



EP#166: THE AGILE
APPROACH TO DIGITAL
ADVOCACY: TRANSFORMING
COMMUNICATIONS

WITH NICHOLAS BRUNEAU

TRANSCRIPT

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Nicholas Bruneau:

We've seen a big change in digital comms. So now, we're seeing it more as a strategic opportunity, opportunity for organisations to really move the needle on key issues to engage their stakeholders. So, really, it's changed, and that the pandemic has been a real accelerator for that. So, I think that if you take a proactive stance, communications really can be a force for good.

Over 80% said that it helped them to be more AGILE. It helped them to try new things, helped them to be more creative. So, I took all of those comments in the survey, because what I wanted to do is I wanted to show that the public sector is actually being active and really doing things creatively in digital.

Voice Over:

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

David Pembroke:

Hello, everyone, and welcome once again to GovComms, a podcast about the practice of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin each week, we like to recognise the traditional custodians of the land from which we are broadcasting today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present and emerging, and recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of this city and our region. Indeed, I'd like to pay my respects to all of First Nations people who are listening to the programme today, and indeed the First Nations people from where anyone listening to this podcast today.

So, my guest today is a real expert in government and public sector communications, and he has decades of experience in social impact communications. Nicholas Bruneau's expertise lies at the intersection of digital communications and purpose-led marketing. Nicholas has worked for intergovernmental agencies from the UN to the World Bank and the EU, as well as a number of not-for-profits associations, media and political groups. He's led digital advocacy campaigns for international development, for education, sustainability and climate change issues.

What Nicholas has done is to roll up all of that expertise, and he has written a book called Engage with Impact, described as a game-changing resource for digital leaders. What it does is compile a whole heap of actionable tips and tactics from the world's top communications directors, uncovering strategies that have helped global institutions thrive in today's competitive, fragmented digital landscape. He joins me from Lisbon in Portugal. Nicholas Bruneau, welcome to GovComms.

Nicholas Bruneau:

Thank you, David. It's a pleasure to be here.

David Pembroke:

Now listen, before we get into the substance of the conversation, I always like to find out a little bit about the people and the person and where they're from. So, what is the Nicholas Bruneau story?

Nicholas Bruneau:

Sure. Sure. I mean, I guess to start, I'm a diplomat's son, so I grew up always travelling. After university, I started working in politics, but then when the opportunity came to work as a business journalist, I packed up my bags, and started travelling the world. Then after that, I ended up working for the Economist in the marketing and communications division of the Economist Group, and finally ended up in Brussels. In Brussels, I was working closely with all the EU associations, all the organisations there. So, I was really fascinated by the public policy, the advocacy side of things, but also, everything was changing.

This was about 12, 15 years ago when digital was becoming more and more prominent. So, I decided to leave my job at the Economist, and then started working as a communications consultant. Then since then, I haven't stopped, and that was about 12 years ago, but then I ended up... I don't know if you saw the documentary called *Before the Flood* by Leo DiCaprio. It's a documentary on climate change, and there's a call to action at the end, and it says, "We all have to do something." I realised, "Okay, what can I do?"

So, since then, I've been only working in communications that are advancing the sustainable development goals, and trying to make a difference. So, I think that if you take a proactive stance, communications really can be a force for good. So, that's been my focus ever since.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Well, there's a lot in that, but let's unpack some of it, and perhaps go back to the beginning. What was life like as a diplomat's son?

Nicholas Bruneau:

Well, you're always moving around, and every three or four years is a different country. So, you're used to change, and you're used to adapting.

David Pembroke:

Through that experience though, and through that experience of being in the diplomatic corps and around the diplomatic circuit, what did you learn and appreciate as you moved your way through a number of different countries, and meeting obviously lots of new people, and obviously observing lots of different change along the way?

