Automated Morse Code Decoders: AI Gone Too Far?

Bryan Bergeron

Software Defined Radio (SDR) has made great strides over the past few years, with more functions, greater frequency range, support for waterfall user interfaces, and a physical package dwarfed by the wall wart that supplies power. A common function is automated Morse Code decoding, in which incoming CW audio is converted into an alpha-numeric ticker tape display. Admittedly a great feature for contesting, but what of routine use?

Based on my own experience with automated CW decoding, there is a tendency to let the machine do the heavy lifting, especially at higher speeds. In the end, after several months of using this "ear candy", I decided to disable the feature on my SDR. Why? Well, what's the point of using Morse code as the basis for communications if you're not going to employ the processor between your ears?

Morse code doesn't employ a checksum or other error detection system. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of standards for wired and wireless communications that provide a more stable, more secure connection. I have nothing against the latest strides in AI, but there is no need to replace the amateur radio operator. The last thing we need are CW Bots (software robots) filling the airwaves with automated means of gathering certificates of accomplishment while we're simultaneously watching TicToc and our favorite movie in separate windows.

SDR has made it possible for every ham, on every budget, to experiment with RF from a few hundred KHz to over 6GHz. I've been using it as the basis for my radio astronomy work. But some things shouldn't be automated. In my mind, technology is inherently good; It's up to us to "do no harm".

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"When you've worked a FISTS, you've worked a friend."

INFORMATION PAGE

When you have a question about FISTS, go to the source for the correct answer. Posting a question on a chat room or email reflector may yield the answer, but your best bet is to ask a FISTS volunteer or look in the reference issue. Several volunteer contacts and/or email addresses have changed from the last reference issue of *The KeyNote.* Please make note of the following listings.

When emailing a volunteer please put the word FISTS in the title of your email. This will help the volunteer recognize that your email is important and not spam.

Awards and Certificates

Dennis Franklin, K6DF, awards@fistsna.org
4658 Capitan Dr., Fremont, CA 94536-5448

Club Call, KN0WCW

"Vacant"
If interested email to:
Joe Falcone, N8TI, store@fistsna.org

Membership Questions; Renewals; Call Changes; Name, Mailing, and Email Address Changes

Dennis Franklin, K6DF, membership@fistsna.org
4658 Capitan Dr., Fremont, CA 94536-5448

FISTS Store Manager

Joe Falcone, N8TI, store@fistsna.org
9880 Musch Road, Brighton, MI 48116

Activities Manager

"Vacant"
If interested email to:
Joe Falcone, N8TI, store@fistsna.org

Website Changes (including getting your personal or club web page linked)

Dennis Franklin, K6DF, webmaster@fistsna.org
4658 Capitan Dr., Fremont, CA 94536-5448

Code Buddy Volunteers and Buddies

http://www.fistsna.org/codebuddy.php

FISTS Sprints
Ashley Lambe, KX4ASH

E-logs to sprintlogs@fistsna.org
Mail Logs to: FISTS Sprint Logs
4305 Roundwood Ct.
Indian Trail, NC 28079

The KeyNote Newsletter

Bryan Bergeron, NU1N, keynote@fistsna.org

We need articles and reviews for *The KeyNote*!

NOTE: Image files need to be high resolution JPGs (at least 1000 pixels wide).

Send your Word or text files to keynote@fistsna.org

President's message
By Joe Falcone, N8TI

When was the last time you wore out a radio, an antenna or a key? If you are like me, you probably go into your ham shack and wonder, "Where did all this stuff come from?" The answer is that with ham radio, if you buy something, and don't sell it at some point, it's going to remain with you because the stuff just does not wear out.

I bet that there are hundreds of FISTS members who still have their first CW Key. It probably is a straight key that someone gave to you or you picked up used when you first started out. After a while you graduated to paddles, a bug or a more expensive key and the original straight key was moved to the back of the shelf. But, you never sold it (how could you?). And, over the years you probably dusted it off once in a while, tried it out and it still worked fine.

