

Random Thoughts About Net Control

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I've acted as net control a few times, and comments made afterwards suggest I didn't mess up too much.

I did have some prior speaking experience, but not on the air. Instead, I've had years of running "technical bridges," long conference calls where a number of engineers attempt to resolve some hardware or software failure in real time. My record call was a number of years ago: a thirty-six-hour marathon dealing with a cable modem provisioning system failure. I was much younger and tolerant of sleep deprivation then.

So, given that I really don't know what I'm doing but do have some experience in a loosely associated field, I'm going to do the boomer thing. I'm going to offer unwelcome advice.

Go low and slow.

No, this isn't about tricked-out cars on Federal Boulevard. When you are net control you should consciously lower the pitch of your voice and slow down your delivery. For most of us, this requires intent because we tend to be nervous in this job, and being nervous makes us speak faster and faster. The speed increase almost always includes a pitch change up, so that in time we begin to sound like a mouse from a Walt Disney cartoon.

There are four reasons for going low and slow.

First, your delivery will be much easier to understand. The other folks on the net will have a much better chance of understanding what you are saying, not only because they will have more time to process your words but also because speaking slowly will allow you to add some expression to what you are saying. Expression aids context, and context adds clarity.

Second, your listeners will mirror your delivery. If you speak carefully, they will respond carefully. This allows you a chance to actually understand what they are trying to say.

Third, a measured tempo allows you to control the flow of the net much easier. Your words will project a gravitas that commands respect. Or, at least, it won't cause someone to ask, "Why is a twelve-year-old running the net?"

Finally, paradoxically, speaking slowly will allow you to speak longer without gasping for air. You'll be able to complete a sentence from the canned copy, i.e. the net script, without suffering inconvenient pauses as you have to take a breath. There are physical reasons for this: it takes much more air to vibrate those vocal cords at higher pitches, and when you speak quickly you tend to take much faster, smaller breaths.

Acknowledge those check-ins.

At some point in almost every net there will come a time when you will be taking check-ins from the net participants. Let me give you a sample of this exchange. The bold text is you as net control; the italic text represents what you are receiving.

Please check in with your call sign using ITU phonetics, name, and location. Please come now.

<Garbled>kilo-kilo-yankee Stan from Franktown

November-four-sierra-romeo-kilo Dan from Aurora

Alpha-charlie-five-sierra Paul from Parker

Net control would like to recognize N2SRK Dan and AC5S Paul.

We had a double at the beginning. I caught KKY Stan. Stan, could you come back with your call please?

November-zero-kilo-kilo-yankee Stan from Franktown

Thank you, NOKKY. Now would the station that doubled with Stan please come back with your call, name and location?

November-zero-kilo-echo-golf Ray in Trouble

Net control recognizes NOKEG Ray. Let's continue with check-ins.

Additional check-ins please come now.

Of course, I made up this whole flow, but it should illustrate a couple of principals.

First, unless net control acknowledges that they received the transmission, there is no way a net participant can know that they were received. Further, most net participants cannot transmit and monitor the repeater at the same time. They have no way of knowing that they transmitted at the same time as another ham, preventing their reception.

Acknowledging the transmission ensures that they were heard correctly by net control, and it also alerts the ham who had an unsuccessful transmission of the failure because they won't hear their call sign recognized.

Second, don't try to "fix" bad check-ins as they happen. Do the check-ins in manageable groups, acknowledge the clearly recognized check-ins first, then work on cleaning up the problems before going any further. This allows the folks that were successful to ignore the attempts to correct problems. They know they weren't the person who doubled or didn't have a good signal. It also alerts those who weren't successful that they need to pay attention when it's time to try again.

Know your net.

It appears to me that there are four kinds of nets which I've decided to call formal, top down, roundtable, and social. I've made up these categories; they are not meant to match somebody else's definitions.

The formal net is best explained with a couple of examples. There are nets devoted to emergency communications. These nets are strictly controlled with the goal that only necessary communications are permitted. Other examples are traffic nets, which are devoted to relaying messages with speed and absolute accuracy. If you want to hear an example of this kind of traffic, listen to the Colorado Traffic Net at 145.310- (88.5 CCTSS) daily at 19:00 Mountain. Just don't be surprised to hear "three" pronounced "tree" along with a few other conventions designed to ensure accurate voice transcriptions of written material. Net control operations for these nets are very formal, almost rigid.