Nicholas Bruneau:

I think it's the appreciation of different cultures and, for example, learning different languages, but learning different perspectives from different countries and different people. So, also recognising that your perspective isn't always going to be the right one, and that someone coming from a different point of view will see things completely different, and it's quite normal. So, I think that's a key thing where when you are a digital nomad in that respect, you have much more respect for different points of view in different cultures.

David Pembroke:

When did journalism strike your interest? When did you start to think that that might've been the career that you wanted to pursue?

Nicholas Bruneau:

Well, it's funny. I mean, I ended up working... I studied in history, and what I loved was getting through the research, getting deep down into what motivates people to make change, what can really make... how people can start movements, for example. So, that was the focus of my history university degree. Then after that, as a journalist, you're part of it, and you're part of history all of a sudden. So, I was, for example, in Ireland

interviewing former Sinn Féin leaders. I was in South Africa interviewing people that were leading against apartheid. So, it's exciting, because you're actually reporting history as it happens.

David Pembroke:

I know exactly that experience, and I was lucky enough to spend about a decade as a reporter for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation here in Australia. My first day on the job was the Tiananmen Square massacre. I think as a young, bright-eyed interested in public events person, to see and feel that history was being made, and the job of the journalist was to get the story and to accurately portray that story, it was a great responsibility, but there was huge levels of excitement that you were right there at when history was being made.

Listen, you've worked across quite a number of sectors, be it not for profits, working for political groups, international agencies. What brings it together for you in this age? You've written this book, *Engage with Impact*. What's the central idea behind the book that people working in government communications should understand?

Nicholas Bruneau:

First, we've seen a big change in digital comms. So first, when I was in Brussels over 10 years ago, digital comms was a nice to have. It was something that people would think of while just tweeting a couple of days a week. So now, we're seeing it more as a strategic opportunity, opportunity for organisations to really move the needle on key issues to engage with their stakeholders. So, really, it's changed, and that the pandemic has been a real accelerator for that as far as helping people to see how they can use digital and online strategies to really build that engagement with their stakeholders.

The book was trying to build on that. So, during the pandemic or just after the pandemic, actually, I did a survey of over 250 marketing communications managers. I asked them, "How has the pandemic helped your communications?" Over 80% said that it helped them to be more AGILE. It helped them to try new things, helped them to be more creative. So, I took all of those comments, and there were a lot of comments in the survey, and then looked at doing a series of interviews and a series of case studies, because what I wanted to do is I wanted to show that the public sector is actually being active and really doing things creatively in digital, that it's not just the business sector.

It's not just the business to consumer sector that is leading the way, but there are some great GovComms stories out there. So, I tried to unearth them with those case studies and with those interviews.

David Pembroke:

How would you judge, or what is your observance, and through those interviews and the survey and the gathering of those case studies, how mature do you see the... Let's call it what it is, basically a content marketing approach for the public sector. How mature do you think it is across the world, and is it more advanced in some countries than others?

Nicholas Bruneau:

I don't know if we can talk about different countries, or I think we have to talk about, I think, different organisations that maybe are prioritising communications more that see the value of communications. It's difficult to say. I think there are some that will see communications as something that you do at the end when you publish a report. Basically, let's just tweet about it or essentially involve communications at the end of the process. Whereas, and this was part of my interview with the communications director for UNEP, he said, "What we're trying to do is for the communications team to be involved at the beginning of the process so that it is part of the policy objectives that communications becomes integrated within the organisation's

procedures and objectives right from the beginning as opposed to just at the end when there's, like I said, a report or something that needs to be promoted."

So, if comms is involved within the process, then that's when you can really be part of that theory of change. That's when comms can really have a real impact in the way that an organisation makes a difference or reaches their goals.

David Pembroke:

Now, one of the assets that came out of the consultation for your book was a framework that you've developed called the AGILE Framework for Social Impact Communications. Can you take us through the framework and how indeed it can be used by government communicators to improve and indeed, in some cases, transform digital advocacy?

