

The Elmers Corner: A Little Planning Goes a Long Way (Part 1)

By Robert Gulley AK3Q

In this edition of The Elmers Corner I want to talk about how to prepare for and listen to the radio, regardless of the mode. I believe listening to the radio should be an event—not an occurrence. Successful listening takes planning, preparation, and intent. Anyone can turn on a radio, twist the dial a few times and land on a station that sounds interesting, but that is not *listening* to radio. So how does one go about turning an evening with the radio into an event?

Some Questions First

In order for an evening with the radio to be richly rewarding one must do a little planning. (I am not suggesting nothing good can come from snatching moments of radio time as they present themselves in our hectic world, but here we are talking about *intentional listening*.) The first question we might ask ourselves is “What am I wanting to hear?”

This may seem like a deceptively simple question, but the answer will determine both the equipment needed and the reception expectations. Listening to amateur radio bands will involve one set of skills, while listening to shortwave another. Copying digital signals, chasing utility, military, aircraft, or public service frequencies all require different listening techniques, radio/antenna equipment, and listener participation.

For example, 99% of all shortwave listening happens on AM, with only a few stations operating on one of the sidebands. This means radio choices are plentiful, and it is likely a typical radio enthusiast will have several radios capable of capturing AM shortwave signals. There are a number of other factors which go into quality shortwave listening time, and the following is just a quick list of possible considerations:

1. Strong vs. weak signals – this can affect antenna choices, radio choices, and even choosing between speakers or headphones for audio.
2. Portable vs. fixed location – where will the radio be used?
3. Antenna choices – based on the radio chosen and location, a built-in antenna or a random wire antenna may be desired, or a fixed indoor/outdoor antenna may be required.
4. Scheduled or unscheduled listening – this can be as simple as listening to one’s favorite station(s) or it can be more focused by following specific schedules published seasonally by various stations.

For an evening of public service listening there would be considerations such as:

1. Digital, analog, or both?
2. Targeted stations or random catches?
3. Casual listening or tracking/identifying transmissions?
4. Single or multiple radio listening?

For Utility/Military/Civilian listening there would be considerations such as:

1. Time of day/time of year – like shortwave stations, military and civilian aircraft and marine stations follow propagation paths as needed both daily and seasonally.
2. Mode capability – some utility stations use only AM modulation, while others use digital modes, sidebands, or CW.
3. Recording/Logging – many utility listeners enjoy logging catches or recording the audio as many of the transmissions are intermittent.
4. Computer connectivity – depending on the modes being tracked there is software available to demodulate many different signals such as MT63, PSK, FSK, RTTY, ALE, CW and others.

How do I want to listen? Relaxed in an armchair or actively twisting dials and turning knobs? Do I want to be a relatively passive listener or an active one? Listening is as much a state of mind as it is hardware capability.

Some days I am not in the mood to listen to static crashes, digital signals, or repetition of transmissions. On those days I listen to strong shortwave signals or amateur radio stations, perhaps following specific programming broadcasts or listening in to amateur radio nets.

On other days, weak stations or intermittent transmissions are exactly what I want to hear so I can catch pilot-to-base transmissions, numbers stations, or ship-to-shore comms. Recently I listened to a coast guard frequency and heard only two transmissions in a half-hour, but I came away quite happy (I am weird, I know!), since it was the first time I had listened on that particular frequency. The frequency in question was one used for HC-130 air operations out of North Carolina, the Coast Guard version of the venerable C-130 airplane. I was lucky to hear anything at all since much of the Coast Guard communication now happens over satellite phone.

Last but in no way least, is the question “How much time do I have to devote to listening today?” While this may seem an obvious question, the time available may eliminate some of the possible listening choices due to the effort involved in getting equipment together (preparation), or with

regard to maximizing a small window of opportunity. If I only have a half-hour to listen to radio, I usually do not want to spend a lot of time searching for weak or distant stations, or spend part of that time getting software/hardware set up for demodulating digital signals.

If I have an hour or two, and the proper inclination for such, I may devote the time to working harder-to-find stations, intermittent stations, or simply listen to some of the excellent shortwave programs produced by various stations. I found a new favorite just recently on Thursday evenings (01:30 UTC Fridays) produced by Blues International Radio on WRMI out of Florida.

A BBC Primer on Listening

I ran across this 1930 pamphlet recently posted on several radio sites around the web, from the archives of the BBC no doubt. The [SWLing Post](#) is where I first saw the posting, and found it intriguing to say the least:

GOOD LISTENING

Make sure that your set is working properly before you settle down to listen.

Choose your programmes as carefully as you choose which theatre to go to. It is just as important to you to enjoy yourself at home as at the theatre.

Listen as carefully at home as you do in a theatre or concert hall. You can't get the best out of a programme if your mind is wandering, or if you are playing bridge or reading. Give it your full attention. Try turning out the lights so that your eye is not caught by familiar objects in the room. Your imagination will be twice as vivid.

If you only listen with half an ear you haven't a quarter of a right to criticise.

Think of your favourite occupation. Don't you like a change sometimes? Give the wireless a rest now and then.

Not bad advice, even all these years later!

73, Robert AK3Q