



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

EPISODE #133

THE ART OF ACCESSIBLE CONTENT

TRANSCRIPT

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Deborah Rice:

So there are so many opportunities to make sure that every element of what we do is actually usable and accessible. And I don't mean just accessible in terms of being able to be accessed by screen readers and that sort of thing, but accessed and understood by the general public generally is a challenge. And I don't think you can do that really effectively if you're just siloed. And that's one of the beauties of eSafety that we do work across V teams, virtual teams.

Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now here is your host David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone and welcome once again to GovComms, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. My guest today is Deborah Rice, the manager of content strategy and publishing with Australia's eSafety Commissioner, which is the world's first government online safety regulator, and an organisation that is joined by many organisations around the world trying to address the challenges of online harms. The impact of online technology has certainly accelerated through COVID, but while providing many benefits, it has also created many serious societal challenges.

David Pembroke:

Deborah and her team at the eSafety Commissioner, they have a unique culture in that it's a government agency with the energy and pace of a startup. And Deborah leads a team who apply design thinking and behavioural insights into their work to work alongside their functional colleagues who are eSafety subject matter experts to create relevant and customer centred content. The job calls for accuracy and speed. And it is certainly a particularly challenging environment where the virtual is real, the risks are high and often there is no precedent for the advice that they give. Now, it won't surprise any of you to know that Deborah Rice was once a journalist with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, because I'm sure it is many of those journalism skills from her days working for the ABC that she now applies to telling the story of the eSafety Commissioner. And she joins me now. Deborah, welcome to GovComms.

Deborah Rice:

Thanks for having me.

David Pembroke:

So how useful is that experience that you had as an ABC reporter in thinking, acting and delivering the story of the eSafety Commissioner?

Deborah Rice:

Oh, absolutely pretty cool, I would say. I came through 1989, I joined ABC radio, rural radio. And so I came through that environment where you had to be able to do everything yourself, especially if you were working in the regions. You had to be able to set up an outside broadcast. You had to be able to do the interviews, do the writing, the whole lot. And then moving back and forth between Western Australia and New South Wales, mainly. Eventually I became a TV news journo. And of course that takes a lot of thinking on your feet. And once we went into the 24/7 news cycle where you can actually be doing a live cross on television, radio as well at the same time and trying to summarise facts in a way that is balanced, but also accurate. I think there's no better experience than working in television news for being able to tell a story concisely.

David Pembroke:

So with that, and with that time with the ABC, because you did spend quite a few years working there at the ABC, what were the things that you learned that you need in good storytelling? What are the things that are absolutely fundamental if you're going to explain something to an audience?

Deborah Rice:

Relevance to that audience, absolutely critical. Of course, you need your hook at the top and you need to think, well, if people hear nothing but this will it draw them on? So there's the architecture of a story is quite important. Very similar to, I guess, the old days of print where you could actually just rip off the bottom of a story. It's the same with a TV news story or a radio news story for that matter, you can take an early out on everything. So your critical information needs to be high.

Deborah Rice:

But also you have to tell the human story as well in order to engage people. One of the things that I always found challenging as a journalist is that you spend a lot of time, a news journalist, at least, you spend a time, a lot of time looking for the conflict, the controversy, the negative in things. And so you can become quite jaded with that as well. And trying to maintain a sense of why you're doing what you're doing, I think is important, especially coming from an organisation like the ABC, whether there is a lot of sense of being there for the public good as well.

David Pembroke:

But it's similar to the mission that you have today in many ways, isn't it? Because you are serving the public looking to tell the story of the eSafety Commissioner and everything that goes into it because it is a huge story. It's a growing story. It's a complex story. So tell us that journey from ABC TV, radio reporter to telling the story of the world's first online safety regulator.

Deborah Rice:

Well, I have to say, I didn't have an unbroken tenure with the ABC from 1989. I spent some time outside as well, working for the commercials as a freelance, working on non-use programmes. Worked for the Commonwealth Bank internal media unit at one stage. So I had a bit of that experience of bureaucracy and trying to get a million different approvals before you actually put anything to air. And I was putting things to air because we were working on CBA TV, which was narrow casting to 30,000 staff every morning. So when I rejoined the ABC and had young children, it was a good flexible employer. And when I got to the stage where my kids were old enough, I was looking for what the next step would be. And I had great fortune of doing some shifts on the online desk.

