

Telling Off the Public: Broadcasters Find It Pays to Be Rude

You Boiled Today, Dad? Asks
One of New Breed of Talkers;
Insults by Phone or in Person

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"You should think about becoming a bone specialist. You've got the head for it."

Is that any way to win an argument on Vietnam? It is if you're Joe Dolan.

Joe, as he's known around San Francisco, is the newest face—or mouth—in the country's booming new parlor game: Electronic insult. Everywhere, radio stations that once subsisted on a diet of records and TV stations that lived for years off reruns of The Life of Riley have discovered talk—preferably tough talk and preferably on a telephone.

Each morning when most San Franciscans are getting ready for work, Joe Dolan can be heard on KNEW, Oakland, jousting with telephone callers on everything from communism to old age. His technique doesn't vary much: Take a call, toy with the caller, get him mad, then demolish him with logic or invective and hang up.

Mother Is Under the Porch

Four hundred miles down the coast, the man who says he started it all, Joe Pyne, runs a similar show on Los Angeles' KLAC. Sample Pyne riposte: "I hope when you go home, your mother runs out from under the porch and bites you on the leg." Mr. Pyne also has a TV show.

Both stations are owned by Metromedia Inc., as is WNEW-TV in New York, where the resident mouth is Alan Burke. The bearded Mr. Burke runs a nightly television interview show. He accepts telephone calls, but he also has guests and a studio audience. Sarcasm, rather than insult, is Mr. Burke's stock in trade.

Syndicated versions of the Burke and Pyne TV shows are aired in other cities. In New York, these shows are seen on WNEW-TV late on Saturday and Sunday night, and Metromedia officials profess to be ecstatic about the audience and revenue from what was once almost dead time for local television.

That Metromedia is happy with its tough talkers is evident at KLAC. After the instant success of Joe Pyne, the station went all-talk—24 hours a day.

Talk shows aren't new, nor are tough interviews. New York's WOR has been offering radio chatter for almost 40 years and has more listeners than any other station in the New York area. Lawrence Spivak was jabbing at politicians on Meet the Press long before television, and Mike Wallace made a television reputation grilling celebrities in the early 1950s.

What is new is the emphasis on audience

participation, in person or via the telephone, and, on the TV shows, an open effort to air the bizarre, the outlandish and the extreme.

Exposing Kooks

For a time, some critics were concerned lest Mr. Pyne, who describes himself as "a quarter inch to the right of center," devote too much television time to racists and political extremists. He says such fears were groundless. "If I bring kooks on," he says, "it's to expose them."

In any event, public figures seem to have given way on these shows (in the face of libel and license renewal worries, other broadcasters say) to guests who hear strange voices, believe the world is flat or have spent time in a penitentiary or a flying saucer.

"They just ask to be insulted," says one broadcaster.

The backgrounds of Messrs. Pyne, Burke and Dolan indicate there is still no prescribed course in acrimony. Joe Pyne started in show business at the age of 16 riding in a motorcycle thrill show. He claims he invented the telephone talk show format 17 years ago when a Kenosha, Wis., milk dealer agreed to pay \$1 for every question Joe couldn't answer on a local radio station. "They paid out a hell of a lot of dollars," he says.

Alan Burke, once an advertising man in Charlotte, N.C., conducted interview programs there and in Florida before coming to New York. In Miami Beach, he did a radio interview show from the Balmoral Hotel. "He was developing his style," says a Miami radio man. "He used to get a lot of women on the show and give them a hard time."

Mr. Dolan is something else again. An ex-fighter pilot with degrees from Harvard College and Harvard Law School, he got into radio when a station executive heard him debate at a civic meeting.

While Metromedia brass rejoice in the success of the Pyne-Burke television shows, they believe the future lies with the radio format Mr. Pyne claims to have invented. "We call it two-way radio," says John V. B. Sullivan, president of Metromedia's radio division, "because it means listener involvement."

"Do you know," he asks, "there are people in Los Angeles so lonely they call up the dial-a-prayer number and talk to the re-

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cording? Enough people move to L.A. every year to populate Toledo. They make up a population with no ties, no friends, no real family life. They're the people who listen to talk shows."

At any given moment during the Pyne show, Mr. Sullivan says, 3,800 people are trying to call in. "He's the single most popular personality on Los Angeles radio, and he put KLAC in the top spot in the ratings," the executive claims.

Mr. Pyne believes his tough talk provides

an outlet for frustrated listeners. "A guy comes home after a fight with his boss. His wife is in curlers, the kids are yelling and the washer is broken. This builds up inside him, so he calls me."

Says Harvard lawyer Dolan: "Talk radio is an important tool for the survival of democracy and free speech. The citizen of today feels cut off—in fact, disenfranchised—by big business, big government and big labor. These 'electronic town halls' allow him to express his opinions . . . and to regain a sense of community responsibility and participation."

(The philosophizing and fancy rhetoric end when Mr. Dolan goes on the air. "You boiled this morning, dad?" he asks an elderly caller.)

Mr. Pyne is extremely proud of the community service he says he renders. And, in fact, he does not hesitate to rout city, state

or national figures out of bed to answer questions raised by his listeners. When callers complained about ambulance service, KLAC reporters investigated, drove one company out of business and got the county to tighten its surveillance of all ambulance service.

Mr. Pyne claims to have got people jobs over the telephone, talked a girl out of using LSD and, by using a three-phone hookup, to have reconciled a mother and her errant teenage daughter. "I had them both on the line," he says. "It was really dramatic."

Not everyone agrees. "It makes me shudder," says one network official. "These guys are institutionalizing psychoses." In New York, radio station WNBC aired Mr. Pyne briefly, then dropped him. "He just didn't fit into the kind of image we wanted to portray," an official says.

Not that WNBC is against talk. Like KLAC, it offers talk around the clock. Brad Crandall is WNBC's version of Joe Pyne. Milder in tone, Mr. Crandall eschews the fast put-down and the barbed wisecracks, and often lets a caller drone on for 10 minutes.

He is no less popular, however. "Every so often I try to call in on one of my own talk shows," says WNBC manager George Skinner. "I've never made it. The people who do must be awfully patient or awfully lucky."

The success of the telephone-talk shows has spawned many imitators. There are even special-market talk shows for Negro and Spanish-language listeners. But the worst may be yet to come. "We are definitely thinking in terms of a woman moderator," says an official of WNEW-TV.