The top down net is distinguished by its structure. It has announcements, generally from club officers about club business, will have a participants' check-in, and may include a re-broadcast of something like Amateur Radio News Line. However, there is no real two-way communication, no allowance for net participants to do anything other than check-in. It seems to fulfill the same function as the Parker Radio Association email blast: it's a way of sending out information to the membership with no expectation of a reply. These tend to have very few net control operators.

An example of what I'm calling a roundtable net is the Preppers' Net that is held Sundays on the WOCFI repeater. A topic is proposed, such as "how do you store water," which is then discussed. These are definitely two-way nets. Participants are encouraged to respond. A couple other examples would be the Monitoring Net, devoted to listening to public service radio transmissions, and the Astronomy Net, which talks about...you guessed it...astronomy. Net control needs to be disciplined when running one of these nets to ensure that the conversation doesn't go too far off topic. Net control must also work to encourage participation. The PRA Elmer net is another example of this kind of operation, although it also shares some characteristics with the social net described below. Net control for these nets demands some special skills, almost those of a product manager.

Finally, there are the social nets. PRA's Digital and Analog Nets are wonderful examples of these. While there are many similarities to a roundtable net, the "topic" tends to be far more informal. Actually, the topic is "ham radio," which means that most "shack reports" center on ham radio activities, although talking about significant events, such as a graduation or going on a trip are fodder for reports. Politics and other controversial topics are avoided...I'd say like the plague, but since we're in the midst of Covid-19 I'll avoid that usage. These nets tend to have the loosest form of net control, and this net control style is possibly the easiest to learn.

As I noted, the skills used by the net control operator will be different for each of these kinds of nets, although there will be many overlaps. Perhaps the most important skills for net control of a social net are to be as welcoming as possible and to actively listen to the participants' reports.

Not actively listening is possibly the worst sin. It is incredibly embarrassing to respond with "Hope you had a great time at your grandson's graduation party," when what was actually said was, "Although my grandson won't graduate because he failed English, we decided to go ahead and hold the party since the food was already ordered."

This illustrates something else that you should be doing. Recognize each report with a few words before moving on. As humans we need to have our words acknowledged, even if it is just a "Thanks for that report, NOKEG. Let's move on to NOKKY. What's going on in your shack, Stan?"

There is a pitfall to avoid when you acknowledge each report with something more than a thank you. Suppose the shack report was about installing a new trapped vertical antenna. You can certainly say, "I know we look forward to hearing about how your new antenna works." You should not say, "I have the same antenna, and it's helped me get a lot of new countries using FT8. I just added three more countries today, so I'm just twelve shy of my DXCC award." While your comments may be interesting, they don't belong here. As net control you are the

facilitator, not a contributor. You'll have a chance to make a report later in the net. You can afford to wait.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

Being net control is a blast, but it is true that moderation isn't a bad idea.

Seriously, it takes a lot of work to be a good net control operator, especially for a social or roundtable net. If you volunteer week after week to be net control you're going to burn out. To do a good job you need to constantly refresh yourself and what you say. If you don't it will become a burden rather than a joy.

It also leads to something worse on the part of the net participants you are trying to help: hearing the same voice and delivery week after week can cause them to suffer net fatigue. I've been part of nets that had the same two or three net controllers...or worse, the same guy...running them week after week. They can become incredibly boring, and people tune them out in time.

I know Dan, N2SRK, is constantly asking for net control operators. That's his job. But I'd suggest that doing it more than once a month is a bad idea. You'll appreciate it far more if you space it out.

In my case, although I love being net control, I've done my duty for this year. There are many far more competent net control operators out there, and I am not going to deny them an opportunity to show off their talents by grabbing a spot and preempting their participation.

What are you supposed to do?

If you aren't net control all the time, what are you supposed to do?

The first answer is you should participate in the nets. That should go without saying.

The second answer is to be an active listener to other net controllers. It's not enough to appreciate a well-run net; you should also ask why it was successful. Sadly, you can also learn a lot from when a net runs like a 1991 Yugo. You'll learn about the faux pas that prevent a smooth operation, and hopefully you'll be able to avoid the same mistakes.

Closing remarks.

I don't have any.

Hey! This was a set of random thoughts created by someone who knows little. The real closing remarks are yours to make. Take time to learn how to be a net control operator; listen, listen, listen to the good ones out there; and take time to think about what works. Then practice your new art in good health. -73