

# Number stations



A numbers station is a kind of shortwave radio station that broadcasts mysterious sounds and signals around the world. Many people believe that these broadcasts are a way of sending secret codes and messages to spies in foreign countries. No government has confirmed this suspicion but it seems to be the most logical explanation for their strange tones, odd voices, and **nonsensical** content.

Not much is really known about numbers stations. Some sources claim that they started to appear during World War I. Some of them send signals at regular times throughout the day while others might only do so irregularly – sometimes just once a year. Their contents can consist solely of seemingly random tones or songs over and over again while others feature voices counting numbers, or reciting a certain poem. At times, they suddenly change and this catches the interest of numbers stations observers. They try to **figure out** what the change could mean and why. Since it is extremely difficult to break the code of a numbers station, it's nearly impossible to estimate the reason.

One famous numbers station is the Lincolnshire Poacher, which is widely believed that the station is run by the British Secret Intelligence Service, an **arm** of the British government dedicated to foreign intelligence gathering. Based in Cyprus, the station broadcast a woman's voice counting off a series of five numbers, with a recording of the English song "The Lincolnshire Poacher" playing between each recitation. Another numbers station, UVB-76, nicknamed "The Buzzer", has been active since the 1970s and still broadcasts a series of sharp buzzing tones each day. This is believed to be a Russian numbers station and it has sparked the interest of radio hobbyists in 2010 when the regular transmission was broken by voices overheard in the background. This may have been from technicians in the station who accidentally **turned on** a microphone.

There is some evidence that lends credibility to the theory that numbers stations are a means for transmitting coded information to spies in foreign countries. When a coup attempt in Moscow happened in 1993, for example, several numbers stations in Russia suddenly altered their broadcast patterns, schedules, and tones. In 1998, the United States government arrested the members of a Cuban spy network operating in America. **It** claimed that they had been using a computer to decode messages from a Cuban numbers station, which was sending **orders** from their government.

Some enthusiasts claim that the heyday of numbers stations is ending and that their use is slowly waning. The end of the Cold War in 1989 has sharply reduced global tensions and reduced the need for large-scale spy operations between superpowers. Several stations in East Germany stopped transmitting shortly after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Another reason for their decline may be due to rapidly changing and improving technology. This may be providing spy agencies with better alternatives with which to communicate with their agents. The Lincolnshire Poacher, for example, went off the air in June, 2008. Although the reason for this is not exactly known, some people **speculate** that cellular or satellite communications may have made a numbers stations redundant for the British Secret Service.



1. According to the article, what is a numbers station?
  - a) a kind of radio station that unusual music and songs
  - b) a kind of radio station that transmits strange sounds and signals
  - c) a kind of radio station that broadcasts news about secret messages
  - d) a kind of radio station that helps people solve difficult math problems
  
2. The word “nonsensical” in paragraph 1 is closest in meaning to:
  - a) absurd
  - b) notorious
  - c) inspired
  - d) obvious
  
3. The phrase “figure out” in paragraph 2 is closest in meaning to:
  - a) interpret
  - b) transcribe
  - c) ignore
  - d) assemble
  
4. What can be inferred from paragraph 2?
  - a) all number stations should be closed down immediately
  - b) number stations have been around for approximately 100 years
  - c) it is known that number stations are a recent phenomenon
  - d) all number stations transmit the same message at the same time of day
  
5. The word “arm” in paragraph 3 could be replaced with:
  - a) limb
  - b) helper
  - c) subtraction
  - d) subdivision
  
6. According to the article, where is the Lincolnshire Poacher number station located?
  - a) in Canada
  - b) in Russia
  - c) in Cyprus
  - d) in Britain
  
7. According to the article, how long has the number station UVB-76 been operating?
  - a) since 2010
  - b) since World War I
  - c) for approximately 40 years
  - d) for approximately 100 years

8. The phrase “turned on” in paragraph 3 is closest in meaning to:
- a) ignited
  - b) activated
  - c) aroused
  - d) shut down
9. The word “it” in paragraph 4 refers to:
- a) the United States government
  - b) a Cuban numbers station
  - c) a Cuban spy network
  - d) the Russian government
10. The word “orders” in paragraph 4 is closest in meaning to:
- a) rules
  - b) commands
  - c) shipments
  - d) answers
11. The word “speculate” in paragraph 5 is closest in meaning to:
- a) surmise
  - b) gamble
  - c) ignore
  - d) invest
12. What is the main theme of paragraph 5?
- a) the problems caused by number stations
  - b) the end of the Cold War and its consequences
  - c) possible reasons why the Berlin Wall fell in 1989
  - d) possible reasons why some number stations are closing
13. What would you predict as the main topic of the next paragraph?
- a) the way in which number stations are being demolished
  - b) how satellite communications are being used by governments to transmit information
  - c) more reasons why numbers stations have become redundant in recent times
  - d) the history of the British Secret Service since the end of the Cold War

Answers: 1. (b) 2. (a) 3. (a) 4. (b) 5. (d) 6. (c) 7. (c) 8. (b) 9. (a) 10. (b) 11. (a) 12. (d) 13. (b)