

“How to Talk to a Wizard”

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I bought my first pair of walkie talkies with a handful of quarters at a garage sale when I was only eight years old. For less than the price of a hamburger, I was afforded the privilege of transmitting my squeaky voice into the cosmic void. From under my impenetrable blanket fort I could hold conversations with my best pal across the street long past bedtime. It was less about what was said and more about the thrill of meeting one another in that secret place, invisible and impenetrable by grownups. It was ours. We were commandos, astronauts, and dinosaur hunters. By the time I was in high school I had moved on to CB radio. I spent more than a few high school lunch breaks pestering truck drivers and cotton farmers. “How ‘bout you Southbound Mayflower? What’s your final 20?” I would ask into a handset watching a Mayflower truck driving South on the dusty Brownfield highway. Where were they going? Where were they from? What was the weather in Albuquerque? There was some peculiar misstep in the cadence of my radio-speak that would flag me as an amateur so a response was rare. As a young man bound to a small town in the middle of the desert, the ability to press a button and speak with outsiders was exhilarating. Years later I watched in awe as a ham in Brooklyn carefully tuned a series of magical knobs and the thick timbre of a Russian voice came crackling through a speaker. The “ham” turned to me with a bright grin and asked if I wanted to “chew the rag” with a Russian on the other side of the world. The beating heart of the ham radio community is connecting with strangers in that secret place. An astral plane reachable only by those who can construct the artifacts to move words through time and space.

[beep] “This is N2EO. Anyone around now?” [radio silence] “This is N2EO... November-two-echo-oscar in Massapequa Park listening ‘85, wishing everybody a Merry Christmas. Anybody around? N2EO.” [radio silence] [beep] [another voice] “Hey Ritchie. KB1HQJ. Merry Christmas to you too... so I’ll just say a quick hello to ya.” [beep] [N2EO responds] “Very good Tim... It gets a little lonely here when the repeater’s not active...” [beep] [conversation continues]

Recorded ragchew - LIMARC repeater - Dec. 20, 2015

Unlike music or cars, ham radio has very few practical applications in the modern world. What was once the internet of its time, is now relegated to dusty ham shacks and war museums. The deeper value found in this archaic skill is the distinct pleasure of radio communication and the sequence of challenges required to establish it. My first ham radio conversation was terrifying. I could hear other hams “chewing the rag” but their parlance was cryptic and inscrutable. Hams speak in curt intervals punctuated with number codes, acronyms and slang. “73” is code for “best wishes”. “QSL” means “acknowledged”. If you’re in need of conversation, you simply press the transmit button on your radio and say: “CQ. CQ.” then give your callsign and wait for a friend or stranger to answer. If someone in the community passes away we refer to them as a “silent key”. This is more common than you might think. Most of the ham radio community are the old guard; analog natives who

were the sons and daughters of the first generation of radio wizards. Their knowledge of radio is deep. My first attempts at conversation on the ham reminded me of my CB experience with the truckers in high school. I was ignored. These local “nets” are often small groups of old geezers that have been chewing the rag for years. We call these veteran operators “elmers”, a portmanteau of the words elder and hammer. In the world of ham radio, the spoken language is *the* medium. Mastering its vernacular is the key to acceptance. It also gave me my own sense of belonging, as the lingo is ultimately what separates the hams from the “muggles”. As a beginner, my nervous energy made it awkward for everyone. It took practice, but once I was confident, I began to relax. It was only then that the conversation felt familiar and easy.

Ham radio channels are the electromagnetic equivalent of the neighborhood pub. One is guaranteed to hear a friend at some point during the day doing a check-in with the standard “CQ” call. Over time you start to recognize certain voices, call signs, and even people’s patterns. I love to turn on my handheld after work, place it on my desk and simply listen to rag chews. Kilo delta two likes to talk about fishing for striped bass in the fall. Romeo echo one *adores* his grandkids, and foxtrot tango five is always complaining about some woman named Rochelle. She’s either his wife or his boss. I can never quite tell. Occasionally, the whole club will converge at once creating glorious chaos that I find amusing. We just hang out and shoot the shit. We’re the chess players in Washington Square Park, the Sunday school potluck and the Dominican’s with the fat bodega cat on the corner complaining about the Mets. I love hearing their voices. The familiar crackles and beeps from pocket radios have become a comfort to me. For a while there, it was starting to get quiet. I was wondering if I had painted myself into a corner with this old hobby. I began to fear that doing a radio check one Saturday morning would only return empty static. Recently, for whatever reason, there’s been a surge of younger operators checking in on the weekends. I think YouTube made ham radio more accessible to the younger folks. Now our community is an eclectic mix of YouTube channels and analog radio, a technological hybrid that only the twenty twenties could dream up.

Today, radio is ubiquitous and touches nearly every aspect of our lives. Wifi is just a radio that uses a higher frequency. Cell phones are radios with a computer attached. Bluetooth earbuds, GPS, smart bulbs, and Apple Airtags are all radios but we take them for granted because their use is demystified through automation and simplification. But there are those among us who still know the old ways. Like the wizards of lore, hams have continually passed on the secrets of wielding the flux, bending it to their will in controlled bursts of energy. Nearly a century before internet chat rooms were invented, radio wizards from around the world were meeting one another in that secret place to chew the rag. One is more likely to hear them calling at night, when the Earth’s rotation into shadow transforms the ionosphere into a more powerful mirror for the wizard’s magic, allowing their voices to travel ten thousand miles. Their shared interests in the unseen properties of electromagnetism and the need to connect with others, stranger or not, is all that is required to find common ground. Russians chewed the rag with Americans to discuss food recipes during both Cold Wars. The ham community takes great pride in its unique language and the opportunities to pass on the mystical arts of radio to the next generation. Something has been lost

in the abundance of digital correspondence. The cost of entry is so low that every message feels disposable. It's fitting that ham radio operators preserve an old tradition of exchanging postcards through the mail to confirm long range contact. Each "QSL" card is proof that the void listens and sometimes, if you're patient, it answers back.

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