



Second Century

The “New Normal” for Events

Taking precautions for COVID-19 over the past year has caused significant changes in our lives, not the least of which was the cancellation of in-person hamfests and larger events. We were prevented from congregating for radio club meetings. Even ARRL Field Day was impacted — those group outings we enjoy every year were largely replaced by at-home operating. As a community, we sought ways to adapt so that we could remain connected despite being held apart by restrictions and regulations.

As part of those adaptations, we gained a new term in our vernacular: we “Zoom” with each other. Companies are using Zoom to conduct business. Clubs are using Zoom to conduct meetings and even online hamfests. Analysts and industry pundits are declaring that the acceleration of society into a distanced or remote way of working and interacting is the new normal, and that we should embrace it.

Over the past few months, I’ve had the opportunity to attend three virtual events: HAM-CON (the Vermont Ham Radio Convention) and Orlando HamCation — which are ordinarily in-person events brought to life by conducting them online — and the QSO Today Virtual Ham Expo, which is purely a virtual event. As the size and sophistication of each event increases, the complexities of, and potential problems with, delivering a seamless, satisfying user experience rise *exponentially*. It is easy to become critical of difficulties and failures of online events like these, but conducting them illustrates how incredibly difficult it is to configure, scale, test, and implement these virtual events.

There have been important lessons learned from conducting these events, including: speakers must not use Wi-Fi or unfamiliar internet connections; speakers must use a camera of good quality; built-in microphones are generally inadequate; live meetings or meetings with live side chats must be moderated by someone other than the presenter, who must be alert to muting attendee microphones during the presentation; the operations of a virtual event must be carefully handled, including emailing/posting links, ensuring mass emails aren’t being routed into spam or causing server blacklisting, handling session recording, and more.

If virtual events are so difficult (and in some cases expensive) to conduct, why do organizers do it? For the love of the hobby. For the feeling of community. For the inclusion of many hams, from local to DX, who cannot travel to events. So are virtual events just a fad? A consequence of the times? Or are they the new normal — or, at the very least, a forward-looking way of reimagining amateur radio events? Here’s my view:

First and foremost, there is no replacement for being there. One of my greatest joys is to walk a hamfest — the bigger the better — to see equipment, hear the stories, and pick out a gem or two to add to my own station. Seeing an old friend, exchanging a hearty handshake, and catching up is another wonderful by-product of being there.

Though online events and in-person events are two very different beasts, there are best practices that apply to both. In-person events have a limited amount of space for speakers. This forces event organizers to be careful about curating their lineup of speakers. Online events don’t have these space restrictions and often book more speakers and sessions than they otherwise would, which can lead to falling into the “just because you can, doesn’t mean you should” trap. Online events tend to work harder at having speakers create a script, and fit their presentation to a specific timeframe. Findings from the YouTube community indicate that talks in the 10 – 20 minute range are optimal — a constraint that in-person events could benefit from. Sessions that are more experiential, from kit building to following along with a book, tend to be more popular and easily work in both environments!

The future seems to point to a hybrid model where getting back together in-person is highly desirable, but not at the expense of leaving out those people who — for one reason or another — cannot travel to the event. ARRL will be taking another crack at an online event this month (May 21 – 23) when we host the ARRL at Home event while sitting at home, missing the fun of Dayton Hamvention! We’ll be spicing things up with a collection of videos, activities, and perhaps a Sunday raffle.

We hope to see you there! In the meantime, stay radio active! Be a connector! And visit our Ideation page at www.arrl.org/ideas to submit ideas for content, products, and more.

David A. Minster, NA2AA
Chief Executive Officer