



**GOVCOMMS PODCAST**

EPISODE #143 THE VIEW OF  
COMMUNICATIONS FROM 30,000  
FEET

TRANSCRIPT

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Sanjay Pradhan:

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David Pembroke:

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Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication.

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone, and welcome once again to GovComms, the podcast that examines the practise of communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke, and yes, that was my voice in the opener. Thanks for joining me for a special episode in a series of four podcasts that would be broadcast over the holiday season where we'll be looking back on 2022 and forward to 2023 and beyond. In this episode, we take to the air and view the state of government communication from 30,000 feet, and the view isn't always pretty.

Sanjay Pradhan:

This attack on Ukraine represents an attack on democracy, freedom and openness everywhere. The resilience and courage you are seeing of Ukrainians fighting to defend their democracy and freedom was also mirrored for us for the last decade in Ukraine with courageous reformers from government, civil society, private sector, fighting to fight corruption and strengthen democracy.

David Pembroke:

Not the happiest of scene setters from the Open Government Partnership CEO Sanjay Pradhan, but a reminder of the reality on the ground for many, many people.

Sanjay Pradhan:

But as you note, David, Ukraine is just the most egregious and palpable and visceral manifestation of this attack on democracy. Globally we are seeing these threats to democracy and attacks on democracy around the world. Freedom House notes that we've had 15 years of democratic decline and attacks on civic space. International IDEA notes that two-thirds of the world's population, get this, two-thirds of the world's population today live in outright non-democratic regimes or countries with democratic backsliding. From Russia to Hungary to Tanzania and beyond, we have seen elected leaders attack civil society, attack media, attack oversight institutions.

David Pembroke:

Sanjay Pradhan, and he'll be back later with some more hopeful words about digital technology and the way it can be used to fight back. But as I said at the start of this episode, it is a look back at the year from up high, and you can't get much more elevated than the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the OECD. It's been looking at the fundamental issue of citizen trust in government. Carlotta Alfonsi told me how it's become an increasingly important part of the work at the OECD.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

I think misinformation is perhaps one of the most important manifestation of how the information ecosystem has shifted and transformed. This is what makes this work all the more urgent. We're not talking about the same communication function that we had in our hands even five years ago. There is also the question of trust. At the OECD this is an important part of our work. We have a team of colleagues who focus entirely on measuring and understanding this really dynamic and complex area.

But from the data we know that there's prevalently low levels of trust across OECD countries. The latest figure was 51%, the figure of citizens who trust their government. But hand-in-hand with this, you have also a crisis of trust in information, and multiple surveys and statistics from the Reuters Institute, from Edelman Trust Barometer, they reiterate this point that people are finding it harder and harder to find sources of information that they trust. They tend to gravitate towards their inner circles: family, friends, trusted figures, often now influencers or public figures that tend to align with people's views and realities. All of this means that there's a clear dynamic between the transformational ecosystem, the work of government and the resilience of democracy. Communication is a very important part of it, and it requires an urgent focus, which is why we're embarking on this work.

David Pembroke:

This work, as Carlotta put it, is the OECD's report on public sector communication where she's been working alongside Karin Badr.

Karin Badr:

We're the open government unit of the OCED's Public Governance Directorate. We work on ensuring that citizens are at the heart of policymaking. This is because when you do this, you have improved policies and services and you have greater trust in government.

David Pembroke:

So what did their report find? Well, wasn't always pretty reading for a government comms professional,

Karin Badr:

The findings tell us that there is really an urgent need to review the mandate of public communication to really set a more ambitious role for this key government function, a role that really lives up to the potential of public communication. This needs to go hand-in-hand with all of the things that you've mentioned: building the necessary capacity, advanced skills, empowering communicators, setting the adequate mandates, building communication based on evidence and data. This is really what will allow communication to fulfil its role and to create impact.

