

Miscommunication Emergency

“We need you.” I can’t count the number of people who said that to us at Dayton this year, in our frank discussions with readers and industry colleagues about the recent difficulties we’ve been experiencing and the actions we’ve been taking to get things back on track. “Amateur radio needs more than one voice,” they would often continue. “It can’t just be the ARRL.”

There is nothing new about this sentiment. Seventy years ago, according to CQ founder Sanford Cowan, then-FCC Chairman James Fly approached him about publishing an amateur radio magazine (since he and John Potts had purchased CQ’s predecessor, *Radio*, which was beginning to focus more on audio and what would become hi-fi). The ARRL can’t be amateur radio’s only voice, the chairman told him¹.

For the past seven decades, CQ has been providing an independent voice, never hesitating to call the ARRL on the carpet when it does something foolish. And as if to prove that nothing has changed, the ARRL has gone and done something not only foolish, but downright dangerous to amateur radio.

Hidden away on page 75 of the June issue of *QST* is an essay in the magazine’s Public Service column by ARRL Emergency Preparedness Manager Mike Corey, K11U. Innocuously titled “Amateur Radio Is Public Service,” the article goes on to describe a conscious, ongoing, effort within ARRL to *de-emphasize* the use of the term “emergency communications” in describing what we do in times of need and replace it with what he considers the broader and more inclusive term, “public service communications.”

“The problem begins with the definition of ‘emergency communications,’” writes Corey. “One does exist and can be found on the FCC’s website (www.fcc.gov/guides/emergency-communications)... Amateur radio is not mentioned in this description of emergency communications... To put it simply, we can help support emergency communications, but we are not an *emergency communications service*.”

He then goes on to discuss the distinctions between public service communications (which he estimates - without citing a source - accounts for about 80% of our community-focused communications), disaster communications (19%) and life-and-death emergency communications (1%). Our terminology, he says, should not focus on that 1% of our activities, but rather on the bigger picture.

Further, he notes that amateur radio’s service to our communities is not limited to providing public service communications, but also includes serving the public “with our technical expertise, educational programs and through our experimentation with and advancement of the radio art.”

Corey also says that “EmComm” has been a divisive term within the amateur community while “public service,” he believes, “is a term that most amateurs can rally behind ... Our service to the public includes all amateurs, not just a select few set apart by an acronym.”

Foolish and Harmful Actions

We believe this change in terminology by the ARRL is not only foolish but harmful. Indeed, rather than protecting the interests of amateur radio - which is its primary responsibility - the ARRL in this case is actively endangering our frequencies and future standing with government officials. Let’s take a look at each of the arguments presented in Corey’s essay.

*e-mail: w2vu@cq-amateur-radio.com

An Amazing Experience

I would like to personally thank all of the hundreds and hundreds of our readers, fellow hams and industry colleagues who talked with us at the Dayton Hamvention® for your amazing levels of support and understanding as we move ahead with the changes we are making to get our print editions back on a regular schedule and to get everything back on a more solid footing.

I lost count of how many of you told us to “hang in there” and reassured us that virtually every small business goes through rough periods. Here and there over the past few months, we’ve wondered if all the changes we’ve been making to get through this difficult period are worth it. Your tremendous support and words of encouragement have shown us without a doubt that they are, and that CQ is an important part of your ham radio lives. Our promise to you is to continue doing what needs to be done to make sure we can continue to be there for you for many years to come. Thank you again.—W2VU

#1: *The definition of emergency communications:* The definition that he cites was cherry-picked from a brochure written for the general public that focuses on the ways in which the average person might have contact with the EmComm system, such as by calling 9-1-1 or listening to an emergency alert on broadcast radio. Assuming that this “definition” excludes everything else is absurd, since by that standard, radio communications between police officers or firefighters responding to an emergency also would be excluded.