Nicholas Bruneau:

So, the AGILE Framework, it looks to change communications within an organisation from the inside out, so first adopting a startup mentality. I think startups, I think we can learn a lot from them from what they're doing and their success story. Then, going digital first, so that's adopting all the tools and the strategies internally so that you're able to communicate digitally in a fluent and fast way, and then as well afterwards, inspiring, so inspiring with personal and authentic stories, so using that storytelling angle and approach.

Then after is leveraging your content, so using repurposing strategies so that you're able to make the most with what you have, and finally is empowering your community so that digital doesn't only stay online, but then you're able to then translate that into a real movement.

David Pembroke:

Can you give us an example of perhaps a public sector organisation that may have adopted the framework either knowingly or unknowingly to generate impact?

Nicholas Bruneau:

Yeah. I mean, I give examples for each... I think each five step, I give various examples of different organisations that are basically adopting some of those strategies. The one that I was also involved in and I think ticks the boxes on many of these is the Global Partnership Education Raise Your Hand Campaign. So, they had a replenishment where they were planning a campaign to raise funds for education in developing countries. Of course in 2020, the pandemic hit, and then all of a sudden, they had to completely pivot all of the campaign. They had to get together and think, "Okay, how can we make this completely digital?"

So, they created a microsite where people could have a call to action, and to showcase their supports. They created an influencer strategy. So, we found different influencers, whether it was Michelle Obama, Didier Drogba, Naomi Campbell, numerous people that would online support the campaign. Then we created videos with people that were on the ground because, of course, nobody could travel at the time. We also used an analytics approach where we tried to improve gradually with what was happening by looking at the data and then adapting, adapting gradually our approach. We also invested in online events, so having curated online events that were not just basically a Zoom call or something like that, but really something that was well orchestrated with music, with artists, with a real feeling that you are part of something, part of a movement.

Then of course, to top it off, we ended up organising the hybrid summit, which was in the UK hosted by Boris Johnson and President Kenyatta, where we were bringing together all these different strategies that we were learning on the go, and created a global hybrid summit, and raised over \$4 billion at the end of the campaign.

David Pembroke:

Wow, that's impressive.

Nicholas Bruneau:

So, it was really a learning experience, but I think it just goes to show... There's a quote from Robert Kennedy that basically says, "From when there's a crisis, sometimes you learn from that crisis, and it becomes an opportunity." So, I do think that organisations like the Global Partnership for Education have really learned from that opportunity, from that challenge, and that's what the pandemic has done.

David Pembroke:

Indeed, but there's a different environment, different risk environment isn't there. Are you seeing that... During the pandemic, clearly, the rules changed. Risks seem to disappear as people were charging towards solutions that had to be made because of the threat. We're now in a different type of environment now. Have you seen organisations become more conservative because the risk is no longer there?

Nicholas Bruneau:

Yeah, I have. I have, and I am seeing people retrench. Of course, those hybrid events have now become in-person events. The investment on online collaboration tools has decreased, so people are doing less online. So, I do think that is a mistake in the fact that we are becoming more of a... It's a process that is becoming more eventually that we have to be prepared for it as far as being more digital and being more collaborative online. So, if organisations are taking a step back, then I do think it's a mistake because that know-how and that ability to learn online and to connect with more and more people to hire also internationally, I think that's a benefit where you're able to really tap into the best in the world by having a hybrid workplace.

David Pembroke:

What are the types of skills that government organisations need to have to take best advantage of this devolved digital environment?

Nicholas Bruneau:

The main skill is to be a constant learner, so someone that is constantly learning, that is constantly trying new things. That's why in the book, I talk about the importance of vulnerability, of accepting that you don't know it all. So, particularly in a growing organisation, people have to be open to vulnerability and asking advice and accepting that they aren't able to do everything perfectly, and also to experiment and to innovate. So, I highlight in the book a nonprofit called Candid that they have an innovation fund. So a little bit like Google, they're able to spend maybe 10% of their time doing new things or experimenting with new things.

