



Simon Boughey

## It's a hack's life

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Simon Boughey is a Cambridge graduate who has chosen in spite of (perhaps because of) a childhood stammer to become a freelance financial journalist, presentation coach and actor. He has worked in New York and now in London on a number of leading publications, such as the Financial News, Euromoney, and International Financing Review. He also writes for Icap, the City broker. We are very grateful to Simon for writing an article about what journalists are trying to achieve; a rare and valuable glimpse of the 'other side' in media interviews.

Journalists are often sadly misunderstood. Those who pose as fake sheikhs for the purpose of entrapment, those who tap telephones of the beautiful, and those who rig up concealed cameras to record deliciously bizarre amatory entertainment give us a bad name. The vast bulk of reporters working in the news industry don't work for tabloids and aren't like that.

At the most fundamental level, when journalists contact an institution or person, they are looking for simple information. They have jobs to do, white space to fill before they go home, but they often don't know all the facts or even half the facts. There is a lot of often quite tedious legwork to be done in tying down the relevant facts about a story. To be sure, they will often have a particular angle with which they are approaching a story, but this won't work unless the facts add up.

By the same token, journalists are also looking for confirmation or verification of what they have been told by someone else. If, for example, a comment has been passed about an individual or firm then the story looks a great deal less convincing if that individual or firm has not had the chance to reply. This is how a story builds up. Every journalist is told (or should be) from the earliest days on the job



the "who, what, when, where and why" format of basic reporting. These are the "Five Ws" that have to be answered. These details should be put at the top of a story, and then it builds with comments from concerned individuals.

This is why journalists get annoyed, and then suspicious, when the most basic and seemingly innocuous information is denied. It retards the development of a story, means we can't go to the pub yet, and makes us far less inclined to look kindly upon the withholder of information. We might also feel that if a publicly owned company, for example, denies the most basic information about its financial dealings (which other similar publicly owned firms

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## It's a hack's life...continued

fess up willingly), then we have a responsibility to dig up the facts and not be stonewalled.

Moreover, it seems to journalists that the simple and most pressing responsibility of the ever-burgeoning public relations industry is to do precisely that: to stonewall. To deny the most basic information in a particularly earnest and humourless manner. Public relations officials are the people that journalists believe are the real practitioners of the black arts.

Even when the PR people do allow access to a senior person at the firm or bank, the officious or nervous ones, can seek to control the process by, for example, disallowing questions not covered by the previously arranged brief. But journalists don't like sticking to a script and ideas may be stimulated in the course of the interview.

In this regard, it's worth pointing out that, generally journalists are not seeking to make someone's life a misery and are not, generally, seeking to score points. It would be naïve, of course, to assume that journalists are not also interested in bad news more than good news. Conflict and controversy sell. Who is not more fascinated by a story about a devastating tsunami than a fireman rescuing a lost kitten?

Journalists love anything that suggests that events in a business or government have not turned out as they were intended, and that, consequently, people are at each other's throats. Such stories are more exciting to write and more fun to read. In my experience as a financial journalist, one of the best stories I ever wrote was about a treasurer of a European firm who managed to shoot his assistant treasurer on a hunting expedition to the Black Forest. This sub-Sherlock Holmes tale was ever so much more interesting than the latest sterling denominated bond issue.

To get to the controversy, journalists might sometimes ask a question to which they know the answer hoping that the interviewee will reveal more than he or she intends in responding. In making a

robust denial, the subject might confess to some other misdemeanour by accident. For example, "Is it true that you are very unhappy with the role performed by (JP Magan) in this deal?" Answer: "No, not at all. That is completely untrue. It is (Levitt Brothers) that messed it up."

Finally, any interview subject should be aware of the rules of on the record and off the record. Unless an interviewee says this at the top of a phone conversation, it is assumed to be on the record and any comments made can be used and attributed. If the interview is specifically off the record, or "on background", then the comments provided cannot be attributed. Often an entire conversation will be on background, but then the journalist may use quotes only if checked by the public relations official and/or the interviewee before publication. These details should be arranged in advance.

