



GovComms
PODCAST

EP#150: UK GOVERNMENT
COMMUNICATION TACTICS,
DISINFORMATION AND THE
UKRAINE WAR

WITH ALEX AIKEN

TRANSCRIPT

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David Pembroke:

Hello everyone, and welcome once again to GovComms, a podcast about communication and engagement in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke and thanks for joining me. So our From the Vault series is over and a big thanks to you, the audience, and for all the talent who stayed with us over the last four or five months as we presented you the best from our archives. And for me, the most striking insight was that the basics are the basics are the basics, and they don't change: clear planning, good objectives, strong insights about the audience. When you create content, make sure it's accessible, it's interesting, and it's in plain English. Regular engagement in multi-channels. And at the same time, make sure those channels are what's preferred by that audience. And measure, measure, measure, and evaluate. Test and learn and on you move. But it is a new day and it is a new year and it's time to fire up the afterburners as we continue our exploration of the growing importance and pressing work and need for government communicators all over the world.

But before we say goodbye to the past, I'd just like to take a moment to reflect about this GovComms Podcast. The first episode went to air on the 17th of February 2015, almost nine years ago. Originally, it was titled In Transition with the very simple purpose to start a global conversation about government communication, to share best practise and lessons learned, raise the profile of the profession, talk skills and frameworks, and ultimately to create and unite the community of government communicators all over the world. Now, since 2015, we have published 317 episodes of the programme. And can I say I look forward to the next 317 and possibly the next 317 after that because we are never going to run out of things to talk about as we collectively pursue this mission to improve the capability and the capacity of government to explain policy, programme, services and regulation.

Interestingly, the World Economic Forum's theme this year was rebuilding trust. Now, there is no more important task for government communicators as we see the reputation and effective operation of our democratic institutions systems and indeed the international rules-based order under challenge like never before, the power of AI technologies, the active and ever present threat of mis and disinformation from bad actors and the red-hot competition with everybody for a share of a person's most valuable asset, which is their time and attention. But what all that adds up to for government communicators is that we have to continue to get better at what we do. So as we kick off this next chapter of GovComms, you win no prizes for guessing our first guest for this year. It is Alex Aiken, the Executive Director of the UK Government's Communication, who today carries responsibility for security international and cabinet office communication.

And he was the head of profession in the UK from 2013 to 2021, and he has been, in my opinion, the architect and leader of the global government communications community. He and his team over the year have generously designed and shared best practise education and frameworks with communicators all over the world. They have mentored hundreds of talented individuals and they have matured the global gov comms profession. And it is fair to say that when Alex visited Canberra in May of 2017, he got a rockstar's welcome. Australia had not seen as much commotion from a visiting Englishman since the Beatles visited our shores in 1964. So please, everyone, a warm, very warm GovComms welcome to the Harry Styles of global government communication, Mr. Alex Aiken. Alex, welcome back to GovComms.

Alex Aiken:

David, that's far too generous. I'm a public servant and I'm here to serve and I love working with you and indeed with the Australian colleagues I've met in London. And that brilliant trip that you organised for me to Canberra and Sydney back in, I think it was 2017.

David Pembroke:

It was.

Alex Aiken:

So it was an absolute pleasure to be back again.

David Pembroke:

But listen, you have led the way, and I know you are a humble public servant, and I think that's part of the integrity of what you bring, but you've always been an educator and you've always been so generous and willing to share. But it has been important, hasn't it, to get the message out, to get the frameworks out, to get the processes out, to get the skills out, to really build capability in what is just a critical area of government operation.

Alex Aiken:

Yes, absolutely. You mentioned the World Forum at Davos and the report that was published by Edelman about trust. And of course that is always an important bellwether in terms of how institutions stand in the eyes of their publics. I think it was particularly interesting this year that they did some really good analysis that says if you are transparent, if you explain, if you listen to your stakeholders, if you communicate, then generally innovations, technological change, which we're all faced with, will be more accepted by the public. So again, that strengthens the message for public service communicators and others about communications, both a two-way process.

