Tuning In

A Lawyer's Career on the Radio

By Stephen M. Karp

If someone had told me in college that I'd be a radio talk-show host for more than a quarter century, I'd have switched my major from accounting to communications, but I didn't. And for that reason I'm probably the worst-trained on-air personality in the history of radio. No Marconi Award for me. I'm also the worst paid. So, how did a full-time career as a trial lawyer turn into a part-time gig in radio at the age of 39?

I began my legal career in Philadelphia, first with Becker, Fryman and Ervais, then at Fox Rothschild. I had appeared on a couple of radio talk shows to discuss the topic of medical malpractice. I enjoyed the experience, especially answering questions from the listening audience. The practice of personal-injury law did not mix well with the big-firm art of keeping time sheets, so I set off for the genteel setting of Chester County, where I have maintained roots for the past 32 years.

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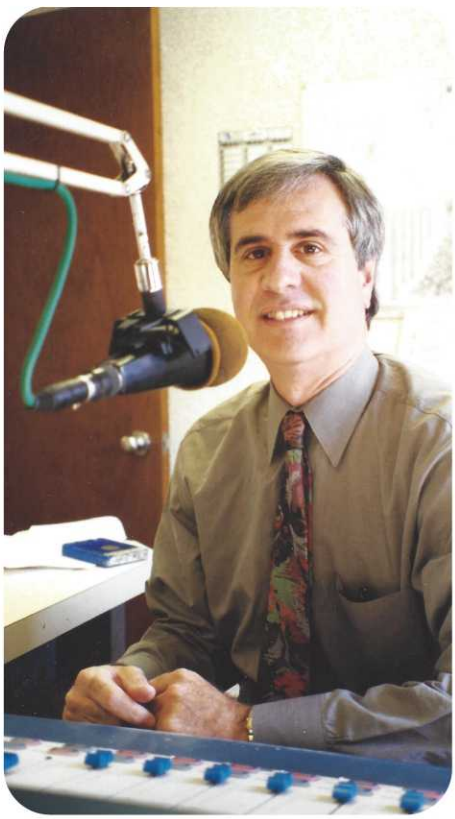
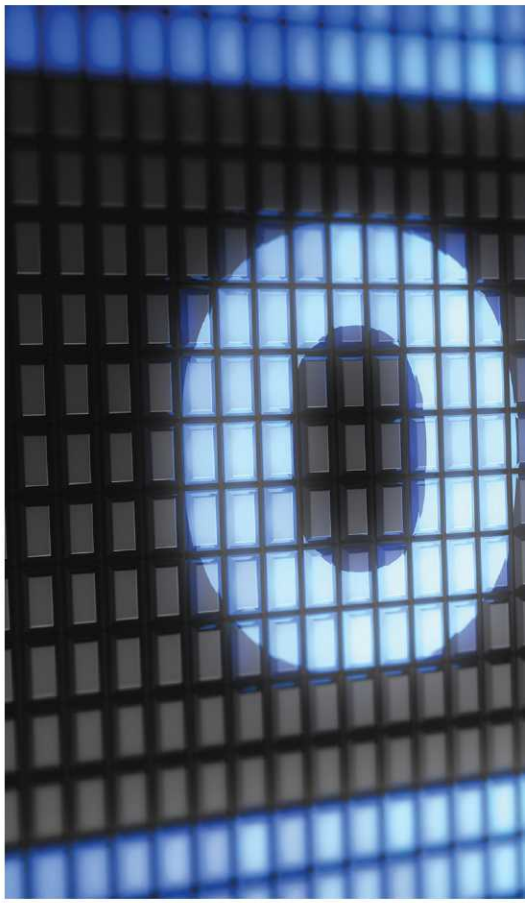


Karp in the studio, 1999

I worked for Lawrence E. Grant, who was a great promoter. To attract clients, he purchased a two-hour spot on Saturday afternoons at WWDB-AM in Philadelphia, where he had on guests and took calls from the audience. The problem was that he was in Florida fishing most of the time. He called me at the office one Saturday around 1 p.m., commanding me to be in Philly in an hour to host the show. The experience was akin to a judge calling you first thing in the morning to tell you that your trial scheduled to start next month will now take place in an hour, so come on down to the courthouse. But trial lawyers, like Marines, are trained to adapt quickly to the unexpected. Unfortunately, as I drove to the station, I drew a blank. But I was rescued by my first caller, Manny from Mayfair, followed by Franny from Fishtown and so on. The next two hours flew by as the word got out that free legal advice was available.

My career as a radio talk-show host was born. Every Saturday afternoon for the next year I acted surprised when I took Grant's 1 p.m. call, but I was prepared.

Shortly thereafter Grant retired and I took over his law practice. I certainly couldn't afford the $50,000-a-year sponsorship of the radio show. But I still had to bring in cases, so I called a local Chester County radio station, WCOJ-AM, to see if it needed a guest to discuss personal-injury law. The quick reply was, "No thank you." Two hours later the station manager called back to see if I would like to sponsor and host a weekly talk show on the law. Twenty-seven years and hundreds of thousands of dollars in sponsorship money later, "Legal Talk" is still on the airwaves. At a banquet several years ago I was introduced as the person in the United States who has spent the most money to be on radio. I later learned that talk-show hosts actually get paid.



Topics of Discussion

"Legal Talk" is a fast-paced show, at least for the first 15 seconds when I'm introduced by the iconic '60s tune, "I Fought the Law (and the Law Won)" by the Bobby Fuller Four. After that, anything goes. Although a new topic or a guest is presented each week, the major issues of the day permeate the discussion. In the early '90s, ice skater Tonya Harding and her role in kneecapping rival Nancy Kerrigan was the rage. The O.J. Simpson case followed, and my guests included personalities from the Court TV network, the guy who wrote the Simpson-trial joke book and later prosecutors Marcia Clark and Christopher Darden hawking their memoirs. The Simpson verdict was followed by President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, followed by the Clinton impeachment.

But these national stories weren't what piqued the listening audience's curiosity the most. No, my audience was more interested in their own lives. Start a show asking whether the president of the United States should be impeached for a sex act and you'd get maybe a call or two. But begin

I have pontificated on every subject from tort reform, politics and sports to how I would run this country.

by posing the question of who is responsible for removing a tree or branch that falls into a neighbor's yard and the phone lines would light up. Politics is local, and so is people's interest in the law.

When I wanted to win a bet with a colleague as to whether I could top a dozen calls in an hour, I asked listeners to pick their favorite movie of all time about the law. ("My Cousin Vinny" always wins.) Other show topics that have reliably generated phone calls have been on listeners' favorite book about the law (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) and their favorite law-related TV show ("L.A. Law").

The shelves in my office are lined with books written by people I've interviewed. And unlike most radio personalities, I actually read their books cover to cover. Some of the more interesting titles are *The Making of a Country Lawyer; Delay, Deny, Defend* (Gee, what industry do you think that was about?); *The Case Against Lawyers; Temptations in the Office*; *Disrobed: An Inside Look at the Life and Work of a Federal Trial Judge*; *How to Get Out of the Hospital Alive*; *Lowering the Bar* (lawyer jokes); and, my favorite, *Dog Law*. I have also interviewed a lawyer who wrote legal contracts for animals in movies. Believe me, Willy wasn't free.

Guests on the Show

My manifesto for "Legal Talk" has always included the following:

1. When answering the audience's legal questions, "first do no harm." Give the correct advice. If I don't know the answer, I tell the listener to call me at my office. If my research fails, I refer them to a lawyer in the field.

2. Educate the audience about the law. Whether I introduce a legal topic or supply the answer to a caller's question, I use the opportunity to discuss the application and reasoning behind the particular law.

3. Dispel the myth that lawyers are dishonest, greedy and only wear tasseled loafers. (At least George H.W. Bush and Dan Quayle got one out of three right.)

To prove that the law is an honorable profession and that lawyers are hardworking,

Broadcasting, 2004

If I have demystified my audience's perceptions about the role of lawyers in our society, then my career in radio has been worthwhile.

charitable and civic-minded, I've invited on as guests legal luminaries such as Lou Fryman (former chair, Pennsylvania State Ethics Commission), Bill Lamb (former justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court) and Lou Teti (former president of the Pennsylvania Bar Association). They and other lawyers, judges and court personnel have certainly helped me to accomplish that goal.

One guest of note was Gerry Spence, the famed Wyoming trial lawyer (and author of *The Making of a Country Lawyer*), who always wore a fringed cowboy jacket. Most great trial lawyers have huge egos. Gerry's was the size of the Grand Tetons. After I introduced him, I asked him to describe a typical day in the life of Gerry Spence. Fifty-five minutes later he stopped talking, just in time for me to sign off the air.

Celebrity guests have included Gloria Allred, John Stossel, Catherine Crier, Phyllis Schlafly, Joe Pistone (alias Donnie Brasco); authors Robert K. Tanenbaum and Jonathan Harr (*A Civil Action*); and congressmen and senators. During an election year, a politician will never be interviewed if he's leading in the polls. That's why I was able to interview Sen. Rick Santorum. I asked him if it was

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hypocritical on his part to sponsor bills on caps in medical-malpractice lawsuits at the same time his wife received a medical-malpractice settlement in excess of the proposed cap limits. His response: "It was my wife's decision." (Spoken like a true politician.)

When I invite local lawyers on my show, they come into the studio extremely nervous, carrying stacks of legal books. I allay their fears with my first question: "Please explain to the listening audience the rule against perpetuities." I only wish that I took a snapshot of each of their expressions so I could send them in for the "People" section of *The Pennsylvania Lawyer*.

One of my most memorable guests was my Villanova Law School professor John C. Dobbyn. He had written a legal thriller. Although I had not seen him in almost 40 years I still remembered receiving a C in corporations, along with about 80 percent of my class. Before the show he explained to me that in his first year of teaching he had given out mostly A's and B's. The dean lectured him in no uncertain terms that this practice would have to end. My corporations class was in his second year. Toward the end of the show, I facetiously announced to the audience that the professor's book was "well-written, insightful and a great read. I give it a C+." Revenge is a dish best served cold.

My all-time favorite guest was Joseph Hirt. He was a tipstaff for one of the judges in Chester County. I read an article in the local paper about his experience during the Holocaust. I interviewed Hirt in the studio for two hours. I presented the tapes in back-to-back weekly shows. His story was compelling. His escape from a German

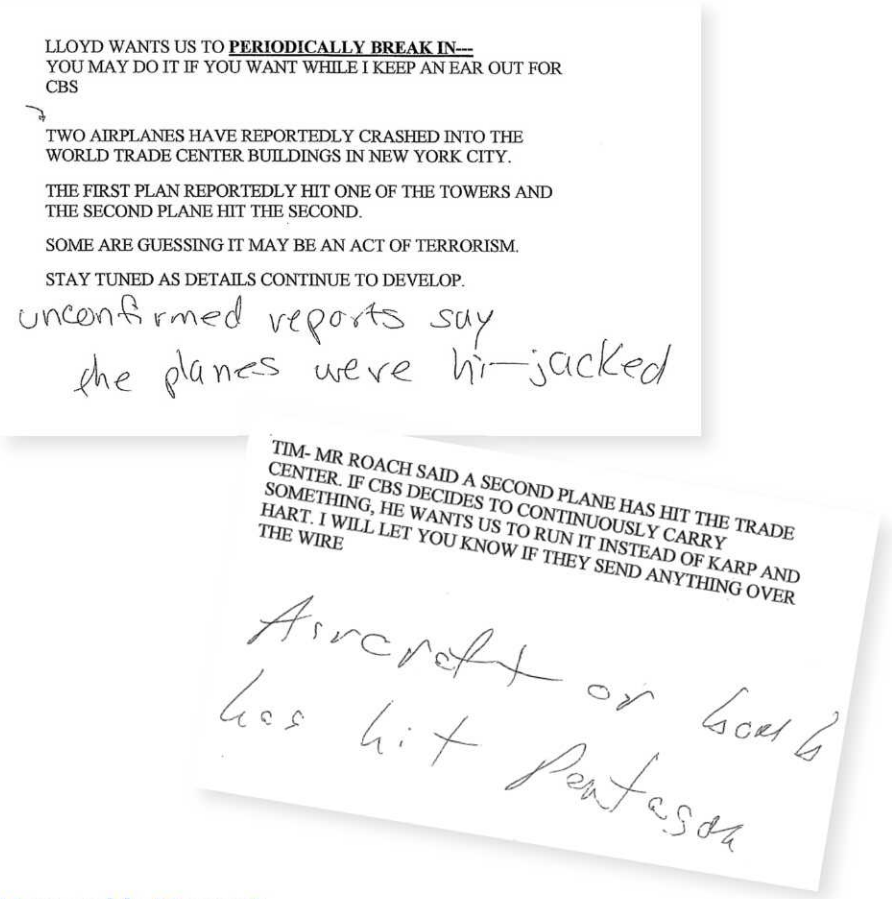
concentration camp, at the age of 13, had been in jeopardy when his foot got caught in the camp's perimeter barbed wire. A Nazi guard appeared. Instead of shooting young Joseph, the guard let him escape. Hirt then made his way to Italy, where he was caught and about to face a firing squad. A local priest convinced the German officer in charge that the boy was with him, and Hirt avoided death a second time.

These acts of kindness during the darkest moments were an inspiration to me and hopefully to my audience. Over the years I have aired the tapes several times. You know that you've been around radio for a long time when, during a court appearance or vacation, the studio plays a "Best of Legal Talk" show.

The Audience

In the first five years of my legal career I handled every type of case from alimony to zoning. That broad experience has helped me deal with the toughest legal questions fired my way. "Legal Talk" has been on two stations in Chester County during the past 27 years. After WCOJ's format was changed to religious talk 10 years ago, the show moved to WCHE (1520 AM). My audience consists of a lot of regular listeners. In the last five minutes of my show "Bill the Answer Man" calls in to correct me and my guests on all of our mistakes. Some of my guests depart a little peeved (especially judges).

If I have demystified my audience's perceptions about the role of lawyers in our society, then my career in radio has been worthwhile. Although I'm not asked to sign my autograph when handing a waitress my American Express card, I have from time to time heard, "Hey, you're that guy on the radio." I am reminded of a Larry King anecdote, "A strange thing happened to me the other day. I met a guy at a restaurant and he didn't have his own radio talk show." So much for celebrity.


LLOYD WANTS US TO **PERIODICALLY BREAK IN---**
YOU MAY DO IT IF YOU WANT WHILE I KEEP AN EAR OUT FOR CBS

TWO AIRPLANES HAVE REPORTEDLY CRASHED INTO THE WORLD TRADE CENTER BUILDINGS IN NEW YORK CITY.

THE FIRST PLAN REPORTEDLY HIT ONE OF THE TOWERS AND THE SECOND PLANE HIT THE SECOND.

SOME ARE GUESSING IT MAY BE AN ACT OF TERRORISM.

STAY TUNED AS DETAILS CONTINUE TO DEVELOP.

unconfirmed reports say the planes were hi-jacked

TIM- MR ROACH SAID A SECOND PLANE HAS HIT THE TRADE CENTER. IF CBS DECIDES TO CONTINUOUSLY CARRY SOMETHING, HE WANTS US TO RUN IT INSTEAD OF KARP AND HART. I WILL LET YOU KNOW IF THEY SEND ANYTHING OVER THE WIRE

Aircraft or bomb has hit Pentagon

Memorable Moment

Over the years I have hosted "Legal Talk" on different days of the week and at different times. On a beautiful September morning in 2001, I put on my headphones and began my 9 a.m. show. After a few minutes I was handed a note by the program director indicating that two airplanes had reportedly hit the World Trade Center towers. A second note, handed to me several minutes later, confirmed the attacks and also mentioned that an "aircraft or bomb has hit Pentagon." "Legal Talk" was shortly pre-empted as the station switched to a CBS network broadcast. That was the only day in my radio career that I was replaced by another broadcaster, and in that case by Dan Rather.

What It Means to Me

The practice of law can be tedious. Some lawyers seek distractions from their everyday routine. We all know colleagues who perform volunteer work, author books, participate in music or theatrical productions or even pen under a fictitious name a column ("To Wit") appearing on the last page of an esteemed legal publication.

While S. Sponte, Esq., expounds on his view of the world by pen, I am fortunate to be able to get everything off my chest via the airwaves. I have pontificated on every subject from tort reform, politics and sports to how I would run this country.

When I finally sign off and return to my full-time jobs as trial lawyer and "Pop Pop," I will have only one regret: I should have named the show "Illegal Talk" and competed with Howard Stern. ⚖

Stephen M. Karp of Karp and Hart PC, West Chester, represents the victims of automobile accidents and medical malpractice. He has lectured in the areas of personal-injury law, medical malpractice and insurance coverage. He has also lectured to Villanova Law School students on trial tactics and expert witnesses. He can be reached at skarp@karphart.com.

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