

# Baudwalking

## New Modes of Communication

By Tom Sundstrom, W2XQ

**H**appy New Year and belated Seasons Greetings to the *Monitoring Times* family of readers, subscribers, advertisers and gang behind the desks in North Carolina. *Baudwalking* is a new occasional column that takes a wide look at what's new on the Internet as it pertains to radio, media and communications.

The listening and amateur radio hobbies radically changed beginning with the 1980-era telephone BBS systems and the Internet's growth starting in 1994 or so.<sup>1</sup> But this isn't a history lesson. There are several sources for looking at the past.<sup>2</sup> Let's get going and communicate.

Electronic mail is probably the largest application of types of services available through the Internet. It is a blessing and it is a curse. Although e-mail is delivered quickly, unwanted, annoying and rude "spam" e-mail clutters the inbox and is an expensive time-waster. What can we do?

### Working around E-mail Junk

Alternative communication methodologies include instant messenger (IM) programs, blogs, Internet relay chat (IRC) "channels" or "rooms," and headline news servers. Mention IM, and some persons say "I would rather not be interrupted all the time." The interruptions can be totally controlled. The IRC network of servers around the world enable the creation of public or private chat rooms, and there are software controls to fine tune each room's characteristics. Blogs – writers' web pages of comments on the social or political scene, or on just about anything timely – and newsletters using special Web page coding are relatively new, but have already become mainstream; "bloggers" (people who write the blogs) were even invited to the USA 2004 national political conventions.

This month let us look at the two-way communications: instant messaging and Internet relay chat. The common characteristic: immediate communications, no delay, and no spam.

The significant difference: IM is one-on-one, whereas IRC is a multi-user chat room.

How does all of this tie into the subjects that interest *Monitoring Times* readers? Whereas the printed word in *MT* provides the depth and background to current events, such as features on monitoring in the Middle East, the World Wide Web cannot easily provide the details, depth and analysis found in the *MT* articles. Rather, the 'net is superb when it comes to breaking news.

One example. As this column's deadline was looming, a window into the IRC chat channel #swl came to life. It was late at night, and listeners in Baltimore, New Hampshire, and Ohio typed "the MW band is open... hearing trans-Atlantic signals." I turned on the radio and listened to a very good signal from Croatia on 1134 kHz, peaking at 30 db/s9. It was the best of the signals noted on 1062, 1215 and 1314 in the southern New Jersey area, and I listened for a while continuing to work.

What's the point? Had I depended upon e-mail, I would have only found out about the Europeans the next day when picking e-mail from the server and only if someone thought to write me. Weekly e-mail newsletters would be slower yet.

A second example. Are you a radio amateur but not a contester? You could tune into a server posting callouts of foreign stations in the CQ WorldWide Contest. Data is instant, and includes the exact frequency and time. If you had the right transceiver and software, the data could even tune the transmitter.

A third example. The South Jersey Radio Association – <http://sjra.net> – have a swap net on K2AA-145.29 MHz at 8 p.m. Sunday nights. The net control of the session opens an IM program and other club members participating on the net help with missed calls or questions on equipment. It makes for a more efficient net, and there is less on-air confusion.

In the business of communicating, these technologies are for more than just business and personal use. It can be very useful in the pursuit

of your radio "career." But how, you ask?

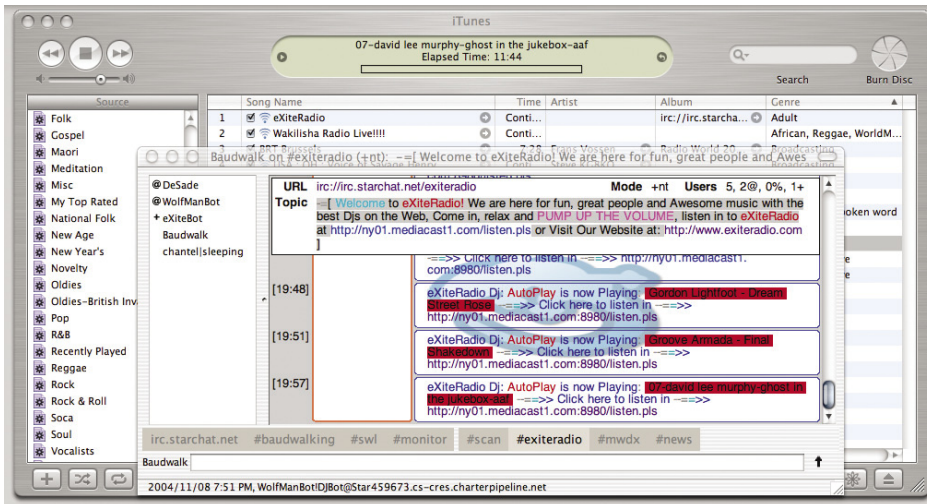
### Instant Messaging

These snappy little software programs were originally designed to do just one thing. You could tell when another person signed onto the Internet and could engage in a keyboard "chat" with that person. Feedback is immediate and positive, without the delays of e-mail and frustration of not knowing if the mail recipient had read the latest message sent.

