

No-shout zone

Dan Rea moves into WBZ's legendary nighttime talk-radio slot and sticks to the high road **BY DAN KENNEDY**

JERRY FROM MATTAPAN never knew what hit him.

It's a Monday evening in late October, and the journalist Sally Bedell Smith is a guest on *NightSide with Dan Rea*, on WBZ-AM (1030). For the past half-hour Rea has been interviewing Smith about her new book on Bill and Hillary Clinton, *For Love of Politics*. Now Rea opens up the lines.

"Sally, Sally, Sally," says Jerry, the first caller, his voice dripping with contempt. "Why do you like being a rump swab?"

Anyone who follows the talk-radio wars in Boston could guess what would happen next. Bedell would deny being a "rump swab"—that is, a kiss-ass. And that, in turn, would set off a loud, unenlightening exchange of insults and enmity.

Only that's not what happened. Instead, Jerry's crude characterization, a phrase heard on some talk shows more frequently than the traffic report, never made it past the seven-second delay. Rea gave Jerry another chance. "Jerry, do you want to play by my rules, or do you want to take cheap shots?" he asked. But Jerry was already gone.

This is talk radio as we've come not to know it. Last fall, Rea, among Boston's better-known television reporters, switched to radio, succeeding the late Paul Sullivan—and, before him, the legendary David Brudnoy—as host of WBZ's evening talk show, heard weekdays from 8 p.m. to midnight. Rea has quickly made his mark as the host of a show defined by civil conversation on a wide range of local and national issues.

Though *NightSide* may be well within the staid tradition of WBZ, a news-and-talk station owned by CBS, it's very different from the nasty, vitriolic rhetoric and inexpensive, nationally syndicated programs that have come to define talk radio in Boston and elsewhere. Since the early 1990s, WBZ had been in something of a holding pattern, as first Brudnoy, then Sullivan, struggled with serious illness. Now the station has a healthy evening host who can make a full-time commitment to the program. But can a show like Rea's survive and thrive in the age of Howie Carr and Jay Severin, of Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage?

Michael Harrison, the editor and publisher of the Springfield-based trade magazine *Talkers*, says the very fact that WBZ management would continue with local programming in its evening slot is a heartening departure from what most stations are doing nationally, as bottom-line pressures force steep budget cuts. With fewer people listening than is the case during the morning and afternoon commutes, many stations—including WBZ's two talk competitors, WRKO-AM (680) and WTKK-FM (96.9)—run syndicated shows at night. (Although change is in the air: At press time, WTKK was getting ready to debut a new, locally based 7-to-10 p.m. program to be hosted by former *Boston Herald* reporter Michele McPhee.)

"I think that program on that radio station has tremendous historical and cultural significance, and is a very important part of the commercial Boston talk-radio scene," says Harrison. "A live and local program in today's radio is a rarity."

Rick Radzik, who's been producing the program since 1997, sees Rea as very different from both Brudnoy, a dauntingly intelligent host who could talk about a wide range of social and cultural issues, and Sullivan, a political columnist for the *Lowell Sun* with a sharp sense of humor who liked to mix it up with callers. But he sees some similarities as well.

"I think one of the things that's important to me and important to the station is, the one thing you always heard about Paul and David was that you may not have always agreed with them, but you always liked them," Radzik says. "Dan's on board with that."

Adds former *Boston Herald* television critic Monica Collins: "I think he follows in that tradition of Brudnoy and Paul. I wouldn't say he's as smart as Brudnoy, but he certainly follows in that tradition of civilized talk, and that's always a refreshing thing to listen to on the radio."

AT 59, REA is starting a new career during a time of life when many people think of winding down. He's walked away from being one of the most rec-

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ognized faces in New England to become an unseen voice in the night. Yet, as he describes it, the decision wasn't difficult.

Rea worked as a reporter for WBZ-TV (Channel 4) for 31 years, and he spent the last 11 on the morning shift. "It was very clear to me that there was a direction of television news that was not going to be reversed, and I wasn't quite sure that I wanted to continue doing television news as I was doing it," Rea says in an interview at his home in Chestnut Hill, where he lives with his wife, teenage daughter, and a friendly brown-and-white Cavalier King Charles spaniel named Charlie. (Their other child, a son, is now a sophomore at Harvard.)

He offers an example: On October 23 one recent year (he thinks it was 2004), he was sent to Winchendon because the season's first snowfall had been spotted. He did as he was told, informing Channel 4 viewers that yes, indeed, white flakes had been spotted.

