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Dear Ken,

Thank you for an interesting portrayal of ham radio operators in yesterday's WSJ. I will admit that we hams are a quirky bunch. We tend to be too technically minded to be any earthly good. Hence, our inability to sometimes articulate who we are.

I would guess that I am one of the most quirky considering my dual career. First, I am a United Methodist minister, pastor of a local congregation here in Tulsa, Oklahoma. (Considering the recent publicity that my denomination has received, some may consider it to be a bit quirky.)

Second, I am editor of CQ VHF magazine and VHF Editor of CQ magazine. The first is a small sister publication of the second, which is the second largest magazine catering to our hobby.

While it is true that we hams are a graying lot, some of us are making efforts to reach out to youth--in rather unique (quirky) ways.

For instance, in my quirky magazine I have published an article on a program that used school children to help assemble miniature satellites. I also have published an article pertaining to how a ham radio operator can assist a local school in setting up contacts with the astronauts on board the International Space Station. I also have published an article on how ham radio operators in Texas encouraged young people involvement in chasing surplus weather balloons that carry amateur radio transmitter payloads. Additionally, I published an article about a youth who built a camera into his radio controlled car and is driving it via amateur television. Speaking of radio controlled devices, in my most recent issue I published an article by a ham who had this lifelong dream of flying a model airplane across the Atlantic--and succeeded, using amateur radio.

An article in the works is one that discusses how young ham radio operators are doing their computer gaming over (802.11 type) wireless links between their computers using amateur radio authorized power levels in order to link up over greater distances than what is allowed under non-licensed regulations.

One of my cover shots was of a group of Boy Scouts putting together an amateur radio antenna.

Getting back to my principal occupation as pastor of a local congregation, it has adopted Hamilton Middle School, an at risk school in our neighborhood. We are hoping, through my amateur radio connections, to develop and roll out a curriculum for their existing after school program that will use amateur radio to teach such non-technical subjects as geography and English.

There is the serious side of our hobby. In April 1995 I was in a leadership position with the national amateur radio organization that found me being responsible for the more than 300 ham radio operators who volunteered themselves and their radios to provide communications in the aftermath of the Murrah building bombing. Initially, ham radio was the backbone communications when cell phone communications were ineffective due to overload. Ham radio operators also played pivotal roles in communications in the aftermath of 9/11, again due to other modes of communications being saturated and overloaded.

Now, about this BPL business. There is evidence that this is problematic for HF communications--sufficient evidence that some countries that have toyed with the idea have abandoned it--one of them being Japan. However, my concern is not so much with the communications problems, but with unfair competition. All five of the FCC commissioners are in favor of the idea of BPL because they believe that it will provide another way for broadband Internet service to be made available to the in-home consumer. Currently, there are two primary sources of broadband Internet service, the local telephone company and the local cable company.

The FCC is convinced that BPL will add a third, competing source to the foray. For example, Commissioner Kathleen Abernathy's speech to the United Powerline Council's annual meeting last fall exuded praise for BPL while ignoring the problems associated with the service.

In my reading the text of her speech, I have a problem with her claims of competition. In particular, she states:

As a regulator, I am keenly interested in BPL technology for a number of reasons. One of my central objectives as an FCC commissioner is to facilitate the deployment of broadband services to all Americans. I also fundamentally believe that the FCC can best promote consumer welfare by relying on market forces, rather than heavy-handed regulation. The development of BPL networks will serve both of these key goals. It will not only bring broadband to previously unserved communities, but the introduction of a new broadband pipeline into the home will foster the kind of competitive marketplace that will eventually enable the Commission to let go of the regulatory reins. I want consumers to have a choice of multiple, facilities-based providers, including not only cable and DSL, but also power line, wireless, and satellite services. Such a robustly competitive and diversified marketplace is something I would call broadband Nirvana.

She goes on to state, "There is little question that BPL services will compete with more-established cable modem and DSL services--and in some markets, satellite and fixed wireless services."

In particular, I am concerned that she is attempting to say that on the one hand, the marketplace will be the judge of who is the best provider of high speed Internet service. On the other hand, by saying that BPL will "bring broadband to previously unserved communities" she admits that BPL will be the initial monopoly service provider in these communities. Where is the marketplace competition in these previously unserved communities? How can BPL be competing with non-existing competitors in these previously unserved communities?

While we are on the subject of competition, with Earthlink's recent half-million dollar investment into Ambient Corp. a Newton, Mass., communications company specializing in (BPL) broadband Internet service, they have bought an ownership position in the corporation and a seat on its advisory board. Furthermore, last month Earthlink, working with Progress Energy in North Carolina began offering Internet service over a test bed involving 500 homes. From my MBA training, I'm more inclined to view this as industry cooperation, which is more like monopolization, than competition. (Source: <http://www.internetnews.com/xSP/article.php/3315881>.)

Speaking of quirky, perhaps the resources of WSJ could be used to follow some of these quirky money trails involved in BPL. To paraphrase an advertising slogan from another print media, I know a lot of inquiring ham radio minds who would like to know just where does these money trails lead.

I think that you probably have read enough of my quirky ramblings for one day. Hopefully, though, you might have been enlightened concerning a couple of perspectives about ham radio and BPL that you might not have considered before.

Most sincerely,

Rev. Joe Lynch, (quirky ham radio call sign: N6CL)