It's listening and responding, as well as speaking and working out from your audience what worries them and addressing those concerns in a age which is unfortunately fraught with a contest and challenge is so important. And reflecting on the journey from 2015, I mean, it was pre-Donald Trump, the UK was still in the European Union. We didn't have the dreadful conflict we have on the eastern part of the European continent, and perhaps China was seen as a more benign state than perhaps it's seen today. So a bit of a roller coaster since 2015 on the podcast, David.

David Pembroke:

Certainly, and lots has changed, and I really do want to dig into some of that and get to some of your observations as to what's changed, but indeed what is going to change and how people can prepare themselves to be more effective. But you also mentioned there, and I think it's a huge step forward for government communication and that is the involvement of the OECD and the open government area there at the OECD, the fact that it's now recognised that government communication is an essential practise for strengthening government. You are heavily involved in that. Would you agree with me that their involvement is important and it is helping to lift the profile of communication?

Alex Aiken:

I think their leadership is important. I think their expertise is vital. I think our involvement and transparency is the key to success. So one of the things that the OECD asked us to do was submit UK Government Communications to a, what they call a country scan. What they really mean is an audit of UK Government Communications and the report we published next month, early in February. Now, that takes a degree of courage because they will tell you things you're good at and you can say, "Well, that's lovely, isn't it?" And so on. And you bank that. But they also in their report will make some reasoned but trenchant criticisms of the way we operate, the things we could do better, how our governance operates and so on. But it's only by listening to peer review, by expert advice. And I hope that colleagues, I suspect that colleagues in Australia or

around the world have learned from this GovComms podcast, but it's only by learning and as a certain extent exposing your frailties that we can get better.

David Pembroke:

When is that going to be published?

Alex Aiken:

Well, around the 8th of February. I'm not sure how they publish it, but certainly from the UK government perspective, we strongly believe in transparency and I suspect the scan will publish. And I hope that will encourage other governments to do so. And look, that's a big example, the OECD, this club of democratic market economies publishing a report. But one of the things that we've done successfully in the UK is the capability reviews of government departments and agencies that looks at their strategy, their operations, their resourcing and the level of their skills and says, "Look, this is where you are. This is where you could be against the standards we set. Can you put together an action plan and we'll help you to improve?" And that focus on continuous improvement and peer review and challenge, the fact there is a professional government communicators is so, so important for continuing to improve our practise in a world where some of the things I'm sure we'll talk about from AI to more traditional disinformation threaten our democracies.

David Pembroke:

Before we move on from the OECD, it's also been encouraging, hasn't it, that they've now established that expert panel on public sector communication and their convening global conversations around things like climate change communication. But again, I just think the more that we can get people talking, the more we can get people engaged, the more people can learn, the more people will continuously improve.

Alex Aiken:

Yes, I would agree with that. I mean, we have very strong relationship with our Australian colleagues, but going to the OECD and talking to, for instance, to the Indonesian delegation about how they approach COVID and sharing our experience with them, and it's not just about the particular trials of the pandemic, it was also about how they do communications and far more, in a sense, community-focused and far more interactive communications, and perhaps the UK does. And we could learn from the Indonesians as we could learn from the Australians and lots of other nations.

David Pembroke:

So I think we do need to draw as much attention to the work of the OECD open government unit and the work that they're doing around communication. And indeed, again, congratulations to the UK for having the courage to say, "Okay, come in and have a look around and tell us what you think." Because there'll be so much learning I know for everybody around the world. Now, listen, you have interesting responsibilities at the moment that you're no longer the head of profession, but you still carry responsibility for security, for international, and also for cabinet office communication. So how has that changed the world and the life and the daily operations of Alex Aiken?

Alex Aiken:

So what I hoped when I stood down as head of profession in 2021, that I'd focus on international security issues. And we have a very effective operation UK Government Communication Service International, which has worked with over 50 allied states around, well, to improve their communications capability.

David Pembroke:

Did you say 50? 5-0?

Alex Aiken:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. From Fiji through to Ghana, through to Latvia where I'm going next week.

