

Scanning Magazines

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This article reviews the three monthly magazines of most interest to scanning hobbyists; Popular Communications, Monitoring Times and Scanning USA. With the loss of the old RCMA Newsletter several years ago a major void has surfaced in up-to-date frequency info. While the Internet has had a big hand in information distribution, printed magazines still are a popular way to keep abreast of the radio hobby.

A smaller, bi-monthly magazine is also published but a copy was not available for review. National Communications (<http://www.nat-com.org/>) is not widely available on newsstands or in bookstores but does boast of some well known writers from the scanning community.

All three monthly magazines are creatures of the editor that created it. Tom Kneitel of PopCom, Bob Grove of MT and Alex Blaha of Scanning USA all created the magazine and left his own stamp on it.

For more current information on radio equipment and frequencies one should search the Internet. There are several avenues available on-line. The most popular of course are web sites. There are sites for any and every facet of the hobby. Just type in a couple keywords into Google and sift thru the found pages.

The next most popular method of Internet Distribution is email lists and web based forums. These allow many people to share information almost immediately. The biggest host of email lists is <http://www.groups.yahoo.com>. Thousands of email lists exist there on every subject under the sun, including radio.

Still around, but dieing slowly, is UseNet (NewsGroups). UseNet has long been an open forum for all things ever discussed, and has bunches of newsgroups devoted to scanners. While half the messages seem to be spam or some flamewar or another, occasionally good info is found. The best place to start looking at NewsGroups is Google (<http://www.google.com>). Click on the "Groups" tab to view newsgroups.

The opinions stated in this article are mine alone. They do not reflect the views of any organization I may be a member of.

Scanning USA

<http://www.scanningusa.com/>

\$28.95 per year.



This is the only magazine devoted entirely to scanning, the other 2 also cover other radio topics. It has been around for 4 or 5 years. While they have occasional decent articles, the content level is pretty low. They waste a lot of space with dozens of pages of license updates that, with a little editing and formatting, could be condensed to a quarter of the pages used. They also tend to fill out space (or is it stretch material) with other frequency lists and charts. The magazine uses what appears to be 14 or 16 point font with double spacing that stretches articles out. Perhaps this is due to the lack of content available and will be reduced as more material comes around.

The articles that are there are usually good and occasionally excellent. Photographs or tables usually accompany them. While the articles may not be as comprehensive as MT's they are usually informative.

Reviews are not particularly complete or well thought out. Usually, if the author likes something they gush about it, otherwise it is just a review of the published specs.

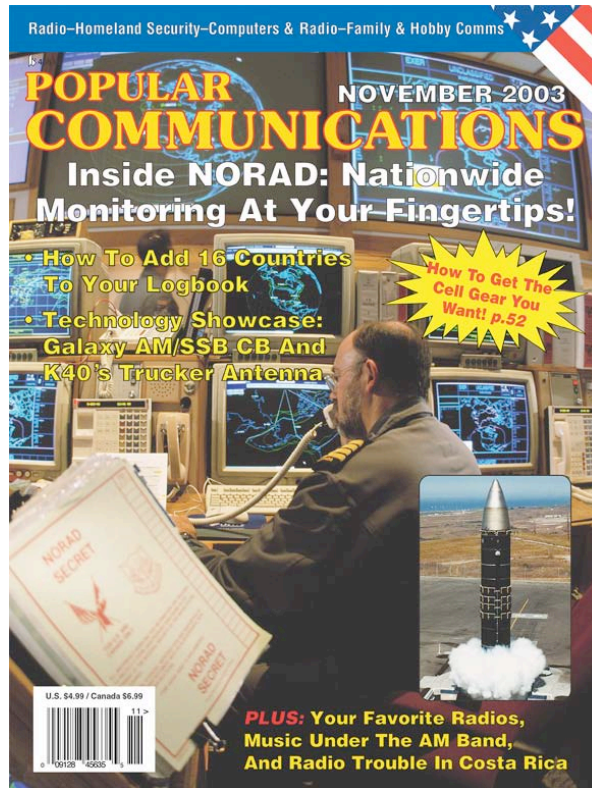
The editorials are usually pretty benign. They are often about the benefits of a well informed populace and how scanners assist in this.

Final grade: C.

Popular Communications:

<http://www.popular-communications.com/>

\$28.95 per year



PopCom has been around for at least 15 years and is published by the same folks that bring you CQ. Articles are written down to a lesser level than the other mags. The reviews are usually skills for advertisers, usually an ad for the item "reviewed" follows a page or 2 after the article. Regular and monthly columns and articles are well written and informative for the most part even with the restrictions of the less technical tone of the magazine.

PopCom has decent articles and columns, usually with good color photos. They cover almost every radio topic from scanning to ham radio to SWLing to CB & FRS radio. One of the most interesting columns was Tom Kniel's old time broadcast radio column, formerly written under the pen name of "Alice Brannigan". The new column is written now under the name of "Shannon Huniwell". While the authorship of the columns have often been joked about, the content is probably the best of the magazine.

