

## Second Century



# Exceptional Acceptance

*Just over a year ago, I wrote a column on diversity and inclusion that drew the largest response of any column I have ever written. The responses varied from very positive to very negative, settling into that commonplace ratio of 50:50 we find in the world today. I read all of them dutifully, but I focused on the negative responses in particular, to see where my thinking may be misaligned or just plain wrong! What I found were many emails from members defending how inclusive their radio clubs are. As the year went on, and I went from convention to convention, members came to speak with me about their thoughts on the issue, and the discussions were personal and powerful! After meeting, face to face, an eclectic group that spanned all demographic categories, it dawned on me how truly exceptional our community is. So, from a year of learning, here are the three main points I'd like to share with you.*

First, I'd like to bring your attention to the September 1920 issue of *QST*, in which ARRL Founding President Hiram Percy Maxim wrote a lengthy op-ed piece related to inclusion issues in the hobby. He had identified a problem in amateur radio where two classes existed: those who are experienced, and those who are less experienced. He cited the buildup of an aristocracy. He criticized radio clubs for developing factions that isolated newcomers. He called on older radio amateurs to work with beginners. This division still exists today, in pockets, and reaching back or reaching down to grab hold of those who are less technical, less experienced, or less involved is necessary to help the community of radio-active hams grow. This is one of the reasons I have been a staunch supporter of amateur radio YouTubers. They represent a means of virtual inclusion in the community.

The second point has to do with ARRL, its demographics, and licensed amateurs at large. We know, and have known for years, that ARRL members represent the lion's share of active hams. Moves to grow the hobby, like incentive licensing and no-code licenses, have grown the total number of licensees, but not the number of radio-active hams. Making licenses easier to obtain only grew the ranks of people who passed their Technician exam, and then faded away while still being counted in our ranks. At their January 2023 annual meeting, the ARRL Board approved a motion to dramatically increase the work being done to survey and census current licensees to find out why so many are licensed but not active. We need to drill deeper, beyond the surveys of the past that concluded we need to get more hams active, into honest reasons why some licensees have abandoned the hobby, and why others have never gotten active. We need to entice them back, reigniting the interest that brought them to amateur radio and our community in the first place.

Lastly, efforts to denounce what ARRL is today is a fruitless exercise. We know about the two "bubbles" of growth within amateur radio during the 1950s and 1970s. The statement that amateur radio was "graying out" for decades wasn't entirely true. Today it is. If you were licensed during the

1970s, like I was, most of the hams you know are older than you. The January 2023 cover of *QST* showed exactly what ARRL is today: the people who raised their hand to volunteer, to run for office as a Section Manager, and get elected by their Section! The Board meeting picture of the Directors and Vice Directors shows the same thing. To change the look of amateur radio from a diversity perspective will take many years. Focusing — seriously focusing — on youth programs and STEM education outreach today is the only realistic future for amateur radio to replace the tens of thousands of hams who will leave the hobby in the coming decade.

What it takes is putting a spotlight on our youth, as we did in our 2023 calendar of clubs that participate in our Collegiate Amateur Radio Program. It turns out that several of those clubs were diverse in terms of race, gender, and physical ability. If these young hams get solid, consistent mentoring and opportunities to be active, ham radio's demographics might look very different in the years to come. What it won't take is a disingenuous effort of filling our media with pictures that promote what ham radio is not, at a level of diversity that doesn't yet exist. But let's also recognize that the ranks of amateur radio operators are changing, encouraging each of us to make room in our community for everyone.

I have learned a lot on this subject over the past year. And I thank you for your honesty and your camaraderie in telling me your stories, good and bad. We are an exceptionally accepting community, and we should be proud of that. But there's much work to be done, and its foundation lies within how young people can use amateur radio to experiment, to learn new skills, and to dream. Be radio active, get on and work VOTA, get your club involved, and see you on the air.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David A. Minster', with 'NA2AA' written in smaller letters to the right.

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Chief Executive Officer