



**GOVCOMMS PODCAST**

**EP#159: THE EVOLVING  
COMMUNICATION PROFESSION  
AND HUMAN-CENTRED APPROACH  
TO A.I.**

- WITH JENNIFER MUIR

TRANSCRIPT

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Jenny Muir:

The Global Alliance is the international peak body for our profession represents about 360,000 professionals, a couple of hundred country peak bodies, which are the members. A lot of our friends in Asia, they're grappling with speed. Their professions are growing so fast, they've got a hunger to move fast. We would consider ourselves a more mature profession, yet I find myself constantly energised and challenged by the speed that our friends are going across the region. And we need to lean in and catch up. Just as we did 20 years ago, learning to write press releases, learning to write speeches, learning how to build communications plans, it is a fundamental tool. It doesn't matter what level you are in your profession, be it a senior strategic advisor or a graduate, and I would say that the graduates will have a headstart on us on this one.

Voiceover:

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 about the practice of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me on the program. Today we have a returning guest. Now, we've just been discussing the fact that the GovComms Podcast used to be called In Transition, and it started way back in 2015. At that time, one of my first guests was the president of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, Jenny Muir, and she returns many years later to join us once again. And interestingly breaking news, Jenny is now on the Global Alliance board, so she is on the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management. We're going to talk to her all about that, but congratulations to Jenny.

Now, Jenny is a skilled advocate and leader with over 25 years' experience in the not-for-profit government, social impact, and civil society sectors. Throughout her career, she has done just about everything in the game of communications, both here in Australia and across Asia. She is renowned for her expertise in building and supporting collaborations and common purpose alliances by providing chief advisory and council to top level executives to government leaders, industry peak groups. And her leadership and commitment, as I say has led her to be recognised with the prestigious Public Relations Institute of Australia president's award in 2019, and she joins me from her home in Sydney. Jennifer Muir, welcome to GovComms.

Jenny Muir:

Thank you, David. Coming to you from Gadigal Land.

David Pembroke:

Yes, indeed. And I am on the Ngunnawal country here in Canberra, and I do pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging. Now, Jenny, breaking news, you have just been appointed to the global board of the Global Alliance. Now tell us that news because the last time we caught up was at a Global Alliance meeting in the back of a cab. I think we were making our way to the airport in Bali, having conversations, but congratulations on the appointment. Tell us a little bit about the Global Alliance and tell us about your role as a global board member.

Jenny Muir:

Thanks, David. I think I do remember that back at the cab in Bali, and interestingly enough, the World PR conference is returning to Bali this year in November. So there's a couple of thousand professionals from around the world that will descend on Bali in November for about four or five days. So that will be quite an extraordinary gathering. Global Alliance board for those in your audience, the Global Alliance is the international peak body for our profession. Represents about, I think last count, 360,000 professionals, but a couple of hundred country peak bodies, which are the members essentially. It has been around for two decades and has a really connected way of approaching to other organisations around the world that people may also be able to name.

I am joining the board. I've been part of the AsiaPac Regional Council that feeds into the global board for a number of years, but I will be a regional board delegate at large.

David Pembroke:

And so what sort of role or what sort of achievements are you planning on accumulating in the time that you are on the board?

Jenny Muir:

So the board are very active members. They're not just a governance board. The delegates at large, particularly for this region, very much recognises the speed in which our region is growing, both professionally and also just geopolitically, economically, and socially. When you think about the multiples of millions of human beings and citizens that are in our region, there is a growth in our profession that is very, very active. Of course, we have quite a diversity in politics, in cultures, in religions.

There's geopolitical targets, obviously, that are being bubbling away that we need to also be mindful of. But generally the region is very, very active in growing the profession. So for me, it will be about creating alliances and connecting countries, connecting communities and connecting professions. A while ago, pre-COVID, pre all of that, we did have a crack at some visa swapping so that we could create some pathways for professionals that wanted to have mentorships and grow their professional practice by coming to Australia or swapping likewise, going into Asia. That's still a goal of mind because we are a profession that needs a lot more graduates, needs a lot more people to respond to the needs of communications particularly strategically.

David Pembroke:

Yes. Well, I remember even back at that conference that we went to in Bali, you were pushing it back then.