Deborah Rice:

So subbing and putting into the content management system, the stories that were going up online. And I really fell in love with that. I decided to do some more training myself. At the time I was pulling back my hours with the ABC, only working as a radio news reader on weekends, as I was building up my own communications business, working for not-for-profits, but really looking at content strategy and website strategy and how you communicate the important messages to people without putting up too many barriers with difficult language and so on. I'd sat on the ABC's language committee for a little while as well, so that informed that too.

David Pembroke:

And in terms then of what you do today, take us into the life of the content strategist for the eSafety Commissioner. What does a typical day look like for you?

Deborah Rice:

Well, I guess I have to explain the environment a little bit more. I initially joined three years ago as the communications and marketing manager. At that stage, there were 80 of us working for eSafety. Now there are around 220, might be a bit more. 220. Our roles have evolved. The volume of material that we are dealing with has escalated massively, because of COVID, because of other things prior to that, like the terrorist attack in New Zealand, which was live streamed on social media. So we've gradually got more powers and we've scaled up. So it's been quite a challenge to scale up. And one of the things is communications and marketing manager, there was never enough time to do everything, through from the social media to the blog post all the way through.

Deborah Rice:

So we decided to split the roles and I have owned effectively the website content and work very closely with the designers on that. I actually sit in the digital and technology team. So I'm not even in the comms and marketing team. I think of myself really as the interface, and my team as the interface between the communicators and tech. So I work very

closely with the people who are doing the coding, who are doing the development, who are actually looking at the UX and creating design and so on. So it is a really interesting position to be in because it's a little bit non-traditional to have that split.

David Pembroke:

It is. And there are people in those roles, and there are people with your skills who obviously clearly sitting in the communications areas. What do you see as the benefits of you having the skill set and the experience that you do sitting amongst the technologists?

Deborah Rice:

Well, I've always been the Jack all trades, I think from that very beginning, that training with the ABC where you do pitch in, do everything sort of thing. And if I was being cruel to myself, I might say, I've got a short attention span. But I think it's more that I'm really interested in a lot of different things and bridging those gaps and being able to bring people from various teams together with the one idea of communicating well to audiences in the way that is going to work for those audiences, means actually tapping into a lot of different sorts of skills. And I think as communicators, we can assume we're the ones who know best, but we also need to speak to the people who are at the cold face doing the training. And by the same token, the people who are doing the coding for the forms for the people who are going to report abuse of what their journey is going to be through those.

Deborah Rice:

So there are so many opportunities to make sure that every element of what we do is actually usable and accessible. And I don't mean just accessible in terms of being able to be accessed by screen readers and that sort of thing, but accessed and understood by the general public generally is a challenge. And I don't think you can do that really effectively if you're just siloed. And so that's one of the beauties of eSafety, that we do work across V teams, virtual teams.

David Pembroke:

So with that, that's a fascinating insight really into modern best practise where you have the subject matter expert with the technologist, with the storyteller. So everyone's sitting together. Can you just explain how do you make those cross functional teams work and work effectively?

Deborah Rice:

All right. Well, what we realised a couple of years ago is that, of course, for the subject matter experts, what they're doing often is they're writing resources that might go on the website for instance. And like every organisation, we had grown a little bit siloed depending which funding bucket someone was being funded from. And so it meant that we'd develop some different messaging across the different arms of what came to be eSafety as it is now. So it's been very much my role to make sure that the people say in the education and training team are messaging things consistently with what's coming out of the investigations branch. So what we did, and also to prioritise what should be the next thing that gets the love and attention from the production and the promotion side of things.

Deborah Rice:

Because as you can imagine, we've got lots of creative people. We've got lots of opportunities to get out material to lots of audiences. And so we have to pick which one in which order to do. We'd love to do it all, but we are gradually in constant this process improvement that we go through.

Deborah Rice:

So what we did is brought together an office wide meeting where we actually look at the content production and design schedule. So we could ensure that everyone in the office knew what we were putting out. And there's also a column there for the marketing team and a column there for the media and communications team. So they've got line of sight right from the beginning on a resource. I think it's been that attitude until a few years ago, that what you did was you developed a report. Say for instance, you might have developed it as a print report, and it's just a downloadable PDF. There, your job's done, that's it.

