

Asking the Big Question

One of the great things about some conversations in our office is their tendency to start out narrowly focused—such as what the topic should be for this month’s reader survey—and end up as wide-ranging discussions—such as whether it’s time to re-examine the whole structure of FCC regulation of the amateur service. These discussions don’t do much for efficiency, but they usually serve to refocus your brain on larger issues (and in the long run, help you better focus on your survey questions).

In case you were wondering, one of those conversations occurred this month. It started with a copy of the July, 1950, issue of *CQ* that I saw in the flea market at Ham-Com in June. The bottom of the cover read, “FOR THE HAM, TECHNICIAN, NOVICE and SWL.” This caught my eye for two reasons: 1) I didn’t think there were Novices and Technicians in 1950; and 2) it made me wonder whether the editors at the time were excluding Novices and Technicians from the ranks of “Hams” or were going out of their way to welcome them. Some research would be needed when I got back home.

Next, we received a copy of a petition for rule making filed with the FCC by the Toledo Mobile Radio Association, seeking an expansion of Technician privileges on 10 meters to include the repeater subband at the top end of the band¹.

My initial reaction was, “great idea, but why not just open all of 10 meters to all licensees? It’s our biggest HF band and very lightly used above 28.5 MHz.” (Currently, all amateurs have privileges between 28.0 and 28.5. Frequencies between 28.5 and 29.7 MHz are limited to hams holding General Class or higher licenses.) This led to my initial survey idea of asking a few questions about that proposal, even though it’s unlikely that this specific petition will see Commission action, because similar requests have been made before and the FCC doesn’t especially like to revisit topics it’s already taken up.

Our publisher, K2MGA, pointed out that precisely because 10 meters is lightly used above 28.5 MHz, a survey tightly focused on the TMRA petition probably wouldn’t generate much reader response. And this is when the discussion really started to get interesting, as we moved to the question of whether it was still necessary for the FCC to be micromanaging our frequency privileges, or which modes may be used where, and then to whether the current structure of FCC rules promotes or impedes technological advancement.

These questions take us back to that cover from 1950. A little digging turned up answers to my initial questions—no, there were not any Technicians or Novices in 1950—the first of those licenses were not issued until January, 1951—but the creation of these new license classes, along with the then-new Amateur Extra Class and changing the old Class A, B, and C licenses to Advanced, General and Conditional, were very hot topics in the amateur community throughout 1949 and ‘50. The purpose of that cover line clearly was to welcome these prospective amateurs into the ham radio community, as that issue’s “Zero Bias” editorial by Albert “Doc” Hayes, W2BYF, noted that “(w)e have fought for the Novice and Technician licenses, both in these pages and in the councils of regulation...”

The January, 1950, editorial discussed an October,

1949, “informal engineering conference” on the matter between FCC officials and representatives of several amateur radio organizations. Doc noted that one of the things “made plain” to the FCC at the conference was “that amateur radio will accept no regulations without the showing of definite need for such regulations.”

And that brings us back to today. Is there still a “definite need” for many of our regulations? Do we still need the government to tell us which modes we may use on which portions of our bands? Or can we use informal band plans that we develop ourselves to maintain orderly operation and prevent interference between incompatible modes? How do newer “hybrid” modes fit into the regulatory scheme? Is digital voice “phone” and therefore permitted only in the phone subbands, or is it “data” (since a datastream is what is actually transmitted over the air), and thus permitted only in those band segments where data transmissions are allowed? Digital voice protocols are becoming more robust and we are certain to see more DV activity on HF as well as VHF. But even on VHF, specific FCC action is needed to permit the use of a certain form of DV (Time Domain Multiple Access, or TDMA). Is there a “definite need” for the regulatory structure that requires hams to petition the FCC for special permission every time a new mode comes along?

Bigger question: Is the “incentive licensing” model on which amateur operating privileges have been based for the past half century still valid? The goal at its inception was to make sure that amateurs using high power and complex gear had the requisite technical and operating knowledge to do so responsibly. Yet the most complex technical challenges today are on the VHF and higher bands, where entry-level licensees are granted full privileges (and have been since 1951, when the then-new Technician license conferred all privileges above 220 MHz).

A Technician today may build a satellite but may not work DX on 20 meters. A Technician today may work DX at the bottom of 10 meters, or transmit on the VHF or UHF segment of a repeater network that includes a 10-meter repeater, but may not transmit on the 10-meter repeater itself. Does this make sense? Do any restrictions on operating privileges based on license class still make sense? Does having more than one license class still make sense?

It is not our intent to propose answers to these questions, at least not now. But the TDMA proceeding and the Toledo petition point up the need to begin discussing them, and for the amateur community to once again take responsibility for assuring that all FCC regulations of our service exist to meet a “definite need.” You are invited to share your views on some of these questions in our reader survey, which you’ll find this month on page 79.

73, Rich W2VU

Note

1. The Toledo Mobile Radio Association petition is available for viewing in on the FCC’s Electronic Comment Filing System, or ECFS (<<http://apps.fcc.gov/ecfs/>>), under the identifier PRM13MB. The Wireless Bureau will be addressing this petition even though it was initially assigned to the Media Bureau. At press time, the Commission had not decided what, if any, action to take in response to this petition.

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