

Secrets and Sin in a Lifetime of Spin : How to Do PR

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First 30 pages

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Introduction: FOBO

Plumbers, electricians, carpenters and mechanics: they must be laughing their arses off. All those mugs like me who went to university, grafting for decades in front of a screen, tapping away on a stupid keyboard.

We are finished.

Manual dexterity is the future of the horribly-named human resource. Master of the U-bend, herculean ditch-digger or brightest of sparks, you will inherit the earth. And good luck to you.

Journalism, law and the creative industries, it's all over. If you can't read the writing on the wall, you need your eyes tested.

FOBO, the fear of becoming obsolete, is growing. In offices, little piggies hide behind desks while the wolf pounds the door wielding an axe emblazoned with two letters: AI.

18 January 2024 was when I knew the jig was up. "Chat GPT can write nearly as well as I can," I wrote exasperated in my notebook.

"My skills are redundant. I am not economically viable," I added, taking my cue from William D-Fens Foster in the 1993 classic *Falling Down*.

I'd come to the party quite late compared with many users. When I did, I watched in wonder as a few prompts on Chat GPT delivered results on screen like the vide-printer that used to reveal football scores at 4.50pm on a Saturday, but turbo-charged. I'm a quick writer, but this was Usain Bolt to my Zola Budd (in contemporary time: Zola Budd is approaching 60)

Some quick calculations followed. It would likely be a year, I surmised, before my slothful company realised that AI had outsmarted their smart-arse head of communications.

It would take another for the containership of French bureaucracy to turn on me - and for HR to consider how best to apply the guillotine. Another year, at least, for the plan (and man) to be executed.

I was a bit optimistic or pessimistic, depending upon how you look at it. A company notoriously slow to adapt to business trends showed remarkable pace. First came an AI governance committee. This

was quickly disbanded and replaced by a dedicated AI department, to consider what were euphemistically described as efficiencies.

I doubled down on planning. I wouldn't be rich, but by the time Metal Mickey stood in front of a BBC camera in my place, I could be happily rolling around in my pants enjoying re-runs of Judge Judy, if not quaffing Veuve at the same time.

Millions of people in their late fifties are engaged in the same type of frantic planning. All working the numbers, trying to get in under the wire, as the Married to the Machine AI podcast put it.

My father went through the same in the 1980s. He was a librarian before libraries were re-branded Discovery Centres and IT experts took over his gentle profession. One of my Brittany Ferries' colleagues in Portsmouth meanwhile completed a degree in technical drawing, just in time for CAD to make his skills redundant. It's not a nice feeling.

So why write a book offering tips and guidance to the next generation of PR person, when the premise of this book is that the entire profession is on borrowed time? is it just to prop-up a disappointing pension?

Well PR is not just about writing. LinkedIn is awash with frantic quotes, elevating the scope of the role. PR transcends the threat, they argue, because PR People increasingly sit at the top table in the boardroom. The C-Suite I think it's called.

There is some truth in that.

Perhaps then there is something to be said for passing on a lifetime of experience to newcomers, in the hope that not everything will be lost to an advancing army of algorithms. After all, there are tips in here too. I hope many can be applied in any walk of life, be you a PR guru, shipping clerk, boxer or bank manager.

The perfect PR person is a chameleon, forever changing behaviour and appearance just enough to be hidden in plain sight, like Woody Allen's Zelig. We all do this to an extent, but in the language of the era we might lazily describe it as something of a spectrum.

In psychology it's called being a high-self monitor, someone who takes cues from their surroundings, making adjustments to their behaviour, sometime small, sometimes large, to shape that of others and fit in.

This book may help shape the chameleon in you, even if you are not that way inclined.

There are tricks anyone can play to influence, dark arts to be orchestrated or subtle moves to be made that an electronic alter ego will not be able to replicate. Plus a litany of mistakes I've made over a career that's included 20 years in the motor industry and 10 in maritime. Perhaps like the lofty old BBC this book is about entertaining, as well as informing.

My fear is the future will be full of grey soup, electronic gruel mined and blended from the internet swamp.

Maybe I'm wrong: perhaps there will still be a place for learning your trade, learning to write well for example, if you plump for a career in PR.

Whatever follows, enjoy the future.

I'm so grateful to be the past.

Chapter 1: Schoolboy error

If you are going to fuck-up with a journalist, try to make sure it's not someone important, like the man who writes for the Wall Street Journal, a man who also happens to be the world's only motoring correspondent ever to have won a Pulitzer Prize.

Everyone knows the adage: journalists are not your friends. Always assume the worst and keep your guard up at all times. It's lesson one in the PR playbook, a bit like making sure you take your glasses if you fly a commercial airliner or keeping whisky off your cornflakes in the morning if you have a busy day of heart surgery ahead.

When it Hits the Fan podcast presented by former Sun editor David Yelland and Simon Lewis included it as one of the seven golden rules. "Never make the error of thinking they (the media) are your mates," Yelland urges in his introduction to the episode.

Now rewind to 2011.

I was working for Rolls-Royce Motor Cars at the time. Gloriously decadent, each magnificent motor was a work-of-art, retailing upwards of a quarter of a million pounds. Generally more like half a million. I was the product communications manager, a title I elevated to global product communications manager when they booted me out three years later.

The company's two-and-a-half tonne motors were not just an homage to excellence in engineering. They were a showcase of craftsmanship for the pretentiously named Home of Rolls-Royce in Goodwood.

Goodwood *is* more than a car factory, that much is true. The site includes a leather shop full of skilled seamstresses crafting monikered leather seat covers from bull hides whose occupants chomped grass on the highest Alpine ranges (no mosquito bite marks in the leather) before succumbing to the cleaver.

There's a wood shop too, housed beneath what used to be the largest living roof in Europe. It's where dedicated teams create laminated, bespoke interior trim to match the family colours of Sheikh Whomever from Saudi or the company logo of Californian tech billionaire Zachery Zachman.

Other cottage industries are kept alive within this ultra-luxury business: a man who hand paints a remarkably straight line down the side of every car by hand. Starlight headliner specialists, carefully weaving hundreds of LEDs into the roof lining creating the effect of - say - constellations in the sky on the very day you were born.

The purists might not have liked it, but ze Germans took a basket-case brand from the 1990s and made it not-a-basket-case anymore. How they did it is a story in itself. Rewind another ten years for a quick summary.