However dishonourable, and often on a Babylonian scale, journalists might be in their private lives, I have never known one abuse this system. At the end of the day, they want to build relationships that can be exploited in the future, and it is not in their interest to be dishonest.

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"The good news is we're sending you overseas for this feature."

# What's in a face? Quite a lot actually...



In 1992, shortly after Bill Clinton entered the White House as the new President of United States, his office received a phone call. It was answered by his recently appointed Head of Communications.

'Please trust me, I am calling with the best of intentions but I'm worried for the President' the voice on the other end of the line said with a great deal of concern. 'Bill Clinton's got this way of rolling his eyes along with a certain expression and what it conveys is "I'm a bad boy". I don't think it's a good thing and I could teach him how not to do that in two to three hours. The thing is his facial gestures give the impression that he's like a kid who has his hands in a cookie jar. I'm telling you, this guy is going to do something and he's going to get found out'. Understandably, the new Head of Communications quickly put the phone down and dismissed the caller as another crackpot. These people unfortunately do call and get through the Whitehouse switchboard from time to time, he reminded himself.

Except that the person on the other end of the line was far from being your standard weirdo. Strange maybe, unusual certainly but no crackpot. In fact, the person dialling the White House was Professor Paul Eckman, one of the world's leading facial experts, and what he had seen in a recent television interview of the new President had caused him great concern. He had watched the same clip, over and over again just to be sure, and then he'd been compelled to get on the phone.

What he'd seen had convinced him that the new President was capable of lying and that he thought he could get away with it. He knew the signs, as he had been researching facial expressions for most of his life, and this time he was sure. However, his advice fell on deaf ears, until a few years later when someone named Monica Lewinsky came along.

Paul Eckman is not only a leading authority on facial expressions but also on how people lie. He has pioneered **FACS**, or Facial Action Coding System, which is now universally recognised. It's also used by the FBI and Interpol. There's a series on Fox Television in the USA called 'Lie to Me' based on Eckman's character and his insights and understanding into the mechanics of the face and emotions.

Professor Eckman has spent most of his life studying the 'microexpressions' of the face.

These are a series of subtle facial gestures that communicate emotion through the different actions of facial muscle groups. These groups each produce a different emotion and can be understood in practically every culture in the world. To test the universality of his theories, he went to Papua New Guinea in 1967, and spent time with a tribe who had never seen other human beings from outside their tribe, or even their own faces in a mirror. When his theories stood up during 12 months of testing in this remote village, he knew he was onto something groundbreaking.

He discovered that there are **6 key emotions** that can be recognised in the face (see pictures) which are recognised universally.



**Happiness** can be recognised by a wide smile and a lighting up or activation of the eyes. The key thing for a genuine smile is that both top and bottom parts of the face are working. A 'fake' smile, for example, typically has the mouth and lips moving while the eyes remain static.



**Disgust** can be recognised by a wrinkling of the nose and a frowning action while the eyes



Tim Farish

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## What's in a face?... continued

narrow. Historically, this emotion derived from dragging something bad smelling into the cave and it is easy to see why!



**Anger** can be recognised by furrowed brows, activation of the corrugator (forehead) muscles and a tightening of the lip muscles around the mouth.



**Sadness** is recognised by a slight drooping of the face, with the mouth downturned and slightly to one side. The eyebrows also form a 'house roof' shape.



**Fear** is characterised by a raising of the eyebrows, a widening of the eyes to show the whites around the pupils, a flaring of the nostrils and a lowering of the mouth and jaw.

**Contempt** (below) is characterised by a narrowing of the eyes and a stretching of the mouth to one side. Of all the emotions that Eckman mapped this was perhaps the most curious. It is the single-most important factor in relationships breaking down as it is the only emotion that is strictly 'hierarchical' or when someone is deliberately looking down negatively on someone else.



