

Pandemic pastime

HAM RADIO OFFERS HOBBYISTS THE CHANCE TO VISIT WITH FRIENDS AROUND THE GLOBE, WHILE STAYING SAFE AT HOME

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Leor Drory enjoys working at contacting as many countries and other national entities as possible, a pursuit known as DXing, from his Winnipeg ham radio station.

In today's instalment of Places We Meet, we take you away from COVID-unsafe physical meeting places and out to the electromagnetic ether, that place where radio signals travel, connecting people, such as these ham radio operators, in faraway places.

From his home in the middle of a Prairie city, Winnipegger Leor Drory might be able to cast a lifeline towards ocean-going sailors in trouble.

"I'm far enough away to be able to hear a boat in the middle of the Pacific," explains the amateur radio enthusiast, of the nets — kind of like online chat forums, but over the airwaves instead — he joins to relay messages between boats and radio operators on the California coast too close to communicate when only 300 to 400 kilometres away.



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Drory tunes his radio on a frequency band commonly known as 20 meters. It's a popular band for long-distance communications.

So far Drory hasn't tuned in to any distress signals, but just reports on sailing conditions he picks up over the radio in his Crescentwood area home.

"It's (them) checking and reporting the weather and relaying the weather."

While some folks may be wondering how to keep themselves occupied during this stay-at-home period of the pandemic, that's not something amateur radio operators — or hams for short — worry about.

LICENCE TO AIR



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Barry Malowanchuk uses his station, among other purposes, to bounce signals off the moon to communicate with other hams, testing his ability to build sensitive receivers and effective antennas.

Amateur radio operators are licensed through Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, after taking a course through Radio Amateurs of Canada.

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Equipped with radio stations in their homes, vehicles or boats, they have everything they need to stay home and still keep in touch with people across the city or around the world.

"We can isolate quite nicely but we're still in contact with each other," explains Harm Hazeu, chair of the Manitoba Repeater Society and treasurer of Radiosport Manitoba, a collection of hams who either participate in on-the-air competitions or engage in DXing, or trying to contact as many of the 350-some sovereign nations and other entities on Earth as possible. DX is shorthand for distance.

A repeater is a transmitter that repeats or relays messages to extend the reach of radio signals that, at the frequencies in question, are often otherwise only effective in the line of sight. Manitoba

radio operators collectively own a transmitter on the top of the Richardson Building as well as a series of linked transmitters across the southern part of the province, explains Hazeu.

"We can keep up on our (microphones) and talk in the repeater and somebody will call back," he says.

"Someone in St. James can talk to someone in St. Vital or Transcona but would never be able to do so directly."

Restrictions around gathering to prevent the spread of COVID-19 meant a temporary halt to monthly club meetings, weekly coffee groups, and swap meets to buy and sell equipment and get caught up on each other's lives, says Hazeu, speaking to how amateur radio enthusiasts have to adapted to the pandemic.

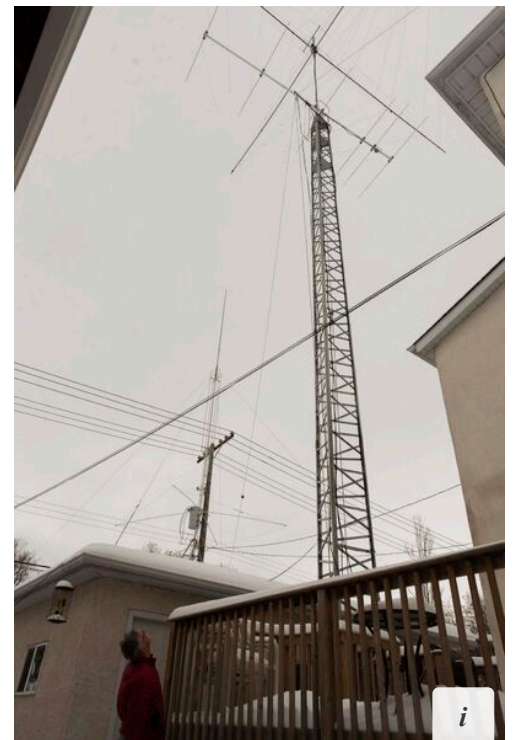
"It's like any other hobby. You learn from each other and set up these social networks," says the North Kildonan resident of the clubs, networks, and gatherings in Winnipeg.

Like other groups or clubs, they've moved their meetings online, and continue to chat over the radio and chase their pursuits over the airwaves, explains Royalwood resident Dan Keizer, who works in IT.

"It's the contacts. No matter where you are, you can remain in contact with people," says Keizer, who has connected with many, many other operators in nearly three decades on the radio.