BMW had been courting Rolls-Royce Motor Cars for many years. But its involvement began in earnest following the sale by parent company Vickers. An unseemly all-German brawl was to follow. In this Teutonic tussle Munich swooped in at the 11th hour to take control of a brand Volkswagen thought they had in the bag.

It led division of Rolls and Bentley.

BMW got what it wanted: it won the right to build Rolls-Royce Motor cars, use of the RR logo and ultimately the trademark for the Spirit of Ecstasy, perhaps better known by the moniker flying lady. That's the famous bonnet mascot, the inspiration for which was early 20th century tart Eleanor Thornton.

This was 1998.

Having outmanoeuvred its rival, BMW upped the ante with an extraordinary claim. In the absence of a factory, (VW kept the production plant in Crewe for Bentley), with no new model design and no staff, Munich committed to launching its new British-built statement product reviving the famous name Phantom on 1 January 2003, five years hence.

The motoring press guffawed. Established automotive brands - those with actual factories in stone and steel - took around seven years to design, develop and launch a new model. Rolls-Royce, a brand encapsulating the expectation of a name that doubles as a superlative for the very best in something, suggested Olympic levels of hubris.

But if history has taught us one thing, it's that Germans move with pace and determination when opportunity knocks.

Affable toff Charlie March and his sweeping Goodwood estate in West Sussex England would provide the oh-so-British location for the Munich project. A plot on the south side, bordering Chichester, was earmarked for the factory.

The late, great Ian Cameron set up a design team in London, to be inspired by all things around them. Architects and builders set to work on a factory, with a brief to blend it seamlessly into its beautiful environment (as a condition of the deal, Lord March insisted the building should not be visible from his bedroom).

A picture of the CEO was issued to media. Suited and booted with phone in hand, his desk was surrounded by wheat in the field of dreams where the factory would eventually rise. Who says ze Germans don't have a sensing of humour.

Three hundred members of staff were recruited to make the impossible happen, to return Rolls-Royce to its rightful position at the top of the podium within the space of a few years.

Astonishingly, incredibly, even as factory walls remained incomplete, Rolls-Royce Phantom made its debut at the Detroit Motor Show in January 2003 to much fanfare, fulfilling the promise made five years earlier.

It was an immediate hit, a defib resetting the heart of the brand and re-elevating its reputation among rap stars (Pimp by 50 Cent was one of its first outings) and the enormously well-heeled. Little by little, the world came to love its suicide doors, retractable flying lady, door-frame integrated umbrellas, silent running and magic carpet ride.

Coupé and droptop (convertible) versions followed. Critical success continued. But a return on investment was still a long way off. The Munich mother ship had invested more than £100m to deliver the impossible, and it was time to send in the accountants.

If Rolls-Royce Phantom was the daddy, its little brother Rolls-Royce Ghost (2009) was to be the business-case car. A slightly more subtle statement of the brand - if any massive Rolls can be described thus - this was the model for volume, if still extremely low volume compared with other car makers.

By the time I joined the business in 2010, Ghost was selling like hot cakes. Furthermore, there were waiting lists for every Phantom. Record sales and brand partnerships started to channel significant profits back to the Munich mother ship.

Not that the company didn't put the odd foot wrong. Flamboyant Californian designer Bijan was an example. He died shortly after the company embarked on an ill-conceived 20-car design project. Tacky non-motoring products from his stable eventually found their way to the shopping channel fronted by ex-children's TV presenter Peter Simon.

Karl Lagerfeld was given a hero's welcome when he flew to Goodwood in 2012. German colleagues swooned as the cadaverous, monochrome, cartoon character crept around the factory. He took some photographs; they were piss poor. A year or so later, announcing production of the company's new fastback, it occurred to me that our press pack was inaccurate: it was not the first time a Wraith had advanced slowly down the Rolls-Royce assembly line.

But on the whole, Rolls-Royce got it right. It claimed to be the pinnacle of automotive, which was arguably true. It was competing not with other cars, but with luxury yachts, apartments and ultra-luxury watches (gosh – writing this I realise I still buy my own PR). But in the year 2011, it lacked one thing. A new product to talk about.

This is where we return to PR and the Wall Street Journal.

A low volume car maker, even one steeped in history and basking in its glorious resurgence, needs to keep things relevant, to keep the punters coming. In the absence of new product, you need to conjure-up stories to keep you front of mind.

The motor industry has a trick for this: it's called the concept car. Everyone gets terribly excited about concept cars and they grab headlines. But rarely do they go any further other than to influence designs of inevitably more drab production models. The Audi TT was a notable exception.

Development of concept car, eventually called 102EX, started before I joined Rolls-Royce. The project had a nickname Glider, a word that still makes me shudder today.

I was thrust straight into it upon arrival, partly because the colleague I'd been warned about before I joined possessed two of the most acutely sloping shoulders I have ever encountered in my career. But mainly because, as product comms manager, it was kinda my job, even if the product in this case was really a talking point and the file had been dumped on me on day two.

Having said that, the project encapsulated all the ingredients for a great story. A company that established its reputation on a century of V12 engines, dipping its toe in the hippy world of all-electric, eco-motoring. The Rolls-Royce of contradictions.

All it needed was a bit of fluff to top the story's tail. After a little research I found it.

In the company's history, Charles Rolls is often depicted as monied toff to Royce's engineer. But that's not true. At University, Charles was known as Dirty Rolls. His hands were covered in oil and muck as he too lived and breathed engineering. He was fascinated by automobiles and aircraft years before the pair met.

At the turn of the 20th century, petrol and electricity were competing for supremacy to propel new-fangled horseless carriages. Petrol got the upper hand, but not before Rolls had assessed the potential of an all-electric Brougham. For the purpose of the 102EX story, his comments were historical gold dust.

“The electric car is perfectly noiseless and clean,” Rolls observed. “There is no smell or vibration. They should become very useful when fixed charging stations can be arranged.” Prescient indeed.

The delicious V12 petrol was the company’s bread and butter. However, its founder recognised the benefits of electric propulsion 100 years earlier. Brilliant stuff. His partner Henry Royce meanwhile had developed and patented the bayonet lightbulb, we sagely noted in the press pack.

