



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

**EP#162: NAVIGATING CRISES AND
PRE-BUNKING DISINFORMATION**

- WITH BOB JENSEN
TRANSCRIPT

Transcript

Bob Jensen:

Let's say you're going to launch a new product. Are you going to announce something that's not great? Like, oh, we've had chemical spills for years, and here's what we're going to do. You know already you can pretty much game out the kinds of disinformation that's going to happen, and you need to get ahead of that, and you need to put your narrative out first and pre-bunk expected disinformation, right? Because the science and the studies have shown that regardless of whether it's true or not, if people hear something and that's what they hear first about an issue, they tend to believe it. And then the government or their organisation, they're playing catch up, and now they have to disprove stuff even if it's not true.

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, a podcast that explores the function 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 acknowledge the Ngunawal people and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and recognise their ongoing contribution to the life of this city and region. And I'd also like to pay my respects to all First Nations people listening to this podcast today. Before we get into today's episode with Bob Jensen, who is one of the world's leading crisis communication experts, and indeed one of the world's leading government and public sector communication strategists.

This show does go a little bit longer, because as you will hear, there was just so much going on in the conversation that I really didn't want to stop because I was learning so much, and I'm sure that you will as well. So just to be clear, today's episode does go a little bit longer. It's probably about maybe 50, 55 minutes long. So anyway, it is well worth the investment of the time because Bob has a lot of insights to share with us today. So enjoy the programme.

So today we talk crisis communication with one of the world's leading practitioners. Bob Jensen is the senior managing director of Strat3. He has over four decades of experience in crisis, emergency, and disaster risk management and consults globally, including with the World Bank, the US State Department, the US Department of Defence, and he has done work in Australia for Emergency Management Victoria. Bob has held senior roles such as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs at the US Department of Homeland Security and spokesman for the White House's National Security Council. He led the US Government's on ground crisis communication efforts after the massive earthquake in Haiti in 2010, and also for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response, and also 30 plus major US disasters including Hurricane Sandy. He joins us from Washington DC. Bob, welcome to GovComms.

Bob Jensen:

Thank you very much, David. I'm really happy to be on this podcast with you. I've got a lot of friends there in Australia, so I'll give a big shout out to them. And I apologise that I'm here in my home office. Nothing spectacular, but I'm really happy to have this conversation with you.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. Well listen, before we get into the work, I'm always interested in the people. So what is the backstory? How did Bob Jensen... Where did Bob Jensen come from? And how did you end up where you are today?

Bob Jensen:

Yeah. Well, that is quite a journey. My father was US Air Force. My mother was from Japan. They met over in Japan after the war. We moved 15 times when I was growing up, so I'm very comfortable in dealing with new situations. I think that part of my life really helped me when talking about crisis and you have to be ready to be agile and flexible. Went to school for chemical engineering for three years, and then switched to industrial design. I know you say, "Oh, I see the connection." And ended up working for the US government. I started out working for the US Air Force, not in uniform, but

as a civil servant. And then I went through years of that. I ran the news for the Air Force. I had 155 staff members around the world doing TV, radio, print, and other products for the US Air Force, which really kind of got me into the whole information sphere. Because of my background, I was one of the first US Air Force civilians to deploy to a war zone at the beginning of the war against Iraq. I went on the ground in Saudi Arabia and then up into Iraq, and I was running all of our media engagement for the air component, which meant also coordinating with the Brits, and we had an Australian team there as well. And from there I was recruited by the US State Department to go on the ground at the US Embassy in Baghdad. I did that for a year as Acting Spokesman and Executive Officer. And you know what they say, if you do a good job, you get rewarded with more work, so after a year of doing that, the Pentagon recruited me to go back on the ground in Iraq for another year to fundamentally change how we were telling the story and to put a system in place. And you hear me use that term a lot, system, and move the needle to take it from where it was at that time in 2006 where all the media was saying we were losing the war and there's going to be a civil war.

And we were never losing that war. It was never pretty, but war never is, but we were never losing that war, so I had to figure out how to change that dynamic globally. I did so well there, they decided to send me to Afghanistan. And then I was recruited into FEMA, the US Federal Emergency Management Agency, and that's the group that coordinates the response to all the major disasters in the US. And from there, I was selected... After I went to Haiti and dealt with Deepwater Horizon, the White House asked me to come and work in their National Security Council as a spokesman. And then after that, I was pulled up to Department of Homeland Security headquarters to really look at kind of where we were going and how to build our system out a little bit better.

