

## The World Above 50 MHz

# VHF Online Chat Rooms — Ensuring Valid Contacts

When operating VHF — especially with meteor-scatter contacts — it's essential to have a method to coordinate contacts, keep track of the sequence and direction of transmissions, and confirm when a contact has been successfully completed.

But there's an important point to keep in mind: Too much online communication can invalidate a contact. Let's examine the range of available VHF chat rooms and how to ensure your on-the-air contacts remain valid.

### VHF Online Chat Rooms and Information Sources

The original online contact scheduling chat room might be *Ping Jockey Central* (<https://pingjockey.net/cgi-bin/pingtalk>; see Figure 1). It is designed to facilitate meteor-scatter contacts, which make use of meteor burst communications in which radio signals are reflected off the ionized trails that meteors leave behind as they burn up in Earth's atmosphere. *Ping Jockey* is accessible online via a web browser, and there is also a downloadable PC software version called *PJClient*, which pulls data from the website and displays it on your computer. You can download *PJClient* at <https://n5tm.com/pjclient>.

Another good page to monitor is the ON4KST amateur radio chat at <http://on4kst.com/chat/start.php>. This

online resource offers chat rooms by band and IARU region to help you zero in on the stations that you're more likely to hear and work. Here, again, there are downloadable software options for displaying the information: *KSTChat* (<http://kstchat.pp.ua>; see Figure 2) and *wtKST* (<https://gm3sek.com/2020/01/31/wtkst-download>).

The Slack app is becoming increasingly popular as a chat option. Several workrooms for VHF operators are available on the app. The main one is VHF-Chat, which includes channels ranging from regions like the "four-landers," to special operations such as "rover-raregrid," to "eme," and even "all-topics." To use this chat room, download the app at <https://slack.com> and request an invitation to the workroom from an existing member.

Another way to access real-time VHF information, such as 6-meter openings, is to join special interest groups on <https://groups.io>. For instance, there is a dedicated group for the Fred Fish Memorial Award that maintains a leaderboard and a calendar of rare grid rover operations.

### The Required Exchange for a Valid QSO

Before we dig deeper into how best to ensure a valid contact, we need to define the key requirements for a contact. Looking back through this column's archives, we find two definitive answers.

In the March 1957 issue of *QST* — back when this column was called "The World Above 50 Mc.," with "Mc" standing for "megacycles" — columnist Edward P. Tilton, W1HDQ, wrote: "The minimum exchange for two-way work to be considered a contact has been fairly well standardized on a two-stage procedure: positive identification of calls at both ends, and the complete exchange of signal reports."

He goes on to say, for meteor-scatter contacts: "If he gets the signal report, he then sends you one. If you get it, you send 'R.' If he gets the single letter, he also sends 'R,' and the QSO is over, as far as the claim for a contact is concerned."

Nearly 50 years later, in the March 2006 issue of *QST*, the subject is taken up again, this time by columnist

Eugene Zimmerman, W3ZZ. He cites the column by W1HDQ and adds:

To this day we still follow the same general outline but with a few changes. Exchange of "signal reports" has come to mean exchange of at least one specific piece of information beyond the other station's call sign. This can be an actual signal report...a grid locator or whatever. In addition, once the contact sequence has begun, there can be no communication between the participants by some other means like the telephone, the Internet or some other amateur frequency, HF or VHF+.

From nearly 70 years ago to today, the definition of a valid contact has mostly remained the same across communication modes: exchange calls, reports, or grids, and provide an RRR confirmation. Additionally, "73" is not required but can be helpful, or at least considered a courtesy, to the other operator.

### Online Chat — What's Allowed, and What's Not

In that same March 2006 column, W3ZZ writes:

All of our awards and standings depend on how vigorously we maintain our standards. As a group VHF operators have always had high standards in the past. Thus I have been dismayed at the reports I have received and in fact the postings I have seen on the Internet reflectors that are used to make schedules for both meteor scatter and EME contacts where stations are talking to one another on the Internet while a contact is being made on VHF. Worse yet, other well-meaning stations with perhaps bigger antennas or better conditions will tell the participants what they have heard.... So the participants are getting information about the contact even if all they are doing is watching the Reflector and not sending anything themselves.

It is completely reasonable to set up schedules and exchange information before the contact takes place, he continues. "Once the contact begins, however, exchanging any details about the contact while it is ongoing is unacceptable," he adds. "Information about the contact from third parties is likewise forbidden."

I personally like the warning posted on the *Ping Jockey* web page: "Exchanging any contact details on here before you're complete invalidates the contact." This directive applies to both sides of the contact and to observers who add information as it happens. That means reporting contact progress via chat, phone, text, or similar methods is not allowed. Specifically, it



Figure 2 — *KSTChat* is another option for scheduling meteor-scatter contacts. This software pulls information from the ON4KST amateur radio chat room.

bans phrases like "I got your signal report" and similar messages. Of course, if you're working the station for the 10th time and trying out a new antenna, it's less critical. But if you're participating in a contest or aiming for a new grid, it matters.

### Ensuring Valid Contacts

We have some incredible technology at our fingertips. That includes our ham shack computers, amazing rigs, and modulation modes from *WSJT-X* that dig deep for weak signals. But we still face the same problems that challenged operators in 1957 and earlier. They are human issues.

We are eager to earn awards, gain rare grids, and help one another do the same, so we'll use any tool at our disposal to make that happen.

But there does need to be some genuine reflection on how we coach each other and how we behave when placed in situations that could violate the principles outlined above. We should further note that our awards and contest results are based on the integrity of every operator.

Good luck with your contacts, awards, and contests. I hope this history lesson and compilation of information aid you in that journey in some small way.

### Thanks to NØJK

With this issue, Jon Jones, NØJK, is stepping down from his role as the "World Above 50 MHz" columnist. He took over from Gene Zimmerman, W3ZZ, in August 2011. Since then, he has documented the ups and downs of two solar cycles in the VHF, UHF, SHF, and higher bands. Thank you, Jon!



Figure 1 — *Ping Jockey Central* is an online chat room dedicated to the discussion of amateur radio meteor-scatter communications, including facilitating contacts.