Marketing pressures and software designers have added everything but the kitchen sink to



*Trillian, for Windows, offers a Basic and Pro version of their software that connects to multiple instant messaging services in one application. Mac users have a similar product, Fire, available to users of OS X 10.2 or higher. See the text for more details.*



*A variant on two-way messaging in IRC is to use an automated program such as done here by #exciteradio. Their Starchat chat room, shown in ChatZilla, shows the song being played by Apple's iTunes at the stated time. The Firefox browser, the plugin ChatZilla and iTunes are available for the Windows platform as well.*

the current generation IM programs. News and sports headlines, weather, stock quotes, audio and video messaging, conference or chat rooms, links to e-mail applications, advertisements... the features are endless.

IM programs typically do one-on-one short messaging. Are you and a friend elsewhere doing some listening while sharing notes of what's heard on a frequency? Did the six-meter band open with Sporadic-E to a place far away? Is your friend busy working on the computer in another software program and you want to attract his or her attention amongst the pile of windows on their screen? Perhaps you are in the same community, and the scanner has come alive due to some activity? What's the phone number? Are you free for lunch?

Virtually all IM programs can be set to beep, squeak, honk, or play the national anthem (not really, I made up that last option...) when a message arrives on station. For someone who cannot pay close attention to the IM window for the occasional words of wisdom, the user-selected noisemaker can be helpful to turn attention to the computer screen.

The most popular of the IM programs are AOL's AIM and ICQ, Yahoo! Messenger, and Microsoft's Messenger. But there are other IM programs out there that are not so well known, and some of these may be a better choice once you look at your needs. Perhaps there are only a few officials with ham licenses involved in managing a county's Amateur Radio Emergency Services (ARES). For security purposes, perhaps a group may select an IM program that has no file transfer capabilities within it or they may step up to an industrial strength IM program like Bantu.

Look at these alternative software applications:

- Bantu (Win)** - <http://corp.bantu.com/> (corporate product)
- Excite's Private Messenger** - [http://www1.excite.com/home/messenger/messenger\\_overview/](http://www1.excite.com/home/messenger/messenger_overview/)
- Jabber (Win)** - <http://www.jabber.com/>

- Odigo (Win)** - <http://www.odigo.org/>
- PeopleLink** - <http://www.peoplelink.com/> - corporate product, for behind firewall.

What do you do when you have friends on different IM networks? The solution is an IM aggregator. Rather than launch up to four or five different programs, taking up display screen real estate and memory resources, a single application "talks" to several networks. Generally, these types of programs do messaging only.

- Fire (Mac)** - <http://epicware.com/> - AOL, ICQ, MSN, Yahoo! and Jabber
- Gaim (Win, Mac, Linux, BSD)** - <http://gaim.sourceforge.net/> - AIM, ICQ, MSN, Yahoo!, IRC, Jabber, Gadu-Gadu, and Zephyr
- Kopete (Linux)** - <http://kopete.kde.org/> - supports AIM, ICQ, MSN, Yahoo, Jabber, IRC, Novell GroupWise Messenger, Lotus Same-Time, and more
- PalTalk (Win)** - <http://www.paltalk.com/> - AOL, Yahoo and MSN
- Pexit (Win, Mac, Linux and Unix)** - <http://www.pexit.com/> - "all the popular networks"
- Trillian (Win)** - <http://www.trillian.cc/> - AIM, ICQ, MSN, Yahoo! and IRC

The programs identified as operating on the Mac do so on OS X 10.2 and higher.

In all probability, in a hobby environment you have friends and acquaintances on most of the popular consumer-oriented IM programs. If

one were to ask, I would probably suggest looking at Trillian (Win) and Fire (Mac) as starting points. An aggregate program focuses on messaging and the extra features that bloat some of the individual programs disappear from view.

## A Matter of Control

Some persons you ask to join you on an IM program will decline. Reasons offered include citing a nuisance value, opening the computer to virus attacks, and unwanted "visits" from persons unknown seeking to open a conversation that may quickly dissolve into something tasteless.

I contend that if a computer user perceives a need or want to communicate directly and quickly with a few friends, such as illustrated earlier, there is little or no reason to avoid using the "proper" IM application.