Could we, we wondered rhetorically, replicate the V12 experience with massive batteries and electric motors. Perhaps customers would accept an all-electric Rolls-Royce at some point in the future if power, silence and the magic carpet ride could be encapsulated in an all-electric package (this transpired in 2023 with the launch of the all-electric Spectre – shout out to engineer Dave Monks).

The 102EX would serve as a test bed to answer our question as we appended the nomenclature with “experimental electric”. Thus 102EX experimental electric would tour the world for journalists, existing customers, power brokers and others to test. This, we said, would provide the intelligence the company needed to make a decision about all-electric as a power source.

It was a great angle. It was also utter cobblers.

The Wall Street Journal was the only title to call us out on it. It opined the car was developed as an opportunity to talk about the company in a year marked by the absence of any new product. In other words, pure PR.

The writer of this column was none other than Pulitzer Prize winner Dan Neil. It was the rest of his column that gave me sleepless nights ahead of publication.

Dan had arrived in the UK in the summer of 2011 shortly after the powder-blue electric car had returned to the UK from its debut at the Geneva Motor Show.

He was part of a select group of American motoring hacks, flown in to be wined and dined in Goodwood, to ooh and ahh over the factory and then to be given the opportunity to drive the world’s first electric Rolls-Royce for themselves.

We plotted a triangular route. It started with the rolling hills of the Goodwood estate, taking in Petworth and Midhurst before returning to the factory, via the schoolboyingly delicious village of Cocking.

A 30-mile round trip. I had to accompany every journalist on this Sisyphean trek, pretending I liked the dreary West Sussex countryside.

It's fair to say I wasn't looking forward to meeting Dan. An American colleague had warned me to be on my guard: "Dan's a little full of himself," she'd said, which coming from an American was a pretty stark accusation.

When I met him, I was delighted to discover he was exactly the opposite. I warmed to him as soon as he approached me with outstretched arm and broad smile. He was a good-looking and trim, smart and funny and we were soon getting on like a house on fire.

We set off in the car after a chat about the 96 cells and the top speed and the amps running through the contraption (I used to know all that crap off by heart: sadly, no more). After a few miles in the electric motor, it seemed clear to me that we shared the same views on things beyond the world of automotive.

Chickens for example. I've no idea how we got onto the subject. But we were soon roaring with laughter: how we hated the filthy little fuckers, clucking around in their own excrement.

Then came Pippa Middleton. She'd stolen the show at Kate and William's wedding a year earlier, wearing a figure-hugging dress that had men all over the country spluttering into their Union Jack mugs. We talked about this - respectfully of course - before turning our attention to her sister. How lucky Wills was to have hooked such a beautiful wife, we giggled.

We moved onto the Swiss. I'd just returned from two trips to Geneva. The first was a drive with a journalist around Lake Geneva in 102EX.

The car's range was roughly equivalent to a circumnavigation of the lake. What if we were to test this, by a "will-it won't-it" make it drive, calling on the services of an excellent freelance journalist with masses of syndication potential. A little jeopardy made it a good story, even though we secretly knew it would succeed because it had been driven 100 miles in the dead of night around the streets of West Sussex before being shipped to Switzerland.

The second Swiss adventure was the car's big reveal at the Geneva Motor Show, an annual event I dreaded. Switzerland was infuriatingly on the receiving end of endless good breaks like stunning scenery, I sneered to Dan.

The food is filth, I added, recalling a dinner with fondue cheese I had to endure a few weeks earlier. And what about their so-called neutrality. What cowards! Finally, I moved on to Nazi gold hoarding,

money laundering and state sponsored tax evasion. My blood boils, I told Dan, when I think of Formula One drivers who make their homes there.

He laughed as I ran through a long list of crimes, crimes I ascribed to a country that was one of the biggest European markets for our cars. Gosh the Swiss, what a fucking ghastly bunch they are, I might as well have said; no wonder they have enough money to buy a Rolls-Royce.

But as the car silently wafted along carefully curated roads, I wasn't finished. Not by a long shot.

What about other Rolls-Royce customers, I snorted. We like to tell media that customers are entrepreneurs rewarding themselves for success in whichever field they operated. The wealth generators, the mass-employers, the good guys if you will. Ha, I added caustically. That's a lot of bollocks.

The reality was a carefully prepared line I've trotted out many times before and since in private. The Rolls-Royce customer base is largely made up of despots, dictators and tax avoiders. Dan squealed in delight.

Having spent an excellent 90 minutes in each other's company on our drive in the countryside, we returned to base. That evening we met for dinner with the rest of the American contingent. Dan was great company, not a hint of the traits ascribed to him by my colleague.

He returned to the United States to file his story the next day.

Two things to remember about this story. The first, this was 2011. I was not fresh out of the PR box. I'd been spinning for more than 15 years by this time. And yet, I had spent a jolly 90 minutes trashing one of our biggest markets, before moving on to every one of the 5,000 ultra-high-net-worth individuals who handed over vast sums of money to own a Roller. In other words, the people who paid my wages.

The man from Rolls-Royce who hates his customers: I might as well have written the headline on a Post-it note and handed it to Dan.

When it hit me, my stomach felt like it would fall out. Dan was a Pulitzer Prize winner, not some klutz scribbler. He knew exactly what he was doing, I surmised. I had just handed him my arse on a silver platter for his left-leaning column.

I waited anxiously for his piece. Not for the first time in my BMW Group career, I foresaw a P45 and the dole queue.

I can't recall exactly how long it took. When it arrived (via electronic clipping), my heart was pounding.

It was beautifully written. It was entertaining. It was accurate.

Most importantly there was not a word about me or the Swiss or chickens or hating the company's customers.

I got away with it.

To Dan, I say thank you. Because that could have cut short my career at Rolls-Royce by a full year.

Of course, that might not have been a bad thing.

SIN : You sir, are a liar

It's worth joining the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR). I have benefitted from many excellent courses, and monthly-magazine Influence is well written and interesting.

But a word of caution on their Code of Conduct. Among other things it urges members to maintain the highest standards of professional endeavour, integrity, confidentiality, financial propriety and personal conduct.

It directs PR people to deal honestly and fairly in business with employers, employees, clients, fellow professionals, other professions and the public. It exhorts them to uphold the reputation of, and do nothing that would bring into disrepute, the public relations profession or the Chartered Institute of Public Relations.

