

If you've ever been the victim of intentional interference, you've probably wondered, "What makes this person act this way?" Well, WB2REM, a licensed psychologist for more than three decades, has some answers.

Psychology of the QRMer

BY JAMES MILLNER,* WB2REM

Have you ever been in a radio conversation only to have someone throw a carrier on you or make a rude comment without identifying? I know I have, and with increasing frequency. I have been an amateur radio operator for over fifty years and during that time, I have observed a gradual decline in good operating habits and procedures which may also mirror the general decline in civility that we've seen among the public at large in recent years.

So what and who is a QRMer? By definition, QRM is interference caused by man and a QRMer (pronounced by some as "Quarmer") is a person who demonstrates these attributes while operating. This behavior can be seen as either unintentional or intentional in nature with the latter fitting into the category of malicious interference. Once we understand why the QRMer interferes with us, it should be easier to address his/her behavior in a more positive manner.

I believe the deterioration in behavior among hams has its roots in a number of arenas. These include:

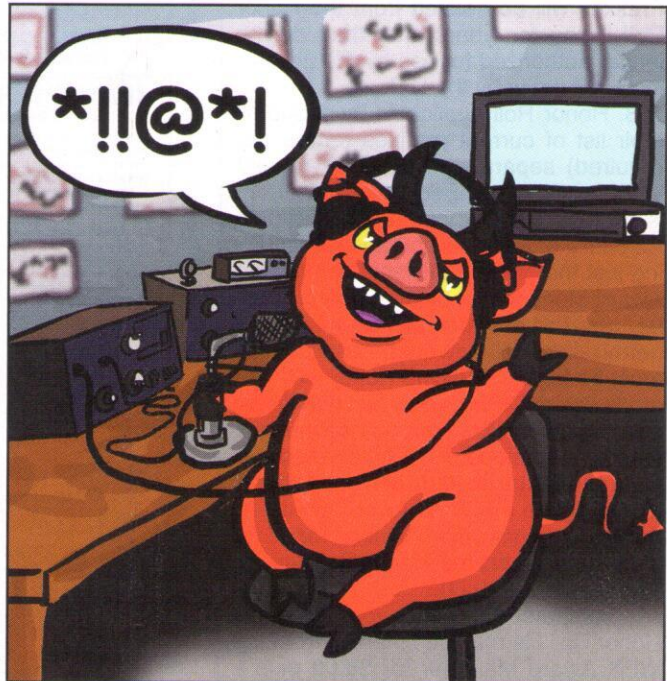
- Intolerance of divergent views
- A general lack of operating experience
- Feelings of station inferiority
- Group diffused inappropriate behavior
- Operating under the influence
- Acts by truly emotionally sick individuals

Unintentional QRM

Unintentional interference can be found in many forms. For example, it could come from a station operating close to another's frequency. Likewise, when two hams unknowingly share a frequency in a state of ionospheric transition, they may find themselves suddenly in competition with each other. In this instance, the stations need to become aware of what has happened and politely agree to change frequency.

Very loud stations, although within normal frequency bandwidth, can create the perception of splattering across the band. The affected station, whose receiver may be overloaded, may blame the stronger station for the interference. This can sometimes be corrected by turning off the receiver's noise blanker and/or pre-amplifier.

Nets with established frequencies of operation can also create interference to QSOs already in progress. A net may not assume ownership of a frequency. However, in cases like this, if you politely explain that a net is scheduled to come up on frequency, the stations in conversation will likely



respond positively and move. The worst thing that can be done is to proceed with the net, pretending the other stations in QSO do not exist. This is bound to create animosity and lead to possible intentional interference to the net.

Contest participants may also precipitate predictable unintentional QRM and generate anger from non-contesters who are affected by competition for a frequency. The demand for frequency spectrum is greatest during these times, which can result in overcrowding and frayed tempers. Contesters sometimes forget that the frequency used is not exclusive to them and that non-contest stations have the right to operate within the same spectrum. Stations that are not involved in the contest activities might want to find less active frequencies in order to avoid confrontation. The WARC bands (30, 17 and 12 meters) may be a good refuge during contest weekends, since virtually all contest sponsors exclude these bands from competition.

