

# Rory Cellan-Jones

British journalist



**You may know him from his years of enthusiastic TV reporting as the BBC's Business and Technology Correspondent, a role he held from the 1990s to 2021.**

**But for many Twitter users, he is actually better known now as the owner of Sophie, a little rescue dog from Romania. Since the 'sophiefromromania' Twitter handle went live in December 2022, prolific tweeter Rory has gained 100,000 new followers and new-found fame offline too.**

"A complete stranger came up to me on the tube the other day and said she thought it was amazing what we were doing with Sophie."

When he joined our Zoom call, he introduced me to the dog first. Later he showed me a harness that is lying on the floor with some ham inside, designed to entice her. The efforts of Rory and his wife, Diane, to settle Sophie into family life have been well-documented on Twitter and she has gone from a terrified pup who hid behind the sofa to one who now explores the house and garden. But the main challenge of getting Sophie into the harness, out of the house and on a walk remains, at the time of writing, elusive.

As a reporter, Rory was very used to challenges. Back in 2007, as the newly appointed Technology Correspondent, he persuaded his bosses to send him to Cupertino to cover MacWorld which was back then a fairly obscure event in the tech calendar. Once the iPhone was announced, his prescience was praised but he immediately came under immense pressure to get his hands on the device in time for the 10 o'clock news.

"I said that it was impossible – they are not going to just give me the phone, it doesn't come out for six months. But I had set up this interview with Phil Schiller, the marketing guy, and so I asked if he had the phone and whether I could borrow it."

Schiller did have a handset, which Rory grabbed and was able to show it off on the news, a scoop that would remain a seminal moment.

"It was the moment that we realised iPhones were going to be about more than just talking and texting. They were going to be these indispensable devices."

Spotting trends and thinking on his feet have been key ingredients to Rory's success. In 2015, he went above and beyond (and probably caused mayhem with the BBC's health and safety forms) when he got a chip implanted under his skin in Sweden. It remains there to this day, obsolete now but still making Rory the BBC's first cyborg correspondent.

And in 2016, Rory took on the challenge of interviewing Elon Musk, confidently promising to the news desk that he had it in the bag, even though the interview with the Tesla boss wasn't secured until after his plane landed in the US.

"He turned up in a baggy, black suit and was sort of mumbly and I thought, oh god, is this going to be any good? But then he started saying outrageous things like 'in a while owning a car that you have to drive yourself will be like owning a horse, something you do for sentimental rather than practical reasons'."

I ask Rory what he would ask the Tesla and SpaceX boss about now, given his new focus on X (formerly Twitter).

"I would be very wary because he's a very, very manipulative guy. I would go in there with evidence of what he's done to destroy Twitter and ask why?"

Blunt questioning is also a hallmark of Rory's

style, something that led Blackberry boss, Jim Balsillie, to terminate an interview when he didn't appreciate the things Rory was asking him.

Musk remains one of Rory's favourite interviewees. Mark Zuckerberg he describes as a "nerdy kid", Steve Jobs was "unsatisfactory" because interviews with him were very controlled, while Bill Gates "was a bit strange".

"I can't remember anything about the Gates interview, but I got a copy of his book and he signed it: To Rory, good luck with computers.

Which struck me as strange."

He is also very proud of his interview with Stephen Hawking, which was a lead to another great scoop when the scientist, asked about his thoughts on artificial intelligence, replied that full AI would lead to the end of humanity.

"That went around the world, it was a huge story," Rory tells me.

He has reported on many seminal moments of the internet era, but when he started out in a newsroom in Leeds in 1981 there was no tech at all.

"Before the programme went out, the news editor had two pints and a cigarette and then sat in the gallery smoking. There were no computers, no technology. It was typewriters and the graphics were on cardboard. And amazingly we were still shooting on film."

A huge expansion of the BBC in London saw Rory move back to the capital, writing

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# Leaders lives

intros for John Humphries among other things, and then to Newsnight as a producer, followed by a few years in Cardiff as a reporter.

In the late 90s – by which time the BBC had a dedicated business unit – Rory says he was “kind of bored with the business stories” he was covering but excited by “this new thing called the dotcom bubble.”