Retired in 2015, after 32 years, started a consulting firm, doing a lot of work for the World Bank, doing a lot of stuff there, as I said to you earlier, in Australia and also New Zealand. The World Bank stuff is mostly in the Middle East and Africa. I also do things for the State Department. So the State Department sends me all over the world to work with different countries, and I'll tell you right now, the number one topic I get asked about is how to counter disinformation, that is the number one topic. The number two topic is, how do we deal with AI? And so I'll just stop right there and let you ask me some questions here.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, what a career. What a career. That's outstanding. And if I could just draw on one of those threads, how did you get from industrial design to communications? I can sort of see the movement, as you said, from chemical engineering across into industrial design, but what was the pathway there into the communication function?

Bob Jensen:

Well, I'll be honest, I hated chemical engineering. I was working in research companies doing coal gasification, and I said to myself, I don't really like this. And I was in a fraternity, a lot of my fraternity brothers were architects and designers, and I was fascinated by what they're doing. And I was like, "That looks really interesting. Hey, can you make money doing that?" And they said, "Oh, of course we can." So I switched majors into industrial design, and my first job with the US Air Force was as an industrial designer designing big exhibits for the Air Force for the Paris Airshow, the London Farnborough Airshow, all the US official exhibits up in the Pentagon. So I started, and that's about communication. A lot of it... I'll be honest, a lot of it was marketing US capabilities in Europe, but it is about communication.

And then from there, I was recruited into the Air Force News Agency just to do all the communication design, including helping set up the US Air Force's first website, we were one of the first in the military to have a website, that tells you how old I am, back in the 90s. And then they kept having a vacancy for the military position for the director of news. So they kept putting me in that until finally I said, "Why don't you just make me the director of news since I'm always doing it?" So that's how I moved from industrial design over to the news and information side of things.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Now before we do get into some of those big topics, disinformation, AI, to get a clearer understanding of the system that you were talking about and the importance of systems, what are the big learnings that you've taken from your career in terms of what needs to be in place to be able to effectively communicate?

Bob Jensen:

Well, it's the same thing, whether it's for a crisis or whether it's for day-to-day things. When I'm talking about crisis management, crisis communication, inevitably my clients say, "We want you to create the best global leading crisis communication plan for us." And I'm like, "I can do that." I go, "Well, let's step back first." They always want to focus in on

the plan. I said, "Let's step back first. Let's look at your system." They're like, "Well, what do you mean?" And I said, "You can have the best plan in the world, but if your system is broken or weak, you're not going to be able to effectively implement that plan." So that's number one, I always look at the system and I have kind of a framework of what needs to belong in that system, everything from policies and programmes and processes, people. I have a thing I call the 10 Ps, and I admit that I had to work really hard to get everything to start with a P, but it is easier to remember.

And I start with that with my clients and say, "Let me look at your system and assess it because, again, I'm happy to do a crisis communication plan for you, but I want to make sure it works because if it doesn't work, you're going to blame me." And so we do that, and we inevitably find big gaps or glaring weaknesses that I say, "You have to fix this, and then let's start talking about the crisis communication plan." The second thing is, and I won't name the company there in Australia, but a company that I did a little bit of work for up in Brisbane, I went to visit them and I said, "Hey, you want me to kind of help you update your crisis plan? Can you show it to me?" And I figured they'd already have it out, but they didn't. The guy had to search around and he finally pulled it off a shelf and blew the dust off and said, "Oh, here it is."

And it was very pretty, lots of colours, lots of graphs, but I said, "Based on the fact that you didn't even know where it was, I'm not even going to ask you my normal next two questions." And he's like, "Well, what are those questions?" I said, "Did you train to this and did you exercise it?" And of course, the answer was no. Because so many companies and governments, when they do these things, they look at it as kind of a compliance thing, a tick the box, "Yep. Oh, got the crisis communication plan. We're all set," but they don't recognise that that's just the start of the journey. And if you're not training, if you're not exercising these plans, and not just with your internal team, but with any external teams that you need to be working with, it's not going to work very well.

And I know there's a lot of companies out there that love to charge a lot of money, and a lot of these PR firms hate me because I call them out on it. I said, "If you don't make it a mandatory part of this plan that it's trained to and exercise, it's not a very good plan." That's the first thing I look for.

David Pembroke:

How often do you recommend that people train and exercise to plans?