Intentional QRM

Malicious or intentional interference first appeared in a very noticeable form in the 1990s. With the appearance of FCC

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Counsel Riley Hollingsworth on the scene in 2000, the FCC began to crack down on violators. The active citing and prosecution of offenders for intentional interference and rule violation resulted in a reduction of malicious interference. However, malicious interference has returned again in recent years in the form of cursing, singing, carrier-throwing, and other rude and generally obnoxious behavior.

[Ed. Note: The perception of increased FCC enforcement during Riley's tenure resulted in a general improvement in on-air behavior. Riley's retirement coincided with changes in FCC privacy practices that resulted in fewer public notices regarding enforcement actions and the perception of reduced enforcement activities, even though there was actually very little change. But the perception of reduced enforcement has resulted in a broader deterioration in on-air behavior.—W2VUJ]

Stations operating from rare DX entities are also prime targets for intentional interference, especially if they employ the common—and generally recommended—practice of transmitting and listening on different frequencies. The wider the frequency “split” that is chosen by the DX operation (occasionally up to 20 kHz), the more likely it is that interference will occur to ongoing QSOs. This type of operation and associated interference tends to create anger and animosity toward the DX station as well as producing a higher likelihood of retaliation by stations affected by the interference. DX stations, whenever possible, should scan the frequency or frequencies on which they will be listening for availability, before announcing the split.

Very loud stations seem to attract QRMers. I can only speculate that this is because less powerful stations feel intimidated by their presence or that they are just heard by more people, which in turn attracts more listeners. One way of addressing the problem is to make people who are listening feel comfortable about breaking into a conversation if they so desire.

When stations engage in discussions of controversial topics such as politics or religion, it can incite stations who may be monitoring on the frequency and inadvertently provoke an emotional reaction. This can put the normally passive listener on the defensive and possibly lead to disruptive and illegal transmissions.

Substance use/abuse has affected all aspects of society. Unfortunately, station owners sometime encounter malicious interference from those who have lost their inhibitions through alcohol and/or other drugs. The only way to address these individuals is to ignore them. As would be surmised, engaging in fruitful conversation with someone inebriated would not be productive.

Underlying Factors

As a licensed psychologist of 35 years, I have come in contact with many personality types. I feel that many of the operators creating malicious interference are psychologically troubled individuals. The behavior we observe from QRMers, for the most part, is not driven by us, but by the overall mental health of the offending operator. Most of us could agree that people who willfully interfere have a need for attention and recognition. These operators tend to employ *displaced aggression*, which is anger directed onto others rather than onto the actual source of their frustration, all the while acting out with somewhat infantile behavior. These hams tend to rationalize their behaviors by thinking that others believe the same way they do and they may project their negative self-image onto others. The overuse of defense

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mechanisms by such individuals tends to create anxiety and emotional turmoil.

Inappropriate group behavior is created by a diffused sense of responsibility. Some troubling hotspots of QRM—where cursing, insults, and poor operating procedures occur—are self-perpetuated by a “monkey-see, monkey-do” attitude. There is a feeling that if someone else can get away with the behavior, so can I. It's useful to avoid these frequencies to lessen their impact and reduce the size of the audience these people are so desperately seeking.

What You Can Do

How can you make your ham radio experience more pleasurable? You can avoid the frequencies which promote toxic, provocative and attention-getting behavior. Like children, these stations crave attention. If they are denied this attention, they will feel unrewarded and often will leave the frequency. If someone chooses to QRM you, ignore them. Challenging them just lets them know that they have gotten to you and reinforces their resolution to continue. In the worst case scenario, when the offending station is transmitting, announce a change in frequency and move.

Are you seeing yourself in the mirror here? At times, stress and anger affects all of us. When it gets bad, turn off your radio! Recognize your feelings before they get you in trouble and address the malcontent in an appropriate arena. Amateur radio is a great hobby which provides most of us with a positive life outlet. Let's not ruin it with self-defeating behavior that diminishes the quality of our hobby.