Consider these ideas to eliminate nuisances. Sign up for a Web mail-based e-mail account that can serve as a throwaway address. Use this throwaway address when signing up for an IM account, and keep your home or personal e-mail address close to the vest (family et al).

## Internet Relay Chat

IRC stands for Internet Relay Chat. IRC is a multi-user, multichannel chat system that is run on a network of computers that may well be scattered all over the world. People can type messages to each other in real time. Each user has a nickname (nick) and converses with other users in either public channels (chat rooms) or in private message areas.

There are a number of different networks, but the radio-related chat rooms – the focus of this column – seem to settle on less than a handful of providers.

The well-known radio-related chat rooms operate with a minimal set of rules established by the chat room organizers who keep order. Common sense and courtesy are the keys to the chat rooms. You will not find the chaos and mayhem that characterizes the chat areas on the large Internet access providers (e.g., AOL, MSN and others).

## IRC Software

Software solutions for IRC are relatively easy to use for Windows and Mac users, and are either low-cost, shareware or free. Mozilla and

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Firefox browser users have an extension plug-in option, Chatzilla, that works quite well, in my opinion. The Windows platform is dominated by a UK program, mIRC, and Pirc is a second; for Mac, Ircle is often-mentioned, but I prefer AkwaIRC. Look at these and select the one you like:

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**AkwaIRC** (Mac) - <http://akwairc.online.fr/>  
**Chatzilla** (browser plug-in) - <http://www.mozilla.org/projects/rt-messaging/chatzilla/>  
**HydraIRC** (Win) - <http://www.hydrairc.com/>  
**Ircle** (Mac) - <http://www.ircle.com/>  
**mIRC** (Win) - <http://www.mirc.co.uk/>  
**Pirc** (Win) - <http://www.pircchat.com/>  
**Snak** (Mac) - <http://www.snak.com/>  
**Visual IRC** (Win) - <http://www.visualirc.net/>  
**Xchat** (Unix) - <http://xchat.org/>

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If you are using a third-party computer when traveling, in a library, or on rental, most of the IRC networks also offer a Java-based user interface accessible through the installed browser. The access is immediate and no software installation is required, but system response may be a bit slower and all IRC features may not be available. Nevertheless, you can get to many chat rooms with just a Web browser.

## IRC Networks

In the past few years I have found radio- and communication-related chat rooms on five networks. Clearly, there are more networks, and a search in the search engine of your choice will find more networks. As a starting point, you may like to browse these networks and look through the available chat rooms:

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**Chatnet** - <http://www.chatnet.org/>  
**EFnet** - <http://www.efnet.net/>  
**Slashnet** - <http://www.slashnet.org/>  
**Starchat** - <http://www.starchat.net/>  
**ZiRC** - <http://www.zirc.org/>

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## IRC Chat Rooms

What chat rooms are available? There are quite a few to start with. I may show up in #swl – note the leading pound sign – almost any time outside normal work hours and put in an appearance in #cybershortwave during the live shows of Big Steve Cole (<http://www.dkosmedia.com>) and Dave Kirby, N1DK (<http://www.n1dk.com/>) that air on Live 365 (<http://www.live365.com/>), and usually monitor our own chat room #Baudwalking. If you see Baudwalk in the list of chat room attendees, that's us. Say hello!

Try these chat rooms. If you know of other chat rooms that fall into our circle of interest, please do tell us. Here is a starting grid:

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#swl - [irc.starchat.net/#swl](http://irc.starchat.net/#swl) - One of the oldest chat rooms that I know of, this one dates back to the ANARC SWL Net days of the late 1990s. See N1DK's history on the shortwave listener's net. This room is alive 24/7 although activity and response time slows during the working hours, mostly east coast North America. See a specific help page at [http://trsc.com/irc\\_swl.html](http://trsc.com/irc_swl.html) for

supplemental directions that should make software installation and configuration easy to understand.

#cybershortwave - [irc.starchat.net/#cybershortwave](http://irc.starchat.net/#cybershortwave) - Originally supporting the ANARC SWL Net, it now comes alive every two weeks when N1DK does a live show on Sunday mornings with a combination of music, radio, and fun. All are welcome. The chat sessions during Big Steve Cole's weekly Saturday night "Different Kind of Oldies" show also takes up occupancy here; if you like Doo Wop and music of the '40s, '50s and '60s, you can't do better than tune to this show. Cole airs repeats of the show during the week, but without the live interaction in the chat room.

