Bryan Glick

Interviewed by

Bill Dutton

20th June 2025

Bill Dutton 00:03

Brian, I'd like you to introduce yourself, but, but I guess maybe by way of introduction, I mean, we're extremely interested in this, because the Post Office in 1999 in the height of the .com bubble, had the vision of creating a future oriented system in which they could network all the sub postmasters across the country to efficiently account for their work and actually create e services across the Post Offices. So it was a quite a visionary system, but it obviously went wrong. It has become the quite notable Post Office Horizon scandal. You started covering that with Computer Weekly. Maybe you could speak about how you and Computer Weekly began covering this, how it arose and how you saw the, this scandal evolving over time.

Bryan Glick 01:08

Yeah, yeah, very, very happy to talk about all that. Yeah. I mean, Computer Weekly's first brief involvement with what we now know is the Post Office scandal actually came as long ago as 2004 when one of my predecessors, at Computer Weekly, received a letter written the proper letter physical in the post back, back in those sort of days, from a chap called Alan Bates, who used to run a Post Office in in north Wales. And he was basically saying, look, I think I know a little bit about computers. I was given this new computer system by the Post Office. More or less as soon as I got it all, my account started, started going wrong, and when I got into a dispute with the Post Office, basically they sacked me and said it was my fault. I still think it's the computers, and nobody wants to listen to me. Now, the chap that he wrote to is a chap called Tony Collins. Tony got back to Alan and said, this sounds really interesting, but you know, it's only you saying this. We can't write a story from, from one person, but please keep in touch. Four years later, Tony got another letter from a chap called Lee Castleton, which basically said exactly the same thing. Lee was a sub postmaster as well. When the Horizon computer system would have been installed in his branch, all of a sudden, his accounts stopped adding up correctly. And again, you know, Lee lost his job. He eventually got made, got made bankrupt, lost his lost his livelihood, his life, his children's lives were destroyed, and Tony saw this letter from Lee, remembered the one from Alan Bates, and sort of said, Okay,

maybe we have got a story. Tony worked. Tony sort of commissioned and worked with a young reporter on the Computer Weekly team at that time called Rebecca Thompson. Rebecca had a background in local newspapers, so she was very good at, you know, digging through archives of newspapers and talking to, you know, she wasn't a techie, she wasn't a traditional tech journalist. She was very good at talking to people, ordinary people in the street, so to speak. And Rebecca did an investigation, and she found a number of other people who all had a very, very similar story to tell. Some of them were very cautious about talking to press, because their lives, in their in their eyes, had been ruined by the Post Office. They didn't want to go through that again. The seven of them agreed to talk to her on the record. Alan Bates was one. Lee Castleton was another, Jo Hamilton, who's, you know, another of the names has become very well known, associated with the Post Office scandal, was one of those seven as well. And they all told exactly the same story. They all said, I've been running successful branch. Everything was going fine. This computer system comes in and suddenly the numbers don't numbers don't add up. They variously lost their jobs, been bankrupted, gone to prison, been being given a criminal record and convicted of anything from, you know, fraud to fraud to false accounting. And the one thing they all said was when I said to the Post Office that it's a problem with the computer system? The Post Office said: no, it can't be the Post Office system. They're the computer system because you're the only person who's getting problems. And when Computer Weekly published the results of that investigation in May 2009, for many of those people, that was the first time they found out they weren't the only one who was having those problems. And that started the ball rolling in many ways. You know, Alan Bates, you know, got in touch with all of these people. He'd been finding a few people himself, and gradually they started the ball rolling. Alan found more and more people who had a very had a very similar story to tell. And when we when Computer Weekly, then started interrogating the Post Office more about, have you got a problem here? They were aggressively denying, denying it, dismissing these individuals as troublemakers, people who had been found guilty in a court of law, and were just bitter about it and wanted to get, wanted to get their own back. But I remember quite early on in this in this process, I joined Computer Weekly in November 2009 so I wasn't there for the original stories but picked it up