David Pembroke:

So impact. There it is. It is just so, so important. A fabulous message or campaign that isn't heard or seen or even noticed is worthless. There seems to be a lot of that about. Here's Carlotta again.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

We found it quite interesting that two-fifths of the respondents to the survey, for example, don't coordinate on the communication strategies, but all of them coordinate on media announcements. This is interesting because media is now not necessarily the main aspect of communication. The press offices have that role, but there's a vast trove of other areas that require closer coordination between governments.

Citizens actually look at the government as unitary. They don't understand or necessarily care about the silos of the internal bureaucracy of government. When they see disjointed or not coordinated messages coming their way, it can create confusion and it can actually undermine the efficacy of each of the communication of different ministries that might on their own be quite well crafted and effective. I think COVID-19 provided a very good demonstration of the need for coordination and most of all of cohesive communication.

David Pembroke:

Cohesive communication. I like that. I haven't heard it before, but I really like this idea of cohesion in communication. Of course, government needs to be coherent. It needs to stick together both internally and externally. It needs to connect and support the people it's there to serve. That's the view of Professor Jodie Conduit, who's a part of the University of Adelaide's research project, Collective Engagement for a Social Purpose.

Jodie Conduit:

I think government plays a really important role, and I think one of its primary role is a facilitating one. Governments are often in the position to be able to bring these groups together in the first place and to really be able to not just even financially, but give people the support to enact change.

David Pembroke:

So much of that change is anchored by technology, the never ending story of the digital world. It was Patrick Kidd of the Digital Skills Organisation who had the facts at his fingertips about what the challenge looks like.

Patrick Kidd:

The fact that the nature of work is changing, technology is being used across all jobs. Nine out of 10 jobs will need people who are digitally literate in the next three years. What we have now is a massive gap in terms of people who've got the digital literacy, so the ability to be able to interact in the world that we currently have, but also to continue to learn as they go forward so that they can maintain that literacy, improve upon it. The significance of that is massive for companies, for small businesses.

David Pembroke:

And for government. How do we take the fear factor out of this brave but not so new world of digital to get the best results? Patrick Kidd thinks a bit of humanity will go a long way.

Patrick Kidd:

We spend a lot of time trying to, I think sometimes seek perfection rather than actually identifying what are the highest priority needs and then really getting after those high priority needs. A classic example is [inaudible 00:10:25]. This is almost like is language and awareness. We tend to find that lots of people are automatically not enamoured by the idea of a digital career, not enamoured by the idea of accruing digital skills. That's so often because of the language that we use, which is impenetrable and tends to talk technology that nobody really understands. How do we actually move away from using this complex language to talking really simple language?

David Pembroke:

So, when we do have a better handle on technology, what do we do with it? Well, back to my conversation with Jodie Conduit from the Collective Engagement for a Social Purpose Project.

Jodie Conduit:

Big question. I think digital transformation-

David Pembroke:

I'd like the answer please because I have got no idea. It is so fascinating I find. I was talking to somebody about this over the weekend and the role of TikTok as an influence. Go back 12 months ago, you'd never have picked that it would've arrived where it is to have the role that it plays now in terms of the impact, and that's just 12 months ago. That's just one platform that's been able to establish itself and therefore have a big influence on behaviour and other things. I'd be really fascinated to know how do you build that sort of adaptability into your thinking and into your analysis knowing that the change is going to be ever present?

Jodie Conduit:

I mean, there's many aspects to this, but one aspect I think is the ability to build those social connections among like-minded people. If we are looking at driving social change, as we've said, having one individual trying to make a difference in their own community, you could often feel like you were a lone voice or a lone soldier. As you said, platforms like, whether it be TikTok or whether that be Instagram or Snapchat, it's allowing you to connect in with groups of people that are geographically dispersed to tackle some of these problems. It also therefore allows us to have greater reach among those people with our communications as well. But there's also other aspects where we can also be looking at getting real-time data around peoples' actual behaviours. If we're looking to drive behaviour change, the critical aspect is actually understanding those behaviours, and a lot of the technology that we have now helps us to understand that in much more detail.