"My executive producer, who can remain anonymous, called me in the truck and said, 'I don't think you're into this live shot,'" Rea recalls. "And I said, 'Really?' I said, 'Watch my next live shot.' And I delivered it with vim and verve, perhaps the likes of which has not been seen on local television. And, of course, I was taken to the woodshed for that because I was not being respectful."

So Rea was clearly looking for a way out. The opportunity presented itself last spring, when Paul Sullivan underwent the latest in a series of surgeries for recurrent brain cancer. Rea began filling in, and he recalls wondering whether he might be able to take the final two hours of the four-hour program when Sullivan returned to work. Instead, Sullivan deteriorated rapidly. Sullivan hosted a farewell show in June (both moving and hilarious, it's still available on the WBZ website), and he died in September. Rea was named the permanent host a few weeks later.

Like Sullivan, Rea is a local boy, having grown up in the Readville neighborhood of Boston and graduating from Boston Latin School, the old Boston State College, and Boston University Law School. This is, in fact, his second stint in talk radio. In the early to mid 1970s, he hosted a program on WBUR-FM (90.9) and, later, a weekend show on WBZ. At that time, Rea was deeply conservative, serving as national vice chairman of Young Americans for Freedom and opposing Richard Nixon's re-election as president in 1972 on the grounds that he was too liberal. But Rea left opinion-mongering behind in 1976, when he became a full-time reporter for Channel 4. (Today, he describes himself as more of a "libertarian conservative," and says that ideology in general does not hold the allure it did when he was younger.)

By far Rea's best-known work at Channel 4 was his years-long crusade to clear Joseph Salvati, who, along with three other men, spent 30 years in prison for a 1965 murder they did not commit after being fingered by a government-pro-

tected witness named Joseph “The Animal” Barboza, an admitted hit man. Rea worked tirelessly, on his own time, after he became convinced that Salvati was innocent, but his efforts drew criticism in some circles that he had lost his journalistic objectivity. A headline on the jump page of a 1994 *Boston Globe* story about his involvement in the Salvati case—HAS DAN REA GONE TOO FAR?—still bugs him after all these years.

“That always kind of stuck in my craw,” he says. “How can you go too far if you really think the person’s innocent?”

Rea’s persistence paid off. This past July, US District Court Judge Nancy Gertner awarded \$101 million in damages to the families of the four men, saying in her ruling, “The FBI’s misconduct was clearly the sole cause of this conviction.” His report on the ruling was the last piece Rea did for Channel 4. “How many reporters would have stuck with that story all those years?” marvels Jon Keller, Channel 4’s political analyst, adding that Rea’s involvement in the Salvati case “speaks to his humanity and his caring about people.”

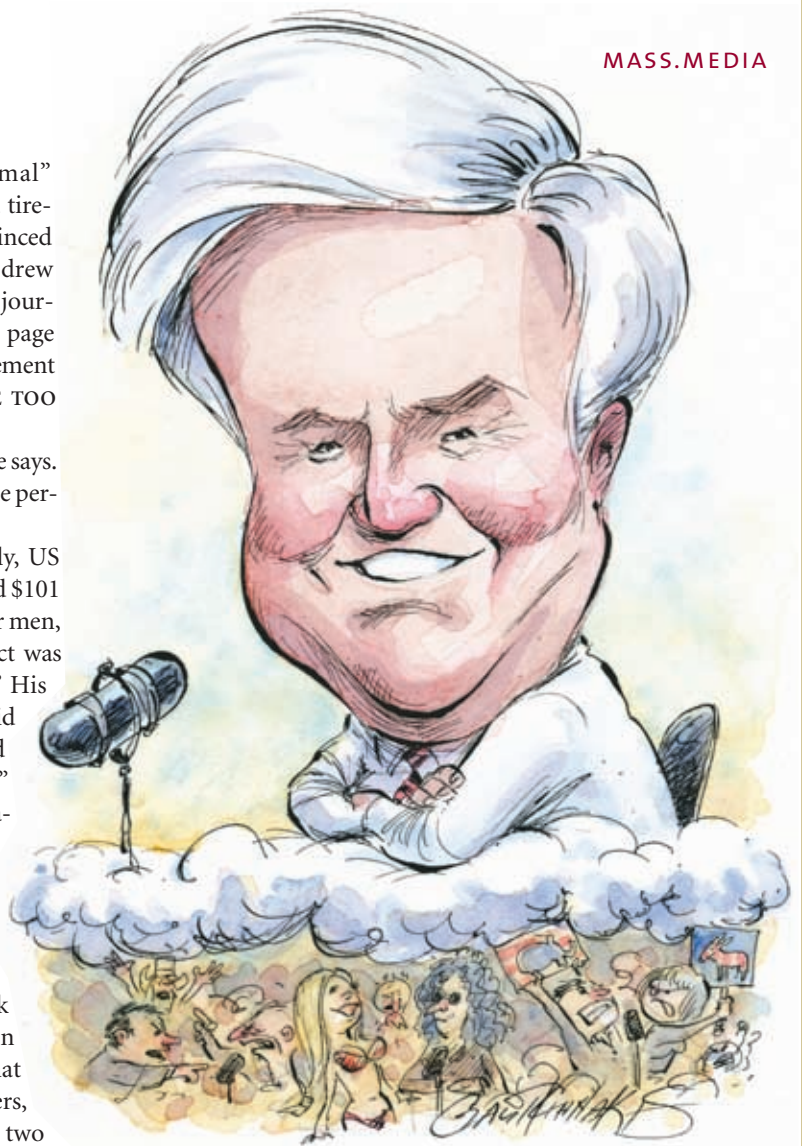
If his role in freeing Joe Salvati was the most satisfying of his Channel 4 career, among the more embarrassing moments took place in the early 1990s. He was reporting on a story about a homeless advocate’s advice that people shouldn’t give money to panhandlers, and he illustrated it with video depicting two panhandlers, both of whom were black. He says he and his cameraman, who was also black, had been unable to find a white panhandler before deadline.