Bob Jensen:

Well, there's no one size fits all, right? It really depends on a couple of things. One, what is the organisation, and what is it doing? And number two, what are the risks and hazards that they're facing? So if you're talking about some smaller organisation that is maybe producing some things, they probably don't need to do much more training than once or twice a year maximum because they're not faced with a lot of risks. If you're talking about a state government or you're talking about something a little bit larger, that's dealing with a broad range of risks. They should be training all the time, at the very least once a month, some type of training. It doesn't have to be super glamorous. It can be simple. And the same thing with the exercises. The bigger the area, the greater the number of risks that an organisation faces, the more they should be exercising.

And the whole point of an exercise. And I'll tell you this. I had certain organisations I was with in the US government in which everyone was super worried about these exercises, and they were trying to gain the system. And I said, "Well, why are you doing this?" And they said, "Well, we want a pass." And I said, "I'm sorry, but there is no pass when you're doing an exercise." The whole point of the exercise is to identify your strengths and weaknesses, is to identify where there's gaps, is to identify if there are linkages that should be there that aren't there. It's not to pass, right? Because sometimes if you make these exercises too easy and the organisations pass and they think they're all doing great, they might not be ready for something that's catastrophic. And so again, when I advise clients, I really look at what it is that they're facing and what they're doing.

And so for many staff, their role during a crisis may not be the same as what it is day to day. And so those are especially the ones that you have to exercise. The other thing that I talk about, especially with governments is they need to have what's called a continuity of operations or coop site, meaning, hey, if something happens to their main emergency operation centre, where are you going to go to continue the operations? And so with the US government, we have multiple sites. We have different sites up here in the DC area for the White House. We've got many for FEMA. And the whole point of those is that no matter what happens, we're going to be able to keep on going. So when you have those sites, you need to go and check them out on a regular basis, turn the lights on, make sure you open the laptops, because the number one thing you'll find is, oh, if you haven't opened that laptop in a year, you're going to spend a day with just the updates.

You know what I mean? So those are the types of things that I recommend. And again, one of the things I said earlier is many organisations don't want to bring people from the outside into their exercises. Well, we don't want them to know if we can't do something. Well, that's exactly the time you want to work with people. For example, if you're a business and... You'd want to bring in the first responders to say, "Hey, can you help us out? Can you give us some better insights? And here's what we're going to do. Is that going to work?" A great example is... Remember the guy there in Sydney who they thought was a terrorist, and he went into one of the coffee shops, and then they found, because of that, that they locked everything down, but they had no system to tell people what was going on or when the lockdown was over.

That was a big finding that they had, and because they had never really exercised that with the private sector, and the private sector, hadn't asked the first responders, "What should we do?" And that was a big deal. I remember, I reached out to the government of Australia to say, "Are you calling this a terrorist act? Are you calling it something else?" Because we didn't want to, as America, put out a statement saying, "We condemned the terrorist act." And then I'm glad I reached out because the government of Australia was not calling it as terrorist act. And so it would've been really, put a lot of different pressure on the government of Australia if we had said something differently, for example.

David Pembroke:

What do you say to people who would often, and we hear it a lot on the podcast, that people are busy, there's so much to do, and things like training, things like exercises, they take time that people feel that they don't have. What's your advice to people when they may be making a case to their leadership that they do need to have time to do this? What are some of the arguments that they could put forward?

Bob Jensen:

Well, number one is if your organisation is not ready to handle a crisis, and you say, "Oh, it takes too much time. It's going to cost money," would you rather spend that as kind of an insurance policy and have the understanding and knowing that your team is going to be ready, or would you gamble the entire future of your organisation? Right? And that's what can happen. And this is something I say, especially to businesses. Governments are... Overall, they get it. They know they have to do these kinds of things, and they don't have the same profit driven motives as businesses. But for businesses, I say, your problem is that all of your senior management and your management, you assume that tomorrow is going to be like today. And so hey, you've got... And a lot of them also tell me, "Oh, we've got a business continuity plan."

I'm like, "That's great." That's great for small things, but if you have something major and catastrophic, that business continuity plan is not going to help you. Or what if you have a reputational challenge, your CEO is caught embezzling or in bed with someone they shouldn't be? There's no business process to fix, and so you're not ready for those kind of crises. And again, if you keep thinking, tomorrow will be like today, everything kind of goes long until it's not, and then you're really going to be struggling. I can't tell you how many groups have reached out to me and said, "Oh my God, we're in the middle of this crisis. Can you help?" I'm like, "Kind of late. I can charge you a lot of money, but you're already going down the road to ruin because they just weren't ready." And I don't do things just for money. And a lot of those, I'm like, "You're beyond help." So, I know a lot of my PR buddies are like, "Oh, I would've gone. I would've charged them 10 times as much." Well, whatever. Yeah.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So listen with that and those elements of crises, and obviously the importance of training and exercise, but what are some of the other characteristics that people should be thinking about as they're starting to assemble the various elements that they will require to be effective in a crisis?