Eckman's FACS system is fascinating as it has proved that the display of emotion can also start in the face. It also has huge implications for how we read audiences as we can gain extraordinary insight into the messages we send each other when we look at another's face or into their eyes.

For presenters, this insight is invaluable in helping to gauge the success of how we are perceived. It allows the presenter to course-correct and ask appropriate questions to interact with the audience when they recognise the signals that are being transmitted.

In the next edition, we will go into more detail on this fascinating system along with advice on how to improve your facial repertory. Until then, enjoy looking out for the signals when you next speak to an audience!

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# To Russia with a mission



The art of persuasion is part of the advice we give to our clients. Often this includes advice on working with different cultures. As I lived in the Yemen for a year, and Singapore and the USA for a further four, the relationship between culture and persuasion has always been one of fascination to me.

For two weeks over Easter, accompanied by a friend, I visited Russia for the first time which gave me a chance to explore this relationship further. It was strictly not business, but a mission to follow in the footsteps of my paternal grandfather.

In 1919 he was asked to volunteer to support the White Russians in their struggle to defeat the Bolsheviks (the Reds). As we know they failed, but Grandfather did rather well: He was a Royal Marines captain, aged 24, in charge of a detachment of marines in HMS Kent based in Vladivostok. The Trans-Siberian train could take a huge 7 ton gun. On the Kama River, they loaded this gun and others on to river craft and fought a series of battles. Forced to retreat, to Vladivostok, and after avoiding the threat of typhus and cholera, he brought them all back unscathed.

We travelled the same route as my grandfa-



ther, taking the sedate Siberian Express for five days from Vladivostok to the town of Perm.



I began with preconceived ideas - typical stereotypes of Russians being a mix of oligarchs, mafia and vodka-drinking bores who die on average at about the age of 58. But we met many Russians who helped us.

Behind the stereotypes we found something different: the Russian professional classes. They are a bit like us Brits; a bit reserved, a bit cautious but polite. But then, as rapport and trust are built they emerge as pleasant and kind people. Most are poorly paid and have a clear idea that



Alastair Grant

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## To Russia with a mission...continued

their Soviet past really has held them back. One described how, when she was a teenager, her family shared a cramped apartment with two other families. Another said those days were simpler, friendships were of much greater value in achieving happiness, they had very few drugs problems and were shielded from many of the other imported evils from the West.

It is easy to base opinions on well-known

Russian leaders over the past decades – most ruthless and unpopular. However, the same society also produced courageous individuals such as Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov.

A culture that produced Chekov, Rachmaninov, Tchaikovsky, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy paints a most different picture from the stereotype.

So based on a rather small profile of Russians and experiences, what have I learned that would be good advice to pass on?

- Russians seem to appreciate even the most elementary efforts to say some words in Russian. Good morning or "doh-brah-eh- ootrah" is met with a smile. Even better if you can read the Cyrillic characters. They live in the knowledge that despite their prowess in World War Two, and their ability to beat the Americans into space, they have fallen well behind the West in all manner of ways. They are too well aware as there is open access to media channels of all sorts.

- Recognising their cultural and educational status as that of equals is a good way to establish rapport and build trust.

- Avoid any sense of superiority. They are proud people.

- I think they are not so impressed by money as they place higher value on relationships.

- There seems to be plenty of bureaucracy but they dislike it as much as we do. So be willing to ask their help in overcoming it. We



*The Trans-Siberian Express...*

experienced their help in this respect a number of times.

- Families mean much to them. They respect the old more than we do.

- They enjoy conversation.

- They are most aware of the huge advances made by China and India. So they are keen to get inward investment and share some of the bandwagon effect.

