

#Fail: How Not To Learn From Mistakes or Why I Will Always Hate Winnebagos

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I am rather suspicious of the 'Fail Early, Fair Often' mantra. The only mistake, I am told, is the one you don't learn from. It's a nice thought, but timing is everything. It is no good being wise after the event if the event never comes around again.*

As part of the Carnival of Journalism blogging network, I was asked to write about a professional blunder that has taught me a lesson. Where do I start in a career littered with failure? I could confess to so many sins of omission and commission.

In my defence I might argue that the point of journalism is that it always fails. If you want a fully considered version of something that is elegantly told, comprehensive and durable, then become an historian. If you want something beautiful, become an artist. Journalism is topical and functional communication on a limited budget and in short time. It is made up of perspiration and inspiration, but with a liberal sprinkling of mistakes, inaccuracies and bias.

But let's get specific. Back in 2001 here in Britain we had a pretty dull election in the offing. Tony Blair's Labour was well ahead in the polls and the country felt pretty much at ease with itself. I was in charge of Channel 4 News' election outside broadcast coverage.

This was an opportunity for the programme to showcase its political analysis and to stir up some drama. Made by ITN, Channel 4 News is a serious one-hour live studio-based programme with a mission to innovate and to give an alternative perspective on the news. So we felt we had to come up with something that would give our election coverage real impact.



Our big idea

The solution? Hire a novelist who had started life as a bus-driver to steer a massive Winnebago RV around the country. Fill it with OB gear and go live from a different location every night to bring the heat of democratic battle directly into the nation's living rooms. Surely this would be the media sensation of the campaign?!

Our logo was blazed along the side of this shiny white behemoth as it raced from one marginal constituency to the next with me and the excellent presenter Krishnan Guru-Murthy in tow .

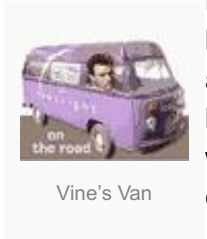
Of course, our exquisitely researched itinerary was thrown out after the first day of the campaign. Instead we plunged off in reactive mode, trying desperately to keep up with stories breaking around the nation. Every morning at day break the newsroom would ring demanding that we dump our carefully-prepared film and cancel all those wonderful guests that we had arranged to interview in a stunning location found months previously. Instead we would point the Winnebago down the motorway towards whatever story the Editor had seen in that morning's newspaper.

The result, not surprisingly, was a series of half-baked broadcasts with guests scrambled together and hastily-edited films. We were supposed to be using the Winnebago as a prop for each live broadcast and as a kind of video box to gather public comment. Instead it developed into a shiny white 40 foot long albatross around our necks.

The Winnebago was designed to coast gently down wide American Interstate Highways. It would get stuck in the

narrow streets of Britain's more historic towns and never really moved above 50 miles per hour even downhill. The worst moment was a flat tyre on the bleak moors between Manchester and Leeds.

Every evening we would have to squeeze this hulk and the logo into shot, thus ruining any location. My dream of creating a political road movie as cool as 'Easy Rider' [or for British readers: Cliff Richard's 'Summer Holiday'] turned into the nightmare of Spielberg's 'Duel'. The Winnebago felt like a swivel-seated coffin containing the corpse of my broadcasting career.



Meanwhile, our archrivals on the BBC's Newsnight programme had shown real innovation and a keen budget sense and had gone for a battered second-hand VW camper van. It toured nimbly around the nation with the effervescent presenter Jeremy Vine. They had mobility and a sense of humour and seemed to stick to their own route map instead of following the daily blips of what was, indeed, a dull campaign. While our Winnebago was a countrywide traffic hazard, their camper van became a national treasure.

I confess the whole thing was both a creative and editorial failure on my part. What did I learn? Well, I suppose the lesson was never to work with a Winnebago again. You see? It wasn't that useful a learning experience after all, was it?

* This blog is part of [the Carnival of Journalism](#) – a monthly group blog by an international network of journalists and academics. This time we were asked to recount a career failure. Read a summary with links to the other blogs [here](#).

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