#monitor - [irc.zirc.org/#monitor](http://irc.zirc.org/#monitor) - This chat room changed networks in the summer of 2004 due to some technical difficulties, and now has found a home on ZiRC. Whereas #swl tends towards more broadcast listening, it appears to me that #monitor has an active group of utility monitors. I see discussions on military and coded transmissions. The chat room organizers have accompanying chat rooms of #airband, #milcomm and #satcomm, but when I have visited I have not seen any traffic. There is a nice touch here: the #monitor room is also repeated on Starchat ([irc.starchat.net/#monitor](http://irc.starchat.net/#monitor)), which makes it easier for users with IRC software that logs onto only one network at a time.

#cqdx - [irc.radiochat.org](http://irc.radiochat.org) - As a radio amateur active on the HF bands chasing DX, undoubtedly you have heard of the term "DX cluster." It is an over-the-air packet radio network system that displays "callouts" of stations worked and heard. The "spotting" of the frequency, mode, date and time gives instant information to other hams on the packet radio network. This #cqdx chat room is an Internet reflection of what is seen at a packet terminal. Frankly, it was rather fascinating to watch during the two CQ World-Wide Contests in late fall. Data just flew by the window at a high rate of speed.

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In addition to the instant feedback and alerting to special events as described earlier, the roundtable nature of the chat rooms is useful in day to day monitoring. A number of years ago, ye scribe heard a bandsweeping noise in 60 m. It was destroying the otherwise normally very good daily reception of Ghana on 4915 kHz. Asking others in the #swl chat room to listen, within an hour we all knew that the pulsing noise was heard in Brazil, the Netherlands, South Africa, Norway, Canada and around the eastern half of the USA. Internet research showed that the interference was low-powered vertical polarized signals from New Jersey-based transmitters, measuring ocean wave heights at short distances out to sea. (Publicity soon forced some reengineering and reduction in bandwidth of these signals.)

What's the point here? The rapid gathering of data and sharing of notes among all listeners would have just about been impossible by any other means. After circulating the information by other delivery mechanisms, several persons wrote and said (in so many words) "I heard that noise but I didn't know where to find more information." If those listeners had kept an eye on the #swl chat room... You get the picture. Undoubtedly similar stories can be told by users in other chat rooms.

## Getting More Help

Does IRC still look like it is too confusing? There are a few Web sites for users just starting out in IRC. Look at these pages for assistance:

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#Beginner - <http://www.ircbeginner.com/>  
**Chatting on the Net** - <http://www.newircusers.com/>  
**IRC Beginner** - <http://www.beginner.pro-room.com/>  
**IRC Help** - <http://www.irchelp.org/>

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## Quickies

Grab your calendar and a red pen. Circle the dates of March 11 and 12, 2005, and make plans to attend the 18th edition of the USA-based Winter SWL Festival. The gathering of the clan is perhaps the largest convention gathering of long-, medium- and shortwave listeners and scanner enthusiasts in the world. It is not too early to plan ahead, and watch for the 2005 registration form to be posted on <http://swlfest.com/> in December or so. You can sign up for a news feed alert as well.

## In Closing

The purpose of this edition of *Baudwalking* was to review a few easy-to-use alternative means of communications on the Internet other than e-mail. E-mail continues to be plagued by spurious spam messages from persons and companies clogging bandwidth and wasting our time. Sometimes there may be a better way to communicate.

By controlling access to yourself, instant messaging can be a useful tool for the occasional short message to and from a friend. If your contacts use a variety of IM programs, there are all-in-one solutions to communicate with different IM sources at once.

Whereas IM programs are designed for one-on-one messaging, somewhat akin to a radio amateur net, a controlled Internet Relay Chat channel is fun or useful for ongoing conversations 24/7 among a group of like-minded persons. In the IRC program setup, mark yourself "invisible" and the stray broadcast messages from unwanted intruders will not show up on your screen. Set the "logging" on to see what happens when you are away from the computer. There may be a listening tip or something interesting found on the 'net, that scrolled off the screen in your absence.

See you next time. Topics will include blogs and XML/RSS news feeds. These are useful tools for current information. Comments or questions? Is there a topic you would like us to address? Please e-mail [tomsundstrom@monitoringtimes.com](mailto:tomsundstrom@monitoringtimes.com).

<sup>1</sup> My first computer, a 48k Apple II with 3 drives, an optional 16k memory card and CP/M card, an Epson MX-80 printer, green screen monitor and Hayes 300 bps modem was a powerful beast indeed. Times have changed. A Palm T3 PDA gets a daily workout.

<sup>2</sup> One source of history is Wikipedia, a multi-language free-content encyclopedia, at <http://en.wikipedia.org/>, with more than 382,000 pages on the server.