This means to me that Russia is open for business. We were enthusiastically taken off to a giant area of special economic opportunity by the Deputy Trade Minister for Tatarstan. It seemed to occupy at least 25 square miles. If you are prepared to make an effort on relationships and not appear 'Western Arrogant' then there are many opportunities to be persuasive in Russia today.

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# Taking chunks out of complexity

I don't know about you, but I think audiences like to have time to think about what a presenter says whilst they're presenting. This is particularly important when the presenter gets to the crucial bit, but I find that this is also the time where the presenters typically go quickly, often combined with a rise in complexity.

The combination of faster and more complex together send audiences into a complete tailspin.

I think there are actually three elements that interact here: pace, complexity and jargonistic technical terms. Together they kill an audience's attention. Let's look at each in turn:

**Pace:** Our Associate in Geneva, Dr Branka Zei, has a lovely technical term for one element of pace, "chunking". This is apparently the correct scientific word for "the separation of content into meaningful sense groups". Yes, I know,

their mother tongue, the chunks can be bigger, maybe 3-4 sentences. Even so, the audience will vary in knowledge from most to least informed, limiting chunk size.

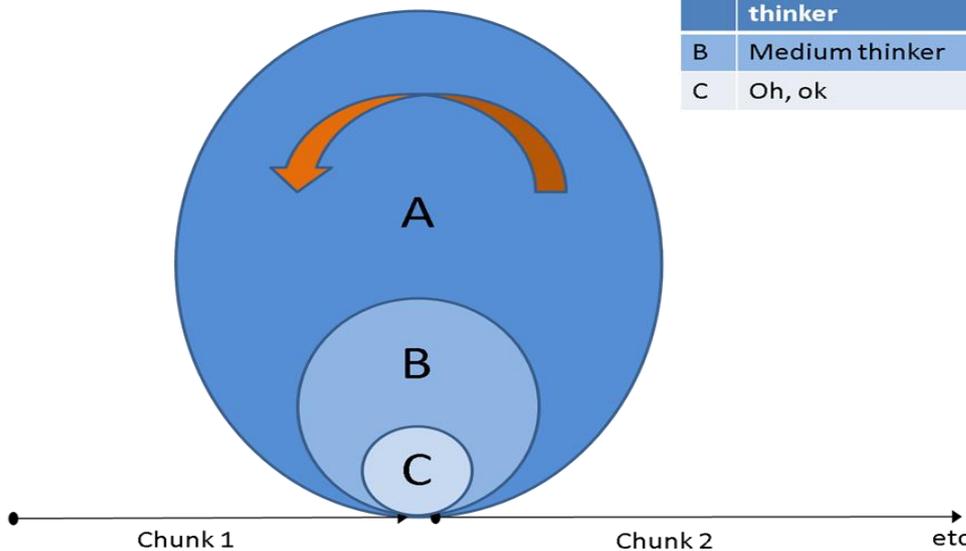
But that's not everything. These chunks have pauses between them, but how big should the pauses be? That's not so clear, but I have experimented and conclude that 1.5 - 3 seconds is about right.

The variance is for a very interesting reason: A while ago we had a visit from Edward de



Ewan Pearson

## Thinking loops



the definition is no more helpful than the term it defines. A definition is not an explanation. If we dissect Branka's definition, it suggests that every piece of information that constitutes a set of words that makes sense should be separated by pauses. The size of a sense group (in number of words) is often less than a sentence, and is determined by (a) any language translation, and (b) the level of sophistication of the listener. So for someone whose first language is say Chinese or Japanese, they need smaller chunks when you present in English, whereas if you are presenting on quantum physics to a group of PhDs in the same discipline and in

Bono, he of 'Lateral Thinking' and 'The Six Thinking Hats' fame. He probably knows as much about how we all think as anyone. We discussed a concept called 'thinking loops'. These are the loops of thought that listeners like to go round inside their heads, between sense groups. I like to call it 'chew time'. De Bono said that bright people can think much quicker than the less bright, and that more knowledgeable people created much bigger thinking loops to travel round. Surprisingly the net effect was that brighter/knowledgeable people needed MUCH longer chew time.

