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Getting the Story Straight

“There’s a saying, often attributed to Winston Churchill, that ‘an [untruth] gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.’ In an age of modern communications, this phenomenon is more apparent than ever.”

Since ARRL’s January Board meeting, rumors about what was decided have abounded; e-mails have flown furiously; reflector groups are burning up. As is typical of uninformed rumors, there’s not much truth to be found in the traffic. It’s not the policy of *QST* to respond to rumor; but because the errors are so egregious, so outrageous, and so widespread, I asked Editor-in-Chief Steve Ford, WB8IMY, and Managing Editor Becky Schoenfeld, W1BXY, to give me one extra page this month to set the record straight. I did this 2 days before the issue went to press, making their lives even more difficult around deadline, so I offer them and the *QST* staff my sincere apologies.

Rather than repeat rumors then provide rebuttal, let me take you through some of the Board’s discussions. Let’s begin with the Official Observer (OO) program. I don’t need to repeat how interference has plagued our spectrum, growing ever more vexing in the last decade. In October, the FCC’s Laura Smith announced a renewed enforcement effort. Her comments at Pacificon came sooner than I was expecting, but no matter, because many of us at ARRL have been unsatisfied by the effectiveness of the OO program as configured — which is not to be construed as failings of OOs — and we were already at work on a solution. Our OOs are among the most patient, careful, and diligent volunteers in our community. Over the past decade, their frustration has risen to unacceptable levels.

Two things will change this. The first is Ms. Smith assuming her new position as the full-time Amateur Service enforcement advocate. Amateur Radio has a good friend here. The second is new FCC Chairman Ajit Pai’s emphasis on enforcement. At a press conference on January 31, Pai told *Broadcast Engineering Extra*, “Enforcement is a critical priority for this commission...my philosophy is simple. Follow the law...and take the appropriate action necessary to protect the public interest.” Another good friend. Accordingly, ARRL must realign the tasks of OOs to conform to the FCC’s renewed view of enforcement. Priorities must be established, and reporting structures must conform to focus on those specific violations the FCC wishes most to pursue, leaving lesser offenses necessarily behind. In order to assist the FCC in implementing the new emphasis, we expect that OOs will be trained to make them even more effective, and to reduce the frustration of legitimate, well-intentioned — but unrequited — pursuits outside the Commission’s policy. This is a good thing. There are a couple of new sheriffs in town. Let’s give them a chance.

As to the role of OOs going forward, I foresee a much more focused, productive, and personally satisfying role whereby Official Observers’ efforts will result in less bad behavior, or make bad behavior a very expensive indulgence for those who continue to practice it. We expect that there will be more, not

fewer, OO opportunities in the future, as well as updated training — with development and succession plans in place — deployed more effectively around the US. That’s my belief, and my earnest hope.

I want to point out that these discussions took place among Board members and senior staff over the weekend of the Board meeting — but *not* during the formal Board sessions. The minutes of the Board meeting accurately reflect the Board’s actions. The above discussions, as well as discussion of emergency communications, which I will address below, took place on Thursday evening, at which time it is the practice of the Board to hear presentations from the staff — or from outside experts — for the purpose of informing the Board on timely topics. The Board makes policy in the formal Board meetings. The Thursday evening presentations attempt to inform that policy making *prior* to Board meetings. That’s a noteworthy distinction.

In that Thursday evening setting, staff discussed the topic of disaster and emergency communications. Since the summer, these conversations have been ongoing precisely because the role of Amateur Radio in disaster preparedness has evolved dramatically. After the events of 9/11 as well as Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, relationships between ARRL groups (such as ARES and NTS) on the one hand, and professional first responders, emergency operations centers, and government agencies on the other, have changed. The number of potential served agencies, including VOADs (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster), has expanded: new opportunities abound. Adjusting to these changes requires careful fact-finding, analysis, and formulation of responses. Most of all, it takes time. No decisions have been made to date. Rumors to the contrary are just that — rumors.

I do not believe our Board would ever sanction wholesale changes in either program without the input and advice of our field leadership: Section Managers, SECs, and OOCs.

So I ask all members, in this era of fast-moving communications and rapidly evolving roles, to pause for a moment and take a deep breath. When we encounter some outrageous piece of random news, use the critical thinking and analytical skills that we possess as engineers or technically trained specialists, and ask ourselves — does this make sense? And if it doesn’t, then, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, let that voice die, with a dying fall.