# A logo for a podcast Description automatically generated

**GOVCOMMS PODCAST**

EP#171 The AI Revolution in Comms

With Stephen waddington

TRANSCRIPT

# Transcript

Stephen Waddington:

... about writing the book about AI in public relations. And inevitably, people are focused on the tactical aspect, so editorial assistance, editing, and manipulating document, proofreading documents. It's very, very good at taking the original form of content and creating it into different versions, so social media posts. I think that a miss is a bigger opportunity and that's the potential to help us elevate our practice into management.

I think the biggest issue at the moment is that these technologies are being used rogue, very similar time to when social media first emerged. A lot of organisations locked it down because of the risk issues of information data breaches.

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 today, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are broadcasting from today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging and recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region.

And indeed, may I also pay my respects to all First Nations people of the lands from where anyone listening to this podcast today is joining us from. Well, there's no topic of more interest to professional communicators than artificial intelligence. It's a phenomenon. And I'm sure like me, there is not a day that goes by where you don't run some sort of experiment and think to yourself, "Wow, it will over time change most of the aspects of our work and influence much of how we live and play."

But in the risk-averse world of government and the public sector, there is hesitation and caution. Data privacy, fair use permissions, they're all conspiring to slow the adoptions, but the guardrails for ethical use are slowly being assembled in different countries around the world. And it's time to think about how we will and can use this incredible technology to deliver on our mission as public servants to strengthen communities and improve the wellbeing of citizens.

Now, as an aside, I had a very useful rubric the other day to consider how we can derive benefits from AI in its current state. And it's the three Cs rubric as a clerk, as a colleague, and as a coach. So the clerk that can help us to automate the mundane and repetitive but always important administrative tasks that are part of our day-to-day. As a colleague who will generously offer assistance and advice around a particular task or a problem we might be wrestling with. Or as a coach giving us access to the best knowledge, assembled from the best advice from multiple sources all over the world through time. It is an incredibly impressive technology that promises much.

To discuss where to from here, I'm joined by one of the world's leading PR practitioners, Steve Waddington, who has recently released an authoritative paper on AI and its impact on the communication function. Steve or Wadds, as he is more commonly known, has a long and distinguished career in both large and small PR agencies as an academic, a non-executive director, and now as a philanthropist. He's currently the director of Wadds Incorporated, which is a UK-based advisory firm that really quite simply is all about helping agencies and communications teams to be more effective.

But along with his wife, they have now founded Socially Mobile, a not-for-profit PR school dedicated to providing management training in PR with a focus on inclusivity and socioeconomic diversity.

But earlier this year, he did release the paper that I did refer to, which was a comprehensive report titled The Use of AI in Corporate Communications and Public Relations: The Story So Far, exploring AI's Potential to enhance PR practice while addressing those critical concerns around ethics, around governance, and adoption. The report does dive into the current applications of AI, examining its benefits and limitations, and provides actionable insights to help PR teams to navigate and use AI effectively. Well, he joins me from his home in Newcastle in the UK. Stephen Waddington, welcome to GovComms.

Stephen Waddington:

Thank you, David. Appreciate the welcome and look forward to this conversation.

David Pembroke:

Listen, just before we get into the AI stuff, what about the Steve Waddington story? Because you are very well-known, very experienced, but how was it that you found your way into the world of communications and PR?

Stephen Waddington:

Thanks, David. So quite simply, I did an engineering degree, electronics engineering in Manchester at the end of the '80s, beginning of the '90s. And as part of that did a year out in the industry as a consulting engineer, and I absolutely hated it. I got on a project where we were commissioning a road traffic system at night, and it was just awful.

But one of the opportunities I did get from that time was to spend time writing out the guidance around the system, doing a lot of the reporting because the system was installed and I discovered I got this natural attitude for explaining fairly complex engineering systems and concepts in a way that the public understands. And that took me into this career as a technical writer. So that's where I started as a technical writer explaining concepts around electronics and engineering to the broader public.

