

Why I don't like FT8

By Vic Rosenthal, 4X6GP

Some hams don't care about DXing at all. Some think that as long as you work a station, it doesn't matter what mode you use. I do not belong to either of those groups. I believe that working DX using CW is the purest form of Amateur Radio. It's what the first ham, Guglielmo Marconi, did!

I do not say that other pursuits are not legitimate. As long as your operation is legal and as long as you operate in a courteous, ethical way, more power to you (unless you are a QRPer – which is OK too). But this is what I choose to do because I think that nothing is more beautiful than contacting distant stations using Morse, especially when conditions are poor and I have to work at it.

But lately, I'm troubled by a trend that will make it harder and harder for me to pursue DX on CW. And that is the sudden accession of FT8 to the position of primary mode for DXing.

The first major DXpedition that used FT8 to a great extent was the 2018 KH1/KH7X operation. This extremely well-executed expedition made 32,442 QSOs on CW, 18,908 on SSB, 16,671 on FT8, and 931 on RTTY, according to the statistics published by Clublog. I worked them on CW on several bands, despite poor conditions and a difficult path to 4X.

The recent 3D2CR (Conway Reef) operation was a different story. They made 7566 QSOs on CW, 3471 on SSB, and *11,696 on FT8* – more than CW and SSB combined. And there may be more FT8 QSOs that have not been uploaded at the time I am writing due to a technical glitch. I managed to work them on two bands on the second and third day of operation, but after that they were less and less often spotted on CW.

I shouldn't complain. After all, I worked them on CW. But the trend is very worrisome for a CW operator. There have already been countries that are almost unavailable in the last few years on CW, like VK0/M, Macquarie Island. VK0AI was operated by an Australian ham who was a technician at the Antarctic research base there. He operated almost entirely FT8, with a smattering of SSB. I'm not blaming him; perhaps he didn't know Morse, but the fact is that I still need Macquarie Island for my CW DXCC.

If the 3D2CR statistics surprised you, here is an even more shocking fact: in the period from 6 to 14 June 2019, 378,114 QSOs were uploaded to Clublog. Of these, 47,583 were CW, 54,006 were SSB, and *261,578 were FT8!*

This is stunning. Clublog represents the activity of DXers and contesters. Most serious DXers use Clublog, because it can provide nearly real time information on whether you have a good QSO with a rare station or expedition. So these numbers tell us what DXers are doing; and what they are doing is FT8.

It will not be long until DXpeditions spend most of their time on FT8 (or newer computer-mediated modes, like FT4). If you want a CW QSO, you will have to hope that there will be a time that the bands are open to your part of the world that coincides with when the expedition has a station on CW.

Yes, I know you can make QSOs with lower power and simpler antennas in worse conditions with FT8 than you can with CW, not to mention SSB. It's easy, too, even easier than voice modes. And as I said at the start, as long as it's legal and ethical, you have a right to operate whatever modes you want.

But I am going to expose myself to hostile fire and say that computer-mediated digital modes are missing something that you find in traditional ways of doing ham radio. Certainly computers are used by most hams today. I use computer logging and propagation programs, and my computer helps me point my antenna and control my transceiver. On the increasingly rare occasions that I participate in a contest that lasts more than an hour or so, I might even allow the computer to send CW. But when the computer does the encoding and decoding, and even the timing of your transmissions, one can argue that you pass the point that the operator is meaningfully engaged in the activity.

It can be hard to draw the line. How is it “meaningful engagement” for a DXpeditioner or contester to run 140 QSOs/hour in which all he does is type a call and hit ENTER for each QSO? I would argue that it is, that the operator in that position feels him- or herself “out there” – part of the band and the pileup, constantly aware of conditions, in a way that an FT8 operator does not.

I can almost hear readers of this saying, “it’s just like spark vs. CW or AM vs. SSB.” No, it isn’t. Those were technical changes – big, important ones to be sure, but they didn’t change the idea of an operator transmitting and receiving information to a distant station in some language that he understands, be it Morse or spoken words.

Or some may recall the complaints that the DX clusters or remote stations will “ruin” DXing. They changed it, true, and the changes were both for the better and the worse. But the essence is still there. Computer-mediated digital modes are something entirely different. They don’t just change it, they hollow it out.

If you push the idea of computer mediation as far as it will go, why bother with the ionosphere when you can make “QSOs” on Facebook with zero investment in equipment, and zero time spent learning even the basic principles of communications, and zero time learning any new skills?

So that’s what I think. You can take it or leave it, and many will leave it. I know that equipment manufacturers and national radio organizations all push digital modes, because that’s how to increase the number of hams. I know that learning Morse for anyone over the age of about 14 is a struggle (most of the people I teach in the CWops CW Academy are significantly older than that). I know that conditions are rotten these days, and fewer and fewer hams are able to put up good antennas or run high power, and FT8 lets them “make QSOs” under those conditions.

I know all this stuff. But I also know that I feel sorry for the ham who hasn’t had that feeling of excitement on hearing his call come back from halfway around the world, perhaps a weak signal with QSB and polar flutter. You can almost feel the distance, the frigid reaches of ionosphere that the signals have traveled. You don’t get that from a computer screen.