



EP#180 HOW AI IS CHANGING
GOVERNMENT COMMS (AND
WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT)

WITH WAYNE ASPLAND

TRANSCRIPT

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Voice Over:

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 back to GovComms, a podcast about the practice of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin today, I'd like to first acknowledge the traditional owners of the land from where we are broadcasting today, the Ngannawal people and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and indeed recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region.

And indeed, I'd like to pay my respects to all First Nations people of the lands from where anyone listening to this podcast is joining us from today. So today, we go back once again to the topic of artificial intelligence and try to understand what does a day in the life of a government communicator look like in 2030. As AI reshapes the way that we work, create, and connect public sector communicators are really at that point where the tools are evolving so fast, but so are the expectations of leaders, teams and indeed the communities that they serve.

Today, we'll explore how communication professionals can move from delivering messages to driving strategic change. And what does AI mean for your role? What risks should be aware of and how can we stay focused on trust, alignment and impact as the world continues to change so rapidly? I'm joined today by Wayne Aspland who is an expert in public sector communication with over 20 years experience in leadership, internal and change communication. He's helped organisations with communication strategy, managing change, and building alignment through content and thought leadership.

Wayne is also a leading voice in the intersection of AI and communication, having authored five research papers and trained thousands of people in the use of generative AI. He's a passionate mentor and educator lectured in communication at Deakin University. He continues to guide and to lead so many of us in the government and public sector communication. Wayne, a big welcome back to GovComms.

Wayne Aspland:

And thanks for the very nice introduction there, David. Hi, everybody. It's great to be here again.

David Pembroke:

And so listen, episode 96, you were on with our dear friend, Zora Artis. After you'd done some really important work and still very relevant work around alignment. That's a while ago now since you put that into place. So what's happened for you from that point in time when you were focused very much on the importance of alignment in organisations?

Wayne Aspland:

As you say, it is a while ago now. We've written two papers on alignment and the second one was in 2020. Now if you think about the world in 2020 versus today, a lot's changed. There's the remote working. There's the very rapid increase we've seen in the level of change going on in organisations. And of course there's AI as well which is making such a big difference. So Zora and I are actually having some initial discussions now about dipping the toe back in the water and getting an understanding of where it's at today.

One of the good things about it is that it certainly puts strategic alignment on the map. So if you look at the Gallagher internal comms survey that they do each year, it's now the number one priority for comms people is strategic alignment. It's talked about a lot by Prosci in their change methodologies of how critical it is to change.

And there was actually an Axios report that came out just yesterday, I think, where they were actually talking about the impact of poor alignment. And leaders were saying things like they're constantly having to fight fires. They're spending too much time working on projects and not time leading. There's poor morale, missed deadlines, and all of this is stemming from poor alignment. So there's definitely this recognition of the importance of alignment, but what there does need to be is a greater level of understanding of how to address it, which is something we want to look at now. So that's something that we're starting to work on now.

David Pembroke:

Why is it so difficult for people to understand the importance of alignment and its impact on effective performance?

Wayne Aspland:

I think everyone understands it. Well, everyone who's been exposed to it. If you think about a large organisation with lots of different demands, many projects running at the same time, many teams meeting and doing things, there is this natural tendency for silos to develop. It is a very difficult job driving alignment into an organisation. One of the things I think we've come to realise is that you need to get beyond thinking about aligning an organisation and think more about aligning hundreds of teams, making sure those teams are aligned, and then together they're aligned to the organisation strategy.

So it isn't an easy thing to do by any stretch of imagination, but there's definitely... I mean, the key thing is definitely a recognition of its importance now.

David Pembroke:

Well, the two papers that I've read around alignment leadership is obviously critically important to successful alignment. What's your view at the moment in terms of that appetite that leadership has for communicating effectively to deliver the alignment that they need?

Wayne Aspland:

Yeah. It's a really interesting question because again, some research that's just come up recently is showing that there's quite a few stresses in organisations or it's suggesting this anyway. People suffering from change fatigue, but also leaders suffering from burnout. It's a difficult thing. I must confess, when we first did the research, I used to look at it and think leaders need to take more responsibility, but there also needs to be much greater levels of support for leaders. That's probably my big learning over the years is that people leaders are a vitally important part of an organisation. They have a critical role to play as team leaders. They need to be prepared and supported to do it better than they are.