Bob Jensen:

Well, let's look at emergency management as an example.

David Pembroke:

Okay.

Bob Jensen:

Let's say you're looking at this. And this is the same for the private sector as it is for the public sector, although there's a little bit different in terms of who's responsible for what. The number one thing, as I've said, again, you have to have some kind of a framework, right? You have to have a system in place. And so most governments have a really good

system. For example, there in Australia, you use a system called AIMS, which is Australian Incident Management System, which is similar to, or based on the US system called NIMS, National Incident Management System. The Kiwis use a similar one as well, but the reason that is very important is that it kind of lays out a framework for how Australia deals with disasters. The second thing is, you have to look at the disaster cycle.

And the problem is, for many places, especially like the countries I deal with in the Middle East and Africa, many times they're so focused on the response, and yet they don't realise that there's a whole cycle and it starts with preparedness and it goes to prevention and mitigation, and then it goes to response, and then it goes to recovery and reconstruction. So there's this cycle, right? And they always want to focus on the response. We had that problem in America where our firefighters, they always wanted... We want more trucks. We want bigger fire trucks with taller ladders, better equipment. And even though they were getting this, and they were really well-trained, the problem that they saw is year upon year, the number of fires happening in America just kept going higher for a lot of different reasons, not least of which as cities expanded, there's a lot of challenges there.

And finally, a bunch of smart people in the fire administration got together and said, "We don't seem to be really addressing the issue here." And then they realised that their issue was they were focused on the wrong thing. They were focused on the response and doing better and better and putting out fires. They said, "Well, we should not be just focused on putting out the fires." Yes, you have to have that, but really, it should be focused on preventing fires, right? So they said, "That's our business. Our business should be to prevent fires. And so they completely changed how they did business. They started doing a lot more education going around houses saying, "Hey, you need to put a smoke detector up here." You've got too many plugs happening in here. We're going to help you with the safety. And so by focusing on prevention versus focusing on response, the number of fires in America went down dramatically because they were looking at the cause of what was causing those fires, right? And that's what's happening globally. That's the global trend right now in emergency management.

So we're moving away from focusing on, how do we respond to a disaster? And in fact, there's a UN agency called UNDRR, which is the United Nations Agency for Office of Disaster Risk Reduction. So we're looking at reducing risk, not just responding to risk and responding to disasters.

David Pembroke:

Obviously climate change is a significant risk. Technology continues to grow, to accelerate. You mentioned disinformation. You mentioned artificial intelligence. How is this changing context affecting strategic communications in the emergency space?

Bob Jensen:

Well, first, let me break that up a little bit. So climate change, as much as some people want to say, "Oh, that's not really happening. It's not going to matter." The fact is it is happening, and we can look at the number of severe weather related disasters happening around the world, and it's just getting bigger and bigger. Now, the United States, 2017 was the worst year in our history for disasters, right? Everyone keeps thinking about Katrina, but 2017 was worse. 2017 had 16 separate disasters that were more than a billion dollars of damage, 16 of them, including what became the second and third largest disasters, weather really related disasters to hit America. And so the total losses and damage that year kind of eclipsed what happened in Katrina. And the reason that's important is that ... the problem is that there's a great deal of reluctance by governments and businesses to really say, "Hey, this is happening. This is real". We've already reached that 1.5 degree centigrade gain and the world's not exploding and burning up, but the fact is, we're seeing the challenges. We're seeing in America, there is no longer a fire season. Fires are happening all the time. I think you're seeing that as well in Australia where fires are happening at times they normally didn't happen. We're seeing large areas of America with severe drought, we're talking a decade of drought. We're seeing that globally. We're seeing tornadoes hitting. We just had a tornado north of Washington DC. I don't think we've had a tornado here in 100 years - I don't know, I'd have to look that up, but it's very unusual. So we're seeing these types of things. We're also seeing sea level rise. And that's something I tell countries is, as they're assessing their risks and hazards, you're going to assess it for now, but you need to also assess what's going to happen in 50 years.