Jenny Muir:

Yeah. So we got it to a point where we actually signed an MOU between all of the peak bodies of all of the ASEAN countries to look at having a level playing field as far as education capabilities and capacity building that was done by a lot of those ASEAN countries. They looked at all of their university credentials and all the rest of it and aligned them globally and to Australia. So that was a baseline we could look towards for any kind of professional visa scenarios, but we do need to now turn our heads to what the opportunities are in that space.

David Pembroke:

So in that role as the regional member of the Global Alliance board, and as you look into Asia, as you say, the fastest growing region in the world, what are the common issues and common opportunities and common challenges that you see that need to be addressed from the profession?

Jenny Muir:

AI and the need to balance technology versus the absolute need to have a human-centred approach to all of that. That's something that the whole profession is grappling with. Thankfully we're on the front foot on that one. There's been a lot of work done over the past five years and we won't take our eye off that. Across the region though, a lot of our friends in Asia, particularly if I think about Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, they're grappling with speed. Their professions are growing so fast, they've got a hunger to move fast.

We would consider ourselves a more mature profession yet where I find myself constantly energised and challenged by the speed that our friends are going across the region and we need to lean in and catch up into a large degree. I think also for organisations, corporate and government, there's a lot of opportunities and challenges. I think a lot of those will come from social and political issues, particularly as organisations grapple with trust and transparency, and being held to account from really a globally connected reputational standard.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Well, there's lots in that answer. So I just want to unpack it a little bit and go back to AI. And when you say that from the Global Alliance's point of view, you've been looking, managing a lot of work has gone into this over the last five years. Take me through that, this notion of human-centred, having humans involved, what work has been done and what does that look like in a practical sense in the way that it's going to influence the way people use artificial intelligence?

Jenny Muir:

Sure. So the profession globally, in the UK, in the US, there's been a lot of research and a of scanning of what are the capabilities to bring ourselves up to speed. Well, we know this. There is no communications professional who can now sit back and say, "I don't need to know that. It is going to be an essential component of your professional skillset." You need to not only have an understanding of AI and that's generic use of AI, but also very specific skills and understanding not only of the tools and what they do and how they work, but all of the protective factors that we need to now be leaning into to ensure that we are doing no harm and not just in the immediate activity that we're involved in, but long term there is an accountability and responsibility that has increased significantly. The other factor that I really, it's very important for us to appreciate and lean into is that humans are absolutely needed now more than ever to guide these tools.

And they are tools only, but when you get to a point where AI has a sentient component to it, we are going to need to have our wits about us and very strong frameworks in place and that all levels of communication professionals will need to be leaning into that as their responsibility.

David Pembroke:

What advice do you have for communications professionals from those just starting out in their career all the way through to leadership about how they can acquire the knowledge and the skills and have that attitude of openness and experimentation and curiosity such that they are able to be effective users of artificial intelligence?

Jenny Muir:

Look, I think just as we did 20 years ago, learning to write press releases, learning to write speeches, learning how to build communications plans, it is a fundamental tool. Doesn't matter what level you are in your profession, be it a senior strategic advisor or a graduate. And I would say that the graduates will have an absolute headstart on us on this one. You do need to set aside time to professionally train yourself and your teams in all of these tools.

I would just put a warning on it. As of February last year, my colleagues in the UK, some brilliant leading academics, they counted the number of AI tools that are now connected to our profession. And the count is going over 6,000 tools.

David Pembroke:

So this is anything from generating text to manipulating imagery, to generating audio...

Jenny Muir:

To data. Data management, analysis, all sorts of areas. So that count was a standing count at February last year. You can only imagine where that's gone.

David Pembroke:

Can be double, triple.

Jenny Muir:

Yeah. So it is a bit of a runaway train. I was listening to some colleagues in the US the other day and their warning was that we as human beings tend to lean into new technology when it first comes about. Mind you, AI is not that new. And we get all excited and then start having very appropriate conversations around control and management and all the rest of it. And then we tend to get really comfortable with it and forget the long-term implication that we take our eye off the ball and that's when most of the impact negative mostly happens, and we can only look to social media for that as the current scenario.

David Pembroke:

What's your view on impact and the use of artificial intelligence in the context of government and the public sector? Because interestingly, a couple of weeks ago I went to a speech that was made by the secretary of the Department of Health, a gentleman by the name of Blair Conley who's a very good operator, very smart guy, and he obviously was saying that, yes, artificial intelligence is going to play a key role.

