



Second Century

For Better. For Worse.

Once in the space of Navy teletypes generating marks and spaces to communicate, digital amateur radio has moved well past the need to use expensive or surplus equipment to complete contacts between stations. When I started with RTTY, it was with a PK-232 connected to the back of my rig. I moved on to AX.25 and TCP/IP on VHF using TNCs with my various radios. After some time away from digital, I became re-engaged using PSK31 software into a sound card on my computer. Very cool! But the contacts were tedious. People began uploading the equivalent of their QRZ page as part of the contact. It didn't take long for me to decide that being on PSK31 wasn't my cup of tea.

Coming back to digital again some years later has led me to JT65 and FT8. Now, to me, JT65 is like watching paint dry. Wow, those contacts take a long time to make from start to finish! For EME that's one thing, but for HF it's a whole different story. If you want to find weak spots in your station, JT65 can sure do the trick. I was very happy when FT8 came along because the contact was significantly shorter and still offered the end-to-end error checking that I wanted in my digital modes. From a gaming DX and awards perspective, tools like PSK Reporter and JTAAlert became available that made it fun to chase needed contacts.

I was not the only one who noticed. A significant percentage of active hams today use FT8. I've seen big-time contesters all over FT8 chasing DX and awards. From the DX perspective, many DXpeditioners have turned entirely to FT8 because it makes the pileups manageable and also gives the big guns and small stations a nearly equal opportunity to work them — with no busted calls! The use of FT8 has even expanded into the contest realm. Certainly digital mode contests have been affected, but most significantly the VHF contests have — on 6 meters, almost no one operates on CW or SSB anymore.

This begins to lead us to the downside of FT8 as perceived by a growing number of nay-sayers. First and foremost there are those who will literally scream “computer to computer!” Regardless of how significant the effort was to find a station and hop around the band hoping that your signal would decode on the other end, there are those who simply refuse to accept that an operator actually made the contact. And in some cases, they'd be completely correct! FT8 robots are now easily accessible. At a recent convention I saw a friend who I haven't seen in a few years, and I commented that I see him on the FT8 bands all the

time. He responded with a smirk that he's using robot software he bought online.

The next problem is contests and awards. We've already covered the effects of FT8 on contests. For VHF contests what are the organizers, like ARRL, to do? There are calls for moving FT8 to a different weekend on its own, changing the scoring to favor other modes, and other ideas to limit FT8. These would probably not be well received by the majority of participants. The loudest cries for change are in the area of the ARRL DXCC award. For those hams who, many years ago, had none of the online tools like spotting networks, the Reverse Beacon Network, or PSK Reporter, using those along with FT8 makes achieving DXCC simply too easy in their eyes. But for the participants of the DXCC and DXCC Challenge programs who have suffered with very modest stations, FT8 has finally given them the ability to work far away or rare DX entities from home. DXing is thriving with the use of FT8.

This is not intended to throw down the gauntlet for one direction or another. It is to acknowledge that there are tremendous benefits to using FT8, while at the same time it causes unintended consequences that some members are not happy with. What is important is to be radio active. If you're not a digital fan, make sure to get on the air and rack up the contacts! Be a connector! Getting the software and radio configured and talking can be a struggle for some. And look for me from Bonaire as PJ4/NA2AA.

David A. Minster, NA2AA
Chief Executive Officer