Deborah Rice:

But now we make sure that everyone from the very beginning, the inception of those, is thinking about, okay, once it gets onto the website, how should it be promoted through the website? How are people going to find it on the website? What promotion do we need in terms of social media, in terms of EDMS, in terms of the media that might be applicable to that, is it large scale enough to justify that? Is it worth a speech by the Commissioner? So that's been a really valuable exercise for everyone because we can all see what everyone else is doing in the different teams and understand how it comes together and why it comes together.

Deborah Rice:

And we also get the feedback then, in other cross-functional meetings where the investigators tell us what sorts of experiences people are reporting who've been abused, or where the domestic and family violence team tell us what domestic and family violence support workers are finding, or the education team tells us what feedback they got from the latest parent webinar or the latest school webinar about what words are being used out there about these things that are being created as we're actually creating the resources about them as well. So we're doing that. As the commissioner says, we're building the plan as we're flying it very much.

David Pembroke:

Well, it's very true. As you say, you go back to the growth that you're talking about, where you were saying, I think you said you started at 80 and you're now at 220. Well, probably by the end of this podcast, you might be a few more.

Deborah Rice:

That's right. Definitely.

David Pembroke:

But the new powers recently given to you, the ongoing conversations that are happening overseas in pretty much every Western democracy about just exactly how these matters are issued or dealt with. It, to me, is fascinating to observe it from the outside and try to imagine just exactly how you are gripping that up. And so that's a wonderful insight to know that's the way you're doing it. You're bringing everyone together. You're getting all of those insights at the earliest possible time and bringing everyone's expertise to the table. So everyone can say... Go on, sorry.

Deborah Rice:

We had that future scanning as well to see what is the next thing that's coming along. How are haptic suit's going to impact, can you be abused in a virtual world? Well, yes, you can. You can be psychologically damaged. So it's taking us into the realm of really high tech, a lot of the time. And there's no playbook for it. It hasn't been written before. In fact, during COVID the United Nations and the CDC in the United States were turning to us for resources, because it hadn't been written before. We are the first creators of this. And so that is really exciting to think about how we explain it and how we make sure that people can access it as well.

David Pembroke:

How do you avoid, as you grow, the silos coming back in, when it's at that manageable size and you can grow and it can still sort of come together? Is it technology that's helping you to maintain this best practise?

Deborah Rice:

Well, there's definitely that. But technology can be a curse, can't it as well, because you can't turn off then. And there's always only so much information you can process as a worker in this environment, as well as someone who is an everyday person experiencing the information overload, where there is just so much new material, new research that we are doing ourselves, that we are looking from elsewhere as well.

Deborah Rice:

I think one of the challenges is to be able to stop and take the time to actually think about the implications of something. You can rush out new material, where you're making assumptions about what might be the risks or what might be the impacts, but to actually take the time to tease that out and think, and to acknowledge that there are some real positives in things as well. End to end encryption for instance, protects privacy at some levels, at a lot of levels, for banking and finance industry and that sort of thing.

Deborah Rice:

But it's also the way in which paedophiles can share images of children being abused. So we have to look very holistically at everything that we approach. And the editing for that reason with my team, I call it interrogative editing. So we are fact checking, but we are really thinking about how this applies to the person who's reading it or could apply. And that comes down to things as simple as choice of language. For instance, in this environment, we often talk about grooming. Now grooming to a child could mean getting your hair ready for a selfie. We mean it as grooming by sexual predators. And so we have to really unpack that. For young children, for instance, you can't assume they know what it means to be online. You have to explain that means connected to the internet from a device that allows them to be contacted by other people and to contact people outside their own homes and family networks.

Deborah Rice:

And also because we're dealing with low literacy, a lot of the time as well too. A lot of those things that you use as a communicator to make content warm and friendly and snackable can actually be problematic for low literacy audiences where there's ambiguity or where you are using idioms that might make it very familiar to a large part of your audience, but might actually exclude and in fact, misinform other people within your audience.

David Pembroke:

So what frameworks do you use to help make some of those judgements?

Deborah Rice:

Well, again, it's one of the things where we've been having to set up those frameworks ourselves. As the Online Safety Act was being implemented over the six months leading up to the 23rd of January when we brought in a whole lot of new, well, not powers, but protections, we like to call them rather than powers. It's not a Jack Boots thing. We set up between the comms team, the content team, the marketing team, and some of our subject matter experts, also those who were looking at higher level strategy within the executive and so on. We set up a V team. And so we came together effectively as a community of practise each week. And we teased out some of the things that we're finding to be roadblocks. Do we say it this way or should we say it that way? Informed by some market research at different points and our own research generally.