soon afterwards. One of the things that Post Office kept saying to us, is there are no bugs in our software. If there were bugs in our software, we would know about it. Because people, as soon as something goes wrong, this is this software is being used in 12,000 branches. It's processing millions of pounds worth of transactions a day. If there was some systemic flaw in this software, we would know about it. And I listened to that, and other, you know, my colleagues in the team listened to that and said, that's a fundamental misunderstanding of how software bugs affect systems. And that set, you know, that set off alarm bells for us, saying, do they really understand what's going on in this, in this computer system? And then, you know, very slowly the ball, the ball got rolling. More journalists got interested. Private Eye got interested. BBC panorama did it, did a few documentaries. MPs got in, got interested, started getting talked about in Parliament and over a period of time, as we all know now that you know, that led to a private court case that Alan Bates and his campaign group put through in 2018/19, where they proved definitively in a court of law that bugs in the Horizon software could be responsible, and in many cases, were responsible for the accounting errors that people had been prosecuted for. And then nearly two years ago, now, start 2024 the ITV drama 'Mr. Bates versus the Post Office' comes out, and that changed everything for everybody who had been involved with Computer Weekly, and everybody who'd been taking an interest and trying to make a noise about this scandal for many years, finally, that television drama broke the dam. Less than 10 days after that TV drama, then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak stood up in the commons and said, we're going to pass legislation to exonerate all of the postmasters. It's the first time in the history of the British Parliament that the executive, the government has passed legislation to overrule a decision of the judiciary, and in this case, it was over 900 decisions of the judiciary. So a phenomenal turnaround, a very long process to get there. And of course, it's still not over. You know, a lot of a lot of the, a lot of the sub postmasters are still fighting for redress and compensation. Horizon is still being used in the Post Office. They are struggling to move away from it. It is still causing accounting errors today, just the Post Office doesn't pursue them anymore. And in fact, it's costing the Post Office millions of pounds every year, because they're just writing off the losses now. So

even now, more than 25 years late on from when Horizon was first put in in 1999 in the middle of the .com boom, as you say, the problems still exist.

Bill Dutton 09:19

Yeah.

Bill Dutton 09:19

Why did it take that TV programme that Bates versus the Post Office, or the Post Office versus Bates? Is there something about IT that is too difficult for people to understand, or is it just not publicly interesting? Or how do..?

Bryan Glick 09:35

You know for a long time, it was very much the case that people look that people looked at it and thought, oh, it's a computer story. Computers are boring.

Bill Dutton 09:46

Yeah

Bryan Glick 09:47

There was no political element to it, so the political journalists didn't really take an interest in it. It was complex to tell, complex to understand...what we also know now in the background, you know, after, you know, Alan Bates had been contacting all the broadcasters, all the national newspapers, not getting any interest. After Computer Weekly, he wrote his initial story in in 2009 we now, we now know that some people started to take a bit more seriously, and that newspapers and broadcasters were getting in touch with the Post Office and saying, what's going on here? You know, what was happening with this computer system? And the Post Office basically said

to them, don't touch it. It is a non story. It's not true. You know, we will be considering legal action, all this, all this sort of thing. And they all went, they all went, they'll step back and say, Okay, we're not going to touch it. So it was a combination of the lack of understanding of how technology works at that sort of time, the difficulty of telling what people saw as a boring computer story about accounting software. And what we now know was, you know, an active campaign by the Post Office to try and keep this out of mainstream media.

Bill Dutton 11:07

Yeah. Well, it seems, from what I've read, Computer Weekly, has done a great job in looking at the actual flaws, the IT flaws. And from even before the Horizon system, and when did it begin? Was the very first iteration of this responsible for all the downstream errors? Or..?

Bryan Glick 11:29

Well, the

Bryan Glick 11:29

scandal that we most know about, which is, which is the Horizon scandal, like so many of these scandals, and like many IT disasters, it's a perfect storm of events that came together to make it happen. And arguably, if any one of those elements of that perfect storm weren't there, maybe things might not have gone the way they did. But yeah, absolutely, it started from a really, really bad IT project. Horizon was born out of a big government it contract that was signed in 1995 called pathway, which was signed with the then benefits agency, what would now be the Department for Work and Pensions. And the idea was they wanted to automate benefits payments. So you know, instead of people going up to a Post Office and or a job centre, whatever, and getting it, getting their dole money in cash, it will be paid directly into their bank accounts. And the idea was that all benefits claimants would be given a

smart card, a plastic card with a strip across the back of it that they would use to claim their benefits. And in order to do this, you have to automate all of the Post Office branches around the UK, because all the Post Office, largely Post Office branches were still manual, manual accounting. Fujitsu won the contract to - or ICL, as they were then, it was still ICL in those days. ICL won the contract to deliver pathway. It turned into what was at that time the biggest, most expensive government IT disaster the UK, UK had ever seen. ICL was forced to take a £180 million hit on its revenue because of, because it was so bad, the benefits agency pulled out and said, we don't have anything to do with this anymore, but the Post Office said we still need the automation. So the contract was reconstituted, given back to ICL again, and said, take what you've done and evolve it instead into the system called Horizon that will automate all the Post Offices.