David Pembroke:

In TV's Mad Men, it's lead character, ad man and ace communicator. Don Draper said, "Change is neither good or bad, it simply is." At Griffith University's Change 2022 Conference, Professor Sharyn Rundle-Thiele pondered the opportunity about what exactly this change brings.

Sharyn Rundle-Thiele:

I think the aspect of change that's quite unique is how it's fusing together the driving of outcome change with the processes and the techniques and the people that actually do it. It's basically about creating a bigger tent because it's not just one person from one field and one background coming to the table. Change is a bit of a unique thing when we stop and think about it because it actually means that we have to do something different that we weren't doing before. Navigating through that with people who are a bit fearful and don't want to take risks and don't really want to jump into the deep end because they're scared, they don't want to have an impact on their own career. I mean, there's so much people and politics to overcome in order to drive that change forward and create an environment that supports people to do something different, fail fast and quick and come back and do more to actually really start to see the positive outcomes that they're really wanting to actually see.

David Pembroke:

Professor Sharyn Rundle-Thiele, who is hopeful about change. There's no doubt digital is front and centre as we look ahead. Sanjay Pradhan from the Open Government Partnership believes digital will deliver in the right circumstances.

Sanjay Pradhan:

Digital technology has been a huge enabler for opening government because it allows government to get closer to citizens and for citizens to directly engage with government. The flip side is that we are also now seeing the insidious impact of digital technology as well. There's a negative impact on disinformation and so on.

David Pembroke:

What do you see as the role of government communications in advancing open government and democracy?

Sanjay Pradhan:

It's not just explaining, government explaining to citizens. There should be a real reform where citizens feel that government is transparent, inclusive, and participatory and accountable, and that they have a voice and a role in shaping government. First and foremost, the role of government communications is so important in this because these end up sounding like abstract buzzwords. The role of government communications is so important in conveying actual stories, stories that touch and impact the lives of citizens.

David Pembroke:

Those stories, they must inform, they must advise, and indeed, when required, provide comfort in this time of change. It's certainly a very big topic, and thank you very much to all of our guests in today's episode who have really shaped that 30,000 foot view on just exactly where the communication function in government is going. Where it's headed is really into a far more strategic and priority position for government as we start to think about solving so many of the great challenges that face us as a community and how we are going to use the wonderful power of digital technology to reach, to connect, and to engage with citizens and stakeholders.

Because as Sanjay Pradhan outlined, it is not just about explaining, it's also about listening and being able to open two-way communication so we can better understand from the people who are most affected by these challenges and by our policy solutions so we can create more robust trust in the community, but also equality, inclusion and all of the other important elements that we need to continue to work on to strengthen communities and improve the well-being of citizens, not just here in Australia but around the world.

That's it for this episode of GovComms: The View from Up High. Of course, you can go back into the archives and play individual podcasts, and I would recommend that you do do that because we've had so many wonderful guests this year sharing their knowledge, their skills, and their attitudes with us. Really the purpose of the podcast is to help people to become more effective in their role working in communication inside government, whether it's in a central communications team or a programme area or a regulatory agency. We all have to improve our communication and there's just so much great content through 2022 and even further back that will help you to become a more effective communication in a government and public sector context.

In terms of this compilation episode, the challenge of repurposing good content, well, that never grows old. I'd also recommend that for many of you who are looking to find content to connect with your audiences, don't ever walk past some of those great archive material that you've got. Get it out, get it maybe repurposed in some way and get it moving because maybe on the first time round it wasn't seen by audiences. But if you repurpose, repackage and reconnect it with that audience, it may be found this time. There's always something to talk about and there is always something to act upon.

My name's David Pembroke and join me very soon for more GovComms. A big thanks to our show runner, Olivia Casamento, to the clip whisperer and script editor Andrew Bell and of course our technical director, Ben Curry, who has once again made it all happen. To you, the audience, thank you so much for coming back. We have grown the audience this year by over 400%, so that tells you something that there is a real appetite. So stay tuned for more GovComms in 2023. But for the moment, it's bye for now.

Outro:

You've been listening to the GovComms Podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to rate and subscribe to stay up to date with our latest episodes.