The interesting thing is, after you bought three or four keys, you found one you liked and tended to use that particular one almost all the time. Oh, every once in a while, you still picked up a new or different key, but always drifted back to your favorite. I am sure that all of the keys, no matter how much you used them, still work perfectly. The thing is, because they all work so well, if you are like me, you can't bear to sell any of them. After all, you never know when you might set up a second station and might need a good reliable key.

That is the amazing thing about ham radio. The equipment just never wears out.

For example, I have an IC 706 that I got when they first came out. I still have it and used it for Parks on the Air activations. That radio works as well as ever, even though it is 30 years old and has been bounced around in my car and suitcases. In addition, I have my old tube boat anchors and the FT-1000D that I spent many hours in front of. That particular radio is now thirty-two years old and works exactly like it did when I first got it.

The key that I use is a Vibroplex bug that I bought used thirty years ago and it just keeps going. I just know that piece of equipment will never wear out.

Ham radio is a hobby that, once you make the initial investment, participation in the hobby costs you nothing other than a few cents for electricity. Every other hobby, except perhaps bird watching or floating around in a row boat, will cost you at least entrance fees and new equipment now and then. Even a rowboat needs painting every few years. But ham radio is the one hobby that you can engage in for fifty or sixty years using the same equipment and it does not matter if you happen to be fifteen years old or eighty years old. You are still going to enjoy it because it will work like it always did.

So, because some of us tend to think that the grass is greener, we will buy a new key here and a new radio there. After a while, we tend to stack radios, speakers and now computer screens up vertically when we run out of space on the desk. What to do?

FISTS AWARDS
By Dennis K6DF

Congratulations to all who earned operating awards from Feb 19, 2023 to Apr 26, 2024.

Award certificates are available, from the Members Area of the Americas Chapter website, for members to download to their own computer for printing. A list of awards issued to your call/member-number is available in the Members Area. FISTS members may log into the Members Area from the following web page:

https://fistsna.org/memlogon.php

New Members can earn a free FISTS Club Key Patch for making their first 10-minute CW QSO with any FISTS member on any band, so get on the air and make your first 10-minute QSO with a FISTS member to earn your free KEY Patch!

New Member Patches Earned:

WI1N Chrissy—QSO with NM5M
KE8EON James—QSO with KC5SAM
WX7V Chris—QSO with KK7XC
KA9BKW Doug—QSO with KD8FKD
NA2MM Owen—QSO with K9HIM
K7NWA John—QSO with K4TNE

We have a list of new members shown elsewhere in this issue of the *Keynote*. Please listen for them on the bands and help them to earn their FISTS Key Patch!

Award certificates are available free to all club members, in PDF format, so get out your favorite key and get on the air. You can also use the free "Log Converter" program to track your club awards, it's also a good general logging program as well. The author of Log Converter, Graham G3ZOD, is constantly providing updates and improvements to the program. **This program was last updated on Mar 19, 2024 to version 4.6.2. If you are using a version older than this please update your program as older versions will not work properly due to recent server updates**. This FREE software will track your FISTS awards automatically and allow you to send in your award logs to the FISTS Awards Manager at the click of a button! The best thing about it is … it's FREE! Log Converter is available for download on the Americas Chapter web site. Look for the download link on the main web page just below the "Welcome New Members" list.

Be sure to check the Americas Chapter web pages for updated awards information and how to apply for them:

https://www.fistsna.org/awards.html

If you have any award questions or suggestions, send e-mail to me at:

awards@fistsna.org

Wishing you good DX during 2024.
73, Dennis K6DF …_. _____ (30)

FISTS AWARDS ISSUED:
Feb 19, 2024 - Apr 26, 2024

Basic Century: IK1LBL, N8IQV, G4YTJ, M0SHM

Silver Century: KE6K, W8SCS, IK1LBL

Gold Century: M0NGN

1 X QRP: KE6K

Millionaire Award: G0DJA, G4YTJ

2 Million Award: KE6K, G4YVM, G4YTJ, G4CLB

3 Million Award: KE6K, WQ1C, G0FOZ

4 Million Award: KE6K, G5VZ

5 Million Award: M0NGN, W8SCS

President's message (continued)

