

A funny thing happened on the way to a conference – and other stories

BY VALERIE J LUND

This series of stories is dedicated to those of you with whom some of these moments were shared (or endured) and, above all, to my amazing and long-suffering husband, David Howard. Most of you know him as an exceptional head and neck surgeon but, since Covid, he has been involved in a large multi-speciality international charitable project reintroducing negative pressure non-invasive breathing support which could transform the management of respiratory disease all round the world. If you are interested, please visit www.exovent.org (or scan the QR code below) for further information and, if you enjoy the stories, please consider donating to the charity through the Exovent website (Click DONATE on the home page drop down menu).

Audiovisual antics – now you see it, now you don't

The mishaps that can beset the hapless speaker are almost too numerous to recount. In the days of slides and projectors, just about anything that could go wrong would do so. After being on an aircraft, condensation would cause a miasma of fogging on the glass slides which could only be avoided by the liberal use of a hotel hairdryer in the early hours of the morning before one's lecture. Or worse still, slides could occasionally go up in flames when the projector over-heated, reminiscent of the opening credits for Bonanza*. Projectionists might be asleep and fail to notice that things were less than perfect in the focusing or slides failed to drop, usually presaged by an ominous grinding noise. This would result in a blank but brightly illuminated screen on which I occasionally did hand shadow-puppet shows to pass the time until normal service was resumed. In Japan,

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the world's electronic superpower, it was still possible in the 1990s to be given strips of white card into which one inserted the slides, which would then be pushed through an epidiascope by a projectionist wearing white cotton gloves.

Dual projection, much beloved by the rhinoplasty surgeons keen to demonstrate their before and after photos, was another minefield. The possibilities for asynchronicity were great and, on occasion, seriously exacerbated by one of the carousels being dropped, disgorging all its contents onto the floor and reducing even senior surgeons to tears. Whilst most projection was done from the front, occasionally one encountered back projection. This always caused bafflement as to which way the slides should be placed in the carousel, there being "eight possibilities, only one of which is correct",

as a famous German professor with a malicious glint in his eye pointed out to a nervous colleague just before his keynote lecture.

Even with obsessional checking, things could still go awry, as happened to me in Belgium when, after a week of audiovisual chaos in which the projectionist failed to project any talk without some mishap, my own presentation ground to a halt. I felt sufficiently incensed to loudly ask the AV chap from the podium what on earth he was up to. To which he replied that he was normally in charge of sound and was not in fact a projectionist. "Well, as you are being paid as one, perhaps you should try acting like one", I returned. The audience gave me a standing ovation.

On another occasion in Istanbul, no stand for the slide projector could be found, so an unfortunate trainee was deputed to hold the

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projector throughout the lecture, wobbling in misery and creating a new version of the moving picture. This was in contrast to the actual videos, all of which consistently failed to play, causing a very famous professor to completely lose it and storm off the stage.

Of course, the arrival of PowerPoint greatly improved the situation, not least because one's hand luggage was no longer dragging on the floor due to the weight of slides and videos, too precious to go in the plane's hold and be parted from the speaker. It was remarkable how quickly PowerPoint swept the world and, within a year, the slide carousel was no more. Now one could endlessly tinker with the presentation up to a moment before the talk. At one's fingertips was a vast array of formats, fonts, colours and just about anything one wanted, often demonstrating distracting style over substance. Inevitably perhaps, the design de jour is black text on a white background.

But there were still glitches, notably the 'PowerPoint pause' as Mac followed Microsoft, or the embedded video which worked at home, in your hotel room and in the 'Slide Ready' room, but mysteriously failed to play in front of the audience. Speakers now became electronic engineers, carrying an ensemble of USBs, cables, modems, dongles, plugs and adaptors,

fearing to load their presentations onto a generic computer while unsure if their computer battery would last.

On occasion, the sophistication of the system could prove too much for the speaker, as happened to me at the Royal College of Surgeons when a new computerised system had been incorporated into the lectern but failed to do what it said on the packet. Unable to attract the attention of the AV technicians in their soundproofed booth at the back of the lecture theatre, I loudly announced, "I don't often say this, but I need a man and I need him NOW!". This provoked much mirth in the audience, the noise of which finally precipitated assistance and was the only thing that people remembered about my lecture.

It seems amazing that one has had the opportunity to lecture to audiences of more than four or five thousand at some international allergy and ENT meetings or to an even greater number of general surgeons in China, sometimes disconcertingly standing in front of a screen similar to an IMAX on which one appears the size of a house. In contrast, I have also lectured to half a dozen GPs in sandals and shorts in a small hut somewhere in the wilds of New Zealand.

Things have moved on and, of course, now with the array of webinar platforms accelerated by Covid, amazingly I have been able to lecture to hundreds or even thousands of colleagues in Afghanistan to Pakistan, China to Korea, or Iraq and India from my kitchen. In fact, there is now very little need to go to a conference in person at all – but where's the fun in that?

* *Bonanza* was a popular American Western series on TV in the 1960–70s. The *Bonanza* theme song famously opens with a trail of flame blazing across a map of the Ponderosa Ranch. Only of interest to the over 60s!

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