The story ran, and co-anchor Liz Walker—the most

Rea has been distressed by the direction of TV news.

prominent African-American journalist in Boston—was furious. “She was really upset,” recalls Rea. “She was really yelling.” It was unsettling enough, he adds, that he feared for his job, but says the incident quickly blew over. He says he was recently a guest on Walker’s current show, *Sunday with Liz*, and that he wants to have her on *NightSide* as well. (Walker, through a Channel 4 spokeswoman, declined to be interviewed for this article.)

In spite—or perhaps because—of that run-in, Rea speaks with notable sensitivity about the way African-Americans are portrayed on TV. “Local television news is one of the great purveyors of racism of our time,” he says. “They don’t understand that. But if you are somebody who



lives out in one of the 128 or 495 suburbs, and never have a reason to really interact with people of color, the only time you’re going to see young black males is when they’re being arraigned, they’re being arrested, or they’re dying in the street. We ignore the 99 percent of the kids in that community who are trying to do the right thing, trying to go to school, trying to participate in community programs and athletics.”

He recalls the difficulty he had persuading Channel 4 to let him report on a summer math camp for inner-city kids, mostly African-American, back in 2006. “It took me much more time than should have been necessary to get this story on television,” he says. “And I think that was an important story to tell. I can tell those types of stories on radio.”

Although Rea doesn’t use the term, his vision for talk radio is a form of civic engagement, both locally and in the 38 states and the parts of Canada where WBZ is heard each night. He’s had Gov. Deval Patrick in for an hour of conversation, taking calls from listeners, and he hopes to do the same with Senators Ted Kennedy and John Kerry. He’s

willing to host some out-there discussions, too, from the endless conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of John Kennedy to a new generation of conspiracy theories over the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. All without shouting or name-calling.

IT'S NOT AS though the idea of civil talk radio is utterly unique. Tom Finneran, Jim Braude, and Margery Eagan, to name a few, are all trying to be heard without calling people names. At WBUR, the public radio powerhouse, Tom Ashbrook, Robin Young, and, since last year, WCVB-TV (Channel 5) refugee David Boeri host outstanding shows, though they emphasize interviews over listener call-ins, and only Boeri's program—the weekly *Radio Boston*—is truly local.

There's no question, though, that *Nightside with Dan Rea* is something of a throwback to the local radio scene of the 1970s and '80s, when the likes of Brudnoy, David Finnegan, Jerry Williams, Gene Burns, and Janet Jechelian saw the mission of a talk-show host as leading a conversation rather than spewing insults.

Among the more prominent talk-show hosts of that era

was Peter Meade, a former politico whose late-afternoon/early-evening program on WBZ led into Brudnoy's. Meade, a co-chairman of MassINC and executive vice president of corporate affairs for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, remembers that he, a liberal, and Brudnoy, a conservative, would usually appear together for about 15 minutes. "What was clear to people is how much David and I both loved and respected each other, and how often we did legitimately disagree," Meade says. "It was fun. And I thought that set a really terrific tone." Meade, who

He vows not to let his show get 'into the gutter.'

stepped down from his position as an occasional WBZ commentator in 2006, calls Rea "a terrific choice for the station."