What I do is, every once in a while, I dig around and pull out that key or radio that I have not used for a few years. I find that it brings me back to times when I was younger and the radios seemed so complicated and you actually had to pay attention when you were getting ready to transmit. Remember how they used to have all sorts of knobs and buttons? Some of those knobs would actually pull out to perform another function. There were no "menus" that you had to learn so you could do ten things with the same button. All you had to know is how to read and remember the order in which you had to fire up the radio and get the proper readings on the meters. Moving from one band to the other actually took a little time. Not only did you have to change settings on the radio, but the antenna tuners were all manual. Most people had little notes stuck to the equipment to remember the settings for different bands and frequencies. Most non-hams got a glazed look in their eyes when they looked at ham radios. ("What does this knob do?") Even with a modern radio, when you tune to a CW station, you are always asked, "How do you know what they are saying?"

The point of all this is that if you ever start to get bored with amateur radio, just turn on one of those older radios and bring out one of those unused keys. I am sure they will work the same as when you put them away. It will bring back some good memories and it will give you an excuse to get on the air and have fun. After all, you can't wear anything out.

73, de Joe, N8TI

FISTS AWARDS (continued)

6 Million Award: W8SCS

8 Million Award: G0PNM, WB9G

11 & 12 Million Award: I5ECW

18 Million Award: G4MLW

19 Million Award: IK0IXI

22 Million Award: NP3K

NANFA Award: G4MLW

Spectrum 80M: G5VZ

Spectrum 40M: KE6K, G4YVM, W8SCS, G0FOZ

Spectrum 20M: WQ1C, KE6K, W8SCS

Spectrum 15M: I5ECW

Spectrum 10M: EA4HKF

Perpetual Prefix: N8IQV, W8SCS

Prefix 50: W8SCS

What's Your Story?

Do you have a story to tell? Members would love to hear how you got interested in ham radio. Did someone mentor you as a child? Did you learn it in the service? What is an interesting experience you had using Morse Code? What is your favorite key/rig? Do you have an interesting QSO you'd like to tell members about? Or photos to share?

Send your stories/photos to keynote@fistsna.org.

WELCOME NEW FISTS AMERICAS CHAPTER MEMBERS

Call	FISTS#	First Name	S/P/C	Call	FISTS#	First Name	S/P/C
WF1YER	22501	Chad	KS	K7NWA	22535	John	PA
KX5J	22502	Lee	LA	VE3GFY	22536	Paul	ON
KB0FIX	22503	Jeff	MO	KS4CR	22537	Thomas	SC
W7MWL	22504	Mark	ND	WB9UDL	22538	Steve	IL
KL7VX	22505	Steve	AK	N5IX	22539	Ronald	NM
WX7V	22506	Chris	TX	K4VMF	22540	Matt	FL
KA9BKW	22507	Douglas	IL	KB4SCB	22541	John	VA
KJ5DYT	22508	Terry	TX	K4OOW	22542	Don	NC
NA2MM	22509	Owen	NY	K6KWV	22543	Kuo Cheng	CA
W2BUG	22510	Jonathan	AZ	K4WPA	22544	Jeremy	NC
K4LAZ	22511	Laszlo	VA	AF2O	22545	Jose	NY
KI5TRF	22512	David	TX	KG5JAW	22546	Brooke	MS
KG5LJZ	22513	Jayant	TX	K6AEF	22547	Andrew	CA
KG5GGL	22514	Carl	LA	K4DH	22548	Heather	NJ
K3CQR	22515	Walter	PA	AD2EK	22549	Jean	NJ
K8JE	22516	Brian	MI	KD8EQZ	22550	Janet	NY
KO4DIT	22517	Eric	GA	KK7TH	22551	Tim	MA
AF9X	22518	Steve	WI	KN4BMQ	22552	Mark	GA
KB2YVY	22519	Ollie	NJ	WA9LB	22553	Allen	IN
KG5URA	22520	David	TX	KI4WLS	22554	Calvin	GA
AC5PW	22521	Chuck	LA	KK7ETF	22555	Steve	GA
W7TDM	22522	Michael	CO	NM4J	22556	Rick	VA
N1SWT	22523	Scott	RI	K6BA	22557	David	CA
KD2DTJ	22524	James	NY	KD2QAR	22558	Mark	MD
W6PNY	22525	Mac	ND	WA1RKS	22559	Ellis	MA
KF6VVQ	22526	Joey	CA	N8KMC	22560	Joe	WV
K1RPC	22527	Robert	RI	KF0QBT	22561	John	CO
KD9ZWA	22528	Sankar	IL				
W5ATJ	22529	James	TN				
KB9TZQ	22530	James	IL				
W5NR	22531	Rick	TX				
KB2VOG	22532	David	NY				
VA3DKA	22533	Doug	ON				
WA2WAO	22534	Barry	WA				

