

PACKET Eulogy

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As most of us know, PACKET radio became very popular in the mid to late 1980s. It was a DOS-based world at that time and the Internet was generally not available to the public. If you wanted to access a computer system outside your home, you subscribed to a service such as CompuServe using a telephone modem operating at 2400bps. For hams, PACKET, operating a 1200 bps, didn't seem much slower and provided a way to communicate with others via a computer while employing amateur radio. Various nodes sprung up in the Portland/Vancouver area that interfaced to backbones providing connectivity to other regions in the United States. Bulletin Board Stations (BBS) were organized under the ARRL National Traffic System and became popular for reliably and quickly moving traffic across the country.

Much of that PACKET system evolved on two meters just below 145.11 MHz. Today, most of it is gone - left in the dust of obsolescence and superseded by the Internet. However, some PACKET activity remains and is, in fact, being reinvigorated by Automatic Position Reporting Systems (APRS) and a system called Winlink which interfaces PACKET radio networks to the Internet.

A third component of the resurgence is being driven by emergency communications needs. Management teams in ARES, RACES and local emergency coordinating agencies such as CRESA (Clark Regional Emergency Services Agency) see PACKET radio as a vital component of an emergency communications system. These agencies are encouraging ham radio volunteers to utilize PACKET radio and are also funding and installing PACKET radio stations in their own Emergency Operating Centers (EOCs).

Recently an article appeared on qrz.com discussing the evolving mission of the Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS). MARS is an organization of some 2,500 amateur radio operators specially trained and licensed for military communications.

Traditionally they provided health and welfare communications to servicemen stationed overseas at locations not served by inexpensive or reasonably priced telephone service. Today, with cell phones available in most any part of the developed world and satellite communications systems covering most of the gaps, this health and welfare mission is no longer relevant. Therefore their mission has been redirected to providing emergency communications to the Department of Defense and other government departments. The qrz.com article stressed the importance of PACKET in this new mission.

Well, perhaps a eulogy for PACKET radio is premature and in fact it will probably outlast most of us. Maybe instead, it is time to find the old TNC and associated cabling and software, and see if you can get the system operational again. Tune your radio to 144.990 MHz (and don't forget to turn off the offset - we are simplex here) and see what you can hear. Try connecting to W7AIA-8 and leave a message on the bulletin board letting people know that you are back on. I bet you get some response fairly soon.

Hope to see you on 144.990 MHz. Who knows, that blinking message light might just be an old friend welcoming you back and asking where the devil you have been for the past ten or fifteen years.