David Pembroke:

Wow, that's fabulous. Congratulations. Anyway, go on. I interrupted you.

Alex Aiken:

So that's what I wanted to focus on. The world had different ideas, and I was reflecting on what you said, David, about at the start of this podcast, about getting the basics right. And I thought, yes, that is absolutely correct. And teaching the basics and the doctrines, things like our OASIS, when countries sort of say, and we have the Americans in here in the cabinet office office yesterday talking to us about, "What is it with the UK Government Communications? Lots of people ask your advice. Why?" I said, "Well, look, I hope respectful and humble in the way that people ask us for advice. We offer it. I think that communication rules are global, but their application is always local. And you would do it differently in Jakarta and Sydney to Manchester or Berlin, but there are some global rules."

And I said, look, I think what the UK government can offer is a thing you've mentioned that absolute focus on capability. We obsess about the why communication works. So for instance, we're doing work on building an AI, well, a large language model essentially to bring together all our communication expertise capability. Second is unity. Yesterday, I chaired the group of national security communication directors and you have all the security agencies and the mainline departments, and we do genuinely work together. And third is our campaign approach. We describe that as OASIS. For colleagues who are not familiar with that, OASIS is the mnemonic that says every communications activity is essentially a campaign because it needs a clear objective.

You need to understand the audience in granular terms. You need a strategy bringing together the ends, ways, and means. Implementation is the I of OASIS. That's where poor communication usually starts and finishes. And S is for scoring. And again, you mentioned evaluation in your introduction. David, there are two types of communication in the world. There's OASIS, which is planned, executed, and evaluated, and then there's SOS communications, sending out stuff. And I guess these last 12 years I've been on a bit of a mission to turn us from SOS to OASIS.

David Pembroke:

And you're continuing also the modern operating model that you introduced there and also the new framework. PITCH is a new framework that you are working on. Can you give us a bit of background as to where that's come from and what you're thinking is about putting another mnemonic in place to help people to think very simply and clearly about the way they organise their communication?

Alex Aiken:

Yeah. Recently I had professional development conversations with the 40 members of the cabinet office communications team. And it's one of those meetings, you've got to go see your boss and he's going to say, "What do you want to achieve in your career?". Bit like going to the dentist, but I hope equally as productive. And you've got some great colleagues who really want to understand digital and what can we do to utilise AI as a force for good? How do I get on? How do I progress? What does leadership look like? And those inspiring colleagues to work with. One or two people will say, "All I ever want to do is to be a press officer." And I think that is a noble calling. I was inspired by the great late Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher's press secretary,

and his biography, 'Kill the Messenger', still has lots of messages for today, but just to aspire to be a press officer in a digital artificially intelligent disinformation threatened world will not suffice if you want to progress in your career.

So partly what drives us is a determination that we are going to remain ahead of the growth of technology, the power of communication, this global network of editors on X or on Meta or YouTube or whatever. So to summarise, we have a communication standard, and you can read these documents on the GCS website. If you Google GCS, you'll get the Glasgow Coma Scale and underneath that you'll get the UK Government Communications Service. But we have a standard, we have an operating model, the Modern Communications Operating Model, and OASIS is part of that. And there are a whole series of doctrines, our latest doctrine you can also find on the GCS website, it's called PITCH. There it is, a hard copy document. We still do hard copy documents. Look, there's a bit of communications magic I hope in the idea of PITCH because like OASIS, it's a way of say to people, "Look, think.?"

So PITCH is designed to help policy makers, ambassadors, and communicators understand the full range of tools they can deploy in international information operations. Public diplomacy, I think the Americans would call it. And it says, "Before you leap in, before you try and communicate with an audience who may not share your culture, some of your values, your beliefs and will have a different media, just think before you implement." And so PITCH stands for partners, work with local partners. I stands for insight, absolutely understand the audience. T stands for trusted voices, think in the community about who can best carry and amplify your message. C stands for content which will remain king. H stands for honesty because there is a fundamental difference between people in Australia, the UK, and many other countries that I could mention that our communications is conducted on the basis of being truth well told.

