an article in an upcoming issue of *CQ* about what went into getting this episode written and aired.)

These recent amateur radio portrayals in the mainstream media share one other feature as well — a collection of hams who immediately started complaining loudly about inaccuracies and perceived rule violations. It turns out that the radio in the Velveeta commercial — never seen in clear focus — was actually a CB rig and not a ham rig. That “ruined” the commercial, said one ham. Bull.

The average person wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between a ham rig and a CB rig if they both came over and bit him (RF bites, of course). And the purpose of the commercial wasn’t to sell either ham or CB radios.

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Molly Ephraim as Mandy Baxter, operating ham radio on the primetime ABC comedy, “Last Man Standing.” (Photo courtesy “Last Man Standing”)

Its purpose was to sell macaroni and cheese (which was in clear focus).

On “Last Man Standing,” Mandy does not use a call sign while transmitting (although all the other characters do), and some immediately assumed that she is unlicensed, that there was no licensed control operator present and that she was therefore operating illegally, putting a bad face on ham radio. Not to be redundant, but ... Bull.

First of all, FCC rules don’t require you to identify until ten minutes into a QSO and we hear only about two minutes of the contact on the program. Plus, Mandy knew how to key the mic and turn on the amplifier, so who’s to say she isn’t licensed?

Secondly, and more importantly, this is television, folks. Plus, the program is a comedy, not a documentary. Complete accuracy is almost never seen in anything on TV, because it’s just too boring. Ask a cop, doctor or nurse about accuracy in crime or hospital dramas. When they stop laughing, they’ll point out legions of inaccuracies.

But shows like “NCIS” and “Hawaii Five-O” have made crime-fighting technology cool, as well as the people who master it. The programs create positive images while also providing entertainment for the masses. Same with ham radio. Mandy’s “hamosphere” which is “just like Twitter, only more advanced,” says to young people watching the program that ham radio is not just some old guys’ hobby, but fun, exciting and cool, even for today’s eternally-connected young people. More advanced than Twitter ... wow, something to think about.

But of course, these sorts of complaints are only about TV, right? Never about real people in real life, right? (Wrong.) When I was at the Charlotte Hamfest in March, I was introduced to five-year-old Ethan Kemp, also known as KK4ORG. Yep, that’s right. He’s five years old and has a ham license.

According to his parents, who are both also hams (Kevin, KK4LMP, and Mitzi, KK4OJD), Ethan learned to read at age three and got excited about ham radio after his dad got his license. When I asked Ethan why he wanted to get his own ham license, he immediately replied, “To talk to Dad,” then thought for a moment and added, “and everybody on the radio.”

Yet, there were people at the hamfest who were griping that a five-year-old couldn’t possibly understand any of the material on the test or how to properly use a radio. Well, in my brief chat with him, which was about three weeks after he got his license, Ethan seemed to know just about as much (or as little) about ham radio as any other newly-licensed ham. But he certainly didn’t lack for confidence. I asked him, “What was the hardest part of the test for you?” and without missing a beat, he answered, “Nothing.” This kid is going places...

There are plenty of complaints about not getting enough young people into amateur radio, yet when a teenage girl is shown on national TV talking on ham radio, it was immediately assumed that she had no license and was operating illegally. And when a five-year-old earns his ham license, there are complaints by people who have never met him that he can’t possibly understand anything about the hobby.

These folks remind me of the famous quote by Walt Kelly’s Pogo Possum, back in 1971: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.” How about we stop taking our hobby and ourselves so seriously and follow Riley Hollingsworth’s oft-repeated advice to “lighten up.”

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