I sometimes wonder if I work in the same profession as other PR people because this guidance comes from a fluffy parallel universe that does not exist. It's very noble, but also absolute rubbish.

Show me a (competent) PR person who has never done something that could bring the public relations profession into disrepute, or who hasn't been dishonest, and I will show you a liar. Or someone who is a bit shit at their job.

The reason we do these things is that we are paid to do so by the company or agency for which we work. It's what you signed up for. If something isn't true, well that's just too bad: your job is to suck it up and spit it out.

And ain't nuffink in no Code of Practice gonna change that.

Chapter 2: This is showbiz

"I worked for years as a radio studio producer and guests would always ask how they had done when they emerged from the studio.

I would say (half-truth, half not, because I hadn't really been listening) 'yes, it was great'. What I meant by that was: you didn't swear, you didn't go blank, you answered in more than monosyllables, and you filled the gap up to the traffic news.

The fact that you didn't manage to get across your points doesn't bother the interviewer/ reporter/ producer. We have different agendas."

Do You Really Need Media Training, by Kate Betts, Chartered Institute of Public Relations PR trainer

My first radio interview took place in summer 1995. It was live with BBC Radio Sussex and I was bloody terrified.

The opportunity was thrown my way by Brighton Ferries CEO and company founder Tony Bertin. When the company went belly-up in early autumn, he took the heat for its failure, partly because he was struck down by a very serious illness.

But it wasn't his fault. San Pietro, our air-cushion catamaran, was neat and fast, but it just wasn't up to the task of long voyages from Brighton Marina to Fécamp in Normandy. Battered by wind and waves, it bobbed around on different corners like Moog the dog in Willow the Wisp.

Plus, the first captain behaved like a colossal dick. He refusing to sail on a whim and moaned constantly about a container that had been dumped by the office that he was trying to ship to his girlfriend's place in the south of France.

Cancellations rose to critical levels, and the commercial director removed all the desktop computers which apparently belonged to him. Tony was blamed, but he'd worked his arse off to make it a success. He sunk loads of his own cash into the start-up and nearly killed himself in the process.

In the early weeks of summer though when the ship was full - and it was full both ways with 280 passengers - there looked to be a future in it. We made hay while the sun shone during one of the hottest summers on record.

The interview request came a month or so into the season when hopes were as high as the temperature. It came from BBC Radio Sussex.

“You do it Nigel,” Tony said with characteristic cheerfulness, when I asked him if he was available.

“OK,” I replied nervously.

The next couple of hours were largely spent swotting-up on the ship while the world fell out of my arse in the WC, all the while telling myself I couldn’t do it.

When the time came for me to talk, I found a quiet office. I brought a tape recorder too, as I had agreed to replay it for the CEO later that day. That might not be true. It seems far more in character to believe I recorded it for bragging rights.

I still have it somewhere on audio cassette which is something we used to have in the olden days for recording songs illegally off the radio. #hometapingiskillingrealmusic

The minutes before the call were terrifying. But not half as bad as the next bit: waiting on death row listening to the programme live through the receiver, before the presenter came to me.

I knew what anxiety was like. The bastard had crippled me since my late teens, and this was full on terror. Maybe this was to my advantage. Unlike prolonged anxiety episodes, characterised as they are by enduring and unfathomable hyper-arousal that can last for weeks, I knew this one would all be over ten minutes after the trigger had been pulled.

When a radio station calls to go on air live, you can be hanging on for two or twenty minutes before it’s your time to talk to the nation. That’s because they need to know the interview fodder is prepped and ready to go. Generally this means listening to a dreadful Queen or Billy Ocean song (sometimes both) before the presenter comes to you; all part of the ordeal.

I don’t recall how long I waited from the initial call from the radio station to my live on air. But it felt like forever. My heart felt like it would bust right through my rib cage.

But the thumping, alongside washing machine stomach and profuse sweating, were forgotten in an instant as soon as my time came. I spoke for about two minutes, answering questions about the craft, the number of passengers and cancellation rates for the ship.

Thinking about it, this was probably my first outright lie on air. I said cancellation rates were probably about equivalent to other fast craft on the channel. They weren’t; we were already running at an unsustainable 20 to 25 percent.

Then, it ended. I put the phone down and a feeling of euphoria surged through me. Endorphins took hold of my body and I'd never felt more alive. This was a pattern I experienced for years during subsequent interviews, radio and TV.

It started with pre-interview terror. The middle bit was the interview in which I generally did an ok job. It ended with the satisfying surge of chemicals from my brain.

Broadcast interviews made you feel alive.

Buoyed by this experience, I did my first piece to camera a few weeks later. We had translated the concept of day tripping into France, I'd said in a press release. The French were coming to Brighton in their hundreds (which was true).

I cringe at the line I trotted out to BBC South.

"In the past we had a situation where we'd go to France to buy their products. Now we have a situation where the French are coming over here to buy our products"

Razor sharp insight.

Sadly, Brighton Ferries didn't last. By October, the end was inevitable and writs had been slapped all over the mast. I didn't do another broadcast interview for at least four years.

In between I'd spent a disastrous few weeks at a company called Halma PR in London, from which I was sacked for being totally out of my depth. Licking my wounds, I spent a summer teaching English as a foreign language on Oxford Street.

Then I'd been taken on (with little enthusiasm on their or my part) by the motor industry. I was part of the consumer affairs team at the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, returning reluctantly to the little I could remember about consumer law, in a role that paid around half of what I would have been earning had I completed my trading standards qualification.

While I didn't much like my job, I did learn to love The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders. Its office in Belgravia was a massive stately home called Forbes House. Badly in need of repair, it nevertheless claimed to be one of only two properties in central London boasting a front lawn.

Parking was free which meant a parking space in Belgravia. For the most part, my days were spent in the most exclusive part of London, most evenings too when I discovered the Grouse and Claret just down the road, now sadly a block of luxury flats.

I loved the maze of corridors in that building. The different levels and departments in which you could easily get lost or hide. It housed teams of smelly old men, literally counting down to their

retirement with Post-it notes hanging from cupboards. There were beautiful girls in the exhibitions team and there was a basement full of data crunchers led by an excellent and ever-patient Maltese fellow called Carmelo.

But one room to which I did not have access intrigued me most: the radio room.