David Pembroke:

Have you developed any working thesis yet around the impacts of remote work on the challenge of being able to deliver effective alignment?

Wayne Aspland:

We haven't developed any specific thesis yet. As I said, we're just beginning the work, but it is definitely going to have an impact. I mean, we've all been through remote working now, and it does tend to make it more difficult for teams to really connect, to have those water cooler conversations to that informal communication that goes on. It doesn't necessarily happen in a remote environment. So it definitely has an impact, but we haven't yet developed any thesis on it.

David Pembroke:

Well, that's going to be fascinating given particularly in government and the public sector and particularly here in Australia where particularly here in Canberra now there's, in the enterprise bargaining agreement, flexible work practices are now embedded. And so there is a huge amount of remote work taking place, and I'll be interested once the research is done as to understanding what sort of impacts that are having on productivity, but also what are some of the successful work practices that can be implemented to ensure that you do build effective performance and you do mitigate the risks of those impacts on work productivity.

But listen, another really interesting area of work that you've been focusing on has been AI. How about you take us back to the backstory around your journey into AI before we actually get into where we are today and what your advice is to people about how they need to be thinking about it to be effective in supporting government and public sector communication?

Wayne Aspland:

Sure. So if I just step back a moment to what got me into communications in the first place, I've been working in it for a bit over 20 years, and I've always had... So writing has always been a natural thing for me ever since I was very young, but I didn't know you could make a career out of it until 20 odd years ago. I started as a speechwriter actually at a company called Sensis, which is the Yellow Pages company. And I'd come out of web design firms in the dot com boom and working in those types of companies. So working in that high tech environment. I was very lucky at Sensis because I had a terrific leader and an incredible team actually. We all bonded really well.

I then went into consultancy and what happened was in about 2017... Actually I should say one other thing that as well as being a communicator, I'm also a complete nerd. So I'm just as happy trolling spreadsheets for insights as I am writing. And I'm also incredibly keen in technology. Where the specific interest in AI came in is that there were some early discussions about it in about 2017, mainly from McKinsey and the World Economic Forum. We're talking about it a bit, and I picked up on this. I wasn't the only one. There were actually a few communicators around in Australia, in UK, and in US who picked up on this.

And it just struck me as an area that communications. It had the potential to revolutionise communications, but also we as communicators, we're going to have a really big role to play, essentially holding these organisations together as AI takes hold. So I wrote this paper called The Robots Are Coming. And interestingly, it tracks quite well in that a number of the suggestions that are for comms that I made have already, they apply now. And I actually wrote in the paper about a thing called Harvey, which is this idea of everybody would have their own little AI robot who would do all sorts of amazing things for them.

What I was describing at the time, I didn't know it, of course, was agentic AI. And so we got some things right. We got a few things wrong. The big thing we got wrong was that there was this early understanding that AI was going to hit predictable work first, and that in fact, things like communications and knowledge work would come much later. But no, we're first kept off the rank as you know, since 2023. It's all gone crazy. So that was my initial entree into it was back in 2017.

David Pembroke:

When you started back 2017, you write the paper that the robots are coming. Well, the robots are here. So what is your best advice to people as they start down this path of understanding how they can use AI help them to perform more effectively and to be able to create more value?

Wayne Aspland:

How would you use generative AI to create more value? The key thing at this point is to just build a mastery of it. And the best way in my view, to do that, I've trained a fair few people now in AI, and I think the best way to do it is to learn the real basics, learn the basics of how a prompt works, learn some of the basic prompts, and then start experimenting yourself and start to think about, "Well, how can this technique that I'm doing with generative AI apply in other areas of my role? How could I use this?"

And it's this process of experimentation that actually starts to build your skill. And at the same time as you'd experiment, you keep a lookout for ideas that other people come up with. If I can give you an example, I saw something on LinkedIn just the other day. I've been fiddling with what are called custom GPT. Effectively, it's a tool you make in ChatGPT to create your own little custom applications if you like. And one of the things that popped up on LinkedIn was this idea of creating your own advisory board. So you actually tell ChatGPT, "Take on these personas of these different people and advise me on what I ask you to advise me on from the standpoint of each of these people."

