

## **Newcomers and Elmers Net: Getting to the Heart of Amateur Radio**

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I listen to amateur radio a lot, more than I actually talk on it, as surprising as that may be.

As much as I like to talk (and who in radio does not like to talk!), I actually enjoy scanning the bands and listening to the conversations of others.

I enjoy gaining insight into people through their conversations and what they reveal about themselves.

One of the most interesting aspects of these conversations is the cross-section of views and opinions of the amateurs toward the hobby, not the least of which involves equipment and antenna discussions.

Recently I heard a conversation regarding tube radios and working with grid currents, plate voltages, and the like. This is not an uncommon topic, and it reflects, I believe, a desire to keep that aspect of the hobby alive.

Elmering was going on—that renowned practice of passing along wisdom and knowledge gained through years of experience. These folks were in their element, sharing experiences of using old equipment and recalling fond memories such equipment recalls to mind.

Similarly, almost daily one can run across conversations about the state of amateur radio today, from bemoaning the abandonment of code and the emergence of the dreaded “appliance operator” ham, to folks singing the praises of remote operating stations and advanced software defined radios.

There is no question the hobby is evolving, and yet there remains a solid group of traditionalists who talk electronics, propagation, and antennas.

Something struck me the other day in a way I had not quite thought of before: no matter how much radio and radio technology changes, antennas are going to remain more or less the same.

This is not to say there will not be advances in the field, or new designs as yet unimagined. Yet because of the physics involved, antennas are destined to be much the same 100 years from now (unless of course we perfect telepathy by then!).

I am not quite sure humans will be involved, but even if machines are initiating contacts between themselves, an antenna will be involved if we are

still moving electrons through the air from one place to another. Conductors, radiators, and feedlines will still be employed, and folks will be talking about them much as we do now.

Another thought struck me recently regarding conversations on the amateur bands: as more and more contacts become quick signal reports and station identifications only, are we going to lose out on a lot of valuable information and experience?

What I mean is this: as amateurs we have the opportunity almost every day to tap into a vast resource of information and experience through other amateurs on the bands, particularly when talking with DX contacts.

To put it in modern terms, the world is our conference call! We have people literally around the world available to conference about our shared interests, and a wealth of knowledge not contained in encyclopedias!

As an American it is easy to get caught up in talking with other locals about antennas, and even folks across the country. It is very rare that I hear any kind of extended radio or antenna discussions going on in the DX realm, with the exception of identifying station equipment and sometimes the style of antenna. (One exception to this seems to be the owners of SteppIR antennas—they tend to mention them regularly<grin>).

It occurs to me that beyond simply identifying which antenna is being used, one might have some meaningful and useful discussions about past antennas, construction, limitations and the like.

I doubt very many folks have put up only one antenna, and the longer one is a ham the more likely one is to have experimented with many different types of antennas.

And this isn't just for newcomers – old-timers can learn a whole lot too, simply because no one has done it all, and no one has experienced the exact same conditions as someone else

With modern equipment, modern tools for hardware and performance analysis, there is more to learn and more to understand than ever before.

Just what weak-signal modes have been teaching me about propagation and antenna performance alone is rocking my radio world!

DX contacts are likely to bring an entirely different mindset to antennas than what we are used to in our own settings. Europeans and folks in other parts of the world have been dealing with limited space antennas for years – they have insights we may find quite useful.

I am also interested in hearing about obstacles which have been overcome, such as space restrictions, interference issues, creative solutions to problems, and so on.

Add to this the issue of baluns, chokes, tuners, traps, capacitive hats and dozens of other possibilities, and one could easily have enough material to talk about for a long time with many different amateurs around the world.

Short of talking about older equipment (which I love to hear!), most radio discussions on the air revolve around features or performance or audio checks. This is because most modern radios are doing things way above our ability to control (or sometimes even understand).

I hear the nostalgia in the voices of folks who go back as far as the days when radios were adjustable with taps and with crystals, and even cat's whiskers (those of you who know, know what I am talking about!).

The modern equivalent seems to be the high-end SDR radios with their many customized settings, but this is still far removed from the days of dipping coils and the like.

What has not changed dramatically is the antenna, in all its glorious forms, from the simple wire to the stacked-phased arrays and beyond.

Oddly enough I have been bombarded with references to hex-beam (or spider-beam) antennas lately, from several folks recommending them for my location, to at least a dozen random conversations overheard during recent monitoring activities.

I am not saying the universe really cares what antenna I use, but I also am not one to ignore large numbers of coincidences. Perhaps a hex-beam antenna is in my future . . . we shall see!

There is no question many folks get rather emotionally connected to their antennas, and anecdotal stories abound for every possible antenna design, but this does not mean there is not a lot of useful information to be gained by discussion antenna experiences with one another.