It's bound by law in the UK. It is governed by the Civil Service Code for us to be honest and objective and impartial about the facts and so on. And I think that that truth well told based on honesty is a powerful antidote to disinformation. So PITCH is a guide to communicators who work internationally say, "These are all the tools that you can deploy from the way that the UK has used cricket in Pakistan to build relationships. The support we gave to the European Political Summit when it was held in Moldova assisting the Moldovan government and tragically the lessons that we've learned from the current conflict in Ukraine.

David Pembroke:

So as we maybe just move into that, and I'm not sure how much you can share with us because obviously the UK government has been very supportive of Ukraine and we do live in this world now of really content marketing in these worlds, whether it's in Gaza, whether it's in Yemen, whether it's in the Ukraine, and the battle for the screen, the battle for people's time and attention and being able to place a story somewhere where it is going to engage with people. What have you learned from your involvement in the Ukraine contest or the war that really can help us to understand the role that communication and content plays in information warfare?

Alex Aiken:

Yeah, I think we're relearning some very old lessons, David. Have you ever been to the Acropolis in Greece?

David Pembroke:

I have not.

Alex Aiken:

No. You know what it looks like.

David Pembroke:

I know what you're you're talking about, but I've not been there.

Alex Aiken:

You should go. You should go.

David Pembroke:

It's a long way from where I am right now, but one day, Alex, I will.

Alex Aiken:

Yeah, yeah. And they don't play rugby or I think they probably do play rugby, but perhaps not.

David Pembroke:

Of course they play rugby. Everyone plays rugby.

Alex Aiken:

Yeah, yeah, that's true. That's true. So there's a brilliant book called 'Munitions of the Mind'. The name of the author escapes me, and one of the points in this book is that the Acropolis, he says, the author says, was built as a massive symbol on a hill, and they cut defence spending and they built the Acropolis to signal to potential attackers that if you come near Athens, we've got this massive fortification on the hill, so you will have a hard time to attack us and defeat us. Perhaps that was part of the purpose of the Acropolis and information warfare has always been with us from the way that armies wore red coats or blue coats to signify their intent and so on. The British government reputedly was once responsible for producing half the factual documentary output of television in Mexico. And partly what I'm telling you is a story of the International Research Department, which was a government, UK government entity that was set up to fight disinformation, fight propaganda from the Soviet Bloc after the Second World War.

It roughly operated between the mid 1950s and the early 1980s, and it produced a massive amount of information, television, radio, millions of leaflets and so on. Of course, that closed down towards the end of the Cold War and then the peace dividend and so on that flowed from that and those glorious years between over the last decade of the 20th century and early into the 21st century. But Russia, Ukraine, and the fact that we do sadly live in a more contested and volatile world has led us to rediscover a lot of these operations. So the story of the UK government's response and look, the prizes and the accolades belong to the Ukrainian people, President Zelensky, and very brave Ukrainians on the battlefield, but also their information, their communication staff who are visiting London this week. And again, we will learn from them and we respect them, which is why when they asked us to host them, we said, "Yes, absolutely."

And they'll go and talk to institutions like the BBC and digital media companies. But when it was inevitable that the Russians were set to invade, then we set up what we call the Government Information Cell. This was to bring together all the specialists that you need to deliver modern high volume communications into one place so we could have a fast, coordinated, and effective UK Government Communications response. And this meant, I talked about unity earlier, this meant working in the foreign office and the defence ministry and other agencies to bring together the data analysts, the behavioural experts, the digital communicators as well as media teams and so on onto one floor plate. And the magic happens when you get those people from different backgrounds and experiences, soldiers, diplomats, professional communicators, coming together with this ambition to support Ukraine in the information war, but also to deter disinformation.