Because if you start building things but you don't think, well, how is this environment going to be different 50 years from now, you're going to be rebuilding things in 50 years. You're going to be moving things. We're looking at areas of the coast of America that already today are being impacted by sea level rise, and it's going to cost billions of dollars to start moving things and fixing things. And so that's number one. And then the second part, in terms of communication, it's very hard to successfully communicate climate change. And there's lots more studies going on about how do you do it in a way

so that the public can go, "Got it. That makes sense," or "I accept that"? The problem we have, I know in the US and many other places, is that there are climate change deniers who they use very simplistic tactics, but it's hard for the government to say, "Oh no, here's the exact proof." Even though we show data that data doesn't mean much. And when you talk about a 1.5 degree centigrade increase, everyone's like, "What? That doesn't make any difference," right? Or a two inch rise in sea level, it's hard to get people to go, "Oh my gosh, we better do something." But now is the time to do it. So that's a challenge, and then we're fighting disinformation on that. The one I see all the time is when we had really bad snowstorms and you had people go, "Yeah, climate change, tell me about it." So the average person doesn't get, well, that's not what it's talking about, right? In terms of disinformation, so we've seen... Disinformation has been around for a long, long time, and it's really interesting that with disasters, there's always disinformation. Many times it's just rumour or misinformation, but we're seeing more and more deliberate acts of spreading disinformation. And it's not just from people on the ground, it's from foreign actors. For example, in the recent Maui fires, which was one of the worst wildfire events in America, 101 people died, 2000 homes destroyed, we started seeing disinformation. There was one that came out that said the cause, the real cause of the fires was a secret military laser weapon that came from the Chinese. And then they had all kinds of crazy videos to kind of prove like, "Oh, look, here's a blue car. The blue car wasn't burned. And that's because the laser didn't affect the colour blue." Right? And the sad thing is people believe that, so they're still today saying, "No, that isn't what caused it." The other one was, there was a great deal of disinformation coming from Russia that was kind of saying, "Oh, look, Oprah Winfrey is buying up all the land from the people, and the US government isn't helping people. But the US government can send billions of dollars to Ukraine, but it won't even help its own citizens who lost everything in the fire." Apples and oranges. The US government can do two things at once, but people believe that. Across the US, it was really hard for the US government to tamp that down. And you're going to see that more and more. And the reason is because of AI, the bad guys, whether they're domestic or they're foreign malign actors, they're using AI to generate hundreds of thousands of disinformation, and they have what are called botnets. This stuff is coming out like crazy. And they use AI to do... And I'm sure you've heard the term deep fake, so videos that look absolutely real, and they can take 30 minutes of any person's voice, and then use software to make your voice say anything they want you to say. Most people are looking at videos and stuff on their cell phones. It's very small. And most people don't take the time to go, "Oh, I wonder if that's real. I better go and investigate that."

That's kind of what a lot of governments are doing now. I'm like, I'm sorry, that's not going to work anymore because the Russians and other folks, they're just going to keep lobbing this stuff at you, and you're going to be spending all your effort trying to debunk every single one of those. And they're just going to laugh because they're going to win. And that's something we have to change. And I can talk about this later. We have to change how we deal with this information.

David Pembroke:

All right, well, I'm very interested in these remedies. So how do we address those very real challenges around disinformation? But I would also be interested in your views about climate change. And as you say at the moment, trying to communicate around 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels ... that's hard for people to grasp in a meaningful way that would then change any sort of behaviour around that. But maybe just your views on what the remedies are around some of the disinformation challenges first.

Bob Jensen:

Well, the biggest thing, and so again, I mentioned that the US State Department sends me around the world and I talk with countries around the world. Last year I was just up in Sweden and Norway, and Sweden was getting hammered by the Russians because they were about ready to join NATO. And Russia did not want that to happen, so the volume of disinformation was outstanding. And we were looking at it, and a lot of it was on TikTok because they were aiming at young people. So you had a lot of young people who were speaking out saying, "Oh, Sweden, we shouldn't join NATO" because they were believing all this disinformation. Speaking with their government, they were so alarmed that they created a new government department that's oddly called the Psychological Defence Agency. I'm sure it sounds different in Swedish, but they created this because they recognised what a big problem that they have.

I met with those folks, I met with other folks, I met with members of parliament, and I said, "There's a level of things, a list of things you need to do, not least of which is start to pass regulation, to criminalise knowingly putting out disinformation." Now, a lot of that comes from outside the country, but if you have anyone inside the country, you can start making it harder for them to do this. And doing a better job of working across government and across nations to start identifying all the sources of this disinformation, because it's not enough just to go, "Oh, there's disinformation." You have to say, "Well, where is this coming from?" And then once you do that, you have to kind of start analysing it

because the reasons or the goals behind the disinformation campaigns can be very different. And you have to understand who's doing it, why are they doing it? What's their point? What are they trying to go at?