Silent Key List

Call	FISTS#	First Name	S/P/C
KF4YP	9972	Verg	KY
K5AIC	9969	Herb	MS

SPRINT INFORMATION

Sprints will be held eight times throughout the year on the second Saturday and third Sunday in each of the following months: Feb., May, Aug, and Nov. Sprints will now run over a 24-hour period.

OBJECTIVE:

To exchange specified information with as many FISTS members as possible using Morse Code only, and within the time frame stipulated. Sprints are a great opportunity for our newer members to get on the air, meet other club members, and have some fun! We encourage more experienced operators to please QRS to match the other operator's speed.

PARTICIPANTS:

Any properly licensed amateur radio operator, FISTS member or non-member is invited to take part in the contest. At least one of the two stations in each QSO must be a FISTS member.

DATES AND TIMES:

SATURDAY SPRINT: from 0000 UTC to 2359 UTC on second Saturday in Feb., May, Aug., and Nov.
SUNDAY SPRINT: from 0000 UTC to 2359 UTC on third Sunday in Feb., May, Aug., and Nov.

BANDS:

Operation is limited to the following amateur bands: 3.5, 7, 14, 21, and 28 MHz amateur bands. Look for other participants around the FISTS frequencies: 3558, 7058, 14058, 21058, and 28058 kHz. You may NOT work the same station more than once.

ENTRY CLASSES:

There are three entry classes: QRO, QRP, and Club.

1. **QRO:** Over 5 watts to legal limit.
2. **QRP**: 5 watts output power or less.
3. **Club**: (regardless of power).

Entry class MUST be shown on logs to be considered for entry in a particular class, or will be assumed QRO. An entry must be ONE class only, no combination of classes allowed.

EXCHANGE:

The following information must be exchanged by both stations and shown in your log for each QSO to count as a valid QSO:

FISTS members: RST, S/P/C, first name, FISTS number. *Non-FISTS members:* RST, S/P/C, first name. (Enter "0" Zero if your logging program requires a power entry for non-members.) S/P/C = U.S. State/Canadian Province/DXCC Country

DX COUNTRY STATUS:

U.S. states and Canadian provinces are those states and provinces that are contiguous and found within the North American continent. DX are those entities listed in the current ARRL DXCC publication, other than the above.

MULTIPLIERS:

Each U.S. state (50) and Canadian province (13) counts as 1 multiplier. Count each only once, no matter how many times worked. Each DXCC country counts as 1 multiplier. Count each only once, no matter how many times worked. Canada and the USA do not count as DX multipliers

BONUS POINTS:

If the submitted Sprint log has a total of 25 or more listed QSO's, a bonus of 250 points will be added to the final calculated score.

SCORING:

Each QSO with a FISTS member: 5 QSO points. Each QSO with a non-FISTS member: 2 QSO points. Final score is total QSO points times the number of multipliers worked, then Bonus points are added.