It was located just to the left of one of the two side-staircases (as opposed to the majestic sweeping stairwell greeting visitors in the Forbes House foyer) and it was a secret place. Above the door a small box had been fitted like you see on the telly. It flashed red On Air if an interview was taking place inside. I was desperate to see.

When I was finally given the opportunity, it was a huge anti-climax. I'd expected glitz and glamour, but this was just a shabby little broom cupboard, with tatty walls, from which conical soundproofing was either peeling or from which it was completely absent.

There was a bare desk and a couple of chairs, in case two guests were being interviewed concurrently or if someone was listening in via one of the two sets of headphones (cans). These were plugged-in to a little black box called a Codec machine.

Ah the Codec machine.

Back in the 1990s Codecs were everywhere. They were used to turn an analogue phone signal into a digital one, dramatically improving sound quality. The BBC used to insist on an ISDN line (still don't know what that stands for) and the Codec was the machine that delivered a genuine digital transformation, before a legion of consultants appropriated the expression to suck the blood out of stupid host companies panicking about this scary interweb thing.

At the allotted time, an interviewee would don the headphones, adjust the microphone and wait for the Codec to spark into life for a down-the-line. A series of R2D2 style beeps and flashing lights would send a pulse of adrenalin through your body. Bobs your uncle, you'd be connected.

My first interview was undertaken before I'd been invited to move from the consumer affairs team to the press office. The subject of the discussion was some minor legal issue. My future boss had asked me to step in partly because he knew I had a little background in the media but mainly because he wanted to see if I might have the right stuff to join his team.

I'd dropped enough hints, exaggerating my experience and expertise.

He asked his press officer Andrea to sit in with me. That upped the ante a little, because I wanted to do a good job and it's always more difficult to do a live interview if you are being watched. Plus, I fancied her.

The interview itself was fine, although she kept passing little notes, which is never the thing to do when someone is in full flow on a live. At the end, I felt pretty good and she was relatively comfortable with what I'd said and how I'd said it. A few pieces of constructive criticism. Not a problem: she was an experienced press officer, her advice was sound and I liked staring at her.

I was invited to join the press officer, when Andrea left to join Volvo. Al Clarke, was the ex-BBC radio presenter who'd given me a shot at radio, then a shot on his team. He was also the ex-announcer at Loftus Road, which maddened me because he hated football and delighted in getting players names wrong when announcing players to the long-suffering fans.

Media Training

Long after my first media interviews, but while I was still relatively inexperienced, Al arranged media training for his two press officers. That was me and a fellow called Jon Stanley.

Media training generally involved someone who either was, or still is, a radio or TV journalist. It can take place at studios like those belonging to broadcast PR agency Markettiers in central London, which used to be home to a dungeon suite of radio and TV studios (think a larger, subterranean version of Scramble Studios from Toast of London).

Part of the training involves mock radio and TV interviews, essential practice for those likely to experience it in their jobs. Participants face exactly the same hostile radio or TV studio environment a company CEO, minister of government or film star might experience in real life. It can be a terrifying and you can't just wing it.

Julian Fisher, a Markettiers grandee and employee for more than 25 years, as well as one of my two go-to guys for advice on broadcast PR stuff, told me just what awaits those who think they can do without.

"My worst experience was watching the chief of a huge global tech firm," he recalled. "I'd been told he didn't need training because 'he knows his stuff' before a BBC business programme that turned into a proper view-from-behind-the-sofa car crash.

"The producer agreed to have him on to talk about his new product launch on the understanding that he would also have to respond to questions about the company losing market share to shiny new tech start-up competitors and risking losing its number one market leader slot. "No problem." his PR replied, "he can easily deal with that line of questioning."

"How wrong they were.

“He responded to an opening question on the new product he was there to plug, then the presenter moved onto market share, starting with a relatively mild question.

“The CEO ignored him and banged on about his wonderful new product once more. The presenter asked again, a little more firmly this time: how did the CEO plan to turn around the company’s fortunes. Again, he was ignored.

“Understandably the presenter got shirty and proceeded to lay out the significant challenges the CEO’s company was facing and asked him what he was going to do about it.

“Upon being ignored for the final time, the presenter turned to the camera. Live on air he questioned the point of having the CEO in the studio.

“That tech behemoth which, at the time really was global leader by a country mile, was swept aside by the new tech start-ups that have become household names today. It went bust a few years later.”

TV can certainly be unforgiving (think Kennedy v Nixon). The lights blaze down upon you. You may be sitting alone in a room, bolt upright, staring down the barrel of a camera lens that is surrounded by piercing green LEDs. If you come to it for the first time, it’s beyond intimidating.

During media training you will have the added pressure of fellow students. Their eyes will bore into you from behind glass separating engineers from lonely studio floor where you sit like a nervous Mastermind contestant. The hopeless earpiece will flop around your head delivering barely audible questions as you try to force it back in while trotting out something vaguely credible.

I wasn’t that phased by the training, partly because I’d already done a few interviews. In fact, I enjoyed it and learnt loads. It was on that first media training course that I learned how to do things properly. The advice carried me for many years ... until I became lazy and complacent.

Our trainer was one of those highly intelligent, slightly camp and ridiculously handsome bastards the BBC used to turn out. He explained the importance of posture when sitting in front of a microphone, not just for TV.

He made it clear that we should arrive calm and composed, never having rushed. Breathlessness would come over to the listener or viewer, he advised. We should always have water to hand, he added, lest our throats ran dry due to terror. He taught us the art of bridging, taking an interview in the direction we wanted, rather than following the lead of the interviewer.

Finally, the piece de resistance: we should hang a sign above the desk in our radio room with the legend “this is showbiz”, he advised. While proclaiming this, he ran an outstretched arm left to right

up high as if he were revealing the name of a west end production to a group of excited American tourists standing outside a London theatre.

Although a little theatrical (Jon smirked), it was sound advice.

In the months and years that followed I took the advice seriously. Wherever and whenever I found myself in the spotlight: the motor show newsroom in Birmingham, Number 4 Millbank at Sky News or in the little SMMT radio room: this was showbiz. And I was part of it.

Fantastic.

Now forgive this next bit as it is going to sound horribly arrogant. There have been three or four times in my life, one most recently at Brittany Ferries, where I have been in the midst of a radio interview and I've had a sort-of out-of-body experience, detachment if you will. Bear with me here; I'm shouting "wanker," too.

