

How to Impress a Non-Ham with Your HT

By Mike Dinelli, N9BOR

Remember when an HT and an autopatch would drop the jaw of an unsuspecting non-ham? You punched in a few DTMF tones, heard a dial tone and proceeded to call your XYL after a long day at the office. That, of course, was in the pre-cell phone/Internet era. Today it's called "wireless," a popular buzzword for the in-crowd, but we still like to call it radio.

Some people see the excitement of ham radio as a thing of the past. How do we convey our love of radio to curious kids and technically savvy adults? We certainly can't compete with cell phones, and perhaps we don't want to anyway. Amateur radio should remain a technical pursuit. We must demonstrate some knowledge before we are even allowed to call our first CQ. After we obtain our tickets, the learning should not stop. For the curious, ham radio is an ideal vehicle for lifelong learning in multiple disciplines.

Take your old 2-meter HT, punch in a few touch-tones and talk to a ham in Glasgow, Scotland. Instead of talking to the same guys every night on the local repeater, you could have Jimmy Khoo, 9W2HJ, from Malaysia stop by to say hello. Perhaps Kappy, W9CJ, is on his way to dinner in Florida and decides he wants to check-in with his buddies in Chicago on the MAC repeater. Is this possible? Yes, and it's really quite simple and inexpensive.

There are several systems available, but one that is growing in popularity is called EchoLink¹. EchoLink is free software that allows Amateur Radio operators to communicate with each other over the Internet, using voice-over-IP (VoIP) technology. The program allows worldwide connections to be made between stations, from computer to station, or from computer to computer.

You don't even need a radio to talk to other hams on the air. You can do it with your computer and an Internet connection. I downloaded EchoLink from their website (1.8 MB), installed it on my hard drive and filled out the registration form. In about an hour, my registration was confirmed. It was manually processed to ensure my amateur radio license status. I start EchoLink and it displays a list of participants. Some are shown as repeaters, some are simplex links and others are just individual hams like me.

I scan through the list, see a repeater in New York and double-click on it. In about two seconds I hear *"Go ahead N9BOR, this is WB2xxx."* Now what do I do? I should have read the instructions! Again I hear my callsign coming from my computer speakers. *"N9BOR, are you there? This is WB2xxx."* A quick look at the Echolink screen and a mad rush to grab my \$2.99 computer microphone and I'm in business. I say, *"WB2xxx this is N9BOR, Mike in Chicago and I don't know what I'm doing."*

¹ <http://www.echolink.org/>

Can you hear me?" Al, a mobile in New York says, *"Nice to meet you, Mike. You sound great!"* Soon I'm in a roundtable with another mobile station and a ham on an HT in front of his house (in New York). The audio is crystal clear and I can't detect any delay or lost packets using my dial-up Internet account. I don't need an outdoor antenna or have to spend any money, yet I'm in Chicago and I'm talking to three hams in New York. Cool! This could even impress my 14-year old son.

To create a linked repeater, you need a simple interface, a boatanchor computer and an Internet connection. You can purchase an interface kit for less than \$50.00². Connections are made for audio in, audio out and push-to-talk. That's all the hardware you need to create an Internet linked repeater. Options are available to enhance operation (e.g. control receiver, compressor/limiter).

So why aren't more repeaters taking advantage of this technology? Maybe we want to keep ham radio a secret. Or perhaps it's because of the gray area that links radio with the Internet. There is some debate by purists as whether this is really ham radio when you use wired (Internet) technologies to facilitate a QSO.

Imagine walking your dog and talking to a ham in England on your HT. A neighbor walks up and says, *"What are you doing?"* You say, *"I'm talking to my friend, Nigel in Manchester, England. He says it's bloody cold, but he's on his way to a Rugby game anyway."* This is how you impress a non-ham with your HT. □

Editor's note: *Mike Dinelli, N9BOR, of Skokie, Illinois has been a ham since 1980. He is currently serving as Secretary of Metro Amateur Radio Club (MAC). His interests include boatanchors, contesting, DXing and CW ragchewing. You can reach Mike via e-mail at n9bor@qsl.net or through his [Web site](#). The author would like to thank Philip Lazar, K9PL, for his assistance in editing this article.*

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² <http://www.echolink.org/interfaces.htm>