

Numbers Stations

What are Numbers Stations? Well this is subject to conjecture with some believing they are weather broadcasts in 5 figure codes, some others believe they may be hoax broadcasts. The majority of those who have listened to these signals over long periods believe they are from several of the world's secret service agencies to outstations or agents in the field. There is now a significant amount of evidence in public documents and books to support this with the USA's CIA, Britain's MI6, Israel's Mossad and Germany's BND just some of the countries represented.

Messages are sent in various modes e.g. Plain language, CW or Digital modes. The languages used in the first example vary also depending on the country of origin of the signals and they also use both female and male voices and these voices can be "live" or synthesised and can be in AM, USB or SSB modes. The format of the messages are nearly always 5 figure or 5 letter groups.

The CW stations sometimes use MCW (modulated CW) which is Morse keyed as a tone on an AM signal. The format of the Morse signal can be as for the plain language types i.e. 5 figure groups, but they also use what are known as "cut numbers" to speed up transmissions. An example of this is to substitute A for 1, U for 2, V for 3, 4 5 and 6 stay as numbers then B for 7, D for 8 and N for 9 which means only 9 different characters need to be sent.

RTTY and ARQ-E are the common Data modes used with RTTY being used for the preamble and ARQ for the main message.

A typical transmission format for a voice transmission can be the Call-up consisting of a female voice counting 1,2 ..., 0 repeated for 5 minutes followed by a preamble of "Messages for (destination/agent in code) then the message of 5 figure groups and the word "end" upon completion. The CW and Data modes all follow the same pattern of a Call-up, Preamble and Message.

Some examples of actual Numbers Stations which can be heard on a regular basis are the Lincolnshire Poacher, called this because its calliope is 3 repeats of; opening bars of The Lincolnshire Poacher 12 times (an old English Folk Song) and a 5 Figure message identifier 10 times. The preamble is 2 glockenspiel chimes (one high and one low) repeated 3 times with the message being 200 random 5 figure groups, each group being repeated. The ending is the same glockenspiel chimes as in the preamble followed by the opening bars of the Lincolnshire Poacher repeated 6 times. This station uses USB with an English female voice and is thought to originate from Cyprus where the RAF has a presence. A sister station is Cherry Ripe (another old English Folk Song) which is believed to be in Guam and beaming towards Mainland China and other nearby countries. Below is a logging for Station M13 that is a (M)orse station with an identifier of 13 but the location is unknown.

M13 on 12216Mhz at 2200z on May 9, 2005.

458 (R5) BT 247 21 BT

03386 38362 41864 38328 05199
04605 23285 33218 42712 51666
49477 19529 42759 29948 57679
28789 35523 23487 55933 49798
46245 BT //2210z

458 (R1) BT 247 21 BT

03386 38362 41864 38328 05199
04605 23285 33218 42712 51666
49477 19529 42759 29948 57679
28789 35523 23487 55933 49798
46245 BT

0 0 0 //2216z

The above gives a very brief idea of what types of signals can be found when listening for the elusive Numbers Stations.

What sort of people listens to these signals? Well, like other aspects of the hobby of SWL they can be from all walks of life. Some like the challenge of trying to decode the messages, while others just like to keep a check on their favourite station in the hope of hearing something in plain text or Morse which will also help to unravel the content of these messages. The group ENIGMA (European Numbers Information Gathering and Monitoring Association) was formed in about 1992 in the hope that by pooling information from many listeners a more concentrated approach to solving the mystery of the Number Stations would eventuate. In about 4 years ENIGMA had grown to about 300 members in 30 countries and in 2005 the ENIGMA Yahoo Group had about 550 members. There are other Web sites devoted to Number Stations and a search on the Internet using Enigma or Number Stations (or both on the same search) will point the listener to where the most likely frequencies and times will be. Some mailing lists also are available to allow posting of logs and other related information. There have also been numerous books written on the subject including "Secret Signals-The Euro Numbers Mystery" by Simon Mason and "Intercepting Numbers Stations" by Langley Pierce. The next three books cover the lives of two people who were involved in the world of espionage and mention is made of Number Stations and their role. The books are "By Way Of Deception" and "The Other Side Of Deception" both by Victor Ostrovsky, a MOSSAD agent and "Spycatcher" by Peter Wright.

The equipment needed to listen to any of the plain language or CW transmissions is the same as you would use for most of your SWL or Amateur listening in that a General Coverage receiver with a BFO to resolve the CW and SSB signals, the normal SWL aerial, headphones, frequency lists from the Internet and lots of patience. For the RTTY/data type signals an interface between the receiver and a computer running the appropriate decoding software will be required. A good place to start with is the Worldwide Utility News which covers all types of utilities and Number Stations. There is an online newsletter with a column called Numbers & Oddities by Ary Boender which displays recent loggings as well as some of the message formats being sent. If you wish to receive regular E-Mails from the WUN site there is a listserv address listed through which you can subscribe. Another excellent resource can be found at <http://www.spynumbers.com/numbersDB/> which is the Spy Numbers Station Database and this site has a searchable database of Numbers Stations and also has listings of those stations likely to be on the air at the present time or in the next hour. One station which can be heard on frequencies of 10125kHz, 10127kHz, 10235kHz, 10445kHz and 11565kHz is M8 which transmits in CW and is believed to originate in Cuba and a station which transmits on USB is E10 which is a MOSSAD station. It has been heard recently on 9130kHz using English.

Have a listen around for these mystery stations sometime, you may find that once started you become hooked.