And that took me to a career at the end of the '90s when the internet was starting to boom and it was an incredibly exciting time and there's an absolute need for people like myself to try and explain what was going on to the public.

David Pembroke:

And you made your way through quite a number of agencies both small and large and always right at the edge of innovation and best practice. What have you learned along the way that has guided you and guided the development of your career? And what advice do you give to other communicators about how they might think about their careers when reflecting on what you have achieved?

Stephen Waddington:

I think there's two things, David. So the first one is a natural curiosity and openness to new things and that seen me well through the first part of my career around the boom in the internet and the shift from traditional media to internet-mediated media. Then through social media and now in this era of AI that we're in. So I've had a natural openness to embrace and try these new technologies and try and understand where they fit within the public sphere and as a means of communication with publics in general. That's the first thing.

The second thing is I come from an engineering discipline trained as an engineer and the rigour and expectation that you are taught from an engineering perspective, I brought into communication. And we have a weak relationship I'd suggest within public relations and corporate communication with management. We tend to focus on media and communication rather than on strategy. And so that's also where I'm focused. If you can push up into management to demonstrate from a strategic point of view the benefit of your work, then you are incredibly valuable. If you're creating press releases and other forms of media, you're siloed in a tactical role and are less valuable.

David Pembroke:

Listen, actually before we do jump into the AI thing. Something that's caught my attention over the last week or so since the US election is the analysis in the United States about the diminishing influence of traditional media. It's what everyone is looking at. Everyone's thinking about it. The US election becoming known as the podcast election, the mobile phone election, that friends and family are now more valuable in terms of news sources than traditional media. How are you looking at that circumstance and how does that make you start to think about the way communicators need to be thinking about the way they do their job?

Stephen Waddington:

Like everybody in public relations and communications, I'm partly in quest in trying to figure out what happened and understand this mediated landscape. Because you're absolutely correct, we're very critical, and practice generally we're quite liberal as a community of practice. And so critical of individuals like Elon Musk and what he's done with Twitter. But actually, perhaps he was incredibly clever and strategic in acquiring that organisation because of its reach. And as it turns out its role.

Similarly, clearly, there has been a role within the election, a significant role of so-called influencers. So individuals, whether individuals in the form of celebrity or individuals that have found a niche and created content around an area of interest and built the community have had a significant role in the election. And I think we've known about this for 10, 20 years, but clearly, this has had a very, very significant impact in this instance.

I'm actually reading a book because I'm like you trying to unpick this at the moment. And there's a really good book that I'd really recommend to people. It's called Invisible Rulers. Invisible Rulers were a concept developed actually in the 1900s by Edward Bernays who talked about individuals within society that had a community around them that had this ability to influence public policy and public opinion, and it's developed through... The author, Renee DiResta, develops this concept through the lens of modern media. It's just absolutely fascinating and I think therein lies the answer to what we've seen happen in America.

David Pembroke:

Okay. I'll definitely take that recommendation and read it. And on top of that, and perhaps fueled by the technology of artificial intelligence and its impact, this report that you did release earlier this year, this notion of The Use of AI in Corporate Communications and Public Relations: The Story So Far, what were the main findings that came from that report as it stands at June of 2024? Because this is a pretty fast-moving world. And I'm sure as soon as you put the pen down on the book so to speak, you probably a week later thought, "Maybe I could have done this or could have done that." But right at that point in time, what were the main thoughts that came out of that for you?

Stephen Waddington:

That's a really interesting perspective actually, because I've written a number of books along the way through my career, and I have had an ongoing conversation with a publisher about writing the book about AI in public relations. We check in every quarter or so, and my feedback is the market hasn't settled. We can't do it yet. We can't do it yet because it is changing so fast. I think there's huge excitement around AI when it launched, when OpenAI launched ChatGPT in November 2022, and we seemingly had this almost magical like system that anyone could access from a prompt. It's very similar to what happened with social forms of media in the early noughties where it was completely democratic, anyone could access it and apparently can do the job or many of the aspects of the public relations or corporate communications role in terms of editing, content creation, providing alternative perspectives, and so forth.

