

(A Fading Signal)



U.S. Army cadets learning the dots and dashes of Morse Code at the Tuskegee Institute flight school in Alabama in 1942. (U.S. Army Signal Corps via The Associated Press)

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It may be the ultimate S O S — Morse Code is in distress.



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times.
John Fore, left, and David B. Leeson, both members of the Stanford Amateur Radio Club at the station at Stanford University

The language of dots and dashes has been the lingua franca of amateur radio, a vibrant community of technology buffs and hobbyists who have provided a communications lifeline in emergencies and disasters.

But that community has been shaken by news that the government will no longer require Morse Code proficiency as a condition for an amateur license. It was deemed dispensable in part because other modes of communicating over ham radio, like voice, teletype and even video, have grown in popularity.

While the decision had been expected, some ham radio operators fear that their exclusive club has been opened to the unwashed masses — and that the very survival of Morse Code is in question.

“It’s part of the dumbing down of America,” said Nancy Kott, editor of *World Radio* magazine and a field representative for the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Metamora, Mich. "We live in a society today that wants something for nothing."

A woman in a mostly male world, Ms. Kott is one of about 660,000 licensed ham operators in the United States and is the American leader of Fists CW Club, an organization that calls itself the International Morse Preservation Society. (An "open fist" was the hand position typically used by telegraph operators when sending Morse, which is sometimes called Continuous Wave, or CW. And in ham radio slang, someone who sends fine code is said to have a good fist.)



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times.
With thumb and forefinger barely touching the two metal ends of a Morse paddle, a ham operator unleashes a stream of dits and dahs.

Within 48 hours after the Federal Communication Commission's move this month to drop the Morse requirement, a discussion on www.eham.net ran more than 380 messages and 57,000 words long, the equivalent of a short novel. The postings were divided roughly evenly between those lamenting and praising the commission's decision.

"CW is just another mode and should not be afforded any special priority over others," wrote K4UUG, who like many radio aficionados identified himself online using his radio call sign. "Proficiency should not be required for those who do not wish to use the mode."

As part of its decision to eliminate the Morse requirement, the commission made essentially the same point.

Inside a hilltop trailer above Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif., a couple of veteran coders seemed to be taking the commission's decision in stride earlier this week. In a room cluttered with electronic equipment, they translated the dits and dahs that beeped in the background at dizzying speed, the chatter between someone in Canada, VE6NL to be precise, and someone off the coast of Antarctica, VP8CMH.

"It's a bit like a foreign language," said W6LD, whose real name is John Fore, a securities lawyer at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, a prominent Silicon Valley firm. "You learn it and it's fun to use it."

With thumb and forefinger barely touching the two metal ends of a Morse paddle, W6NL, a k a David B. Leeson, unleashed his own stream of dits and dahs with the ease of a virtuoso, joining the global conversation. "I fell head over heels for amateur radio when I was 4 or 5 years old and heard Morse Code signals from afar at the station of a 14-year-old," said Mr. Leeson, 69, a consulting professor of engineering at Stanford. "I still remember the thrill."

The thrill turned into a hobby, and the hobby turned into a career in technology. In 1968, Mr. Leeson founded California Microwave, once a thriving telecommunications equipment company but now defunct. Now radio and Morse are just for fun, said Mr. Lesson, who is faculty adviser to the Stanford Amateur Radio Club, which once counted William R. Hewlett and David Packard as members.

Mr. Leeson and Mr. Fore are both active in radio contests, 48-hour competitions in which hams try to contact as many other hams as possible, often using Morse. Mr. Leeson has a station in the Galapagos Islands, where he goes several times a year with his wife, Barbara (K6BL), for contests. They once contacted as many as 17,000 other hams in a weekend. Mr. Fore, who is 50, and got his first license when he was 10, has a station in Aruba.

They embody the kind of utility-free passion for Morse that the futurist Paul Saffo said would ensure its survival.

"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," Mr. Saffo, a fellow at the Institute for the Future, wrote in his blog.

Morse Code was first devised in the 1830s for use with the telegraph. It later became an essential part of civilian, maritime and military radio communications. But the military has largely abandoned its use in favor of newer technologies, and the Coast Guard stopped listening for Morse S O S signals at sea during the 1990s.

The F.C.C. first lifted the Morse Code requirement for entry-level licenses in 1991. It later dropped proficiency requirements for higher-level licenses to five words a minute, from 20. And after international regulations stopped mandating knowledge of it in 2003, it was only a matter of time until Morse Code was no longer required in the United States. The requirement will formally be phased out sometime next year.

The demise of the Morse requirement, however, could be a boon for ham radio itself. After the F.C.C.'s decision, the American Radio Relay League, an organization representing ham radio operators, said demand for information about radio licenses surged from about 200 in a typical weekend to about 500.

"We are very pleased to see that," said David Sumner (K1ZZ), the league's chief executive.

That is no consolation for the most avid defenders of Morse.

"There is something magical about being able to put two wires together and start going dit-dit-dit dit-dit," said Ms. Kott, or WZ8C. "We are just going to have to get on the air and do what we do and hope for the best."

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