Another good feature is the "Washington Beat" column. It helps keep an eye on regulatory news that impact the radio hobby.

PopCom is written with a less serious tone than the others. This tends to make it kind of a fun read. Being written to a lower technical level than the others helps makes it seem less

authoritative but more entertaining. One of the long time columnists, well known ham Gordon West, seems to be trying to win back some credibility after years of writing about mods to ham transceivers so they could transmit out of band in the guise of public service.

One of the silliest things around was the old "Registered Monitor" certificates PopCom's company sold. People actually paid money for meaningless "callsigns" that "registered" their monitoring stations.

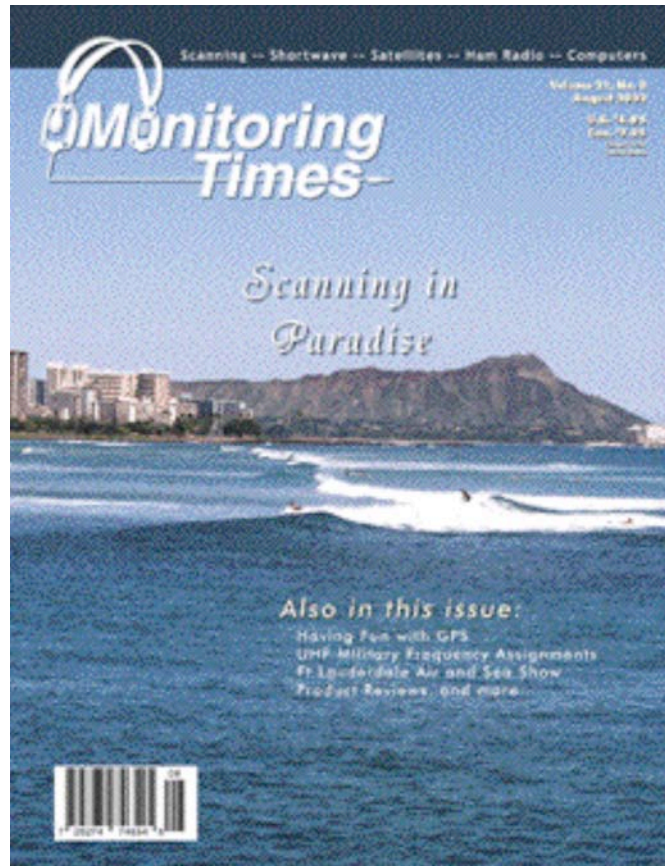
Under Tom Knieta the editorials ranged from informative to silly, but with Harold Ort they tend to be more geared to consumer communications (Cell phone, CB, etc.).

Final grade: B-.

Monitoring Times

<http://www.monitoringtimes.com/>

\$19.95 /year (electronic), \$24.95 printed)



(Disclaimer: I have had a couple articles published in MT over the years.)

MT is a comprehensive magazine for monitoring enthusiasts. It covers not only scanning but also HF, satellite, and broadcast communications. Well established columnists and editors provide decades of radio experience to draw upon. The writing tends to be more serious in tone and written to a higher level than the others. In the early 1980s it was a pulp newspaper style monthly and later converted to a more typical magazine format.

MT always tended to be more technical than the others. Many articles over the years by the late Bill Cheek and others provided details on radio mods and home brew projects. While Cheek had his detractors and controversy the articles were always informative. To this day MT provides ample technical discussions and articles.

Reviews are much more impartial and informative than PopCom. While MT does occasionally print reviews of products made or sold by it's sister company, Grove Enterprises, they state so clearly and will fairly comment on them.

M/T has a great set of complimentary columns, "Ask Bob" and "Bright Ideas". While Bob will stray to non radio related topics such as medical frauds, they are usually pretty good otherwise. Most of the other columns are the cream of the crop with such respected names as Bob Parnass, Larry and Gayle Van Horn, Glenn Hauser and Ken Reitz fill page after page with informative articles and reviews.

MT is also available as a downloaded PDF, either with or without the printed version. This allows for speedier delivery, you download it a week or more before the paper copy comes to your mailbox.

My biggest nit to pick with MT is that the Letters to the Editor section is presented as a compilation rather than individual letters as more traditionally done.

Editorials are presented on the rear inside page, and occasionally by guest writers. They are almost always informative and insightful.

Final grade: A.

Summary:

All 3 magazines are geared toward a different audience and serve them well. Scanning USA is dedicated solely to scanning while PopCom and MT are more general in content. PopCom is more for the CB'er and radio beginner and MT is more toward the serious hobbyist.

I read each of the 3 every month and each is good in it's own way. If I had to choose but a single magazine I would take Monitoring Times. While some people may find it too technical it has the widest range of knowledgeable staff that write the most interesting articles.