It is interesting that we didn't see a lot of disinformation from the Russian state directed at the UK. That's partly because they know that we are a hard target because of our educated population and our independent

media, but nevertheless, we produce content and we explained the war, and I think that one of the biggest single thing I think I would illustrate through this process, the Government Information Cell, was that we moved much faster to declassify secret intelligence about what was happening and put it into public domain to shape the debate, to warn and inform than we had previously done during the Salisbury poisoning crisis 2018, when the Russian states poisoned citizens in Britain, it took us 13 days to declassify the intelligence.

We've moved from position working with some really professional people in our security agencies where we move from 13 days to a few days in very severe occasions, perhaps even a few hours done safely, but an example about government working together. And I think that Government Information Cell was really important at the start of the Ukraine War. And then that's been mainstreamed into government as a new arm of the foreign office, the Information Threats and Influence Directorate, which does what it says on the tin. It works for right information about how the democracies can work together, and it also works to counter information threats.

David Pembroke:

How big was that cell when it first was stood up in the early days of the war?

Alex Aiken:

As these things do, I mean the practicalities, David, the findings of office space, a open plan office space in a relatively secure building, the whiteboards, the computers, the digital tech, literally it was two or three people to start with. At its height, it was probably 60, but it varied over that time, depending on who we could bring in an emergency situation, a really dreadful situational 24th of February 2022, an invasion of a European state and the murder and the rape and the destruction that followed from that caused by President Putin.

David Pembroke:

So listen, just in terms then of technology and the role of artificial intelligence, obviously concerns about misinformation and disinformation, synthetic media, how are you thinking about that at the moment in terms of understanding the potential positive uses, but also the detection perhaps of fake news and other synthetic sources where people are getting a story that is not in fact true? How is in fact the UK government unpicking that problem?

Alex Aiken:

Look, I think you talked about brilliant basics, and I think that the absolutely central point is, unless you can tell your story brilliantly, you will fall victim to disinformation. On the 24th of February 2022, I listened to Boris Johnson thinking through the challenges we faced. I remember him mumbling to himself and he then said, "Hang on, I've got it. Putin must fail. That is our policy. Putin must fail." And that in a sense is a story that we told then and a story we're telling now. Boris Johnson did have a brilliantly intuitive ability to summarise the story, get Brexit done. In terms of COVID, stay at home, save lives, protect the NHS. Perhaps far more than any politician I've ever seen. So that is an example about telling your story well, but unless you are able to do that and then build an understanding of the information environment, you simply will not succeed.

In terms of directly answering your question then influenced today by the fact the FT are reporting that a synthetically created Joe Biden is apparently rigging voters in a state in the United States telling them not to vote on election. And the US legal authorities are now looking at this. There was an intervention in the recent Slovakian election in Central Europe where the leader of the liberal party was an artificial and inaccurate persona was created saying bad things. Keir Starmer, the opposition of the UK, has been a victim of this. So it's a very personal attacks as well as the general disinformation we've been used to. But the way that we are looking at artificial intelligence is to use it as a force for good. And the London Summit recently had a whole range of countries around the world looking at the threats, but also the opportunities. As the Government

Communication Service, we are seeking to bring together all the plans, the strategies, the knowledge that we have, and create a large language model where we can plug all that in.

So we can, as you can do with ChatGPT, just tap in, can have a communication plan on the economy, on social policy, on foreign policy, and it will bring up the knowledge of what's been done before, including the evaluations, what worked and what didn't work, which behavioural interventions were successful or not, and give you a flat plan. I would emphasise that once we get this model created that is a guide and a first draught of the communications that we will operate, we are really clear in terms of our doctrine and our guidance that technology can enable. But then you need the human input to assess, to verify, to add, and finally to sign off on a more general level. Of course, we use artificial intelligence in huge numbers of ways from the media assessments that we do. I suppose the change from the fact that I used to go into crisis meetings and read out what was in the newspapers and the television headlines.

