

Second Century

The Spectrum of Hams



“We have some data, albeit raw data at this time, that tells us where segments of ARRL members and non-member amateurs fall in terms of interests and priorities. ARRL needs to develop products and services for all these segments. In today’s age, ARRL has the ability to customize our engagement with customers and members who expect this from us. ARRL has to do this, in order to remain relevant. One size no longer fits all.”

Is your passion for Amateur Radio primarily about communications, or about technology? Do you consider Amateur Radio a hobby, or a service?

The answers to these questions are not either/or decisions. Most people do not fall to the extremes. Nearly everyone’s pursuit of Amateur Radio falls somewhere along a spectrum between developing new technology and using existing technology to communicate, and along a spectrum between Amateur Radio as a hobby and Amateur Radio as a service.

A spectrum between hobby and service is easy to understand. Hobbies are undertaken in one’s leisure time for pleasure. Service activities help someone else.

A spectrum between communications and technology might be more difficult to picture. At the technology end, you have researchers in government and industry labs advancing the state of the art, creating new devices, systems, and processes to move electrons and photons from one place to another. At the communications end, you have operators battling the elements, using whatever technology is available to exchange information. In the middle, you have people selecting the best commercial products that allow them to communicate efficiently.

Now imagine a two-dimensional grid, with hobby-to-service as the horizontal axis, and technology-to-communications as the vertical axis. Every ham can be aligned as a dot — or possibly several dots — on that grid. But interests and passions change over time, meaning that many hams are likely on a path through that grid.

Where do you see yourself on our two-dimensional grid? If you are a DXer or contester, you are watching sunspots, the diurnal cycle, and atmospheric conditions, using the technology in your shack to get through a pileup to make that contact. Perhaps you engage in these activities to hone your skills for use in the next disaster, or perhaps you enjoy the feeling of accomplishment in achieving the next level of recognition. Whatever the underlying reason, your ham radio hobby is primarily about communications. You are the “guardians” of ham radio — an ARRL term for “classic,” “old-school” practitioners of the hobby. Your interests can be

found on the left side of the grid, probably about midway up the technology-communication axis. ARRL is there for you with *QST*, *DXCC*, *NCJ*, product reviews, and daily bulletins.

If you are a ragchewer, perhaps with a regular chat schedule with a small group of longtime friends, or the adventurous type who wants to make new friends in other parts of the world, you too are a “guardian” of ham radio, though you are probably in the upper left quadrant of the grid. For this type of guardian, ham radio is all about communicating. Again, ARRL is there for you with local clubs, a Spectrum Defense fund, and articles on “good old-fashioned hamming.”

Another segment of hams has been given the name “technologist.” Technologists are interested in building radios, antennas, and accessories. They are intrigued by transmitting information by using as little power as possible, trying the latest form of digital communications, or trying to quantify the latest improvement they made in their antenna. Technologists occupy the lower left quadrant. ARRL is also there for them with *QEX*.

The upper right quadrant is occupied by radio amateurs who are interested in helping their community by providing communications during disasters, or just helping in civic events like road races. They are not particularly interested in developing new technology, but they are looking for ways to communicate when the infrastructure collapses. The Amateur Radio Emergency Service® (ARES) consists of licensed amateurs who have voluntarily registered their qualifications and equipment, with their local ARES leadership, for communications duty in the public service when disaster strikes. ARRL staff has begun calling these service-minded hams “the ready,” for their commitment to helping others.

These are just my suggestions. There is no one right way to be a ham. We are all brothers and sisters bound together with a license we earned. I encourage you to discuss your view of Amateur Radio with your fellow hams, and I welcome your comments at wb2itx@arrl.org.