So that was something I learned from LinkedIn. So it's this idea of learn the basics, experiment with them, think about how they can apply to your role and keep your eyes open for ideas. And those things will help you build that sort of mastery of AI. And that's definitely the first step.

David Pembroke:

So in terms of the tasks that you are then seeing with the people that you're training, the tasks that they're then going back to work to apply the learning that you are giving them, what specific areas are you seeing the biggest changes?

Wayne Aspland:

From a communications point of view, the really obvious one is content creation, that there are a lot of people using it to create different forms of content. Lesser amounts of involvement in research. I think research is one of the really big opportunities, but what you tend to see as you go forward, if you are training a large group of people over time, you start to see in the beginning people sort of going, "Oh, wow, I saved time doing this. This is fantastic." Or gen AI made this particular task so much easier. What starts to happen over time, people start to come to you and say, "I want you to help me with developing a prompt that is going to enable me to really streamline this particular process."

So their actual requests for help become far more sophisticated, if you like. And they start looking at things like, "Well, okay, they move from how do I write an email using gen AI?" Over time it starts to look at, "Well, how do I AI enable our crisis communication process?" Or how do I AI-enable the way we do change management?" So over time, these requests become far more specific.

David Pembroke:

Do you have any advice to people in terms of this acquisition of skills, in terms of the way that they should be applying a new mindset and new practices in order to build those skills? So perhaps is it a certain amount of time that people should be dedicating every day? Should it be a part of everything that they do? What is your best advice to people as they start down this journey of this acquisition of a new skill using these new tools?

Wayne Aspland:

So my strongest piece of advice is to actually go through this as a team, and it comes back to our leadership discussion before. If you go through this journey as a team, it means that everyone is aligned together at the same point. They're all learning the same things. They're learning the same techniques. And then as you start to get more sophisticated, you can start to do things like, "Let's brainstorm as a team what are the particular use cases that we should focus on first? What are the ones that are going to give us the highest value and how can we focus on them together?"

So it's this idea I think of experimenting, sharing, learning as a team that is probably my strongest bit of advice, and it's where again, the leader becomes so important.

David Pembroke:

And again, in terms of your exposure to these groups of people who are looking at AI and AI training, how many and what percentage would you say of people are excited and engaged and how many would you categorise as resistant?

Wayne Aspland:

Right. This is actually a really difficult question to answer. There are a lot of surveys out there that talk about this and they vary widely. There was one that came out again yesterday that showed that Australia, New Zealand, France, and UK were actually lagging the rest of the world in their sentiment towards AI and had the highest percentage of resisters of like 30% or something like that.

Typically, what I've seen in my own work is that it follows the technology adoption curve quite well in that you are going to get 16 to 20% of your workforce are going to jump on this really quickly. And so you'll get that quick win, but then you get to that point where it starts to become more difficult and you start to push into people who are less interested. This is another reason actually why teams are so important because you can get leaders to actually motivate their teams to get involved.

So the numbers tend to vary from these different surveys. At a guess, I think it's like 30, 40% of people are probably actively using it now, but that's just a guess. I could give you numbers from all sorts of different surveys, but as I say, they vary widely.

David Pembroke:

It is interesting though in government and the public sector because I know of some federal government departments where the staff aren't allowed to use-

Wayne Aspland:

That's right.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, AI because of the perceived risks around the use of AI. Do you agree that there are risks and if there are risks, what is the best way to manage those risks?

Wayne Aspland:

Right, okay. So, yes, there definitely are risks. There's security risks, there's privacy risks, there's risks of hallucination. There's a reasonable number. There was a comm survey that was done recently where a pretty reasonable number of people responded to the survey saying that they don't review gen AI outputs before they use them, which in itself is a significant risk.

So there do need to be guidelines around how people use it. I understand, and I should have made the point basically also. When I talk about that 30% of people using it, etc, it doesn't necessarily apply to government for the reason that you just said because there are a lot of government workers who aren't allowed to use it. But there are definite risks. Organisations need to focus on building some very clear guardrails around what people can and can't do with gen AI, because it's such an open book. There are so many different things you can do. There needs to be this sort of guardrail that's put in place.