Bryan Glick 13:48

Now, I said, because, you know, ICL at this time, Fujitsu was its majority owner. ICL at this time, was heading for a flotation. It was due to go through a public floatation. I think it was scheduled for in the year 2000 as I remember, and it would have been, at that time, the largest tech flotation in the UK. It was rumoured to be to be worth about £2 billion, you know, so a lot now, but even more back in back in 2000. There was no way anybody in ICL could allow anything to stop that happening. We now know, because of whistle blowers who have talked to us since that within the, within the Horizon project team, there was a lot of awareness that the software they were developing had massive problems. They'd made some really bad architect architectural choices. They chose to take some packaged software and develop some bespoke software and try and plug it all together and use specially designed terminals, rather than taking things off, off the shelf. And it had just, you know, it was turning into a dog's dinner. Uh, one guy, one guy that we talked to back in 2019, I think it was now, who was a senior project manager on that, if I'm paraphrasing, paraphrase his words, and I'll spell one, I'll spell one out, just in case. You know, he said the software was a pile of S, H, I, T, and everybody knew it. And this, you know, we now know this, this was being escalated up to the up to the top of, up to the top

of ICL. And basically the message that came back was, you know, it's fine. Don't worry. We'll sort the problems. You know, we need to hit these timescales. We'll sort the problems out in implementation. Corners were cut. Testing wasn't as thorough, as thorough as it should have been, and this large, enormously complex IT system, an IT system that the Post Office and Fujitsu themselves described as the largest non military IT project in Europe was rolled out to Post Offices with known bugs in the software.

Bill Dutton 16:00

Okay, so, so the Fujitsu sale, I mean, the purchase by Fujitsu went comparatively swimmingly but, but they, I guess they had due diligence. They probably knew that there were problems with this software, or, we don't know.

Bryan Glick 16:14

I mean, yeah, you know one, one presumes that that the these issues were, were, raised at the top level, raised up to raised up to Fujitsu. But you know, again, let's think back to that time. You know, 1999/2000 this was a time when most of the public sector was being automated for the first time.

Bill Dutton 16:36

Yes

Bryan Glick 16:36

Every government department was going through some big IT project typically outsourced to some giant IT provider, like ICL, like IBM, like EDS, if you remember that, remember them at the time. This was all part of Tony Blair's push at that period of time to, to automate, automate government, e government, as he used to call it, at the time. And the perception at that time was, we in government, we don't

understand technology. All you big tech companies, you understand you understand it. We're going to get you to come in and do all the work, do the work for us. Of course, we know with hindsight that those big tech companies didn't know much more about how to do enormously big, complicated IT projects than the government themselves did. And we know that because, you know, I've been a tech journalist since, since 2000 and I spent most of that first 10 years writing about all sorts of enormous, big government IT disasters in all sorts of departments and all sorts of areas of the public sector. What was different with the Post Office? In most of those cases, somebody somewhere looked at the problem, looked at the fact there's a problem with the IT, and said, 'Stop'. For some reason in the Post Office, they looked at the, they looked at this, and nobody said, 'Stop'. They doubled down. And a lot of that then comes back to the fact that although this software was flawed, it had lots of, it had lots of bugs in it, had lots of issues that were causing these accounting mismatches in there. It was the confluence of technology and people that caused, caused this scandal, and the Post Office at the time, again, and this is, much of this came out during the Post Office public inquiry, had at its head office, had a pretty toxic culture, pre Horizon, because all the accounts in Post Office branches were being done manually. There was a perception, a strong perception, among a lot of people at head office, that most of these sub postmasters were all on the take. They were all on the fiddle. It was a cash-based business. Remember, this was the 90s. There was no Chip and PIN. There were no contactless cards. This was, this was cash and checks. And there was a perception that large numbers of people, were trousering a tenner here and there and all this sort of thing. So, when they put in, when, when Horizon was put in, and suddenly it starts showing lists of people where, you know, the amount of cash, what they've sold doesn't match with the amount of cash they're declaring. Some people in, in head office, the Post Office, went 'At last, we've got the thieving bastards'.