But he made the point that it's going to be slower in terms of the adoption in government just because of the governance that sits around a lot of government information, the issues of privacy, of security, of data and those other things. And he tended to suggest that, yes, in the longer term there'll be a significant impact, but in the shorter term it's likely to have less of an impact because of the considerations. Would you agree with that?

Jenny Muir:

Look, I think that that's absolutely the nature of the beast. The tension I think that is going to be alive as that is they go about that approach is the speed in which the technology is evolving, that your audiences outside of government are on a high speed trajectory in its use, and typically it takes appropriate amounts of time to get all of those regulatory settings and safeguards in place.

That timeline is often out of sync with the speed of the thing that you're trying to regulate and control. So there's going to be a natural tension there. And there's also going to be for the strategic communication teams, a desire and need to lean into it and use to be able to connect with the audiences that they want to connect with. So there's potentially going to be an out of sync scenario.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. It's going to be fascinating because the tension that you describe is clearly going to be there, and it will be fascinating to see how that gets resolved. Now, just to that earlier answer that I wanted to unpack a little



bit more, you talked about our near neighbours here in Australia, up in Indonesia, in Malaysia, in the Philippines. You talked about them moving fast because the relative immaturity of their professions as opposed to say a more industrialised country like Australia.

But you say that they're moving fast and indeed moving faster. Is it driven by artificial intelligence or what other aspects of the development of the profession in those countries is out of sync with what you're seeing here in Australia and perhaps the US and UK?

Jenny Muir:

I think it's actually they have the benefit of not having had a, as you termed it, an industrialised kind of development. They have gone from a relatively low level kind of connection to all of this, to I think the phrase is they've almost jumped the shark in a way. And the arrival of technology and the arrival of the development of their profession through university education, the growing of their middle class from a cultural and social perspective, that has all happened rapidly over the past 15 years. So they have not burdened with, I guess the legacy of some of the things that we're going to need to also deal with.

Obviously, that comes with unique challenges as well in that they don't have as much of a platform of regulation and safety and those control mechanisms, but also we need to recognise that they have different political systems, different cultural and social systems and their values from a country perspective are different to ours. So they are leaning into opportunity, they're leaning into the growth and recognition of their countries. From a professional perspective, we've got a lot of opportunity in the way that we connect and walk alongside them.

David Pembroke:

But ultimately, the skills of the skills are the skills, aren't they? And so there would seem to be an opportunity to work with our near neighbours to assist with the development of those skills.

Jenny Muir:

Absolutely. And that's what we started about five years ago, and with the alignment of those professional capability frameworks, so they've gone ahead and done that. I mean, I remember having a conversation and meeting with them and signing the MOUs, and then within a year they'd done the work.

David Pembroke:

They'd actually gone ahead and done it?

Jenny Muir:

Yeah. They just gone ahead and changed it a bit.

David Pembroke:

That doesn't catch on.

Jenny Muir:

I know. Changed all of their university coursework and done it. And I remember reflecting, thinking, "Right."

David Pembroke:

"What do we do now? Oh, okay."

Jenny Muir:

They came back to me and said, "Right, we've done that." And I've gone, "Oh, okay."

David Pembroke:

You were doing that work or that advocacy with the Public Relations Institute of Australia, which now has a new name.

Jenny Muir:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

What do you think about the change in the name?

Jenny Muir:

Look, I am totally embracing it. It's something that we looked at when I was president. The way that the board and the CEO have gone about consulting and engaging the profession for that name change, it's been an absolute gold standard example of how to bring all your stakeholders on board. So there's been nothing but a joy in embracing our new name. It very much recognises the breadth and depth of the profession. And we're one of the oldest peak bodies as an institute where all the universities are members. So it has a very strong reputation and I think the change was great.

David Pembroke:

Where do you sit with its role and with say, the role of the International Association of Business Communicators? Can they coexist or should they collapse into the one organisation?

Jenny Muir:

Look, I think that... I remember, we all took a bit of a step back and gone, "Oh, should we all merge together? Can we all live happily in the same pond?" Yes, we can all live happily in the same pond. There are, I know, many people who are members of both. They often, I know at a global level, do things together. They align because they need to. I mean, reputationally, we need to all be on the same page as far as the way we respond to things that are going on with the profession.