So, when it came to short form video, they said, "Let's experiment, and let's do a controlled experiment where we're posting a few times a week short form videos. We're doing it across platforms, and we're learning, and we're seeing what works and what doesn't work as far as content, as far as audience engagement, and learning from that." So, that was what formed their video strategy going forward, but it was only by doing that experiment and looking at the data that then they were able to move ahead.

So, I think having that experimental approach, it can be a large organisation or a smaller organisation, and that's why I talk about learning and acting like a startup, because that's what startups will do. They'll try. They'll fail fast, because that's how they learn, and that's how they evolve.

David Pembroke:

So listen, actually before we jump on, if I might just take you back to something that you said a little bit earlier around the involvement of communications professionals in policy discussions at the beginning, what's your

advice to people about how to get into those conversations if they're struggling at this stage to be recognised or the value of their particular capability or professionalism is not recognised such that they do get invited?

Nicholas Bruneau:

Yeah. I mean, sometimes it's inviting yourself to the meeting. So, I was-

David Pembroke:

Turn up.

Nicholas Bruneau:

When I was at the Global Partnership for Education, I would attend the crisis meetings to make sure that there was always a comms element to it. So, even if they didn't always need me there, but I was always making sure so that if there was a crisis or if there was something happening, we would be aware of it, or at least we could plan ahead for it. Another thing which was also the Global Partnership for Education was the fact that they created these on-message sheets. So, it was initiated actually during the pandemic where things were changing so quickly that we needed to have clear messaging.

So, they created basically like a boilerplate sheet with the key information on the pandemic. That was updated gradually, but also, it was continuously improved together with the policy team, together with senior management. It was a way in which we were aligned on a key issue, particularly the pandemic, that Covid, that was changing day by day. So, it was so successful that they ended up doing it for various issues. So, they have an on-message sheet for climate change, another one for education and areas of conflict or different kinds of issues like girls' education. So, it was a good way in order to align with senior management and also the policy team, so to make sure that they were collaborating on those key issues, and having a joint message.

Then little by little, that collaboration became more institutionalised. So, there's real back and forth about, "Okay, what do you think of that? Should we add this to the on-message sheet?" So, I think it's working collaboratively on key issues.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So, in your book, you also talk about community building and the importance of community building. How do you define community, and why is it so important for government communicators?

Nicholas Bruneau:

I think that when we are working digitally, we can't just post and publish and without trying to have a back and forth with trying to engage with our community. So, I give the example in the book about the Malala funds that looked at, "How can we give a voice to our stakeholders?" So, that's what I try to do in all of my communications is to see how can we give a voice to the people that we serve so that it's not just communications about, "This is what we're doing, and this is the success story of our organisation," but talking about the people that are either our recipients or our stakeholders and what's important for them, and how we're helping them to address their issues and address their challenges.

So, it's giving the mic to those people. So in the story of the Malala funds, they decided we need to help girls to tell their story. So, if you know the Malala funds, they're one of the largest education funds or education nonprofits helping to support the education of girls worldwide. So, they created a newsletter, which initially was just going to be a newsletter, and then they asked their subscribers, "Would you like to write a story?" But then it became so popular that they had all these girls that wanted to contribute, and wanted to speak about their reality and their challenges. So, they ended up creating a magazine, and they have a whole platform now that helps girls to talk about what they're doing, but then there's also a back and forth.

So, they're able to talk to each other and to share best practice. So, it's been really a positive way of creating that community online. So, now, it's almost like having a small media group within the nonprofit, and they've even won awards. So, it's a really good example of how you can try to support your community. At the same time, it's a win-win, because you're getting a lot of content and a lot of really engaging content from those people that are your stakeholders in the end.

David Pembroke:

Listen, I'm sure a lot of people listening to the podcast now are thinking, "Well, that's great for the Malala Foundation, but I work for a very risk-averse organisation, and we don't really want to give the microphone to the audience because if we do, we just don't know what they're going to say, and we're going to open ourselves up to greater criticism." So, it's much easier just not to do it.

Nicholas Bruneau:

Absolutely. Absolutely. I had that discussion with someone from NATO the other day. I said, "Look, there's no reason why you wouldn't give the mic to all of your member states or people that are in your member states," and then to help them tell their story about what NATO is doing in their country. So, it doesn't have to be from military, but it can be from different people. I'm also doing it right now with the United Nations where we are working on a storytelling strategy, and helping the countries where we are working to tell their story, tell their story about their challenges and how they're facing those challenges, and of course how the United Nations is helping them to meet those challenges, and to have an impact.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, it's also a little bit quaint, isn't it? There's this notion of control, because they really don't have control anyway, because people will be saying whatever they're going to say. If they don't do it in that forum, they're going to be doing it elsewhere. So, perhaps there's some advantage to having those conversations take place in a moderated format on your home ground, so to speak.

Nicholas Bruneau:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. That brings me to another point, which is trying to create content that you will then own that will be on your platform trying to create a strong newsletter. So, we're seeing the fragility of social media, of just broadcasting on social media as being something that is a give or take going to have less and less impact. So, we're seeing a decreasing impact on X on Twitter, and we're seeing actually that platform as being banned in Brazil. We're seeing now issues now, I think, that Elon Musk now even calling Prime Minister Albanese a fascist, that you are seeing, basically, these social media platforms are rented land.

They are basically platforms that may not exist in the near future, or may completely change. So, we can't rely our communications only on that, on social media platforms. We should try to build our own relations with our stakeholders, whether it's through email, whether it's by having other community platforms or, of course, making sure that we're in direct contact with them across different ways.

David Pembroke:

So, the creation of content is clearly fundamental to successful communication and engagement. What are your views of the impacts of artificial intelligence and algorithms such as ChatGPT? Where do you see those content-generating, content-enabling platforms, which are frightening in terms of their capacity, in terms of what they're able to do in terms of speed and volume and other things? Where should and how should government communicators be thinking about artificial intelligence as part of the capability that they now have to be able to achieve their mission of strengthening communities and improving the wellbeing of citizens?

Nicholas Bruneau:

Sure. I mean, I think first, I think the context is that communications teams are, particularly in the public sector, are small. We're constantly working at 120%. We have small teams. So, I can totally see that the artificial intelligence opportunities are great. There's a lot of opportunities there to streamline processes to create content or repurpose content. So, in the book, I've talked about more the repurposing angle where using artificial intelligence tools, you're able to take long-form content, and to repurpose it into either blogs or social media posts, different ways in which you're able to slice and dice it into different forms of content, and so that way you're really maximising while still keeping your voice.

So, I think the first thing is to keep your tone of voice, and not to use artificial intelligence tools without having a human element to it. The final thing is the importance of trust. So, as we've seen in all of the trust barometers, trust for public sector is decreasing. So, it's important that we maintain that trust, and so to decrease the over-reliance on artificial intelligence, we always need to make sure that there's fact checking. We always need to make sure that we're using AI tools to supplement human communications, but not to override it.

So, that was in my conversations with UNDP, they are double checking and triple checking the information because whatever they publish needs to be trustworthy, and needs to be fact-checked.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So, we're coming up close to time, but I'm just interested in coming back to the framework and how it might be used as an enabling tool for teams in government and public sector to arrange themselves, and organise themselves to be more effective. What advice would you have for people thinking about how they may apply the framework to be more effective in the way they do their work?

Nicholas Bruneau:

I think it's thinking digital first. So, it's having first those tools so that you're able to create content that is going to be online. So, you have the know-how and the ability to really distil that message for a digital audience. So, in today's economy, in today's online platforms, you need to get people's attention right away. You can't just take a long story. So, of course, you have to have an approach that is going to be adapted to that, and then also adapted to Gen Z that has a different approach and a different viewpoint.