And right now, the big thing, the change in how we are going to deal with this, there's two things. One is governments, especially western governments, have to be better at understanding what's called narrative. And you're a communicator, you get what this is. There's a narrative out there, so the Russian Putin, his narrative for Ukraine is, well, they've always belonged to Russia and they're really Russian people, and we're going in to save the Russian people from the Nazis. There are no Nazis there anymore. So they had this whole narrative that's all false to kind of justify what they're doing. The US and our close allies, part of the Five Eyes, which your readers may or your listeners may understand as the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, we share information, and we saw from very highly placed sources inside the Russian government, we knew that they absolutely were going to attack Russia, or attack Ukraine, excuse me. Before it happened, we knew.

And of course, many of our allies in Europe are like, "Oh no, they're just doing exercises." Because what had happened is the Russians had desensitised those governments and they were doing all kinds of stuff, and yet we had the actual intelligence information that said, no, they're really going to attack. And so we did something, and this is the way of the future, we did something that we've never done, and we took highly classified intelligence information and we released it. We said, we know that they're going to attack any day now. They're going to use a false flag event. They're going to say they're going to blame it on the Ukrainians, and that's going to be their excuse to go in. And so we put that out, and even with putting that out, a lot of our allies were like, "Oh, well, we're not really sure." But of course when it happened, they're like...

David Pembroke:

I remember that very clearly.

Bob Jensen:

Yeah. And so that's called pre bunking, and you're going to hear that term a lot more. And so obviously governments can do that easier than an organisation could do it, but I tell some of my clients that you know when you... Let's say you're going to launch a new product or you're going to announce something that's not great, like, "Oh, we've had chemical spills for years, and here's what we're going to do." You know already, and you can pretty much game out the kinds of disinformation that's going to happen, and you need to get ahead of that, and you need to put your narrative out first and pre bunk what expected disinformation, right? Because the science and the studies have shown that regardless of whether it's true or not, if people hear something and that's what they hear first about an issue, they tend to believe it. And then the government or their organisation, they're playing catch up, and now they have to disprove stuff, even if it's not true.

And so that's the new thing. And then the second part of it, and I'll talk about this a little bit more if you want, is there's new technology coming out. The hardest part right now is very quickly knowing if an image has been manipulated or if it's an AI generated image, or if it's AI generated, whatever. Now, there's technology that's out now that's being put out there in which you can detect if something's AI generated. And that's really important, because some of that AI stuff looks really real. I get invitations on LinkedIn regularly from extremely beautiful Chinese women. And then of course when I blow up those photos, I'm like, yeah, that's AI generated, but I know that they're trying to fool me, and so I take the time to look at it very closely. And of course, they're not very good at it, so I just delete, but this is what's happening.

And then the second thing, another part of that is not only do you need to be able to detect that, we have to work to, as it's coming through the systems, once you detect it to start eliminating it, right? Now, we already have the ability within the west to shut off internet traffic from any country we want. Now, there is times when I was running the Air Force's website where we were getting DDoS attacks, the denial of service attacks out of North Korea, and we worked with our edge servers, a company called Akamai. We actually cut off any traffic from North Korea, just said, "Nope, nope," because that's where all this... And we can do that for other countries as well. So that's something to think about. It's going to be a combination of technology and a combination of really analysing what's going on, and then putting our narratives out first and pre bunking. So that's kind of where things are going. It's kind of sad that it's come to this, but we should be using the technology just like the bad guys.

David Pembroke:

What about the platforms? What responsibility do they have to limit the false narratives that are established?

Bob Jensen:

So that's really a challenge for a lot of different reasons. We've tried in the US. We don't have great legislation yet. Because what happens is you've got certain groups, and they are political, that say, "Oh, you're impinging on my free speech rights," even though they're putting out there is clearly not right. And so it's a political challenge, especially in the US. I don't know how it is there in Australia, but we make a big deal out of free speech because of how we were formed as we went against Mother England. And basically I think that that's going to be our challenge as we keep going on because there's a lot of work being done by the platforms, but I think it's going to depend on who's in the White House. If a certain person wins, they're going to get like, "Hey, we're not going to do much more."