Bill Dutton 19:22

Oh right.

Bryan Glick 19:23

And they doubled down on on prosecuting these people because it was that it was reinforcing the bias that they that they already had. You know, if you take the scandal back a little further to where, to how this happened as well, back to 1995, you know, a lot of people might not, certainly weren't aware then, might still not be aware now, the Post Office is one of a very small number of former public sector organisations that still has the power to bring prosecutions directly, without any involvement from the Crown Prosecution Service or any external checks and balances. Now they've stopped doing it now because of this, because of the scandal, but at the time, the Post Office was allowed to take, to charge people and take them to court and assign a barrister and prosecute them as if they were that, as if they were the state. In 1995 there was a big debate going on about the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, because all of a sudden, in lots of court cases, people were presenting evidence that had been generated from computers. Because the public sector, the private sector was getting more and more ... computerised, the law said that any evidence that that was presented had to, you had to prove its veracity. But there was a large body of opinion saying there was so much computer based data coming through now that this is that you just can't do this, and computers are generally reliable, so there was a big consultation about a change in the law, and that was accepted, and the Police and Criminal Evidence Act was changed or introduced. It changed the balance of proof, and it said that any computer-based evidence, it will be deemed to be accurate, unless proven otherwise. Now we found out a number of years ago now. Obviously, when this consultation was going on, there was a lot of different opinions. There was a lot of lobbying going on. Guess who... guess which organisation was one of the strongest lobbyists in favour of changing the law. It was the Post Office. The Post Office actively lobbied the government to get this to get this law, this law changed. So then five, you know, the irony is, the law, the change in the law, was passed in 1999 the same year that Horizon rollout started. So as soon as the Post Office started taking sub postmasters to court and prosecuting them for, you know, fraud or accounting errors or whichever charges that they were doing to them, the law said that if the Post Office presented the data and showed that showed that there was a mismatch, that had to be true. Some, there were some sub postmasters

who have, maybe they were a bit IT savvy, or maybe they had, they had particularly good solicitors who tried to push back and again, as we have learned since, in many of those cases, the Post Office had the data but refused to provide it. They knowingly withheld evidence that could have cast a reasonable doubt on the chance of conviction for those, for those sub postmasters.

Bill Dutton 22:57

Yeah

Bryan Glick 23:00

And that's all part of this, this perfect storm, you know, the law changed the government attitude to technology changed, the pressure that ICL and Fujitsu was under for the flotate, the flotation, the fact that people were still learning how to build big, complex, IT software systems at that time, and all of this surrounded by a company with an unconscious bias and a pretty toxic culture towards the people who are using this, this technology. And that, you know, all that put together, set the spark that created this awful scandal.

Bill Dutton 23:40

That's a really great point you made about the culture of most organisations at that time was computers were going to enable us to make run it like a business and be more efficient. The catch flaw, catch mistakes, etc, trusting the computer and... but at the same time, it was clearly wrong for them to tell postmasters that you were the only one, oh yeah, to have that. So people in the Post Office must realise that that's not true, that it was, it was more than one. There was actually, what, 50, I don't know how many people in the end...?

Bryan Glick 24:24

Yeah, I mean most, most scandals, not just this one, start because of a lie. To do... One example, one example, was a football fan -that the hills the Hillsborough scandal started because a police officer on the day of on the day of Hillsborough lied and said football fans charged down a gate and that's how they got in. And everything that happened after that point was to try and hide or defend that lie. With the Post Office, the lie was you're the only person this is happening to. At some point, someone somewhere in the Post Office, some individual, some group, some committee, whatever it was, must have made a decision to tell their help desk. If people say to you, it's a problem with the computer, you say to them, no, you're the only person that's getting this problem. We don't know who or when or how that happened, but basically everything that happened subsequently was in defence of that lie.

Bill Dutton 25:24

I don't know whether... I understand that Mr. Bates actually created a website so that he could share information - that people... even though he quit being a sub postmaster, he created this website so other postmasters could inform people about the charges against them. With - I guess that may have contributed it to it, but also was news coverage that that that revealed this line, that it was not isolated, or ..?

