

Cluster use and etiquette by F6EXV

Hi!

DXing is no longer what it used to be ... thanks to new technologies. When I started DXing, over 30 years ago, rare country hunters would organize a VHF network, or would even telephone each other as soon as an extraordinary DX or a missing one would appear on the air. In Bordeaux, we would monitor 145.450 in those days. So we could sometimes hear brief announcements like "VK9YA is presently on 21.295, split up 5 ; here is F6BKI".

Today, all internet-connected DXers share the results of their hunts live, but also the hunt of the whole world, thanks to the worldwide cluster network. A ZL8 appears on 17m, and the whole world knows in a matter of one minute.

Nevertheless, erroneous or useless info occasionally appears, and I thought it would be nice to remind users of basic rules, which, in my humble opinion, should govern the use of the cluster.

The cluster is not meant to make QSO

It is more and more common to see two connected hams exchange reports on the cluster, sometimes after having a sked on 160m, for example. Reports should not be passed on the cluster, but only on the air, otherwise why not telephone each other to make a QSO? Giving reports over the cluster may invalidate the QSO for DXCC.

The cluster is not meant to spot stations you cannot hear

How many times have we seen info like:

DX de F6XYZ 21260.0 FK8ZZ No copy in Paris

Most of the time, the info was given a few minutes before by someone else who copies the DX.

Imagine all the connected stations informing the world they are not copying that DX. The clusters would be full of useless info.

The cluster is not a chat box

Limit the use of "announce" and "announce/full" to what is really necessary. Before asking for a QSL manager, search the Internet or the cluster itself, typing "SH/QSL DX0AA". It is likely the info will be displayed, without you bothering the rest of the world. Avoid chatting with your local friends: use the "talk" command rather than "Ann".

If you want to inform that you have received a card for a recent DXpedition and you have been lucky to be one of the first to receive it, use "ann" rather than spot the DX like:

DX 14000.0 KH8SI QSL received today

In this case, remember that the spot will be treated like a real one and computer bells will ring all over the world for those with logging programs indicating that entity is still needed on that band. These guys will hate you forever! Comments should be info useful to others, not to your ego. Give the split rather than say 599 or "yessssssssss first call!"

The cluster is not a parrot

Once you have read the info on the cluster, you are lucky if you can make the contact yourself. There is no need to spot it again, as the whole world already knows that DX is there. So avoid repeats. How many times do we see the same spot repeated 20 times in 5 minutes?

Much info is wrong in terms of callsign. 6W1XX spotted as BW1XX. The cluster is not a bible and you should LISTEN for the call on the air rather than fully trust the cluster info.

A DXpedition is not necessarily connected to the cluster network

You hear that rare IOTA expedition to P29 on 15m. You need P29 on 17m. Your request through the cluster to QSY to that band is very unlikely to reach them. On a desert island, the expedition is not connected to the web and they will not see your request. Not only the expedition did not go there just for you, but also you will be seen as selfish by the whole worldwide community.

The cluster is not meant for complaints, at least in terms of spots. Don't criticize a DXpedition for not being on a band you need it on, just listen and they will be there sooner or later. You are not there yourself, and you cannot imagine what circumstances the guys are facing on their side.

The cluster is not meant for you to spot yourself

Don't spot yourself as calling on a certain frequency, even if you have a sked. If you are on an IOTA, someone will spot you quickly after you show up on the air, your ego will have to bear with waiting for the spot. Imagine every active station spotting themselves: the cluster would be full of useless info.

Don't spot your next-door neighbour, even to say he is calling DX. You hear him CQing DX, but this does not mean he is heard on the other side. Let some DX spot him instead.

Not everybody is connected to his local cluster

It is useless to thank the guy you just worked when you spot him. Hopefully you will have thanked him over the air, and he is not necessarily connected to read your thanks. Send him a QSL better! The common "Tnx new one" may be nice, but who cares? Imagine everyone spotting all their new ones...

The cluster is not a copy of your log

It is not worth informing the whole world you just worked a common DL on 20m, or a SP on PSK on 17m. Even a beginner can find this kind of station by just switching on his rig. It is an excuse to say a beginner needs everything. A beginner must also learn to turn his VFO knob...if there is no DX today; there is no need to feed the cluster with useless info.

What to spot, what not to spot

Common sense should dictate your choices. The desire to help a beginner should not be an excuse to spot "anything". There is no general rule or a list of what to spot. What is rare and of interest is not limited to what you need. Nevertheless, to work a Ukrainian on 15m PSK is not a fabulous achievement of which the whole world must be informed. To work Florida on 17m CW may be nice, but should the whole world know? Any station has at least one reference for a local award (DOK for DL, zip code for Spain, department for F, county for USA, etc). This does not mean you must spot everything you hear. What are these awards worth if you just need to watch your screen to get them? A special prefix can be spotted, without exaggerating in terms of repeats. A semi rare US state can be spotted (like Wyoming or the Dakotas) but who needs a spot from New York?

As a conclusion, I would like to say this is only a point of view. The cluster system is a fabulous technical achievement, but do not forget that everything that goes through it travels around the entire world in a matter of seconds. It is better to find the DX before it is spotted: fewer competitors, easier to get though... so get to your VFOs!

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