Communication teams have a very important role in building these guardrails. They can bring in the view of people. They can champion the guardrails when they're built. But most critically they can make the guardrails, make sure they're clear, because these guardrails can be fairly complex if you let them. And what happens is if you don't make them really clear, people will get confused. People will be uncertain, people will make mistakes, etc. So there is a process that you need to go through to get these guardrails right, make them incredibly clear and ensure that everyone understands them.

David Pembroke:

So for people who are using AI and have adopted its usage in order to deliver outputs and impact where do you see, say, the next 12 to 18 months going? Are we going to see another big jump or are we going to just see an incremental improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of ChatGPT and the other LLMs?

Wayne Aspland:

I don't think there'll be anything incremental about it to be honest with you. It is very hard keeping up with the change at the moment. The amount of changes that are coming through the new features, the new capabilities are extraordinary. So it's a constant job to look at, "Well, what are these tools capable of now, which ones work better than the other? And what does that mean for me? How can I use them? If I could give you an example of that, ChatGPT has just come out with this ability to hold context in its images. So you can create an image of two people shaking hands in an office reception, and then you can say and then create another picture of the same two people in a room having a meeting, and it'll hold the context, the people will look the same, et cetera, et cetera.

Why do I think that's interesting? Because it starts to open up the possibility or the opportunity for all of us to be doing more visual storytelling. We can literally start creating visual stories to help us communicate ideas. And so what you've got is it's almost like this new comms capability has come out of this change in ChatGPT. Now, these changes, things like deep research, the images. They're coming pretty much monthly at the moment and there's no sign of them slowing down. We'll see things like I mentioned before, agentic AI, and there is a lot of talk about when that'll come in.

Basically, what that will do, it'll give you the capability to... The easiest way the people explain it is with gen AI today, if you want to go away on a holiday, you can research where to go. You can get gen AI to create an itinerary for you, et cetera, et cetera. With the agentic AI, you can then get the AI to actually negotiate the rates with the different vendors and then make a decision about the best holiday for you and actually do all the bookings so it can just autonomously do all of those things. That of course, is quite an amazing capability, but it also raises a whole new level of risk.

So that capability is there now. The question is how quickly does it come in there, given the risk discussions. So I can expect even in the next two years, there will be enormous change and hold onto your hats because this is the thing that it's this accelerating pace of change. It's going to be with us now and it's something we're going to need to cope with.

David Pembroke:

But at the same time though, from a content creation perspective. There's a lot of things it can't do, isn't it? In terms of how it produces and what it produces as opposed to more traditional methods of the creation of

engagement like we're having now, a conversation. It won't simply come and replace all forms of communication. It is just a significant enabler, an enhancer of that capacity, isn't it.

Wayne Aspland:

It depends a little bit on how we choose to use it. So as I mentioned before, if you've got people who are saying, "Look, I just take Gen AI outputs and use them," then what they're effectively... That's replacing a job effectively. But you are right in that they're not perfect. It is fairly easy to spot AI content, AI generated content. It doesn't meet the tone of what a professional writer would write. And so it is not there yet to be able to replicate what we do. We need to come in with our understanding of the context, with our creativity, with our empathy and we need to bring that to what we produce. That's the really critical bit.

And the thing that I always tend to say is that AI working together with people that gets the best result. Perhaps I could share an example with you. I mentioned before about deep research, and this is this capability for ChatGPT or Claude or Gemini can do it too, to really go in and deeply research something. Take 10 minutes, deeply research it, come up with lots of sources, and then develop a thesis out of it.

Now, I've started using this quite a lot as the background research for things that I write because it researches far more deeply than I'm able to. It does in 10 minutes, what would take me a couple of days, and it does a really thorough job of it. But I don't ask it to write an article. I ask it to write an outline and then I will write the article and I will bring in my perspective, etc. I'll probably change the outline a lot. It's really the research.

So it's like you can look at it and say, "Well, what does it do now that's better than me?" And there are certain things it does that are better, but hang on to the things that you do better because that's how you'll make the difference. AI can't write the same as me, and I'm going to hang on to that quite carefully. Having said all of that, it will get better over time. It'll get harder to distinguish.

David Pembroke:

So today, you mentioned the research. You mentioned the outline function, the drafting function. How else are you using it in your life as a professional?