So, if you want to connect with various audiences, you have to do it in a different way. I don't know if you know Marshall McLuhan who famously coined the term the medium is a message. Well, nowadays with social media, you need to really condense, and really focus your message so that it's very clear. So, it's simple, and it's easy to get in just a few seconds.

David Pembroke:

So looking ahead, looking to the next, say, three to five years, what do you see in this world that you've covered through Engage with Impact?

Nicholas Bruneau:

I mean, I'm seeing... I think that organisations will, as you say, start adapting the AI tools to their advantage, but at the same time maintaining, so increasing their efficiency. I do think that we will be gradually be seeing more and more success online as far as organisations being able to lead campaigns that are really helping them to meet their objectives. It is a challenge. However, I do think that many organisations from the public sector still don't have as much know-how as the private sector as far as having the final, I guess, reaching objectives online. It is still a challenge. So, one of the major things that came out of my survey was that engagement was still something that was very difficult for a lot of organisations to do online.

So, there's a good example as far as... I don't know if you saw this video with Olivia Colman called from the organisation Make My Money Matter. So, they had a video which was showing how oil companies, oil and gas companies are still being funded by UK Pensions. So, there was a call to action for people to join the campaign, and to find a pension that was going to be sustainable and respectful of the sustainable development goals. So, they got a huge impact from the video, but then a very, very, very little amount of actual people participating and taking part in call to action. So, I think we still have a lot to learn as far as making sure that we have a call to action that makes it easy for people to engage, and people to participate.

David Pembroke:

Indeed. Well, it is indeed a fascinating world, and one thing you can guarantee is that people are going to have to keep paying attention. They're going to have to keep transforming. They're going to have to keep watching. They're going to have to keep thinking about ways to connect. But I think through it all, there's, as you said before, that consistency, that essence, that authenticity about who they are, what they stand for, and if they continue to turn up over time. There is an opportunity to get the message through in what is a hotly contested world, as we all look for a share of a person's time and attention.

So, congratulations on the book and for the contribution to GovComms and to the world of GovComms. So, how can people get a hold of it?

Nicholas Bruneau:

Thank you. Well, it's very easy. It's just the website is engagewithimpact.com, and so there, you can either get the book. Anyone who gets the book also helps to plant a tree. So, every book generates a tree, so I'm doing that in partnership with them with an NGO, or alternatively, there's a free guide for the AGILE Framework so that people can see what it's all about.

David Pembroke:

Fantastic. Everyone loves a free resource. Nicholas Bruneau, thank you so much for joining us from Lisbon in Portugal today for that fantastic conversation there about Engage with Impact. There's nothing like a framework, a mnemonic, to really focus you on how you can go about it. So, it sits there, the AGILE Framework. So, take it away, and maybe why don't you put it in the middle of your next conversation with your team, and think about it. Think about how are you going to start to make that. I'm sure that there'll be conversations that come from it that will help to perhaps adjust the way that you go about your business, and maybe help the way you go about it.

But, I also liked Nicholas's idea of just turning up, turning up and being useful. We've heard that conversation so often in the modern role of the communicator is to be a connector and is to be useful. So, be nosy, be curious and get involved, because if you are seen to be useful, if you are seen to be solving problems, you'll soon enough get invited along to those conversations as Nicholas Bruneau did when he was working for the UN Global Partnership for Education. So, there's some good advice as well. So, a big thanks to Nicholas for joining us today, and a big thanks to all of you for coming back.

Once again, the program's been running since 2015, and haven't we had some wonderful conversations in those times. We are coming up to 400 episodes as we explore this wonderful world of government communications, and today more great stories about the world of government communications. I think Nicholas is really... The call there is for experimentation. The call there is to try and to really demonstrate the value that you can bring, and the role that communications plays, as he said in the theory of change. But again, as I say, a great conversation today.

Thanks for you coming back for this fortnight. We'll be back at the same time in a fortnight with another great guest from the world of government communications. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

Speaker 2:

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