

Building a strong local club structure



In this short article, I want to raise a few radical proposals that are intended to change, or at least start a discussion about changing, the way our national club structures work.

I recently took on the Chairmanship of our local Amateur Radio Club, mainly because no one else would and the club was facing possible closure. My first committee meeting was spent in desultory discussion about how to recruit new members, but no one had much of an idea how to do this, nor did they recognise that the model of belonging they were promoting was desperately out-dated.

As a semi-academic exercise I have in the past researched and written on the nature of belonging. More specifically, about how people today belong to organisations. So before I take a bulldozer to our structures, please bear with me while I set out two little bits of theory. It's not electronics theory, but I believe it's just as important for the future of our hobby.

Firstly, the rapid change in mass communication means that our society faces a huge issue. The technical word is 'disintermediation', but it simply means cutting out the middleman. For example, instead of physically visiting a local bookshop or electronics store, we use our computer to buy online. There are huge advantages. Firstly, it's more convenient. Secondly, we are not limited to the suppliers geographically near us, which means we have a better choice of product. Thirdly, wider competition coupled with lower overheads means we can

get a better product at a cheaper price. One example is the demise of the local shop and the rise of Amazon, Kindle books, and online clothing stores. Another example, possibly nearer our heart, is the demise of Maplin and the rise of Ebuyer.com.

What's this got to do with amateur radio clubs?

It's not only commerce that needs to change because of disintermediation; organisations need to change too. Fifty years ago, you might express your support for a political viewpoint by 'belonging' – by joining the party. You'd pay a subscription, hold a membership card and probably go to local meetings. If you were religious, you'd express your belief by going regularly to church. In short, you'd be a 'participant' member. The local party, or the local church, was the 'middle-man'. Amateur radio clubs mimicked this process. We held meetings, raised subscriptions, elected committees, provided talks.

Today, all of that is changing. There are fewer regular paid-up members of political parties, fewer worshippers – and fewer 'participant' members of radio clubs. 'Participant' membership is declining in every area of our society, and all organisations that rely on member participation to fund and maintain their activities are struggling. But does that mean that people consider themselves less 'political', or less 'religious'? Or have less interest in radio, technology, or global communication? Frankly, it does not. Today, someone who consistently votes Labour or Conservative and strongly believes in their goals may never join a political party. Never pay a subscription. Never go to a meeting. But they strongly 'associate' with the party's beliefs and aims. Suggest

that they're not a real 'Tory' or a genuine 'Labour' member just because they don't pay a subscription or attend a meeting, and they'll quickly put you right.

Political lobbyists have recognised this and have used the new thinking to great advantage. Religious organisations have yet to catch up. And amateur radio hasn't even recognised the problem.

Put very simply, organisations today have two different kinds of members. 'Participant' members join, pay and organise. 'Associate' members identify with the aims, but don't join, don't pay and don't help with the organisation. But 'Associate' members believe just as strongly in the aims of the organisation as 'Participant' members. And they are just as valuable. These are the people our clubs should be encouraging and embracing. And for most organisations, 'associate' membership outnumbers 'participant' membership by a considerable margin.

The RSGB amateur radio club structure is like the old 'High Street' of the 1950s – full of small local shops, or local clubs, that fewer and fewer people are going to. The overheads are mounting; the rent for meeting rooms and cost of administration falls on fewer and fewer people. We struggle to keep each small club going, trying to provide every aspect of our hobby in each local club, putting more and more strain on the declining number of 'participant' members, whilst completely

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ignoring potential 'associate' members to whom we are hardly visible.

In our part of Somerset, there are about seven small clubs within driving distance of each other that strive to survive. Each of them has rental and administration costs. Each of them tries to persuade members to go to meetings they don't need, listen to talks about things they could find better and more easily on the internet, and pay subscriptions they can't see the value of. They recognise that they can get a better product, more cheaply, and with less physical stress, by using alternative networks. The real value of club meetings is in the social interaction and shared interest, and whilst the talks may be interesting and sometimes highly amusing, the meetings do little to keep the organisation running. Just like the high street shop, the choice facing many clubs is either change, or die.

We need to change. We need to embrace disintermediation, not resist it. And here's an outline what I'd propose.

Instead of fifteen different clubs within driving distance of each other struggling to serve small areas and provide the whole range of amateur radio offerings in each place, we only need one networked regional club serving the whole. One set of overheads, one committee. Saving money, energy and resources.

The local networked club would exist primarily online, and would therefore provide much more accessible entry points for people interested in the varied aspects of our hobby – electronics, propagation, operating skills, radio physics, and so on. People would pay

for access, not for membership. Which in turn means that for many, the cost of Amateur Radio support and information would be less than it is right now, but would reach many more people, and with increased access for 'Associate' members, the overall income would increase.