And so naturally, practitioners have lept in to try and understand these systems and use them within their workflow. I think there's a lot of experimentation going on at the moment. The market is moving so incredibly fast and there's a related issue that you cannot have a regulation and legislation sitting on a shelf waiting for a technology system or a new means of technology to emerge, so there's this almost parallel track lagging behind the development of the technology, looking at the governance issues. And I think for public relations practitioners, that's the second opportunity. Every organisation is going to have its AI moment where there's the intersection of the organisation and the impact of AI leads to risk issues. And that's the second area, I think, where practitioners have an advisory role. It's a very significant advisory role in helping organisational leaders understand that the public and the public context.

David Pembroke:

As of today, what is your advice to people who are working in public relations and communications in terms of acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to play a role as an advisor, as a leader in the adoption and the application of the technology in whichever organisation they might be working in?

Stephen Waddington:

I think very simply. So experimentation is a really good place to start to understand this. Ethan Molek, who's a US academic, who's been very early into this technology said, "Basically it takes you three sleepless nights to understand this technology and you do that through experimentation." And I would urge anyone to... That's the place I've always started. Try it out for yourself so you understand. But then I think you've got to follow that up with training. And we're seeing public relations associations and higher education organisations around the world providing organisations like GCS in the UK, the Government Communication Service providing training for practitioners. Get some training as soon as you can so you can start to understand this. Understand it from two aspects. The impact on your workflow potentially and how you can use it in your daily practice. And lots of organisations are starting to run pilots to use AI within practice. And you shared a really helpful rubric at the top of the pod about how you can do that.

And the second one is the societal perspective. There's an awful lot of work being done on that. ChapGPT caused a huge amount of energy in the market, and AI shot into public awareness because of that. But organisations like the CIPR in the UK have been looking at this for 10 years. 2018, it started a social media panel to explore some... Sorry, an AI panel to explore some of these issues and look at them from a risk perspective.

David Pembroke:

And so through your own experiments, where have those moments been for you where you've thought, "Oh, wow. This is transformational, this is seriously going to have an impact," when you look at some of the enhancements perhaps that you've been able to derive for your own workflows and your work processes?

Stephen Waddington:

David you captured it. The rubric you shared right up front captured it really, really well. I think inevitably people are focused on the tactical aspect because that's what we do. And clearly, there is a significant support that can be provided by AI in terms of the tactical roles that we do. So editorial assistants, editing and manipulating document, proofreading documents, creating content. Things like if you created a white paper extracting key points from that white paper. It's very, very good at taking an original form of content and creating it into different versions. Doing the first draught of social media posts, doing the first draught of a press release from a report, and so forth. So that editing and summarization role is very good.

And we tend to focus on... That's where a lot of practitioners tend to focus, so that functional area. I think that belies and misses a bigger opportunity, and that's the potential to help us elevate our practice into management. So that's helping understand from a management perspective, the public sphere, large amounts of data.

One thing AI helps you do is very quickly get to grips with a large amount of data. Now, a large amount of data might be the transcript from this podcast. It might be a policy document or it might be a report which would take you half a day to read and get to grips with. And then, if you were to use that as part of a horizon scanning exercise, take you a significant amount of time to understand. Now, AI can help you interrogate large amounts of data, any of those aspects that are shared, and get to grips with that and understand that very, very quickly. And there, I think, is the power. It's a shortcut. And you described it professional advisory, and it is.

If you start to think then about applying that in practice in activities like horizon scanning, understanding risk, red teaming. Now, I've taken annual reports from organisations and uploaded them into a large language model and said, "Right, okay, assume the role of an activist. How would you undermine this report from a financial perspective? What are the weaknesses in this report? If we wanted to mount as an activist investor, wanted to mount an aggressive takeover of this organisation, what would be the best way to do it?" And it just provides you with that alternative perspective, breaks you out of your biases, and helps you understand. So there's a tactical element, incredibly useful, but the really powerful aspect, I think, is the management element.