CERTIFICATES:

Certificates will be awarded to the first, second, and third place finishers in each Sprint for each Entry Class. End-of-Year Certificates will be awarded ONLY to FISTS members with the highest cumulative point totals in the QRO, QRP and Club categories for all Sprints at the end of the year. Certificate will be sent to the winners via email in PDF format.

New Sprint Information (continued)

LOG SUBMISSIONS:

All log entries must be received within 7 days after the Sprint to be considered valid. Logs not sent to the proper address will not be considered for entry. The logs will be spot-checked for accuracy and correct scoring procedures. All logs MUST contain the following information for entry:

1. Your name, call sign, mailing address, and FISTS Number if a member.
2. Club name and call sign if entry is for a club station.
3. Sprint worked—Date of the Sprint worked.
4. Entry class—QRO, QRP, or Club.
5. Number of FISTS members worked.
6. Number of non-FISTS worked.
7. FISTS number for FISTS QSOs.
8. List of multipliers.
9. Your claimed score.

An entry form is available here and on the FISTS website at:

https://fistsna.org/pdfdocs/sprint_entry _form_rev2.pdf

ELECTRONIC LOGS:

We will accept electronic logs in standard Cabrillo or ASCII Text File format. If you're not sure about your format, please contact the Sprint Manager before the contest entry deadline. E-logs are sent to:

sprintlogs@fistsna.org ONLY.

PAPER LOGS:

Send log and entry form to:
FISTS Sprint Log
4305 Roundwood Ct.
Indian Trail, NC 28079

Get More Involved in FISTS-NA!

1. Enter one of the quarterly Sprints. If you are a new ham, it is a great way to practice your Morse Code. You can get on the air, meet other club members, and have some fun!
2. Submit an article, or articles, for the newsletter. We welcome all articles, photos, and experience levels. You don't have to be the great American novelist! Articles are lightly edited for typos and grammar.
3. Earn a free FISTS Club Key Patch when you make your first 10-minute CW QSO with any FISTS member on any band.
4. Volunteer! We are currently in need of an Activities Manager.
5. Submit suggestions about how FISTS-NA can be more relevant in 2024 and beyond.

FISTS SPRINT ENTRY FORM

Check Sprint Entered: Saturday _____ Sunday _____ Sprint Date _____

Entry Class: QRO _____   QRP_____ FISTS Club _____

Name _____ Call _____ FISTS # _____ Non Member _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

If Club, Club Name, Call _____ FISTS Nr. _____

E-mail Address (optional) _____

SCORING: Number of FISTS member QSOs: _____ × 5 = Total [A] _____
                   Number of Non-FISTS QSOs: _____ × 2 = Total [B] _____
                   Number of multipliers worked: = Total [C] _____

Add [A] to [B] and multiply by [C] to get your TOTAL CLAIMED SCORE = _____

-------------------------------------- **CIRCLE WORKED MULTIPLIERS** --------------------------------------

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	VE	DX
CT	NY	DE	AL	AR	CA	AZ	MI	IL	CO	NB	NF/LB
MA	NJ	MD	FL	LA		ID	OH	IN	IA	NS	NT
ME		PA	GA	MS		MT	WV	WI	KS	PE	YK
NH			KY	NM		NV			MN	QC	BC
RI			NC	OK		OR			MO	ON	
VT			SC	TX		UT			NE	MB	
			TN			WA			ND	SK	
			VA			WY			SD	AB	
						AK					

Please enclose paper logs ONLY, photos, comments, ideas, etc., with your entry and mail promptly to:

FISTS Sprint Logs
4305 Roundwood Ct.
Indian Trail, NC 28079

Statement: "I have observed all FISTS Sprint competition rules as well as all regulations for Amateur Radio in my country. My report is correct and true to the best of my knowledge. I agree to be bound by the decisions of the FISTS Awards Committee."

Date _____ Signature _____ Call sign _____

SOAPBOX COMMENTS: