

Law on the air

There are probably a few dozen of us who do it up and down the country. From time to time we creep into darkened rooms, sit in front of something that looks like a lollipop – and speak. We are called variously Legal Eagles, Legal Beagles, Legal Seagulls – or just plain money grabbing lawyers.

We are the voices that boom out over local radio airwaves spreading what we hope is calm and clear advice to puzzled people as they try to make sense of the law.

It all started for me in 1984 (the year when George Orwell's dire predictions of a grim totalitarian state were not coming true – at least I hope not).

"I hear," said a programme presenter from the then fledgling BBC Radio Norfolk, "that you know a thing or two about the Consumer Credit Act." He had rung me several times before I returned his call. I was frantically busy at my day job. Eventually he persuaded me to talk on air.

Taking to the waves

It was a nerve-wracking experience. It was my first live broadcast. I was alone in the studio, but in Norwich were two presenters and another solicitor (who was later to become a commercial court judge, so you can imagine how formidable he was). I felt distinctly outnumbered. A record was being played. As it ended, a disembodied voice came down the line: "So, Richard Barr, what's all this about the Consumer Credit Act?"

I began to launch into a legal explanation. "Stop right there," he said. "Say that again and this time in English. No long words. No Latin."

I took a deep breath and began again. "When you pay for something by credit card you get extra protection from the law and this would help you if what you buy is defective or the seller has done a runner." "That sounds more like it."

I told the story of a client who had gone into one of those shops that are here today, gone tomorrow and back again on Thursday. He had bought a television with his credit card, but, when he plugged it in, there was no picture, just a lot of smoke. He



stormed back to the shop, but by then its proprietor was gone. I introduced him to section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act and he received a full refund from his credit card company. He was so pleased that he tipped off Radio Norfolk – and launched my legal broadcasting career. I don't think I even sent him a bill for that advice.

Love life woes and nude neighbours

More than 25 years later I am still going back to Radio Norfolk to do legal broadcasts.

In this time we've heard from all human life. The first listener's question often sets the tone for the hour-long broadcast, so one day it might be wall-to-wall wills, and the next it could be those horrible neighbour disputes that are often as bitterly fought as the worst divorces.

There have been lighter moments: one man called in from the middle of Norfolk. Confidentially he told of his problems with his love life, repeatedly punctuating his accounts with "You won't tell anyone will you?" Eventually the presenters were able to get a word in edgeways and point out that his confidential problems were being listened to by around 25,000 people. He quickly rang off.

Then there was an imperious lady who complained that her neighbour was gardening in the nude, and asked what could be done. "You can't be serious," we said. "I can and I am," she responded scarily. So we solemnly pronounced on the legal possibilities: breach of the peace, indecent exposure, behaviour likely to frighten the horses. But, unless her neighbour was in a public place, we concluded that there was not a lot that could be done – and we refrained from

suggesting self-help with garden shears.

Once, a friend rang in to the programme. She had decided to wind me up and came out with all manner of scurrilous spoof accusations against me. The problem was that during this broadcast I was in King's Lynn and the presenter was in Norwich. There was no way I could signal that this was a wind up. Eventually the presenter faded her out. But it didn't end there. Several outraged listeners then called in to ask why the programme was protecting me and I had not been asked to answer the accusations.

Power without responsibility

There is something addictive about radio broadcasting. If it is an ego trip, it is one for small egos: you do not become a celebrity. If anything, it is power without responsibility – you send people scurrying to their solicitors certain in the knowledge that you do not have to do the hard work.

Every now and then someone recognises my voice and says "I know you, you're on..." then names a different radio station.

I did, however, have to arrange the cremation of a dead horse from Singapore airport. When the lady at the pet crematorium in Potter Heigham recognised my voice it suddenly became the easiest thing in the world to get Sugar Plum safely into the afterlife from 12,000 miles away.

But when our neighbour told me that I was not behaving towards him as I had advised the listeners to behave, I told him to do as I say, not do as I do. And then ran away.

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