"You get to know a lot of people and you get to talk to a lot of people."

Radio operators don't have to resort to Zoom or other video conferencing for group chats, relying on the radio signal instead of a sometimes shaky



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Drory looks up at his antennas tower in his backyard. His antennas

internet connection and fuzzy headshots. The attraction is the ability to communicate over vast distances without the use of billions of dollars in commercial communications infrastructure such as fibre optics, commercial satellites or trans-oceanic cable connections.

"We can have a group chat or discussion and it's round robin," he says of the protocol of allowing the next person to talk by saying "I'll pass it over to you."

"It's one person talking at a time on one frequency."

In addition to the chat — called rag chewing — radio operators also participate in contests where they compete to see who can make the most contacts during an agreed-upon time limit.

Keizer says those types of events test one's equipment and abilities as an operator, as well as connecting with other operators all over the world.

"In order to be a good tester, you have to have a good station," he says.

Someone getting started in the hobby can spend a few hundred dollars for a used radio, set of headphones, wire for antenna and a coaxial cable to connect it all, explained John Romanec, president of the 101-year-old Winnipeg Amateur Radio Club. He says costs can quickly add up once operators install backyard towers, invest in remote stations, or connect electronic equipment to their system.

"The saying goes that your antenna is always 10 feet shorter than it should be," joked Romanec, who got his radio licence five years ago.

Most of the fun is building it yourself, says Romanec, noting the hobby attracts people interested in electronics, computers or engineering.

"Amateur radio started off as an experimental thing. People built their own radios and antennas," explained the Garden City resident.

"People like building things with their hands and seeing how well it works."

Some hobbyists, such as Drory, also install radios in their vehicles or boats, taking the pastime on the road or to the lake for the personal connections or to maintain a reliable source of weather information.



SUPPLIED

Dan Keizer has been a ham radio operator for nearly three decades. From his home in south Winnipeg, he can communicate around the world.

"I'm able to hook up my laptop and without any internet I'm able to send emails back and forth," he says of transmitting from a sailboat in the middle of Lake Winnipeg by sending messages to another station connected to the internet.

The pandemic has slowed down Drory's pursuit of chasing countries — DXing — in order to collect contacts from every entity in the world, including countries, islands and uninhabited islands. Radio operators set up temporary field stations in uninhabited islands or sparsely populated countries so hobbyists can make contact, but travel restrictions have impeded that part of the hobby for now.

"It's exciting to hear your call sign come back from Antarctica," he says of catching a message from 15,000 km away.

The challenge of DXing is making contacts using different frequencies, adds Hazeu, who has collected about 130 out of the worldwide goal of about 350.

"It's just the thrill of putting 130 feet of wire up in the air and making contact with people around the world," he says.



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The radio in Leor Drory's truck is capable of both worldwide and local communications, which typically use different frequencies.

As much as those connections are sought out in the ham radio world, operators also focus on local communications during floods, snowstorms, power outages and other emergencies through an organization called Amateur Radio Emergency Service, or ARES.

For instance, amateur radio operators handled communications during the 2017 hurricane in Puerto Rico when cellphone infrastructure was destroyed. During the 1997 Red River flood ham operators were flown into flooded communities south of Winnipeg to run radio communications for a couple of weeks at a time, and more recently, provide communications at public events such as the Santa Claus parade, says Keizer. Hams have handled

communications for the Manitoba Marathon, which was cancelled for 2020, since the event began in 1979.

"It's a great service to the community and a great hobby to be involved in," he says.

Radio operators provide that service because they like the idea their hobby can be useful, added Hazeu.

"Ham radio has more frequency allocated to them than any other organization other than military or the government," he explains.

"When we do that public service, it's payback for the privilege of using that frequency."

Ham radio is also an important fallback to commercial systems such as cellular telephones, he says. Cell systems and telephones can be the first to go down, or become overloaded, during an emergency.

Right now, during the extended emergency of a global pandemic, hams also employ the airwaves to take care of each other, says Romanec. Some operators incorporate variations of a "stay safe" message in recognition of how everyone is living with the extra challenges of lockdown and isolation to prevent the transmission of COVID-19.

"They're saying, we're over here and we have the same issues over here," Romanec says about the safety message.


"It's neat that people recognize that."

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Faith reporter

Brenda Suderman has been a columnist in the Saturday paper since 2000, first writing about family entertainment, and about faith and religion since 2006.

 [Read full biography](#)

HISTORY

Updated on Sunday, December 27, 2020 at 11:13 AM CST: Corrects name.

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