Bryan Glick 25:53

I mean, for you know, this was, this was featured in the, in the in the TV drama. You know, it really was the case that for a lot of the victims of this, the first time they knew they'd been lied to, was when they read the Computer Weekly story in 2009. That showed a whole bunch of other people all, all saying 'They told me I was the only one'. You know, that was very much the catalyst for Alan to other members of the Justice for Sub Postmasters Alliance, which was a campaign group that Alan, that Alan set up, to start being, to start persuading people they knew it had problems, to talk more public, more publicly. And it started a band waggon that made lots of other people who had no idea any of this was going on, and just thought it was just

them, suddenly found, to suddenly find out that there were, there were other people in the same boat. You know, we now know, I mean, we still don't know the exact figure, and we perhaps never will, because a lot of people still don't want to, haven't come forward. They don't want to come forward, but we know that it's almost certainly a little over 1000 people who were prosecuted. And it's, you know, I think I saw was something like seven or eight thousand people who, while not prosecuted, had to pay back money to the Post Office the Post Office claimed they had taken, that they hadn't taken. And when you think, when you think about the fact there was around about twelve, twelve and a half thousand Post Office branches at that time, and we now know that maybe seven or eight thousand people had some sort of problem, it's just making a... How could you possibly not see these things happening to so many people in the organisation, and nobody at the top of the organisation say, 'Maybe it's us'?

Bill Dutton 27:52

Well, there was also, I'm not sure it's a lie or just misunderstanding that that it was as distributed. I mean, all the postmasters could work with their accounts, but it was all aggregated in a central office and central computer-based system. But they said it could not be changed remotely, so that the central office could not change anything. But it turns out they could.

Bryan Glick 28:17

That's right, yeah, yeah. This was, you know, one of the lies that was told to cover up the initial lie was that it was not possible to amend a branch's accounts remotely. And again, the Post Office stood behind this lie for some time, until eventually a whistleblower came forward the chap called Richard Roll, who used to work for Fujitsu, and the first time he talked was on what was on a talk public. He was on a BBC panorama when he said, Yep, I worked in the office in Fujitsu in Bracknell, and we would be going into sub postmasters accounts and changing them all the time. You know. What was interesting about that, you know, there's been a bit of a time.

There's a bit of a sort of conspiracy theory that says, oh, you know, maybe people in Fujitsu are doing this deliberately and siphoning off money. That's not the case. There's no evidence to suggest that. These were just, you know, support techies who went to, who were going to make changes as part, as part of their everyday tasks, they weren't fiddling money. But what this did do was the first time it proved that the Post Office had been lying. There was actual proof to show that one, one of the lies the Post Office had been saying consistently, was proved beyond all doubt to have been a lie. And again, that just then accelerates, accelerates the scandal, and gave more evidence to campaigners, to MPs, to journalists, to say, look, well, if they're lying about this, what else have they been lying about?

Bill Dutton 29:57

Well, what I ... Journalists and also the Bates and others held the Post Office more accountable. But what were the factors that led to the lack of accountability within the Post Office? I guess people say the culture of the Post Office. What about the, what was it about the culture? That is - they just have a top-down culture, or what? What elements of the culture of the Post Office?

Bryan Glick 30:24

When, during the Post Office inquiry, the former chief executive of the Post Office, Paula Vennells, was interviewed as a witness over three days. It was one of the highlights of the of the inquiry. She was, she was chief executive when the scandal was unfolding. So after our story in 2009 although she also worked for the Post Office before that as well. And it was, she was the public face of defending the scandal and denying there was, there was a problem for many, many years. She had, she refuses to talk to the press, continues to refuse to talk to press. So when she when she talked to the inquiry, everybody was showing great interest. She gave three days of occasionally very tearful testimony, in which, strangely, she can remember a lot of things, that happened at the time. Only that. But she concluded her, she concluded her evidence when asked about, you know, looking back, what might you

have done differently? She concluded her evidence by saying, you know, looking back, I think perhaps we prioritise the institution too much over the individual. And in that one line, I think she summarised everything that was wrong with the Post Office. Because at all stages, every decision they made was all about protecting the Post Office, protecting the brand and what somehow the people at head office never seemed to be able to get through their heads, was that to the entire public, to you, to me, to anybody who's ever walked into a Post Office branch and bought a stamp or sent a letter or whatever, the sub postmaster behind the desk that you're dealing with, they are the Post Office. Those people are the Post Office. How they never made that connection to this day, I cannot tell you. In trying to protect the brand as they saw it, and remember, in about the time that the Computer Weekly first story came out, the Post Office's marketing tagline was 'Britain's most trusted brand'. They were so determined to protect that; they completely took their eye off what today we would call the customer experience.

