

Morse Code - Dead Language, Bright Future

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Late last night, the FCC announced that it will no longer require Ham radio operators to learn Morse Code in order to obtain a license. This was hardly a surprise, as Morse has been in steady decline for the last two decades: the FCC dropped the Morse requirement for the entry-level Technician's license years ago, and the US Coast Guard officially stopped listening for Morse on distress frequencies in 1993. For all appearances, Morse Code is the dead language of the digital age (it was in fact the first digital language) done in by computers, satellites and the Internet.

Well, not quite. The Coast Guard may not be listening, but the ether still resonates with the conversations of ham operators ditting and dahing over High Frequency airwaves around the planet. Morse has even gained some new converts, including me. I passed the Morse exam years ago while getting my ham license, but I never used -- or even considered using-- Morse on the air. Then back in July, with full knowledge of Morse's obsolescence, I decided to learn it well enough to be able to actually carry on a radio conversation. To celebrate my modest progress, I ordered a top-line GHD telegraph key (the Rolls-Royce of keys) as an early Christmas present to myself. With exquisite irony, UPS delivered it yesterday afternoon, only hours before the FCC announcement was released.

It is tempting to conclude that the FCC's action spells the end of Morse, but I am certain we will see a very different outcome. Freed from all pretense of practical relevance in an age of digital communications, Morse will now become the object of loving passion by radioheads, much as another "dead" Language, Latin is kept alive today by Latin-speaking enthusiasts around the world. Latin fans eagerly tick off the practical benefits of speaking a dead language, but of course they pursue their study because it

is fun and challenging, gives them a sense of accomplishment and links them to a community of other passionate speakers.

The same will now happen with Morse. Passionate amateurs will gather around this "dead" language, cherishing it, promoting it, using computers and the Internet to teach it, communicating in it and building a new community of Morse fanatics to match their Latin bretheren. I'll bet the total number of Morse-tappers actually increases and their average age will drop to something less than the entry age for AARP membership. After all, Morse speakers don't even have to leave home to talk with their pals -- they can just switch on their radio and start clicking away.

