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Editorial

I had a surprising telephone call in the summer holidays. A researcher from Radio 2's John Dunn Show wanted to know why there are 360° in a revolution. On the show, listeners write in with questions that they would like to have answered, and Anne Macnaughton, who was the researcher, scours the country for "experts" who can answer them. So I gave her an answer that ranged over the millennia from the Babylonian sexagesimal system to the metric system. I was extremely impressed by her demonstrations of interest and knowledge, especially when she wondered why she had learned base 7 arithmetic at school, and we discovered that we were exact contemporaries and had both suffered the nutty "arithmetic in any base" in our Scottish O-grade exam. So it was with considerable confidence that I hopped in to Radio Inverness on my (temporary) crutches to record an interview.

I was to be interviewed by Sarah Kennedy. She had been briefed by the researcher following our extensive conversation the day before, and her input was to quote back little bits from what I'd said to the researcher. Ms Kennedy started off badly with her introduction "... the origins of (yuk!) geometry"; followed up with "... and I (ha-ha, simper) haven't even got O-level maths", and then directed the interview round to the metric system "... and how can you be sure there won't be another system invented to replace the metric system ...". She foiled all my attempts to answer the very interesting question that a listener had asked, and though I kept my temper, it was impossible not to sound patronising in the face of such deliberate lack of effort on her part. I'm glad no readers were listening, as my six minutes would have kept us in gleanings until the end of the century.

Well it left me with a greatly increased respect for the three or four people (Patrick Moore, Heinz Wolff, Magnus Pike, Ian Fell) who have been able to popularise technical matters in a reasonably uncompromised way. They may have adopted strange mannerisms to achieve it, they may have trivialised their subjects to a certain extent, but they have fought the good fight against the apathy and foolishness of swathes of broadcasters in the Sarah Kennedy mould.