But if a different wins, then they might know we got to do a lot more in policing this. I personally think that if it's patently false, then the platforms need to... They can't just go in and rip it down unless it's breaking a law, but they certainly should be doing a lot more of, "We just want you to know that the information being presented here is not factual," and then let people make up their own mind. That's the way I look at it. But there's got to be a lot more of that. I know that they're already working on that in relation to the upcoming US presidential elections, because there's a lot of disinformation going out in that.

David Pembroke:

Listen, just before... I want to be respectful of your time, but I am interested in your views around climate change and the communication around climate change because you did articulate the challenge and the problem. But again, remedies, where do you see, or how do you see best practise? What are the ways that it can be communicated more effectively to encourage the change in behaviours that are required to meet the emissions reductions targets that have been set in place with the Paris Agreement?

Bob Jensen:

Well, one thing is people are unclear about what they can do. And many people feel that, "Well, I'm just one person. How can I change the world?" So the approach to communicating about solutions for climate change have to be a lot better about saying, "Well, let's look at one person or one family, and then let's look at a whole city, and then let's look at a country to start to give a better concrete understanding of what can happen, right? That's one thing, because people can't visualise, like, "Oh, if I stop using gasoline, gas cars and I start using electric, is that going to be better really?" Or, I love the whole carbon credits. Nobody understands that. I barely understand that. And so this notion that, "Oh, I'm going to give my airline \$10 for carbon credits, really, what is that really doing?" There has to be a lot better explanation of what that means.

And I think that the challenge we have is, I think sometimes the scientists, they're not using the right type of risk communication, right? So they're talking, "Oh my gosh, if we get up here, it's going to be the end of the world," and they're not understanding that you need to talk to the public in a different way when you're talking about things that... You're trying to get them to make behaviour change. And so scientists and governments have to work more closely together, using risk communication techniques to understand several things. Number one, the biggest thing that a mistake has made is that many governments and many scientists don't initially try and show that they actually have a respect for the public and that not everyone can do something and just acknowledge. It's just like during COVID, the people who could do the least were the ones who... The frontline workers, they couldn't take days off. They couldn't stay home. They had to work. And so we made mistakes in America during COVID about not acknowledging what the individuals are going through and not having empathy for them. So that right there is part of the change that has to happen. And again, a better explanation of the science in terms that the public can understand, right? What exactly does a 1.5 centimetre temperature increase, what does it mean? And this is something that we should be doing, is pointing to the increase in severe weather, the increase and the changes of where there's droughts and things like that. So I was in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and they're having a big problem. They're going to be facing this, and we're going to have... The military has already said that there's going to be wars in the future because of water scarcity and food scarcity, all directly connected to the shift in weather patterns around the world. So again, we have to be a lot more deliberate. We have to put it into terms that the public can understand. We have to say that you might not think what you do is going to make a difference, but we have to have everyone trying. And if everyone is trying even a little bit, it's going to go a long way.

David Pembroke:

Well, Bob, thank you so much for coming on and sharing some of your knowledge, your wisdom, your experience with the audience today. A lot in the conversation that we've just had, and I'm sure people will go away to think about that because there is so much change taking place in the communication function. And I'm sure you'd agree with me that it's only getting more important as a capacity and a capability that government needs to draw upon to better explain, as you've just said, to citizens and stakeholders about policies, programmes, services, and regulation in a highly contested environment. So it is something that government is going to have to continue to invest in. And would you agree that, well, in your experience, and looking back perhaps over the last maybe post-COVID, that there's been a change in the way the communication function has been viewed amongst your clients in government across the world?

Bob Jensen:

Well, certainly in the military. As we're watching what's happening in Ukraine, as we're watching what's happening in Gaza, the information aspects of war have... It is front and centre now, and it's called hybrid warfare, where they've long talked about grey zone warfare in military communities, but it's front and centre, and everybody is watching this. Frankly, I think that certain countries are already at war, even though they don't think they are because of the deliberate disinformation campaigns that are happening. And then from the aspect of just any organisation, the reality is the explosion of communication technology is changing rapidly, how people get information, where they get it, and how they get it. So for example, mainstream media in the US is rapidly disintegrating. A lot of newspapers going out of business. A lot of radio stations are all centrally controlled. More people get their news and information off of social media, which to me is very scary because there's so much information on there, and there's so many choices. Now you've got thousands of cable and online channels. You've name it, there's a channel for it. And so when we talk about nightly news in America with the main news networks, their nightly viewership has gone down to just almost insignificant numbers, and they have to think about how they're going to change their business to keep going. So when I was running the news for the military out of Iraq, at that time, the nightly news, the average nightly news viewership for the main news networks was about 22 million, which isn't a lot to begin with. And then now, it's about 8 million. Even though we have a lot more Americans, the number has gone down because people just aren't watching it. And so how you communicate, it's the rationalisation of information sources. And this is what's going to make it harder and harder for companies and countries and governments at all levels to make sure they're getting information out.