Wayne Aspland:

If I could use a couple of examples. One is planning. So I've written a custom GPT for myself that when I get it started, it will ask me a series of questions about what is the plan you want to build today? How many people does it impact? What's it about, etc? It'll ask me all of these questions and then what it'll do in response, it will spit out effectively a change summary if you like, or a communication summary that will summarise what this particular project is all about. It'll summarise the stakeholders. It'll give me some key steps in the timeline, etc, etc.

It'll actually give me all of that very quickly. Saves me a lot of time, but again, it won't be correct because it doesn't have all my context. But the really great value about it is that the worst thing about doing a plan, be it a change plan or a comms plan is actually staring at the blank template. It's an awful feeling to be able to actually get a first draught down on paper really quickly and then build on that from there is a tremendous sort of step forward in my view. I also use it very heavily for research as I've already said. I'm using it for these advisory board type things. So I'm using it for quite a few different things.

David Pembroke:

And in terms of that custom GPT that you built, you obviously uploaded a lot of historical information and documentation and other things. So it's well-informed about you, your style, the way that you do things. So it's producing higher fidelity and better quality outputs for you because you've designed it that way.

Wayne Aspland:

That's right. And to get it to the point where I was happy with it, it did take a lot of tinkering with it. Actually custom GPTs or they call them gems in Gemini. They're actually quite easy to build, but then you've got to actually tweak them quite a bit to get them right for what you want. To be honest with you, I wouldn't release this custom GPT commercially because it suits what I do. It doesn't necessarily suit what the other people are going to do.

And also, I haven't really commercially [inaudible 00:30:46]. I wouldn't be confident giving it to other people, but I know what I need to do with any planet builds. And in that respect, that works well for me. It just saves me a step in the process that can be a very time-consuming step.

David Pembroke:

So at this point, you are obviously an enthusiast, you are an optimist, and you see the big change. And so really your best piece of advice to people is get started. If you haven't started, get started. If you've started, keep going and keep working so that you can best understand how it can help you in your particular way that you are going about your work.

Wayne Aspland:

Yes, that's the best piece of advice I could give you. I suppose the other thing I'd add to it is have fun. It's an incredibly exciting process. Like many of us these days, I do quite a bit of work at home and my wife works at home too. The amount of times I've run out to her office and gone, "Oh, come and have a look at what I just did. This is incredible." It's a lot of fun. This kind of voyage of discovery and learning new ways to do things is a really, really exciting. So have some fun with it.

David Pembroke:

Good. All right, Wayne. That's a great way to finish the conversation because I think that gets lost sometimes, doesn't it? The joy of curiosity and as you say, those moments of, "Oh wow, that's fantastic." So all the best with your continued education around and your advocacy for the use of AI in the world of communication. All the best with that coming work that you're going to be doing with Zora around alignment in this technology infused, ever-changing world that we live in because I think that certainly is going to continue to be a constant in the role of communicators and how that we can deliver that alignment so we can deliver better performance across the enterprise.

Wayne Aspland:

And if I could say the research that I've done on the impact of AI on comms, and this day in the life of a comms person in 2030, this imagination that I did, it's all available on my LinkedIn profile. So if you want to just look me up on LinkedIn, you'll be able to download it all from there, and it's readily available to have a look at.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. Well, Wayne, thank you so much for coming along today and to you, the audience, thank you. Grateful as ever for you to come along, but what a great conversation there today with Wayne. And isn't it great that people such as him who have that nerdy background, that technical background, who are also communicators, can combine the two of them to carve a path for the rest of us who perhaps maybe not so technically minded, but we can learn. And I would commend you those resources that Wayne has spoken about because I've looked at both of them.

I think that they're accessible, they're simple, they're relatable, and you'll learn something. And as Wayne said, they're freely available on LinkedIn. So make sure that you do look him up. Now, a rating or review for the

show is always appreciated because it does help us to be found. So wherever you're listening to your podcast today, doesn't take long, jump on, give us a review, and that helps us to be found. You can find all the latest information, updates, and insights from this and all the other GovComms episodes on LinkedIn at the GovComms Institute.

Again, a delight to talk to Wayne today and we look forward to bringing you another great story from the world of government and public sector communication in the next fortnight. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke and it's bye for now.

Voice Over:

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