Now we have really smart technology that will give us volume, tone, sentiment, and source so we understand what's going on. I mean, that's important. During the royal funeral, ministers were worried about one article in the Daily Telegraph that said the royal funeral was going terribly. I said, "Look, our analysis of social media and TikTok, for example, 13 and a half million people have watched David Beckham, the famous footballer, standing in the queue and he's praising the organisation." So you can see from that power of data, one newspaper article versus 13 million views on TikTok, what is actually shaping the public debate.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So listen, I want to be respectful of your time. I know you're very busy and the Ukrainians are here in town, and I'm sure plenty of other people in town and many more of your 40-person team looking for your time to be able to help with them. But just as you think back, you sound energised, you sound enthusiastic, you're as you always are looking practically at the challenges, opportunities. Advice, what advice do you have for young government communicators who are listening in today, understanding the context of the conversation and the various elements of it? What advice do you have to young people today, and probably even older people as well? What advice do you have for people to help them to continuously improve? What are the things that they should be focused on?

Alex Aiken:

Never stop learning. I have the responsibility, the privilege of presenting to the most senior ministers in the UK government, including the prime minister. And it's at moments like that, like every young communicator around the world in public service, but particularly in Australia and the UK, when you get that moment where you're sitting around the table and you've got to advise the chief executive, the prime minister, the cabinet minister, senior officials on a course of action, then that is when all the learning that you've done creates the muscle memory where the advice that you give is credible and evidenced and will lead to action that will improve, enhance, sometimes save people's lives. Tonight I'm going to a session organised by the Page Society, which is the group for senior communicators. It's IBM in London, and it's looking at quantum physics and artificial intelligence. So I hope that's evidence that I am never stop learning.

And another point, David, I mean thinking about modern communications, I try to express it to people in terms of, look, it's about five Vs. And this is partly inspired by President Zelensky. It is visual, it is video-driven, it is always at high volume, and that's the way you should deliver your communications, but it has to be underpinned by a vision of success. What will be different if your policy is successful and it must demonstrate the values that we hold. And I think that values, vision, volume, visual and video is a way that I use to try and frame my thinking about modern communications. If it hasn't got a picture, why are we doing it? If it's not consistent with what we are actually doing, why are we saying it? So I hope those are helpful hints and ideas, but there are lots of other good ones around there, including from the content group and on the GovComms podcast, which I listen to.

David Pembroke:

Well, indeed, indeed. And it's great because it's great conversations with people from all over the world who are really essentially trying to do the same thing, which is to better explain what's going on so people can understand, make up their own opinions about what it is that is being done or not done. But again, if we can take advantage of the technology to be able to create programmes that are supported by the five Vs, the PITCH framework, the OASIS, the government operating model. And really I do think in terms of that aspiration and inspiration to continue to learn, a great place to spend a lot of time is the GCS website. So the Government Communication Service in the UK, it's an Aladdin's cave, dare I say, for government communicators and indeed for all communicators, really, because the principles are very much applicable, whether it is rugby or whether it is public policy, certainly telling a good story is really at the essence of it all.

So listen, Alex, thank you so much for being generous with your time. Thank you for joining us straight off the top of the clock here in 2024 because as I say, we're going to keep having these conversations because it's important that we do and share insights from around the world of people who are pursuing the activity that we are. So thank you very much to you and best wishes to you, the family, and indeed all of your team and the other communicators there in the Government Communications Service who are doing such great work. And to you, the audience, thank you for coming back once again, and as I say, From the Vault's done, we are now back into it and we have plenty of high quality guests all lined up already for 2024. There is so much to do, so many stories to tell, so many interesting things that are happening.

So I do hope that you can join us every couple of weeks. Now, there is also another podcast that I'm doing, and we're coming up to a hundred episodes of that podcast, and that's really about the Australian public service and really interviewing the influencers and senior leaders inside the Australian public service about what they're trying to achieve in their work. That's called Work With Purpose. So if you'd like to go and subscribe to that, it's a great podcast as well. And it's really interesting talking to different people in different parts of government doing the fascinating work that they do in support of not only the Australian people, but our allies around the world as well. So very grateful for you coming back once again, and thank you. And if you do like the podcast, a rating or a review always helps because it does help us to be found and to be shared with other government communicators. But to Alex Aiken, a very big thanks to him, a very big thanks to you. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks. My name's David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.