And of course, just start adding multilingual, multicultural in there, right? So the US government has not done a great job in doing things in different languages. When I was in New York and New Jersey for Sandy, I had to put things in 20 languages, but I had to deal with 148 languages, and I had to work with a lot of community leaders. So these are the challenges of the future. We could have a whole discussion because I talk about the future a lot. And I'm happy to come on again and we can talk ...

David Pembroke:

Yeah, yeah. No, we'll definitely... Well, again, you've just... In Australia, it's defined as culturally and linguistically diverse audiences, and certainly in the recent COVID pandemic, there's been some assessment done of government communication, and one of the big areas of weakness that was identified was there wasn't enough multilingual communication. The message didn't get through to some of those communities, and hence it led to... That created a number of other related challenges. But listen, just before I do get you, because I will get you back, but are you optimistic or pessimistic as you sit there, as we have this conversation? Because sort of sitting here thinking, wow, every challenge that you've identified and discussed today, they're almost unresolvable in so many ways when you can look at the complexity and the challenge and the changing context and the acceleration of technology and the intent of malign actors, the artificial intelligence, disinformation, a lack of systems to be able to communicate in this, as you say, fractionalized world. So are you optimistic, or are you a little pessimistic?

Bob Jensen:

Well, I'm very optimistic, and I'll tell you why. I'm lucky in that I get to talk to governments at high levels around the world. I also get briefed, and I meet with technology firms here in the US and in other countries. Obviously, I have to sign a lot of NDAs, nondisclosure agreements, but I'm just really amazed at the things that are going to be coming out that you're going to start seeing and hearing come out in the next year or two to directly deal with the challenge of disinformation, as well as a lot of people are almost scared of AI. I'm like, no, I think of AI in terms of Star Trek, not in terms of Skynet, the old movies here. But I think that I tell people, "Hey, you might think you're not going to use AI, but you're already using it. When you use search engines, when you are dealing with certain companies and they have the little chat bot, that's all some form of AI."

And I think we're going to get to a point where we're really going to do it well. The challenge is we need to have some kind of standards and international agreements and some framework. I'm not saying we have to regulate it to the nth degree because certain countries are just going to ignore our regulations anyway, so... And then we haven't even talked about connecting quantum computing to all this, and that's just going to... Things are going to go really wild. But I am very optimistic because I think we have a lot of smart people globally who are working on this, and there's a financial incentive for the private sector to really get their arms around this as well.

David Pembroke:

All right, well listen, I think we definitely have to have a part two, part three, part four. The podcast has been going since 2015, so there'll be plenty of opportunity as we start to see some of these changes. And let's end it on that hopeful note that Bob knows best. Bob has seen, and as you say, you've signed a lot of NDA agreements and the technology is coming, but the behaviour is really going to be fundamental to that and the understanding of people because the potential to undermine institutions, democracies around the world is there. And clearly at the moment, we're wrestling with these challenges. And so yeah, it's going to be fascinating. So anyway, thanks Bob for coming on today. I really did enjoy that conversation, and certainly a lot to think about there.

Bob Jensen:

Thank you very much.

David Pembroke:

I think one of the things Bob raised very, very early in his responses there was this notion of systems and thinking of comms as a system. And we've talked about that before in the past on the podcast, is that you've got to set up that system. No plan is going to help you if you don't have the various component parts and the relationships in place, and the processes, and the policies, such that you can operate a reliable system to be able to explain your policy, your programme, your service, or your regulation. And again, I think the other thing Bob was talking about there that caught my attention was this notion of making comms relevant, making climate change relevant to people in their everyday lives. And so understanding what are the simple things that people can do to make a difference, but talk to them in the ways that they want to be spoken to in the channels at the times and in the formats that they're looking for and the way that they are engaging.

It's difficult, because I think another thing that Bob did point out very articulately was this challenge of disaggregation, this fractionalization that people are... Audiences are very, very narrow, and sort of trying to participate in those communities is not without its challenges. But a fascinating conversation by one of the world's leading communication strategists, and very delighted that he came onto the programme today. Before I let you go, a rating or review for the programme always helps. So if you do have the time to do that, I would be very grateful. We'll be back in a fortnight's time with another leader from the world of communication. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

Voiceover:

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