Also giving a thumbs-up is veteran anti-tax activist Barbara Anderson, the director of Citizens for Limited Taxation. During the 1980s, Anderson was a ubiquitous presence on Brudnoy's and Williams's shows, and her organization's signature victory—the tax-cutting initiative Proposition 2½—would probably not have been approved

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by voters if it hadn't been for talk radio.

"I'm a big Dan Rea fan," says Anderson. "There's never going to be another David Brudnoy, and nobody would expect anyone to be. But I think he'll be his own great talk-show host."

Not that Rea doesn't have a learning curve he needs to master. If it's a good thing that he's not as snide as Howie Carr or as caustic as Jay Severin, it's also true that, in his early months on the air, he was also not as cutting as David Brudnoy or Paul Sullivan had been. For all his smarts and charm, Brudnoy, in his soft-spoken way, could be devastating if he thought a caller or guest was being ridiculous. And Sullivan could get pretty hot under the collar; it's just that he managed to do it without getting personal and without holding a grudge. Rea, by contrast, has been almost too polite, especially with callers.

WBZ program director Peter Casey says he expects that will change as Rea becomes more comfortable in the job. "I would say that for anybody who comes from a reporting background, whose whole career has been spent not putting their opinions into the content they've been providing, it's a bit of a transition," he says. "It will evolve."

Rea agrees, up to a point. "I don't want to criticize other people's programs. Maybe this show, *NightSide*, won't suc-

ceed, but I'm not going to let it deteriorate into the gutter. We'll hopefully have strenuous conversations, strenuous disagreements. Raised voices? Not a problem," he says.

"My producers and Peter Casey are trying to say to me, 'You've got to get out there further, you've got to state your positions.' Sometimes my positions are a little more nuanced than they should be. And they want you to say, well, 'I'm in favor of this,' or 'I'm in favor of that.' I think I'm getting better at it. But, ironically, maybe I was better at it 30 years ago, because now I see that there is always more than one side to a story, multiple sides. So I don't know if that's going to be an impediment to me becoming a good talk-show host.

"I feel like I have great freedom to do this. The thing is, I'm at the end of my career. I did 31 years in television. I could retire tomorrow, I really could. I'm doing this not because it's a job, I'm doing it because I like it. If it turns out that the public doesn't like what I'm doing, I'm sure 'BZ will adjust. And I'll be able to deal with it." **CW**

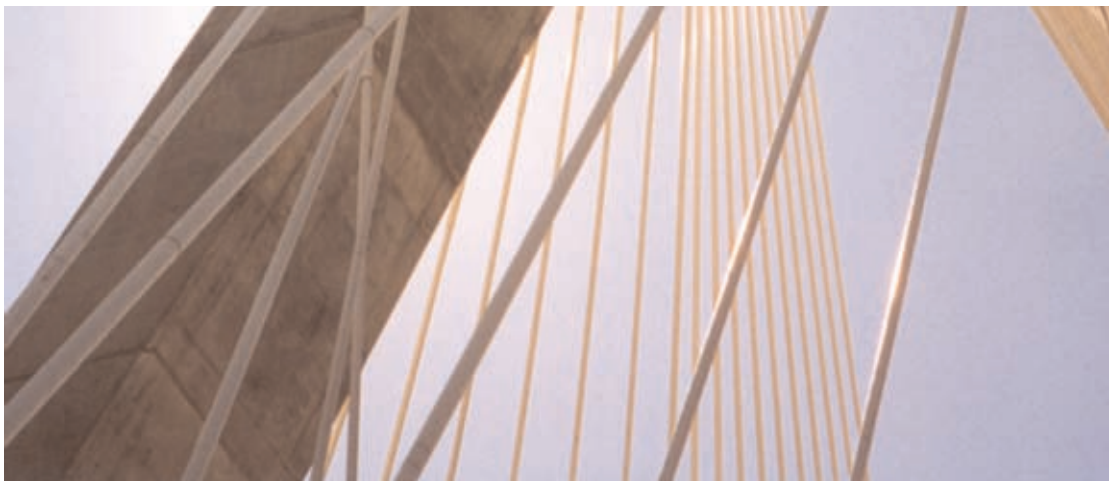
Dan Kennedy is an assistant professor at Northeastern University's School of Journalism. His blog, Media Nation, is at medianation.blogspot.com, and he can be reached at da.kennedy@neu.edu.

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