There are other organisations like the Page Society that is very sort of US-centric. So I think the way the profession is represented needs to have a diversity, but also needs to have a standard, a consistency. And I think it's quite okay for everybody to have different organisations. I think also that there are very specialist areas of our profession like science and environment. I can think as an example that have a very specialised way of communicating and a very niche group of experts as an area.

And the same with government, all of your listeners, and to my experience as well is there is a very specific way in which you need to operate and function when you're working inside governments. And that often as... I mean as this podcast is an example of, needs a specialist treatment, but I think the peak bodies can represent them.

David Pembroke:

So listen, you have a long and distinguished career as a practitioner working in all sorts of roles. I think your most recent senior role was running the communications for-

Jenny Muir:

National Mental Health Commission.

David Pembroke:

... National Mental Health Commission, which was an enormous priority of the previous government here in Australia. And there was huge amounts of funding and you were working very closely with the chief executive. And again, you've done all sorts of different things as well. But interestingly, you mentioned to me just before we turned on the microphones that you've given yourself the opportunity to take a bit of a break from those sort of high octane, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, responsive, exhausting roles that you've had to actually take a bit of time to sit back and think, "Okay, I'm just going to take a pause now."

Clearly there's more to come and you don't take on a role on a global board without starting to think about what that next chapter is. But why did you feel the need and what drove the decision to take a break?

Jenny Muir:

I have basic decisions about taking care of yourself. As you said, it was a high octane role. It was on the back of 15 years of very similar roles in consulting with very, very serious social issues that do have a cumulative effect on your own psyche and your own just physical being. But it was also a recognition that continuous professional learning is the lifeblood of what we do. If you're not able to stop and learn from others to pivot and sit and really deeply take in new ideas to connect with people in other jurisdictions, other cultures, not just through the job that you're doing at the time, because that's never going to lend you the freedom and the time to really sit and listen and be objective, and analyse the ideas and the thoughts and really ruminate on them. And you don't know that you need it until you stop and you do it really. That's kind of the way it goes. So that's what I've done.

David Pembroke:

Was it a personal intervention or did you have somebody tap you on the shoulder and say, "You probably need a break?"

Jenny Muir:

Oh, it was both, but it took me a minute to go, "Hang on a second."

David Pembroke:

That's a good idea.

Jenny Muir:

Yeah, that's a really great idea. Over the past couple of days, I've been sitting in a room with some very, very smart humans and just deeply listening. And that is, I think for me, one of our former Australians of the year, senior Australians of the year. I remember being connected with one of her very amazing ideas that she promotes is Dadirri, which is an indigenous idea of deeply, deeply listening. It's a state of mind, but it's also a state of body. And I've got to say, David, it is definitely a worthwhile approach, particularly when you're trying to fill your cup back up, is to just sit and deeply listen to what experts to read all of the journal articles that you haven't been able to get, to do some of the research in the topics that you represent, instead of just skimming something and pulling it together and providing advice on the fly to really deeply go down the rabbit hole on things is definitely worthwhile.

David Pembroke:



Can you spell that out, Dadirri? Because interestingly you say that, I remember when, she's an indigenous lady, I think from Alice Springs, but I read about this Dadirri at the time, and I went and had a look, and I thought, this is actually compelling what she was talking about. And the fact that you've just mentioned it again means I'm going to go back and have another look at it.

Jenny Muir:

Yeah. It's absolutely the Dadirri, Miriam Rose.

David Pembroke:

Miriam Rose, that's right. Miriam Rose.

Jenny Muir:

The idea of Dadirri is just something that I've really embraced and I think it's... I mean, for me as we all walked through the vote last year and now are trying to find a pathway from that, our relationships with our First Nations people and even the way in which we as strategic communicators connect with and listen to the communities that we are trying to represent and walk alongside to advocate for the deep listening ideas. And we need to slow down and actually make time for that.