The local network club would not rely on subscriptions from a declining 'participative' membership for funds. Anyone could draw on the collective experience and knowledge of the membership, getting help with antennas or electronics, learning operating skills, and enjoying every aspect of the hobby, but paying only for what they use, rather than paying subscriptions that go mainly to maintaining an out-dated local structure.

The local network club would then be able to diversify its offering. Because of the low overheads, it could afford to run a full local station in one area for all members – participative and associate – to use. In fact, I'd suggest that every regional network should operate a full station, thus making Amateur Radio available for all. It could offer training using the facilities of the local Adult Education service. Its members could meet socially in their own local area – as we do at Weatherspoons – at little or no cost, but as part of a much bigger regional community of Amateurs.

Transition for change is never easy. It means embracing new ideas, exploring new ways of working. At the very least, it requires the key members of local clubs in a region – not necessarily the committee members –

to come together to discuss how they can embrace disintermediation and provide much better availability for both 'associate' and 'participant' members at lower cost and with more focussed offerings.

And if local clubs do get together to plan new ways of working, support from the RSGB nationally will be needed. One of the worst mistakes a central organisation can make is to come up with solutions before they've really understood the problems or listened to the members. So in support of local and regional transition planning, maybe the RSGB might consider establishing a lightweight 'development group', run as an online discussion, with the very clearly focussed aim of helping to establish the right kind of regional networks.

Amateur should not mean 'bumbling'. It should be sharp, professional, and fit for purpose in the new millennium. We need to change. Before we die.

About the Author

Richard Thomas was educated at Oxford, and was a member of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and a member of the Public Relations Consultants Association for many years. As a commercially endorsed RYA YachtMaster (Ocean) Yacht Skipper, he ran his own business delivering yachts by sea. He holds a UK amateur licence (G4JJP) and a Thai licence (HSOZLY), has dealt with pirates in the South China Sea, and chairs the Mid Somerset Amateur Radio Club.

Richard

Thank you very much for an informative and challenging article.

Within the RSGB strategic aims, and at a wider level within the IARU, I am looking at 'future and growth', be that of the hobby itself, the member societies (RSGB in the UK) and at individual and club level.

I agree completely with you that change is desperately needed if we are to combat the general decline in numbers and are to embrace the transformation of people's needs and wants from a hobby, society and club. As you so correctly state, people fight change, often to their detriment; admitting the problem exists is often the first and major hurdle to overcome before you can begin to tackle it.

As part of the work I am doing for the RSGB, we have broadly split the challenge into three key areas; Attraction, Promotion and Retention. Very generally speaking, as radio amateurs, we seem to be very bad at promoting our excellent hobby (there are exceptions) and because of that we fail to attract newcomers. I would argue that we don't even go to the right places to look for newcomers, let alone have anything interesting to show them when we do! Even when we gain new blood into the hobby, we are often very poor at retaining individuals and they drift away after two or more years.

Both the IARU and the RSGB are working hard to support the key areas I identified above. However, if we are to be successful, we need to completely re-define what amateur radio is, who we think it is attractive to and then develop mechanisms to entice and retain people in the hobby.

We need to be attending Maker Fares, Hackspace events, EMF

camp and reaching out to the likes of the Men in Sheds. We should be welcoming with open arms other spectrum users like the model makers. For example, am I a 'radio amateur' if I want to use more RF than the licence exempt rules allow to control my robot or other invention? A lot of people reading this will say a definite 'no', I'm afraid I am arguing very strongly that it's a definite 'yes'.

What is attractive about amateur radio in the 21st century? There are lots of things on the 'yes' list like Digital ATV, satellite communications (especially the new Es'hail-2) and construction. A definite for the 'no' list is the typical special event station on 40m SSB; that just won't do at all anymore I'm afraid.

Everyone you meet in the street is likely to have several radio transmitters in their pocket, we call them smartphones. We need to embrace this technology and not just repeatedly say about anything new 'it's not amateur radio'. If we keep that attitude, then amateur radio will soon become a very lonely place, if indeed we have any spectrum left to utilise as the commercial value of what we have is growing by the day.

As an information gathering exercise, I conducted a workshop at the IARU conference this April with representatives from different member societies to gain an insight into the scope of the problem across Region 1. I now have visibility of what has been successful in each of the broad areas across our patch; I also asked some very uncomfortable questions and set out some very difficult challenges to the hobby at large.

It's very early days, but I hope that some of the work I am doing will help us re-shape the future and plot our course going forward.

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