

# Numbers & Oddities

## Introduction

My first encounter with a numbers station was in the early 1980's. I found it intriguing and I started to look for more stations. I found a lot of them and I still follow these stations. Although many stations have disappeared when the Soviet Union fell apart, there are still stations active. Note that not all numbers stations are intelligence stations. A number of them are military stations or diplomatic services.

We founded the Worldwide Utility News Club in January 1995 and I was asked to write the column about digital modes but I would rather write something about numbers stations, so I decided to do both. I wrote my first "Numbers & Oddities" column in January 1995. It was published in the WUN newsletter in February 1995.

Back then the Spooks mailing list was one of the sources for people who were interested in these stations. The list owner and I thought that it would be a good idea to include logs and info from the Spooks list in N&O. From that day on N&O appeared not only in the WUN Newsletter but also as a separate newsletter for WUN and Spooks members. Lack of interest/input was the reason why N&O stopped as a column and numbers stations news was included in my Utility Round-up column. But after a couple of months N&O was reintroduced as a separate column.

The N&O website was originally setup as a service to the members of WUN and Spooks. A place where they could find all the newsletters and some additional information. Later on I have also included a logs database, recordings, links and other relevant information.

## What is a numbers station?

Numbers stations are radio stations that are mainly active on shortwave. Mysterious stations believed to be owned by governments, the military and/or intelligence agencies. They broadcast coded messages to agents or military personnel in the field or to embassies or wherever they are. Some have fixed schedules; others are transmitting their messages on an irregular basis. The messages consist of letter groups or figure groups. Very often in groups of 5 characters but 4 and 3 groups are also quite common. Chinese stations, for example, are often using 4 character groups.

The first reports of coded messages date back to World War I when the military transmitted coded messages via HF. Most of the involved countries had interception capabilities but the British organized as one of the first countries an intercept service. The intercept stations were known as the "Y" stations. The coded messages were further analysed by the crypt-analysts of Admiralty Room 40.

In the early days not all messages were sent as number or letter groups but also as text phrases like "the milk is boiling over". Interesting are also the Indian code talkers who sent coded messages in their native languages. In both World Wars "code talkers" served in the American forces. The name "code talkers" is especially associated with the Navajo speakers who served during World War II in the Pacific theatre. The first code talkers, however, were a group of Choctaw Indians from Oklahoma serving in the U.S. Army during World War I. These Indians are referred to as Choctaw Code Talkers. Both the Choctaw Code Talkers and the Navajo Code Talkers used Native American languages as military codes that could not be undeciphered.

The codes used by the modern numbers stations are believed to be so called one-time pads. A one time pad is the only currently known secure encryption system, if used correctly. The system was created by Gilbert Vernam in 1917. The technique itself seems to be much older. Steven M. Bellovin, a professor of computer science at the Columbia University School of Engineering found a code book from 1882 that describes a similar technique.

Especially during the Cold War you could hear a host of stations from many different countries like the U.S.S.R., Bulgaria, Czecho-Slovakia, Poland, Algeria, Egypt, U.K., U.S.A., East and West Germany, Hungary, France, Cuba, Yugoslavia, North and South Korea, Taiwan, China, Rumania, and Israel. Languages used were Russian, English, German, French, Spanish, various other Slavic languages, Korean, Chinese and even Tadjik and Farsi.