It inspired not only his interest in tech but his first book, Dotbomb, which was followed towards the end of his BBC career by Always On: Hope and Fear in the Social Smartphone Era. His latest tome, Ruskin Park: Sylvia, Me and the BBC, was his first foray away

from tech. Named after the council estate he grew up on, it documents the often difficult life of his mother, a single parent who was as dedicated to the BBC as he himself has been.

“It’s a very personal project, about my mother who joined the BBC in 1941 and loved it so much that she left her husband,

who hated her working for the BBC, came to London with a young son, my half-brother, and in the 50s worked in television drama.”

The book was born when Rory was clearing out his mother’s flat after her death and found thousands of letters under the bed.

“They told a very vivid story of her life, including a box containing all her love letters and the story of her affair with a note inside which read: “For Rory, so he should understand how it really was.” For someone who has lived out much of his own life on Twitter, the letters provided “a contrast to social media.”

“We think these days that

everybody lets it all hang out on social media. But it is basically fake, performative. Whereas these letters are just incredibly frank and honest.”

Despite seeming to fit a very BBC mould – public school (an assisted place at Dulwich College) followed by Cambridge, Rory’s upbringing was atypical.

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## What are your three pieces of advice for a successful career?

Self-belief

*Being open to being told you’re wrong. I’ve seen too many companies go wrong because the leader is never questioned.*

*Know when to pivot and don’t be afraid to move on. I know people who have stayed at the BBC when they hate it and become pains in the arse or people who have left but carry on moaning about it. I’ve tried to do neither.*

## What piece of tech (other than your phone) could you not be without?

*My Apple smartwatch. I’m an Apple fanboy. I measure my sleep with it. And in terms of my Parkinson’s it is quite important.*

## Tell me something surprising about you?

*I went to Jean-Paul Sartre’s funeral. I was living in Paris at the time and everyone took to the streets for the funeral, so I have a very distant, dodgy photograph of his coffin going past.*

## If you weren’t a TV correspondent, what would you have done?

*When I was 10, I wanted to be a postman. But when I was older, I always dreamed of starting a company of my own. I always admired people who had that kind of energy and commitment.*

He was the result of an affair his mother had with a much younger man, film and television director James Cellan-Jones, and he only saw his father once as a child – fittingly and fleetingly in a BBC studio.

“Someone once contemptuously described me as a BBC public school boy, which was true but there was a different story to tell. I was embarrassed

about not having a dad. I never wanted kids to come

home because my mother was there, and she was barking mad, and it was a one-bedroom council flat.” Beneath the confident exterior, there is a more vulnerable side to Rory. At Cambridge, where he studied French and

German, his lack of faith in his

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own abilities nearly scuppered his journalist career.

"I was incredibly intimidated by the idea of doing student journalism because everyone was going to be so bloody clever," he confesses.

Some advice from a fellow student resonated and remains to this day the best advice he has ever been given. "It's not the cleverest people who necessarily get on. It's the people who've got more oomph to them. So, he "muscled his way in" to the student newspaper and then applied for "every single journalistic training scheme".

Since leaving the BBC, Rory has kept himself incredibly busy. He writes his own Substack newsletter on technology and health, has a column for Which magazine, and does some consultancy work. He will be speaking at Boardwave's September event, Boardwave Live, which aims to provide insights into where the software industry might be in 2033. I ask the man who has asked so many tech CEOs for their predictions for the future, for his own. "My session at Boardwave Live is focused on health. I am hoping that AI will, by 2033, have accelerated drug discovery, will have dealt with a lot of the productivity issues in the NHS, and will have given patients a much more fluid and useful relationship with doctors." But, he admits, making this happen will be challenging, and could mean the NHS is "awash with data" that it doesn't know what to do with.



Health is a topic close to his heart because in 2019 he was diagnosed with Parkinson's. Since then, he has made himself a guinea pig for a range of tech devices aimed at easing the symptoms. Currently the condition is under control.

Rory has made a popular podcast about his condition, with a host of impressive fellow 'Parkies', including Jeremy Paxman and a high court judge. The pod - Movers and Shakers - is sponsored by Boardwave.

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Rory spent 40 years at the BBC, but I don't need to ask if he misses it because he is still making regular appearances. But this time it is not him who is the star, it is Sophie. So far, the pair have appeared on the Today programme and the 6 o'clock news.

Sophie may even become the subject of his next book, Rory tells me. He just needs to persuade her to go for that walk.

