

FORMER PRESIDENT ALAN DOMVILLE CONTINUES HIS REMINISCENCES AS A MOTORING WRITER & LIFELONG GROUP FRIEND.....

Embargoes and deadlines were two of the most problematic aspects of any veteran Journalist's career over so many years, including myself, though a cub reporter these days would hardly know anything about them. The advance of the internet and social media means that new cars can no longer be kept a closely guarded secret by manufacturers and professional journalists until their launch day.

Car companies have long given up any effort to come up with a surprise and to impose an embargo date; that relatively new phenomenon, the web blogger, knows what they are working on for at least five years into the future and cannot resist telling.

As far as deadlines are concerned the whole process is like a rolling road. Newspapers, for some strange reason I have never fathomed, nowadays upload all their best stories to their websites some days ahead of the publication of the real thing. To my mind it's like giving away the Mars bar to save you going out to buy it.

But to come up with an exclusive story was one of the great joys - especially in the days when Warrington, for instance, was served by two weekly newspapers with considerable prestige along with five evening newspapers produced in Liverpool, Manchester and Wigan, a localised Sunday newspaper that came out on a Saturday night - and later, a clutch of radio stations.

Even then, however, there would be the unscrupulous among us who wouldn't think twice about breaking an embargo. The day before the announcement of the Queen's Honours List twice each year I would receive a list of local people to be awarded medals - along with strict instructions not to approach any of them for an interview until 3:00pm.

On one occasion a local car dealer was to be awarded an OBE and I stood outside his house for half an hour before knocking on his door. At precisely 3:00pm, out of his door stepped a bouncer from one of the evening papers who had disregarded the rules.

It was like the Wild West out there sometimes - and one I knew became a "hacker" - but there were journalists who did play the game.

By mutual agreement new cars were traditionally launched on Wednesdays because the specialist magazines all appeared that day - but during the evening before one could always guarantee that one of the television news programmes would feature the vehicle before the appearance of those publications and the morning papers.

It was infuriating - but done I know with the collusion of the manufacturers who regarded such exposure and free advertising and worth millions. The observant would sometimes spot a vehicle on the road with all its badges concealed with tape and so disguised so that it was difficult to tell what make it was. Not any more. Visits to motor shows in London and across Europe were memorable for the surprises they used to hold - and many of us will fondly remember walking past a dealership showroom containing what was obviously a new car over which was draped a sheet.

Simultaneously at dealerships all around the country, the sheets would be removed at a set time and regular customers would proceed to kick the tyres.

Today, when I visit a car plant, there will be prototypes similarly draped and at a press conference press officers will refuse to reveal details of what's coming next.

They are wasting their time - those days are long gone.

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