In addition, this narrow “definition” from a consumer brochure completely ignores the focus on emergency communications that is an essential part of the FCC’s rules for the Amateur Service, starting with the very first item at the very beginning of Part 97 in the Basis and Purpose of the Amateur Service: “(a) *Recognition and enhancement of the value of the amateur service to the public as a voluntary noncommercial communication service, particularly with respect to providing emergency communications.*”

That’s “emergency communications,” not “public service communications.” The rules also specifically address emergency communications in several other areas, including limited authorization to communicate with non-amateur stations (“*while providing emergency communications*”), authorization to pass international third-party traffic without regard to having an agreement in place (“*when transmitting emergency or disaster relief communications*”), and an entire subpart devoted to “*Providing Emergency Communications.*” If there is any confusion regarding the definition of emergency communications, it appears to be in Newington, not in Washington, and not in communities around the United States.

Amateur radio’s value to the public, “*particularly with respect to providing emergency communications,*” is at the core of our justification for having either exclusive or shared access to a greater swath of frequencies across virtually the entire RF spectrum than any other service besides the military. De-emphasizing our role “with respect to providing emergency communications” undermines the basis and purpose of our service and endangers our continued access to the frequency bands we use every day.

#2: *Drawing distinctions between public service, emergency and disaster communications* is a distraction and “a solution in search of a problem.” Corey says that in his law enforcement days, he was told that the difference between a disaster and an emergency is that “a disaster happens

to you; an emergency happens to me.” This is just plain wrong. Police respond to other people’s emergencies every hour of every day, and very few of them occur within the context of a disaster.

Amateur radio emergency communications is not limited to calling in auto accidents, as Corey suggests. A perfect example of this can be found right on the ARRL’s website. A May 6 posting titled “Ham Radio Volunteers Shift Gears to Handle Mountain Bike Event Emergency” described how members of the Yavapi Amateur Radio Club in Arizona, providing public service communications for a 50-mile bike race, quickly shifted into emergency communications mode when the weather turned bad and some of the 2000 riders began showing signs of hypothermia. “Net control worked with race, search-and-rescue, and other emergency personnel to coordinate transportation to evacuate these riders,” the article reported, noting that after the weather cleared, “the net shifted back into its accustomed role of gathering race updates from the checkpoints.” This was an *emergency*, not a disaster, and hams provided *emergency communications* until the situation improved.

Likewise, when last year’s Boston Marathon was disrupted by a terrorist bombing, hams providing public service communications for the race instantly began providing *emergency communications* - helping authorities make sure that remaining runners were escorted off the course safely and efficiently, and connected with transportation to meet up with their families. Thankfully, the marathon bombing did not rise to the level of a disaster, but since it was considered possible in those early minutes that there might have been additional bombs along the route, securing the course and getting the runners safely off of it was considered an emergency. Once again, the hams did what they’ve always done.

Part of the ARRL’s supposed rationale for changing its terminology is that most of the communications that we provide on behalf of the public (80%, according to the article, but with absolutely no substantiation) falls under the category of public service events, such as a bike race or a marathon. But why do we do this? For the t-shirts? For the enjoyment of getting up at 5 AM on a weekend in order to be in position with our gear before a course is closed to vehicles? Hardly.

There are two primary reasons: 1) to be able to provide emergency communications in the event that one or more of the participants become ill or injured, or the safety of participants is threatened (see examples above), and 2) to train and practice in a relatively low-pressure environment so that in the event of an emergency or disaster, we are prepared to quickly deploy our stations, assemble our networks and provide effective, efficient communications, whether to replace or to supplement normal communication channels. (See example in this month’s “Emergency Communications” column on page XX - discussion of this issue made us realize that we needed to rename our “Public Service” column as “Emergency Communications,” because as column editor K16SN writes this month, “It’s All Emergency Communications When You Think About It.”)

Corey says correctly that we are not an emergency communications service, but in the first critical minutes or hours after a significant event, hams often provide what is many times the only communication link to a stricken area - and much of the communication that we provide relates to bringing emergency response to places where it is needed. Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina and the 9/11 attacks are but three examples of ham radio providing vital *emergency communications* in the earliest hours of what became disasters for which we later provided more routine disaster-relief communications. But there was nothing routine about those early hours.