When talking about antennas here on the net we always encourage people to do real-world testing as much as possible to evaluate antennas, and not to depend on anecdotal claims.

There will always be the person who says they have used their metal fence to work the world on every band without a tuner, but using a reasonable amount of critical thinking will weed out the whack-jobs from the serious experimenters.

The reasonable person knows almost any antenna design will work for some situations under some circumstances, and that no antenna can do it all under all circumstances.

Armed with the right attitudes and reasonable expectations, I believe we can have some very meaningful and enlightening conversations regarding antennas from sources we are not typically accustomed to exploring.

### **What is at the Core of Amateur Radio?**

Which leads me to perhaps the bigger issue behind this discussion. I will echo here what I have said myself, and what I hear more and more on the air: amateur radio is in danger of becoming little more than a vehicle for competitions and contests (and no, I have nothing whatsoever against contests).

I participate in contests regularly, partly to sharpen my operating skills, partly to see how my system is really doing, and partly because I can hear DX stations from parts of the world where they do not get on very often except for contests.

This last part is sad, really, because if signals can get out during contests, they can obviously get out at other times. I fear there is a crowd-mentality here – only come out when everybody else is out.

Maybe it is the quality of the equipment or the ease of making contacts now, but for whatever reason many folks seem only interested in exchanging station calls and signal reports.

I heard a fellow talking on the air to another ham recently referencing this very thing, and I really liked his analogy. He said no one calls up another person on their cell phone and says "can you hear me okay?" and then hangs up (despite the Verizon commercials!).

What many do on the air is really just like that. The log entry has become the goal, not communication.

Is it possible we have lost something of the pride of ownership in amateur radio? By this I mean because we often have little to do with building our stations any more, perhaps we do not feel the same sense of pride and accomplishment felt by our radio forefathers?

Or has the technology left us a bit cold compared to the days when one might spend weeks building a radio from a kit or from plans in a magazine?

Even with the reduced amount of kit building today, I have had and have heard interesting conversations from folks who have built a QRP rig, their own amplifier, or designed their own antenna farm. The more directly involved we are in the process of building our stations, the more we are likely to want to share our experiences with others.

Does this mean every amateur radio operator has to build their station from scratch to be of value? Of course not. And there is nothing wrong with commercial antennas should one decide to go this route. But building a radio, a matching network, an amplifier or an antenna is something special which no ham should miss. I wish I heard more talk about building and experimenting as a mark of a "true" ham, than whether or not one knows Morse Code. I really do not believe either practice qualifies one for amateur radio sainthood, but if I had to choose between the two, building something to be used in the shack is closest to the spirit of the hobby, in my opinion.

Every aspect of the hobby can be something to talk about, and it definitely takes all kinds of people with varying interests to make up this great group of folks. Let's work at broadening our communication skills so that this hobby, which has one-on-one communication at its core, once again becomes a path to learning, doing, and lifelong friendships!

Part of my job on this net is to bring topics to you which help you expand your horizons in the hobby, help with solving problems, and hopefully get you thinking about the hobby in new ways.

My goal with this discussion is not to motivate you to do a particular thing, but rather to think about your place in the hobby, and encourage you to remember that the heart of this hobby is communication.

Yes we use technology to expedite that communication, but the technology is not the end goal itself. It is a by-product of communication; we build so we can communicate, and we build better or different to facilitate some aspect of communication

We can easily get caught up in the DX chasing, contesting, or public service aspects of the hobby, but it is at its core a hobby focused on communication and we should make that at least a part of what we do over the air.

Whether we are on repeaters, simplex, HF or even digital modes, take the time to have some conversations with people

Just this past week I met a local fellow over the air working digital modes and we texted within the program to meet on a simplex frequency for coordinating some band hopping.

In the process, we learned a bit about each other, our love of dogs, the fun of rescue dogs, and compared our canine best friends and found they have a bunch of similarities.

We also talked radio equipment, background in the hobby, family stuff, work stuff, and of course a lot of radio stuff in general. What a pleasure that has been!

When we lose communication as the heart of our hobby we cheat ourselves out of so much

### **What can I do?**

Make the effort to have contact with people extending beyond just a call sign, signal report, and 73 signoff

Ask questions about the other person, even if it is just about their equipment, when they got into the hobby, what their favorite things are in the hobby etc. Usually you can easily move on to other things like work, family, etc.

Even if the conversations are short, make it a goal to learn something new from someone every time you make a new contact. And of course, share something about yourself.

If you are on the repeaters be aware others may want to use them or even join in, so allow time from people to put a call in between your transmissions

I usually let the other person know why I paused, and this helps keep such practices in the forefront of our minds.

Of course on HF, you don't have to do that as much, but it is still a good idea to have pauses now and then to let someone else join in; amateur radio is the original party line because you never know who is listening, and who may want to join in!