Deborah Rice:

Of course, it'd be fantastic to be able to do market research on every little thing. But if you are writing a whole lot of new legislation, or in our case, writing and editing the regulatory guidance for that legislation, I can tell you, you're still doing that the night before it was published. As many people in our organisations would know, you are always working to pretty tight deadlines when you... And also what was that, there are so many quotes about brevity, aren't there, that you've got to take a long time to be brief about things and concise and accurate. But then of course, you're talking about digital technology. You're also informed by the data on your website, on your social media, on your EDMS, what people are engaging with. So it's a matter of listening as much as possible, but at times being able to lock down and stop listening because of the volume.

David Pembroke:

That's great advice. I think that baking in the time for reflection I think is really important because it is so busy now, there's so much to do, there's never enough time. I don't think you could ever come across anybody who says they've got plenty of time to do what they need to do.

Deborah Rice:

That's right.

David Pembroke:

But to really take that time. And how do you plan that?

Deborah Rice:

Well, that's a challenge because when you are scaling up, you are having to do the work and recruit the people for the work or recruit the external agencies to help you with that work. And so time is very challenging and being able to set

that aside, especially when people are working very separately during COVID, where we're still not back in the office entirely, only occasionally. So what I've done is just tried to maintain a connection. So each morning we check in with each other in my team just to say, "Okay, this is what I'm working on today. This is what might be relevant to you." We have these cross team meetings. We, my editors and publishers, meet with the designers and developers regularly. We have our weekly forum where we are bringing people together about what's being, in a steering committee basically.

Deborah Rice:

And then my group itself, my team, we have a weekly workshop, and we have lately been introducing exercises, which are not related necessarily to a piece of work that we're labouring over. It might be something completely different, a creative writing exercise, or not even dealing with words. Last week, we were playing spot the difference together, which was challenging online because the person who's got hold of the cursor and you are trying to say, "No, no, the spot on that fish, on the top left hand corner next to the stripe, that's different."

Deborah Rice:

So yeah, being able to build that in is very, very challenging, especially when you've got a really dynamic group of people and dynamic leadership.

David Pembroke:

And what about the further collaborations? Because clearly the eSafety Commission and Commissioner have a roles and responsibilities. But as you mentioned, you are only 200 strong and there are a lot of other government agencies be they at the national level or at the state level that you would be working with. Can you explain how that works with outside government partners and how you bring alignment and clarity to those relationships and that storytelling?

Deborah Rice:

Yeah, well, that is challenging, of course, because first of all, you've got to define what's safety and how is that different to security and privacy? What is the territory of the Privacy Commissioner or the Information Commissioner? What is the territory of cyber report and scam watch? And there's always an overlap in those things, of course, because really as a whole digital literacy needs to take into account the three legged stool of privacy, security, safety. And really, you can't have safety without some digital literacy about privacy and security to begin with as well. But it's a space where we've had to work it out among ourselves over the past years. And we do have some. And we have had different relationships with law enforcement, with the other government departments who are our close partners, where we've been teasing out these issues and trying to define it ourselves.

Deborah Rice:

And we've got to a point where we're more confident that, okay, we can say this matter is not us, and that's where you need to go for that. This matter is us, and this is how you find that. And to also cross promote a bit as well. But of course, when you are the new player among some very long established organisations and agencies and departments, you have to be singing pretty loud to have your voice heard.

Deborah Rice:

One of the things of course for us is that because we're getting so much attention overseas because governments in other countries are coming to us and looking at the model that we've set up for regulation for prevention through education, through proactive change by elevating safety by design within startups, for instance. All these things have made it, I guess, have validated that what we are doing is something that is important to every single stakeholder. So it should be important to every single department and agency because there's no distinction between what is online and what is real life anymore. We don't use in real life on our website because real life is working online, is studying online, especially since COVID, is socialising online, is meeting your partner online. Online is part of our real lives now.

David Pembroke:

So if you look back, say over the last couple of years, and you look over your shoulder and you look way back to when you got going and you got started, what's the single biggest thing that surprised you about what has happened in your job? This is probably the area really that's had such massive change in its context. And so you've probably been thrown from one end to the other, I imagine, on a number of occasions.