Bill Dutton 32:48

Yeah

Bryan Glick 32:49

You know the customer experience was, was that face-to-face interaction with a with a sub postmaster in a branch. You know that, like so many parts of the scandal, offers so many lessons for us today in technology, you know. And in that one, in terms of, you know... We're automating everything today, technologies is, is the forefront of so many companies' interaction with their customers, even more so now with AI. And we're all getting used to dealing with companies through our, through through AI chat bots. Always remember that you know, what is your customers' experience? Who does ... who and how does your customer interact with, with with their brand? It always comes back to people in the end.

Bill Dutton 33:42

You remind me, from Postman Pat to all the people who deliver the mail and so forth, the Post Office has a wonderful position to be trusted as an institution.

Bryan Glick 33:56

Absolutely.

Bill Dutton 33:56

Because you know that you know these and you have this trust in the individual members, and then they didn't. They could have taken advantage of that in terms of trying to champion the small entrepreneurs in the country.

Bryan Glick 33:58

Absolutely

Bill Dutton 34:13

Okay, so, well, maybe we should turn to lessons learned. I mean, I, I'm one of the things I wonder is if, if this had happened in the day of social media, maybe it would not have, maybe it would have been discovered very early on that many post sub masters had questions about this, because they could have communicated with one another. But from your perspective, what are the lessons learned for the IT industry or the Post Office, for journalism, actually?

Bryan Glick 34:44

Yeah.

Bryan Glick 34:44

I mean, I think... the... From the point of view of, you know, technologists and people working in IT I think the major lesson here is, I think it's something a lot of people in IT, perhaps know, but perhaps less so in business. Technology is not a panacea. People... so many people in business and some in technology see technology as the solution to all their business problems, or all their public service problems. We see it today. We've we know we've got a prime minister today who's talking about making billions of pounds of productivity savings across the civil service by implementing better technology and, AI. You know, implementing better technology on its own never improved anything. You know. I think you know we you have to learn that people are always at the heart of this. Change is difficult, and what technology represents is change. And if all you're doing is implementing technology, and you're not managing the managing the change that goes with that, at a an employee, at a citizen, at a personal level, you've got a recipe for disaster there, without a doubt. The technology sector needs to learn from this, because tech the tech sector sells technology as a panacea. It sells it as a solution to all your ills. And that's you know, often setting people up, setting people up for failure by doing so.

Bryan Glick 36:20

Now, yeah, we know a lot more about how to implement technology now than we did 25 years ago. We know a lot more about software development. We're much, much better software development now than we were 25 years ago. Software doesn't go wrong as often as it used to, without a doubt. But as you and I are sitting here, now, three days ago, Cloud Flare's network went down and took out a huge chunk of the of the internet. Couple of weeks ago, Microsoft Azure went down, took out a chunk of the internet. The week before that, Amazon Web Services went down, took out a chunk of the internet. Technology still goes wrong. And in most of the - in a lot of these things, when the investigations are done and you try and find out what goes wrong, there's a little human error there, that's been this, that's been the cause of it. So I think, from a technology perspective, absolutely, you know, technology is not about, is not a panacea.

Bryan Glick 37:25

I think this, you know, I think the Post Office shows very much that for if you're a leader of organisation, if you're if you're on the board, if you're a non-executive director who is looking to hold an organisation to account, you should be asking, 'Does, does this organisation have the skills and the and the awareness of what digital transformation really means, to be able to ask the right questions both our employees and of our and of our suppliers?' There was an unwillingness in the Post Office to ask the difficult questions. And of course, when they asked the difficult questions and were given the difficult answers, they ignored the difficult answers as well. But you know, you need to have the skills and the awareness at the top of any organisation to make sure that you understand what's going what's going on. You can't outsource; you must not outsource this critical knowledge. Now every organisation is a technology company these days. You know, the world runs on technology, and if you're the chief executive or a board member of a company, you can no longer get away with saying, oh, yeah, that's the IT department's stuff I don't need to know about that. Yeah, I'm sorry. You do. And I think, as you know, as we're, you know, we're coming up onto the cusp of another revolution in technology now with, with, with AI, when we, when, when we look back on the Post Office scandal now, the once the flaws in the Horizon, software were exposed. It became a lot easier to understand what happened and why it happened. We knew, you know, we knew what questions to ask, and we got the answers for it.