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## Taking chunks out of complexity....continued

Think about it, if you know very little about a subject, you take what's said with little processing, but if you know lots, you will think lots about it, relating the chunk of content to what you know already, as well as being able to construct original thought, all of which takes at least of cup of tea (or glass of good Islay malt whisky) to think through properly.

But presenters don't give you that long, they carry on at the same or faster pace, so the chew time is either afterwards, or more likely just doesn't happen at all. In rehearsals, I am often stopping presenters at these points to ask them to go back over this crucial content again, and more slowly, as I really want to think about it. In a large or formal audiences though this back flip rarely happens.

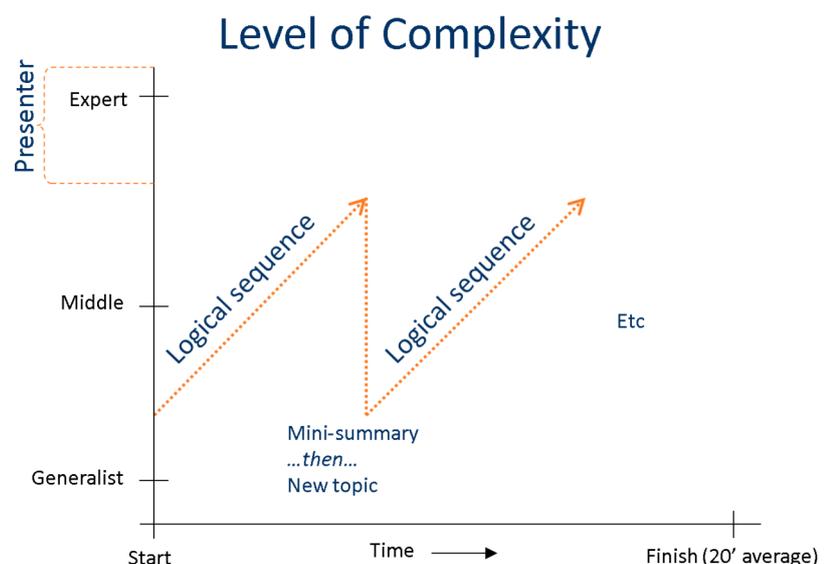
**Complexity:** Getting complexity right has always been a concern for presenters, many of whom have been on the receiving end of presentations that are far too complex. But when they themselves present they worry that their own presentations are not sophisticated enough, that they may be dumbing down, or that they lack enough new information. Sure, no presenter should be patronising, or be boring by only covering known stuff, but that does not excuse the ascent to the stratospheric that some presenters strive for. It's quite the wrong approach. A good presentation satisfies the hunger of the most ignorant, the most expert, and most others in between. Now, there's a holy grail challenge I like!

Entertainment is not the answer, although presentations should in the main be fun to present and fun to receive. No, the answer is to manage complexity, using time to build it step by step, like climbing a

staircase but a new staircase for each topic. There cannot be any gaps in the logic steps, although this is common as presenters assume their audience (like them) can jump them; audiences can't so instead fall back down my metaphorical stairs. There cannot be any acceleration, which I notice often accompanies the steepest parts of the climb. That's just showing off, but again the audience falls back.

**Jargon:** The sad thing is that many presenters rarely know when they're using it. For them it's their lingua franca, their coffee machine chat. It should really be minimal, explained or avoided completely. Have you ever heard anyone trying to explain (I don't mean define) what a share option is, or a quango, a quark or quant investment? Their attempts make for pretty measly consumption, yet those that can do this well score great credit with all audience members from experts to generalists. The use of partly-known acronyms is a serious worry here.

Here's the answer to the holy grail of complexity: to be able to explain complex concepts simply, clearly and concisely to an audience so that they all 'got it'. Your turn to try some chunking and give 'em some chew time.



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