As I have been speaking, I've simultaneously thought to myself, my goodness you are nailing it and I've sort-of been able look down on myself as the interviewee. It's a little hard to explain and I hate myself as I type this paragraph, because no one likes a big-headed twat, but it's true.

Sadly though, a few more years and many interviews later, like the hardened drug addict, the thrill I'd experienced at the outset began to wane. There was no longer the pre-interview terror, followed by euphoria once it was all over. I missed the buzz.

I never got bored of people telling me they had heard or seen me on the telly though. One of my friends told me of his irritation with family who associated my time in front of the camera as a measure of success, as he ground out a perfectly respectable career in law.

But it all became a bit routine.

Complacency bred laziness. I started to drop best practice rules. No longer did I seek a quiet room, glass of water in hand, three key messages carefully prepared and well-practiced, at peak readiness for the curve ball.

Once, I completely forgot I had been booked for a live with a national radio station in Ireland. I had taken a detour to the third floor at Forbes House to flirt with a lady I nicknamed Skywriter. My media manager stepped into the fray when he couldn't raise me on my mobile.

I recall a weekend interview where I'd been pitched against someone from the Alliance Against Urban 4x4s. This group had been campaigning against the rise in sales of massive Chelsea Tractors

back in the early 2000s. I agreed entirely with their call to ban the hateful vehicles, but at the time I was paid to say the opposite.

The interview was scheduled for a Saturday morning and I woke up late. I sat on my bed in my underpants waiting for the call. I giggled to myself as I thought about my glamorous sparring partner (now Green MP) Sian Berry, who was no doubt fully clothed and was treating this with the gravity it deserved. Or maybe she wasn't. I hoped she wasn't.

Other crimes followed. As media manager for the Environment Agency's southern division in 2009, I took a live outside the Indian restaurant where I was having a ball with pals. I wasn't going to let a BBC radio interview interfere with a night out. Yes, there was traffic noise, I said to the producer. Sorry about that. Can't be helped. Take it or leave it.

My worst performance came one morning when I woke with a horrendous hangover. I'd agreed to a live with BBC Radio Newcastle the preceding day. I can't remember the subject. But I could hardly get my head off the pillow such was the weight of the night before. I was so sick, waves of nausea pulsing through my body.

All I remember was somehow getting through the interview, then racing for the downstairs toilet. I threw up everything from the night before.

"This is showbiz," I remember giggling to myself as I flushed and faced the water. Shortly thereafter I answered the call of the big porcelain microphone once more.

SIN : Recall message

A decade before my experience with Dan Neill, I worked as public relations manager for BMW UK. It was an unhappy ten-month stint. Today I get on extremely well with my former line manager. Back then, I despised him.

We were in the United States when an incident took place that could - and probably should - have put me on the next plane home.

The Spartanburg factory in South Carolina is where BMW made the excellent Z4 sports car and the hideous X5 Chelsea tractor. A PR team of three had been whisked to the US in a private jet from Farnborough, hosts for twenty or so A-list national and regional motoring media.

It was a two- or three-day jaunt, I can't remember why, the launch of a new variant with optional indicators or vast cubby holes for jack boots maybe.

It's not just the arduous tasks of driving, drinking and dining that fill the days of motoring journalists at events like this. They need a little down time too. On this occasion, that meant a visit to an all-American shopping mall.

I was absolutely thrilled to be on a bus, with a bunch of fat journalists, going to a fucking shopping mall.

Shortly after the bus set off from the hotel, my boss stood up to make a speech over the PA. I was not impressed, but then again I wouldn't have been had he matched the oratory skills of Cicero, such was my loathing for the man.

I glared behind my seat and thumped an acerbic message into the buttons on my phone. "Another hopeless speech made by that useless twat Harrison."

I hit the send button and waited for the reply from a friend in London, who was familiar with my struggles at the company.

The trouble with sending vitriolic texts about an individual is that the brain has a nasty habit of conflating the subject of a message with its recipient. In my haste for catharsis, I did what so many people have done before and since: I sent the message about my manager to my manager and not my friend back home in London.

As soon as I realised my critical error, I panicked. The sack beckoned. For sure. I turned to stare out of the window for a few seconds in the hope that it didn't happen and that it would go away. It had, and it didn't. I would have to face the music.

My heart jumped as my phone pinged. A one-word response. "Fowler!"

I was saved.

Clearly my number had not been stored in my manager's phone. Potty-mouthed George Fowler, motoring editor of the Daily Star at the time, took the rap for my angry message. Knowing nothing about it, George saved me that day. Thanks George. And belated apologies to Mr Harrison who is actually a very decent guy.

I dined out on this incident for many years before I realised there might be more to it than an amusing anecdote. What if this approach could be used proactively, by anyone in any walk of life? If you want to say something really unpleasant to someone, if you want to deliver a message under the doorframe as it were, deliberately mistaking the recipient can be the way to do it.

It's incredibly powerful.

During the nastiest part of my divorce, I delivered four unpleasant messages to my ex-wife in one text. I pretended it had been sent in error by addressing it to my partner of the time. But it was a carefully crafted, deliberate ploy. Again, belated apologies.

It's how I delivered a stinging insult wrapped up in a couple of home truths to the director of Portsmouth International Port who'd foolishly made me an enemy by framing a complaint to my CEO about something I hadn't done.

If you are deploying this tactic by email, there's an additional trick to ensure the mail is not lost in the fog of inbox congestion. Recall the message shortly after you have sent it. If you "recall message" Outlook automatically sends a second email to the recipient, telling them you have tried to recall it. The original remains in their inbox.

It's like catnip to Tiddles. Nothing drives curiosity, nothing amplifies the power of a message contained therein than a frantic attempt to recall it. Why would someone want to do that?

I'm not alone in playing this game of subterfuge. On 26 January 2026, Suella Braverman, former home secretary and Conservative MP for Fareham and Waterlooville defected to Reform, the party headed by Nigel Farage. Hers was the latest in a long line of damaging defections and the Tory PR machine sharpened its knives.

A statement issued to media questioned the MP's state of mind: "It was always a matter of when, not if, Suella would defect. The Conservatives did all we could to look after Suella's mental health, but she was clearly very unhappy."

Having issued this to the media, angry ripostes followed from Reform and mental health charities. The statement was quickly "withdrawn" then re-issued with an apology. The Tories claimed it had been a mistake: this was a draft statement, rather than one approved by the party machine.