Bryan Glick 39:13

I wonder now if something similar happened with AI, where it's coming out of a black box, where we don't necessarily really understand how, how that AI - look at large language models, for example - how that AI is coming to the decisions that it's making. You know, do we even know the questions to ask any more in order to find the answers when we're going to an era where we're putting so much trust into these big, these, these big AI systems? We all know the potential of technology. We should

all know well enough now that for every good side of technology, there's a likely unforeseen negative. Who would have thought in 2008 when we were all getting very excited about Facebook and social media, that barely six years later, Facebook would be being accused of of helping to manipulate elections in the authoritarian states. You know, the you know, the biggest danger that we as technologists, and arguably, increasingly, we as a system, we as a technological society, face is that we are not well prepared enough for the unforeseen consequences of new technologies. A couple of years ago, we had everybody talking about AI safety. Nobody's really talking about that anymore. It's all about how quickly can we roll it out? How quickly can we do it? How capable are these? Are the, are these technologies? So overall, if there was one lesson I would like everybody to learn as a result of the Post Office scandal, is to make sure that we are more honest with everybody about the potential downsides of exciting new technologies as we are about the benefits for them, and put the mechanisms and the processes and the awareness in place to make sure that we are better able to deal with the unforeseen consequences if

Bryan Glick 41:34

and when they happen.

Bill Dutton 41:35

One of the most enduring issues that you raised is who should know what about it. And often people think the board of an organisation shouldn't deal with IT - delegate that, or they might not even want to explain to them, but, but more and more, I have a sense that everybody feels like most people should know, because everybody's using IT and AI will be in the 90 over 90% of youth now, probably using AI chat bots and so forth. So it's more and more accepted that we all need to know more about IT. And I think that's right. But I mean, do you have a sense from Computer Weekly that you probably, when you in 2009 you're probably speaking primarily to IT people. Are you speaking to a larger audience now, or is it still a problem?

Bryan Glick 42:34

I mean, yeah,

Bryan Glick 42:35

yes, we are speaking to a larger audience. Yes, there are more people in business functions and at the top of organisations now who take an active interest in technology from the perspective of what it can do for their organisation, how it can benefit their organisation. What does digital transformation really mean? What new business opportunities does this open up for us as an organisation. I think where it's still lacking is, I still don't think there's enough awareness or knowledge to ask the difficult questions. You know, every chief executive wants their chief information officer, chief technology officer, whatever job title the senior tech person has got in any particular organisation, to come along and sell them? Yep, X percent savings. X percent, you know, X million pounds, additional, additional revenue. You know, this much, these many productivity savings. You know, they still don't want them to come along and say, you know, we've got a real we've got a real problem here. Let's just look at another, another couple of topical examples. Jaguar Land Rover, you know, has, you know, lost tens, I mean, hundreds, of millions of pounds as a result of the cyber security attack that it faced earlier this year. We even had, I think in the last couple of weeks, the latest GDP figures coming out, and they actually attributed a drop in GDP growth, partly to the Jaguar Land Rover cyber security attack, because it had such a widespread effect on the manufacturing supply chain in the Midlands that supported them. What more indication do boardrooms across the country, politicians across the country, need to make sure they are aware of, you know, the potential downside of what can go wrong with technology and be able to, you know, to ask the difficult questions and understand the difficult answers, than the fact that one ransomware attack can actually, you know, affect the economic growth of an entire country.

Bill Dutton 44:53

I think it's clear more and more people are realising that, that we all have to know more about IT. We have. Understand it, because the resilience of our business, our government, our household, being able to operate is actually dependent on making sure that we're secure, safe at home, so forth. But there's one, I mean, one of the problems you must face daily is that... There was a there was an old story I heard about when they tried to explain to people how a television programme was made, and once they heard the discussion of exactly how a television programme was made, they were more mystified than before. And I think that happens in IT. You explain, this is how the accounting system works, and this is how what went wrong with these ledgers and so forth, and they... people are probably even more confused than... I mean, how do you deal with that? And I guess in trying to reach a broader audience, do you think it's, it's an insurmountable problem or or are there ways in which you can do that?