I wrote a note for myself for this conversation, is one of the most fundamental things I think that government strategic comms teams and engagement teams really need to build into their toolbox is how to do engagement and consultation with communities in a more meaningful way rather than in a transactional way. Particularly, if we're wanting lived experience to really co-create and partner with governments for policy reform. We can't just, "Oh, it's beautiful, but quite detrimental comment that was made to me by some elders, Northern Territory." There was like, "Oh, you can't just come here and be seagulls." And I've never forgotten it because it was quite a stark description of the way that they sometimes see government consultation.

David Pembroke:

So listen, just to the audience, I would highly recommend just Google, Miriam Rose and take a bit of time to think about, and read, and listen and sit with this concept of Dadirri. It's compelling. And I'm going to go back and do a bit of a refresher because I do remember being struck by it at the time and taking a bit of time to actually sit with it and thinking about this.

It's a wonderful gift from our First Nations people. So listen, just before you go, I do want to plug that World PR conference again for the Global Alliance up in Bali. You mentioned that's a huge number of people, a couple of thousand people over four or five days, a jamboree of communicators. Give us a bit of an outline as to what people might be able to express because they might be able to make a business case to get themselves up there to learn from colleagues from all over the world, because I'm sure there will be people from everywhere that descend on Bali.

Jenny Muir:

Well, absolutely. That's the idea. So the theme is, and this will probably help with making the business case, 'purposeful influence for the common good'.

David Pembroke:

Okay. There we go.

Jenny Muir:

It's completely aligned to government requirements and what your purpose is, your marching orders. Obviously, there will be a big representation from the region. It's the 19th to the 22nd of November in Bali. It's not very expensive in the scheme of what it is. Of course, you've got flights and bits and pieces, and we're very lucky we're close. And a ticket to that, even government rates, buying tickets and a couple of hotel nights. And you can sit within your allocated professional development budget.

David Pembroke:

There we go. Okay. So give us that before we go the website that people can get to.

Jenny Muir:

So it's easier to go through the Global Alliance landing page. So just [globalalliancepr.org](http://globalalliancepr.org).

David Pembroke:

Okay. [globalalliancepr.org](http://globalalliancepr.org). And follow your nose and you'll find the tickets. So I am going to have a look at that because I think I need a break. There's so much fun because you just run into people and you meet people in elevators and you're standing in the queue to get a coffee or you're sitting next to someone at dinner and you just learn. You just learn, and learn, and learn, and learn, and you come back and you just feel so much better about the profession and you come back energised. You never regret going to those big conferences.

Jenny Muir:

You suddenly feel part of a tribe and not lonely.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, indeed. No, it is a lot of fun. So listen, I will probably see you in Bali. Enjoy that break of yours. Don't work too hard. Don't go and see too many smart people. And you've got lots of books there behind you, and I'm sure you're burning through those.

Jenny Muir:

I do. I am. There's a pile.

David Pembroke:

We all have a pile. I've got a pile at home that I'm trying to get through slowly but surely.

Jenny Muir:

I'm doing bits and pieces for colleagues who sit in very vulnerable organisations. I'm helping them. But yes, I am burning through lots of journals and research pieces as well.

David Pembroke:

Very good. Okay. Well, we'll let you get back to that. And very grateful, Jenny, for you coming back there. So what a great guest. As I say, a return guest from way back in 2015. And Jenny has had a substantial, or made a substantial contribution to the communications profession here in Australia as a member of the Public Relations Institute of Australia for a long time or when it was called that back in the day, but has obviously gone on to now sit on the global board of the Global Alliance. So that's fantastic that she's representing Australia.

And I do remember when she was over there when we were at that conference and she was arguing for these professional capability framework. So it's wonderful to think that that work was done and has helped to start to put the foundations in place to grow the profession throughout the ASEAN region, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, for those of you who are unfamiliar with that term.

So anyway, thank you so much for coming back once again. Wonderful guest. And I know that you will take a lot away from that. And I do hope that you do take the effort to get to the World PR conference in Bali from the 19th to the 22nd of November. It's cheap. That is really, really cheap. And I'm sure with flights to Bali, that's probably doesn't cost very much either. So look forward to seeing you at that gathering and I look forward to you coming back once again. If you do have a chance and I know you do, everyone has got a little bit of time, a rating or a review, a five star review always helps the program to be found. We'll be back in another two weeks' time with another guest from the wonderful world of government communications. My name is David Pembroke, and for the moment it's bye for now.

Voiceover:

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