If you believe that, as her defection was over-shadowed over a row about her state-of-mind, you will believe anything.

A couple of days later the BBC reported. "Amazon confirms 16,000 job cuts after accidental email.

"US technology giant Amazon has confirmed it will cut 16,000 jobs - hours after it told staff about a new round of global redundancies in an email apparently sent in error.

"The email, which has been seen by the BBC, was sent late on Tuesday and refers to a swathe of employees in the US, Canada and Costa Rica having been laid off as part of an effort to strengthen the company."

The message was, we were told, shared by mistake as it was quickly cancelled. Whenever you read something like this, be 99% sure it's bollocks. The error will have been entirely intentional.

Chapter 3: Dirty emissions

“Little fucker,” I mutter as the feeble scraper clatters onto the frosty driveway. As it hits concrete, the noise is amplified by the stillness of 5.35 am.

The bastard thing bounced and has fallen somewhere beneath the car. I fumble in the darkness, find it and continue my violent attack on the glass.

This wasn't in the script. It's already too late. I should be on the road. Curse South West Trains for a schedule that won't get me to London on time. Curse the bloody weather.

I still haven't done the dummy run. Why? I've promised myself I would on so, so many occasions. Scoping the route, noting and charting opportunities. Do it when the stakes are low to prevent this... this nightmare when stakes are high.

I'm barely making inroads into a stubborn sheet of ice. How did it get so cold, so quickly? It was mild yesterday evening.

The blowers have opened up a second front, the motors furiously whirring. They are blasting cold air onto an even colder windscreen, while I frantically scrape away in the freezing morning air with this stupid bit of plastic.

Minutes later, an arc of ice-free glass finally clears through the surrounding opacity. But it's in the wrong place. I need a letterbox at eye height, not down by the wiper blades. I need just enough vision for departure, in the freezing cold.

Manic scraping continues. There! Finally, I have my letterbox. But there's still a translucent layer of something beneath. Ice on the interior? Condensation? Fuck knows. It doesn't clear with the sleeve of my shirt. Christ!

I can't set off without a minimum of forward visibility. A sliver on screen, plus driver and passenger windows open; that's a given for the off.

I know the drill. 5.30 am. The deadline.

It's essential that I meet it, if I am to have a traffic-free, anxiety-free, embarrassment-less dash from Winchester, where I live, to the offices of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders in the heart of London.

That's 55 miles to Sunbury. All motorway. Then 13 miles through west London, the left side of a city that will wake up and quickly clog the roads with the awful Chelsea Tractors I'm paid to pretend I like.

If I leave any later than 5.30, I'm fucked. Curse the bloody trains once more.

I've been here before. Many times. Anxiety is about a four and building. But the screen is now mercifully clear - at least the part I need.

Why did I agree to the interview? "It has to be an ISDN," the producer told me yesterday. It's policy. ISDN is clear, broadcast quality radio.

A national breakfast show, and BBC rules are BBC rules. I knew this when I agreed to take part. But I still asked if a landline would do.

No.

Bloody BBC.

There's no turning back. The radio room beckons. I must be ready to don the headphones and wait for the beeps, ahead of my 7.50 am appointment with the nation.

I've just got to get there without...well... without letting myself down.

I dream of the office as I set off. Oh, the reassuringly office, close to the pristine porcelain I crave as speed to the motorway. The office, where I will fill my body with the caffeine it desperately needs, but whose effect I dare not risk now lest it amplifies the fight-or-flight reaction surging within me.

It's all arse over tit of course, I know that. A live radio interview broadcasting to millions. Holds little fear. But a drive to central London in rush hour? I'm a wreck. And don't I know it. Ridiculous, that's what it is.

London is not the problem. Toilets – or rather lack of them - between Fleet Services and Belgravia. That's what floors me.

Why have I developed this terror? An event that's never happened and a scenario invented in my head? Near misses and close calls, you could say. Plus anxiety: my constant companion since childhood alongside a first-class degree in catastrophising.

Demons pull on sane strings in my head. "Sooner or later, you know it will happen," they taunt. "When it does, the shame will be glorious, excruciating. No one comes back from that."

I've assembled my defence. My line to battle the chemicals making a mockery of reason. Nothing to eat, nothing to drink and Imodium Instants to bung myself up. Two Solpadeine to boost my mood. Ten minutes before leaving.

"Solpadeine: it's two of my five a day," I say to friends in the pub. Far too often for it to be funny.

Sometimes the pills work. Sometimes they don't. For codeine is a fickle little fellow. Today there is no benefit. I feel nothing other than jolts of adrenalin, forewarning the trauma to come.

It is a journey fraught with potential jams and accidents and temporary traffic controls, all of which derail careful planning.

Careful planning? Pah! It's already 5.40 am. Ten minutes too late.

The journey begins with reassuring motorway. I join the M3 at junction 9. That means eight potential pinch points at junctions ahead. Time it right and this part of the journey is quick: get it wrong - like I have this morning - and the jeopardy intensifies as the junction numbers tumble.

On ticks the clock. The junction countdown continues, reaching its climax at the M3's source where the potential for mischief grows.

Motorway junctions are the jabs to soften me up. Stage two is the devastating combination, ready to floor me. M3 becomes A316 at Sunbury-on-Thames. It slows to a trickle at Twickenham. Three lanes become two. Two become one. Then back to two once more.

A snake writhing into the heart of the urban jungle, routes that narrow and widen like the fucker has eaten a baby deer, then narrow again.

On good days it's a breeze. Harrods before the morning madness. Home and dry. A scoot round Belgrave Square and bob's yer uncle: the office. What was all the fuss about, you will scold yourself angrily. I'm so over this nonsense, I will chide as the kettle boils.

I'm dreaming of Harrods as I roll up the windows, the screen now clear. But I fear the worst. There's good reason. Today will be what marathon runners call "a bad one".

On the motorway, brake lights illuminate. It's junction 4: why are we slowing? There's no reason? Oh, but there is: there are more people on the road than there would have been ten minutes ago. By now, I should be near London, approaching Sunbury.

Worms somersault in my stomach. Heat rises through my chest. I shift, almost imperceptibly, in the seat anticipating the worst. I reach for window switches. Down the glass falls to the whir of the busy motors once more.