Bryan Glick 45:59

I mean, I think it is a very difficult problem. You know, it's one we've talked about for decades in tech, isn't it? You know, how do we educate the people outside of tech to get enough of an understanding about what we about, what what we do? And, you know, it's changing gradually. It is partly a generational thing. You alluded earlier, to younger generations who are more familiar with technology as they rise up into more senior positions that brings a fresh awareness as well.

Bill Dutton 46:36

I'm not sure if the Bates programme actually communicated what happened, but it certainly communicated the consequences of...

Bryan Glick 46:44

I mean, yeah, I think what they what they did extremely well in the Post Office scandal TV drama was finding a way to relate the technology problems to people, individually.

Bill Dutton 46:58

Yes.

Bryan Glick 46:59

The single most impactful scene from the TV show was where you had Joe Hamilton, the sub post master Jo Hamilton, and this was a real-life scene. I've talked to Jo. It's exactly how it happened. Seeing her screen, the numbers wouldn't add up. She's on the phone to the Help Desk. She's explaining what's happened. They say, we'll do this. She does this, and the the loss on the screen doubled,

Bill Dutton 47:25

Yes, I remember that.

Bryan Glick 47:27

And I think that tapped into everybody's experience of sitting at a computer doing something and it's not doing what you what, what you expected it to do, and you just don't know what to do about it. For most people, it doesn't matter. You'll step away, you'll switch it off, turn it back on again, and it'll be fine. But for Jo, that moment changed her life completely, and I think that made ordinary people watching on TV realise this could have been my aunt, my granny, my mum, my dad could have been me. I think the message it did put out was, yes, you know, we all need to be a bit more aware of this technology that we're relying on every day. You know, we joke about 'computer says no', but we should, you know, we do all need to be better at that. Now that at a societal level that comes down, obviously, to education. There are

huge problems there. You know, we still haven't got education...you know, IT education right in schools. Only recently, the government has announced that they're overhauling the computer science computer studies curriculum, again, at a GCSE level. This happens every few years, because it never, it never quite keeps up with technology. It's not a massively popular topic in school, because it's just not well, not well taught. But we've got a generation who are living on their phones. You know, where's that? There's such a mismatch. They have this generation who live on their phones, live on technology, yet we can't excite them about understanding what a bit more about what they do.

Bryan Glick 49:09

I do think that the technology sector has to take its own share of share of the blame here as well. You know, when I look at all the material that comes out from IT companies, it's all features and functions and speeds and feeds and all this sort of thing. You know, to me, the tech sector is really bad at storytelling. They can't take - they're not very good at taking what they do and explaining it in a way that relates to people's everyday lives. Or if you're a chief executive, to the challenges of challenges of running a business, it's much easier for them to sell a product. To me, I think, you know, we can't carry on just selling a product, because we're not selling a product, we're selling a capability. We're selling the ability to transform an organisation. Ultimately, we're selling the ability to transform society, potentially with AI. And we have to change the conversation from - here's a product with a bunch of features and features and functions, to a wider narrative about what this means, what the challenges are, and what are the questions that we all need to ask in order to make sure that we are going to all get the undoubted benefits that the potential and new technology offers to us.

Bill Dutton 50:38

I think there's that's much of the promise that I think it's no longer an embarrassment to ask people what happened. How do I do this on my computer? What's going on

here? Why is this happening? And they communicate over on their block or on their road and or everybody doesn't need to read Computer Weekly. I'm sorry [laughter]. They can inform their neighbours and their family and so forth about it. So, it's this, you know, two step flow of information. We can't popularise it too much, but it's but I think more people are trying to learn more from their friends and or co-workers and so forth. But thanks to journalism... I mean, I ... journalism really shown in this in this situation, with the ITV issue, but also the continuing coverage by Computer Weekly and I guess private eye has done a good job as well.

Bryan Glick 51:42

Yeah, absolutely.

Bill Dutton 51:42

But thank you very much for speaking to us about [it]

Bryan Glick 51:46

My pleasure.

Bryan Glick 51:46

Thank you for asking the questions and taking an interest.

Bill Dutton 51:50

Okay.