Without the training and practice provided by our activity in “public service events,” we would not be nearly as well-prepared or as effective in providing either emergency or disaster communications. Separating these functions, as the ARRL is doing, is wrong. It paints an inaccurate picture of what we do and why we do it, and will cause long-term harm to our service.

#3: *Amateur radio public service is not limited to communications*, but includes helping our communities “with our technical expertise, educational programs and through our experimentation with and advancement of the radio art.” Sorry, but this simply doesn’t fly. Sure, we do all this, but we are hardly alone in offering technology-based

educational programs, and the vast majority of the general public views amateur radio technology as old-fashioned, not cutting-edge. A recent Fox News story on ham radio was titled “Old Technology Gets New Respect.” This is the public perception of ham radio. The public is wrong in many cases, but perceptions are what they are. And what the public perceives - correctly - as amateur radio’s unique value to the community is its ability to get through “when all else fails” (a term coined and promoted by the ARRL)... in other words, *emergency communications*. This is what sets us apart and we must not dilute that message or that image.

#4: *Corey says that “ ‘EmComm’ has been a dividing term, and this does not help Amateur Radio.”* I guess we haven’t been paying enough attention because we were not aware of any significant conflict within the amateur community over the use of the term “EmComm” or even its root, “emergency communications.” Are all amateurs involved in emergency communications? No, just as not all amateurs are involved in “public service,” contesting, DXing, moonbounce or any of the myriad of different activities and specialties that come under the umbrella of amateur radio.

The difference with EmComm is that it is an integral part of our culture, and when the you-know-what hits the fan, any ham with a working radio or the ability to get to one will make himself or herself available to help (those who have trained via public service events will be more effective). We all recognize that emergency communications is the 1% of what we do that gives us the special privileges that allow us to do the other 99%. The value and importance of amateur radio emergency communications cannot be underestimated and must not be diluted.

#5: *Finally, we must wonder about the ARRL’s motivations* in a) promulgating this ill-advised and dangerous change in philosophy and terminology, and b) what appears to be an active effort to divert attention from it while reporting on it in, of all places, *QST’s* Field Day issue. ARRL CEO Dave Sumner, K1ZZ’s, editorial for June focuses on interference from “grow lights” - discussed on page 72 - and FCC actions at 5 GHz - discussed on page 73 - but ignores a significant change in ARRL’s approach to a major underpinning of our hobby that is introduced on page 75. Did Dave stop reading this issue at the end of page 73?

Is it possible that ARRL’s senior leadership is unaware of this change and that a mid-level manager is making unilateral decisions that affect our future without their knowledge? Hardly. The ARRL is a hierarchical organization whose senior management and board of directors are deeply involved in every aspect of its operation. It is virtually impossible that such far-reaching changes could be put into place without the knowledge and approval of the ARRL’s top leadership.

What Next?

The ARRL’s board of directors meets this month. The directors need to re-examine the change in policy and philosophy expressed by this new approach to public service vs. emergency communications, consider the short- and long-term damage it will cause to amateur radio’s future, and reverse course immediately. (The very fact that this essay was published in *QST*, written by the League’s Emergency Preparedness Manager, gives ammunition to those who seek our frequencies. We hope it is not too late to reverse that damage. Perhaps it’s best from that perspective that the essay was buried on page 75.)

ARRL members need to contact their directors and make sure they know how you feel about this issue. You may agree or disagree with the views expressed here, but your elected representatives need to know their constituents’ opinions on such a significant matter.

Finally, the ARRL needs to please, please, stop trying so hard and so consistently to prove the ongoing need for an independent voice to point out when the emperor has no clothes. —73, W2VU

Note:

1- See 50th anniversary issue of *CQ*, January 1995, for complete interview.