David Pembroke:

At the moment, how many hours would you find that you are using it or have you now have it perpetually sitting with you?

Stephen Waddington:

You suggested it has a role as an assistant and also a coach. I think it's very useful in both those roles. I tend to, and I think a lot of progressive practitioners now have some form of larger language model open all the time on their computer. I certainly do. So either use a system called Claude or I use OpenAI. I'm very, very aware of the governance issues and around these systems, and so manage them accordingly. In a more secure environment, you might want to consider Microsoft Copilot because that is locked down to very firm guide rails. And so a lot of enterprise organisations are starting to roll out Copilot and provide that to practitioners. And yeah, practitioners just have it open and just as you would Google and use it.

David Pembroke:

Well certainly, that has happened here in Australia. Microsoft have signed a very large deal with the Australian government around Copilot. And so that is the system that Australia's public servants can use if they've obviously got to make a case for it, but then they get a licence, and off they go. Now, you mentioned issues around ethics governance, and they were also part of the report that you did. What were some of the findings that you made around ethics, governance, and ethical use of artificial intelligence?

Stephen Waddington:

I think the biggest issue at the moment is that a lot of these technologies are being used rogue. We are in the very similar time to when social media first emerged where a lot of organisations locked it down. And I can think in the healthcare setting, you weren't allowed access to Facebook in the early part of the North East when it was first available because of the risk issues of information and data breaches. That same behaviour is happening.

The challenge is we live in a post-COVID era where people are working from home. The workforce is much more distributed. You might be working within the context of an enterprise IT policy that can lock down systems and limit what you can access, but everyone has a mobile device that they can use. And that's the issue at the moment. We're in this world where there is very limited governance within an organisational context about how these systems can be used so they're being used rogue.

Because why wouldn't you? If you can get a productivity benefit or an effectiveness benefit from using the technology like ChatGPT, why wouldn't you do it? So that's the big issue. Organisations, just as we did with social media, need to put in place for every aspect of the organisation guidelines about the use of AI, where it can be used, where it can't be used, and progressive organisations are doing that, and they're training against that. In the UK, the Government Communication Service, the end of last year, issued to all practitioners and trained against a governance policy about the use of AI in practice, and every organisation needs to do that.

David Pembroke:

From here, where do you see things evolving to and emerging over the next, say 18 months to two years? What's your best guess as to what sorts of impacts we're going to see and what are the things that people are going to have to be thinking about if we consider that they have looked at that experiment, they've done the training, and their understanding of the ethical constraints that they need to use and apply? Where do we get to? And again, what sort of impacts do you feel that that's going to have on the actual profession?

Stephen Waddington:

There's a related impact. There's a progressive part of practice. Now, the individuals that want to try things and break stuff and innovate that very naturally are progressive and want to lead into technology that are using this technology. There's then across the organisation a significant cultural issue in embedding these technologies. And so the stage we've got to go through, we've got to go through from this hot excitement of the shiny new toy to look seriously about how we embed these technologies safely in our practice to get the effectiveness and efficiency benefits that have been promised.

Now, with any new technology, the numbers, in terms of how they can help from both effectiveness and efficiency perspectives, were way overblown at the start and completely ignored the cultural issues of embedding these technologies in practice. I think every organisation and the smart organisations that I've seen that are doing this are creating innovation groups that are looking at, okay, breaking down the workflow of the practitioner and looking at where these technologies can be best embedded.

And there's loads of good advice and good guidance starting to be shared about... We've talked about some of the use cases already, but how those can be embedded within practice. And there's a couple of ways to do it from a technology point of view. You can get a large language model and have that sitting on everyone's desk as some sort of assistant or coach. Or you can, the technology vendors themselves, the tool vendors that supply this public relations market are now starting to embed AI technologies into all the different aspects of their tools. So there's a dual approach happening in the market.