It's just an accordion, the frustrating ebb and flow of traffic in rush hour. I curse my fellow commuters, looking left and right. "Fucking amateurs," I yell out loud.

Junction 3 brings more brake lights. I shift again. Adrenalin surges, heat builds. Windows open once more. It's fucking freezing, but I have no choice.

Accordions have slowed me by minutes, nothing more. Down to 40, back up to 70, then 85. But the damage is done to a plan falling apart. My head is in bits. My stomach will follow. Junction 2 awaits. 15 minutes behind schedule.

This time we stop. We start and we stop. It's a jam. a short one, but a proper queue this time. Precious minutes tick by. In Twickenham, South Kensington and Hammersmith, Londoners prepare breakfast. It's nearly time for work.

The windows go down. Then windows go up. I move in my seat. I curse myself for being like this. I'm not an old lady. Why can't I just be an adult. And hold on.

"Just drive to work like all these normal people," I growl at myself.

I've thought about solutions after past near misses. A bowl or bucket, or some combination with make-shift privacy curtains. A Portaloo to be deployed in an emergency, for Christ's sake.

But I just couldn't do it. My kids would know: my wife would know. Most of all, I would know.

My demons would make hay. "Look at you, with your bucket and curtains. Prick."

The drive goes on and a welcome reprieve. Junction 2, London's orbital, the M25: it carries away half the cars that threatened my onward journey. It's dual carriageway now, clear dual carriageway and the wasteland between M25 and the outskirts of London.

Part one is done.

Thorpe Park's rollercoasters tower to the left, still in darkness. My rollercoaster stomach calms, as we make good progress. It's temporary, but welcome. I accelerate to 90 in a futile attempt to make up time.

The first outer London junction is approaching. Hospital Bridge Roundabout joins several arteries in southwest London. This is the bell weather. If all looks clear, we might be ok.

I'm not confident.

My heart sinks as I scale the flyover and scan the road ahead. Sure enough, there's the queue, miles from the roundabout, back-to-back. Already.

No surprise there. It's 7.00 am. I should be approaching Knightsbridge. But I've barely made Twickenham. Rush hour is upon us.

Battle stations, my demons say.

Decades of torment return, and anxiety does its worst. It's arctic, but my windows are down again. My stomach is on fire. Waves of – I don't know what – adrenaline maybe, course through my body. I move constantly. Being still ain't an option.

I know what's coming. And it comes on quick. The first ghastly pulse, a movement down below.

"Please no. Not again. Spare me this time."

But here's the rub. My opponent calls in the big guns: the chemical weapons to arm your demons. The more anxious, the more physiology ups the ante. The more they flow, the more you need to... well... go.

Trapped in my car, there's nowhere to go. "Fuck Imodium. I trump that shit," they taunt.

Techniques! Use them. I know how to deep breathe. I've done CBT. I've got a psychology degree for God's sake. But can't heal myself. From beta blockers to anti-depressants, I've tried them all. Nada when you are in the eye of a storm.

I can't be calm because we're barely moving. What if I can't. What if it happens?

Is there a side street, I wonder, as I've wondered so often before. Why didn't I make the fucking map?

But the horrible reality of that scene: "Mummy mummy, I just saw a man taking a poo next to his car." Not exactly what you want while serving Cocopops to kids in your posh west London terrace. Try explaining that to plod.

Ok what's option B, because now it's unbearable. Will I make the office? Forget it. No chance.

Richmond Park! Yes, Richmond Park. That's my only hope now. It has saved me before and it could save me again. Twickenham to Richmond. It's not so far. If the traffic is kind, I might hold on until then. Just. Richmond... my saviour.

It's a nasty little dump for a dump, dirty and cold. But any port in a storm.

"You won't make it," my demons tell me. "Yes, I fucking will." This ain't gonna happen just before I speak to the nation.

“Fucking hell,” I scream out loud. “Move!” but the car in front can’t, because there’s a car in front of the car in front.

Fucking waves: just give me ten minutes. Please.

It’s touch and go. I tear right across traffic into the car park. An angry motorist in an oncoming SUV mouths wanker at me. Fuck you mate, this is an emergency. Oh and fuck your fucking car.

Dawn is breaking as I scream into a bay. There it is: my oasis. That filthy little block by the roadside, still in near darkness. I run now clutching my guts: I’ve barely got time.

I’m here. Thank you Jesus. Thank you.

But... wait... What? Then horror. The horror. Doors are locked. I can’t get inside. Shit, shit. SHIT.

I shit.

(sad face emoji)

Ashen-faced, I slope back to my car. My head hangs in shame. Mortified, I move at a snail’s pace.

The scene of my crime shrinks in the rear-view mirror, but this, this thing is already indelibly seared into my brain. For life.

“Oh, you disgusting man.” My demons dance in triumph.

I stare grimly into the middle distance, my own thousand-yard stare. I’m driving on auto pilot. I barely notice anything, people, cars, cabs and signs. London is mobilising for the day ahead.

With five minutes to spare, I reach the office. I throw my head in my hands, humiliated.

I look around sheepishly. No one saw, but that’s not the point.

The chief executive’s loo. That’s where I’m headed. Needs must, and he’s not here. I head there ... sort myself out.

A few minutes later I’m in full-on showbiz mode. Speaking to the nation, down the line with 5 Live on the cursed ISDN line in the broom-cupboard, come radio room.

Radio, it’s the thing I love the most. Commuting on the IBS express is the thing I like least.

Our subject for discussion? Unacceptable emissions in towns and cities like London. What can we do about it, the presenter wants to know. Oh, the irony.

Part of me wants to scream. “Open more fucking public toilets on my drive into central London.”

Automotive journalism's finest column

Long after I'd left the joys of commuting behind, and that traumatic morning was just a bad memory of a bad day, American title Jalopnik published what one UK motoring writer described as the finest piece of automotive journalism ever written.

Neal Pollock's, *I shat myself in a Lexus press car*, tells the story of a Lexus GS450 loan, a cream leather interior and an urgent case of explosive trots. There's probably enough detail in the title, so I will only quote two things from his report

"It was a low point," he said.

Despite the pristine leather, he got away with it. "Miraculously, my old blue jeans, now forever dead and crap encrusted at the bottom of some Texas landfill, had held the line."

I got away with it too. But I'm still horrified. And deeply ashamed.

Mine too was "a low point".