Deborah Rice:

Well, sometimes you can plan for things that you've got a ditch, of course. Like if you are planning a programme where you are putting youth and elderly people together to mentor each other, which we were doing just pre-COVID, then you can't do that once COVID comes along. But for us, it's also been the rapid evolution of legislation. Of course, being in the office on the day that Facebook was live streaming the terrorist attack in New Zealand was completely eyeopening. We had-

David Pembroke:

Can you tell us that story?

Deborah Rice:

Well, I can tell you that everyone was shocked by it and everyone was immediately thinking, okay, what are the crisis implications for us as an agency? We didn't necessarily have the language and the legislation around that, that followed. And so what is surprising then for me, was to see how that's done, how that is developed, because I had not worked within government. I'd worked sort of alongside government and I'd worked in public policy, but with NGOs. And so to see, I guess that was the most surprising thing to see how legislation is developed really rapidly and how then you need to implement legislation, which by its very nature is fairly high level, but you've got to think through the fine detail of what the standard operating procedures are on the floor for a group of investigators.

Deborah Rice:

I guess I would say that those things are less surprising and more exhilarating to think that you're there at the cutting edge as these things are changing. And it was a real privilege to be involved in thinking about how do we put in messaging about things like ISP blocking, internet service providers, geo blocking these extraordinary things. So that's at a very high level, strategic level and I'm not the legislation and the legal and policy team, but I work closely with them and find that fascinating, find that really fascinating.

David Pembroke:

So that's a question looking back. A final question to look forward as someone who has responsibility for content strategy and publishing and sitting in there as part of those cross functional teams and seeing the change in being so aware of the environment and what's working and what's not working and what's growing and what's not growing, what advice might you have to other people working in not just regulatory government, regulatory communication, but communication more broadly? What advice might you have? Because I thought your insight there before about low literacy environments is sometimes something that we don't really think enough about in our communication.

Deborah Rice:

Yeah. Yeah. And it's been fascinating doing some of the training for accessibility as well. And thinking about, like we even write easy read resources, so that's a whole different sort of literacy where you have to use pictures and simple words as well. So I guess my advice is not to be afraid of change. I actually know I'm a little bit of a change junkie, even though I always throw up my hands-

David Pembroke:

You're the right place.

Deborah Rice:

I hate change, it's terrible. Because the platforms will change. The way you get out to the audience will change. Where your house, your material will change. Will we have websites? I don't know. But the principles of speaking to people and stopping and making sure you are not assuming knowledge that others don't have, I think is a really powerful ability to have no matter what industry you are in or what you're trying to communicate. The importance of the principles of a well structured piece of information, which is clear, but concise enough that people who live very, very busy lives are likely to be engaged enough that they might come back to later to investigate more.

Deborah Rice:

So, yeah, don't be afraid of change, embrace the change and think about how exciting it might be to have yet another platform for us all to be working on.

David Pembroke:

Well, Deborah Rice, thank you so much for coming on to GovComms today. Your insight's, just fabulous. I think it's such an exciting part of society, really, and those changes those challenges. And really, I love the way that you've brought that structure and that really best practise functional structure and taking advantage of the fact that you've built a culture from the ground up and you've held onto it and that ability to be able to bring everybody together and take everyone on the journey together and being able to identify-

Deborah Rice:

Well, it doesn't always work.

David Pembroke:

Oh, no, no. Yeah, I'm sure, but at least you've got a process. You're not leaving it to luck.

Deborah Rice:

Yeah.

David Pembroke:

You're not leaving it just to happen there. Well, Deborah Rice is the manager of content strategy and publishing with Australia's eSafety Commissioner. Thank you so much for joining us on GovComms today. Another fabulous interview for the audience out there. And thank you. I think we're now in our eighth year of doing GovComms. And to you, the audience, thank you for coming back once again. Delighted that the audience it continues to grow and it continues... It's all over the world. I was only looking at some of the numbers the other day, and there's people in the Congo, there's people in Belgium, there's people everywhere who are dialling in and listening to these great stories-

Deborah Rice:

Or is that where their VPNs are?

David Pembroke:

Indeed. That could be. But again, imagine just what you've learned today in the time that you've been able to spend with Deborah Rice. Delighted that she was able to join us and delighted that you were able to come back once again. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks with another wonderful guest from the world of government communications. But for the moment, it's bye for now.

Outro:

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