

my first editor

ROB MCGIBBON
ON
ANDREW PALMER



McGibbon's first paper

My favourite memory of my first editor is easy: it's the day he sacked me. Andrew Palmer. The Wimbledon News. Wednesday, 5 November 1986. I was 21 and a reporter for just over a year. I proudly wore a tweed jacket from the cool new fashion chain. Next, and worked 12-hour days on a story production line for £6,000 a year. I loved it.

Palmer was a decent boss, if a bit reserved. I topped up my rock'n'roll wage by selling stories to Tom Petre, legendary news editor of The Sun. Tom gave me a shift one Sunday and then offered a mid-week slot from 6pm-1am. I couldn't refuse and reluctantly spun a yarn to Palmer to clock off early.

The Sun sent me to door-step Boy George's Gothic home in Hampstead. George was the subject of the next day's splash but had refused to respond. It was either beginner's luck or George was suckered by my boyish pleadings on his phone. He appeared at the door, stiff in hand, and gave me an exclusive interview. Shaking uncontrollably, I fled what became a buzzed-off splash.

I was so baffled the next day that I typed out a long letter recording the events to my girlfriend, who was working abroad, and slipped into Palmer's office to photocopy it for posterity. In my haste, I left the first page, which amounted to one of the most endearingly romantic resignation letters of all time, in the machine. When Palmer read it, he called a disciplinary hearing. I was allowed one witness. I walked around the office at a bunch of hacks who clearly had no future in journalism: Belinda Goldsmith (Reuters, New York), Penny Marshall (ITN), Paul Myers (The Guardian), a 17-year-old called Lorraine Butler who blushed if you looked at her (now Candy, editor of Elle), and a pseudo-posh bloke called Pugs Pughe-Morgan (freelance).

I was obsessed with the hot new movie Top Gun and tried to twiddle his pen round his fingers like Ice Man. That made me Maverick. I drafted him in as my wing man.

Palmer outlined the charges and said I was fired. My fledgling local newspaper career had crashed and burned. I declined the condemned man's last words. But Pughe-Morgan intervened more like Penny Marshall on acid than Ice Man and began the most hilariously flattering defence. For a second, even I believed I should be saved.

The next day I began working at The Sun pretty much full-time under the pen name more feisty editor — Kevin Mackenzie. My nerve-jangling Fleet Street career had begun prematurely and for that I will always be grateful to Andrew Palmer.

Rob McGibbon is a freelance journalist.

FLOOD REPORTING

Emergency forum to learn Cumbria flooding lessons

Role of regional media is key to keeping public informed of disasters



The internet kept the public informed of the floods (above left) but newspaper sales peaked in the aftermath (above right)



INSIDE 38 PAGES OF PICTURES AND REPORTS FROM THE STREETS OF CARLISLE

By Jon Slattery

The vital role regional newspaper websites played after the devastating floods in Carlisle knocked out the rest of the media is to be highlighted at a top level meeting on the disaster.

Cumbrian Newspapers editorial director Keith Sutton believes the internet's ability to keep the public informed in a crisis is one of the major lessons the press and the emergency services can learn from the floods.

It will be one of the issues raised at a meeting of the newly formed Regional Media Emergency Forum in Cumbria on 15 February.

The forum is for representatives of the media, government, police and emergency services to discuss the implications of disasters.

The meeting will examine the huge impact the floods had on communications and the media after an electricity power station, feeding 15 sub-stations, flooded. Mobile phones, television and radio transmitters were knocked out and the power to Cumbrian Newspapers' new £5 million printing press was cut, costing the daily News & Star all but a few thousand of its Saturday 8 January edition on the day after the floods.

Sutton will be stressing the importance the internet sites of the News & Star and weekly Cumberland News played in getting information to the public and how they broke through the news blackout.

This was reflected in website use: the News & Star site got 1.7 million hits — eight times its average figure. The Cumberland News website recorded 250,000 hits.

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KEITH SUTTON
CUMBRIAN
NEWSPAPERS



The front page that never was

Copy sales NEWS AND STAR FLOOD SALE SETS RECORD

Even in a multi-media age, it is newspapers the public turn to after a disaster. Sales of the News & Star and Cumberland News broke all records in the aftermath of the floods.

Sutton said: "I think people just wanted to see the floods in words and pictures and it is important that we get the right tone in our coverage."

The News & Star's first edition on the Monday after the floods outsold later editions and has become a souvenir of the disaster. It featured a photograph of a father wading through a street of water and carrying his two-year-old daughter. On that day the News & Star sold a record 61,610 copies. This compares with the previous year's figure on the corresponding day of 26,000. Tuesday's News & Star sold 32,231 and the weekly average was 35,264.

scope of the disaster because they had been unable to see pictures or get authoritative news since the Friday and Saturday nights," Sutton said.

"The emergency services rushed to get on the radio which nobody could hear. This disaster showed the importance of getting information out and the emergency services should be aware of the importance of the internet."

Although BBC radio stations also have their own websites, Sutton said newspapers often had more editorial staff to draw on. In his case 50 journalists across the region.

A request for pictures put out on the News & Star's website produced hundreds of shots from readers. One of the first showed a submerged ambulance and made the front page of the News &



The weekly Cumberland News featured a poster front page of pictures headlined "City of Heroes" and sold 43,724 copies, the highest in the paper's history. A Western Morning News special on the day after the Boscastle flood last August increased sales by 37.5 per cent.

Star-that-never-was on Saturday when the press failed.

The paper published a special eight-page insert of readers' pictures.

Sutton claims the media will have to become more aware of how to deal with such disasters in the future as flooding is predicted to increase. An emergency generator that would have kept his press rolling after the power failure would cost around £100,000.

Sutton believes the national press has underplayed the Carlisle flood story. "This has affected 35,000 homes, closed schools and businesses, led to mass evacuations, homelessness and two drownings. The damage has been estimated at a quarter of a billion pounds. This is far bigger than Boscastle and on a scale with foot and mouth."