



Second Century

The Future is Fragmented

Once upon a time, QST magazine had something close to a monopoly when it came to amateur radio news, projects, product reviews, and much more. That's not to say there weren't alternative publications, but QST was clearly the 800-pound gorilla on the block.

Amateur radio was more homogeneous in those days. When you got on the air you mostly operated SSB, CW, or FM. You attended hamfests, handled traffic, and exchanged QSLs in the mail. Morse code was a lingua franca that almost everyone understood to one degree or another.

As amateur radio has changed over the years, so has the publishing industry. In this month's column, QST Editor Steve Ford, WB8IMY, explains how ARRL's publications are adapting to keep up.

There was a time when amateur radio was a quasi-fraternal community and the content of *QST* reflected that community. Even as the hobby began to diversify with increasing digital activity in the 1980s, the community remained united, especially in the way in which it acquired information.

And then came the internet.

During the last 25 years, the internet has wreaked havoc across the media landscape by fragmenting audiences into almost infinite numbers of groups and subgroups. With content-filtering technology, individuals can easily pick and choose what they want to see according to their interests, no matter how narrow those interests may be.

Newspapers and magazines are struggling in this environment, desperate to adapt to a world that changed almost overnight. As a result, many are shrinking or going out of business entirely.

QST hasn't been immune to these disruptive forces, which is why we hired a media research company to investigate how members, and non-members, really felt about the magazine.

To no one's surprise, the vast majority of older hams were still quite content with *QST* and gave it high marks. However, younger hams — age 30 to 60 — were not happy. They felt the technical material was over their heads and they could not relate to the tradition-oriented tone the magazine seemed to project. For example, they told us they found discussions of ham history and vintage equipment boring and they were put off by other aspects of *QST* that had been standard fare for decades. I'll always remember the barbed comment from one study participant (age 41) who wrote concerning the "Silent Keys" column: "Who puts lists of dead people in a magazine? Yeah, that's what I want in my mailbox every month!"

The data sent a clear message: Our audience was fragmenting, particularly along generational lines. As we

watched other publications scrambling to reposition themselves, we realized the ARRL media battleship needed to change course, and quickly.

The first result was the new *On the Air* magazine, which debuted in January. I'm happy to say that *On the Air* has hit the bullseye for the increasing number of amateurs who don't find a "home" in *QST*. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and I only regret we didn't publish it sooner.

At the same time, we launched two new podcasts: *Eclectic Tech* and *On the Air*. Together with the weekly *ARRL Audio News*, these also appeal to a younger audience that consumes podcasts voraciously, although we're noticing that *Eclectic Tech* and *Audio News* have a growing audience among older amateurs as well.

Expect to see even more focused media offerings from ARRL. We are considering digital publications that will concentrate on specific activities in the way we do now with the *ARES E-Letter* and *Contest Update*. Speaking of digital publications, the weekly *ARRL Letter* now has a circulation of more than 107,000. If it continues to grow, it will someday rival *QST* as the most popular ARRL publication.

There is also the *National Contest Journal* and *QEX*. By the time you read this, both magazines will be available in digital formats to all ARRL members.

But what becomes of *QST*? Rest assured the magazine is not going away. If you are a veteran amateur, I believe you'll find even more to enjoy in the issues to come. Of course, *QST* will slowly evolve as today's veterans leave the ranks and a new crop replaces them. The future is about increasing fragmentation and, as with all media, *QST* will adapt.

Steve Ford, WB8IMY
Editor