David Pembroke:

But ultimately, people are still going to play a role. So again, what's your best advice in terms of people thinking about their future? Obviously, thinking about how they can use AI, but your advice to particularly younger people who are coming through, how they might consider development of complementary skills, which are going to make them more effective?

Stephen Waddington:

AI is definitely a tool. I had this long conversation with an academic at the London School of Economics, Leah Edwards, about a work she'd been doing exploring practice where I argued that I couldn't envisage the day where AI would take the relationship perspective. We wouldn't have a relationship with AI. It's there as a tool to help us and support us. And she argued very well that actually we've seen the bots emerging and people are becoming quite comfortable in having a relationship with a bot. So we haven't quite settled on what the level or role of AI is from a mediation perspective. But my own view is that the human connection becomes more important than ever where everyone has access to tools like this so lean into those human aspects of your role is what my suggestion would be.

The other point is this technology gives us tremendous advantage in demonstrating the value of what we do in planning, and it helps us really push up into the strategic role within management. And that's where I'd focus as well.

David Pembroke:

Now, listen. Before I let you go, and you've been very generous with your time, but I just want to know a little bit more about this not-for-profit that you and your wife have put together, your wife Sarah, the Socially Mobile not-for-profit PR school. What's the motivation about that? And how can people learn a little bit more about it? And indeed, how might they be able to contribute?

Stephen Waddington:

Sarah and I have both been separately presidents of our association in the UK, the CIPR. Me in 2014. Her in 2018. And looking at the data around the state of the profession, we spotted this issue with representation across all characteristics. We have known probably since the '50s and '60s. There's an issue in practice. And that actually, if you want a public relations team, corporate communications team, I use the terms interchangeably, to deliver optimally, it needs to represent the public that it's serving as a minimum.

And there's lots of examples of good and bad when that happens or when it doesn't. So there's two issues in addressing representation. You can either address it entry-level within practice, and widen the sphere of applicants into practice. And that's one issue. That's massive though. That's a big job. The intervention we looked at and we have developed through Socially Mobile is providing management training to individuals who have been in practice for 2 to 10 years that don't get the support in getting management training.

You might be a great writer. You might be very good at media relations. You might be very good at a functional aspect of the role. But you haven't got support in understanding finance, line management, policy, and so forth. So we've developed this 10-week management education program that provides all those aspects, and we've been running it three years. We've got 120 graduates now, and it's starting to make a real difference. We're seeing the impact directly on the individuals that go through the program. So typically, an individual comes out of the program, and within 12 months, they get a better paid job or they get a significant promotion in the existing organisation, and then that community is creating scale and is becoming a force for good within the industry. So yeah, that's Socially Mobile.

You can go and find out about it at sociallymobile.org.uk, and we're sort of taking that as a model now, and next, having lots of different conversations about how it could be scaled to greater effect.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. And just in terms of people staying in contact with you and your thinking, I subscribe to your newsletter, and obviously, you are prolific publisher of content, so where are the best ways for people to stay across your work?

Stephen Waddington:

I built my career on Twitter, but I've...

David Pembroke:

Taken a break.

Stephen Waddington:

I've taken a break for the moment. Yeah, so LinkedIn at the moment is probably the best place to find me. By all means, please connect with me on LinkedIn. And I share a lot of what we're doing and thinking on that.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. Well, Wadds, thank you so much for your time this afternoon or this afternoon Australian time, early morning your time there in the UK, very grateful for that. And I'd also encourage people to go and have a look at that report, to again, just get started and get understanding about some of these principles. But I think some of the advice there from Wadds is fantastic, and his notion of having it there, having it open with you, and maybe thinking about that rubric of the three Cs. And thinking about how can it deliver those benefits for you in the work that you do as you are more able to do that. So a very big thanks to Steve Waddington there today from the UK.

And thanks to you, the audience, grateful as ever for you to come back and listen to another great story from one of the leaders of communications around the world. You can rate or review the program. It does help us to be found, and we'd be very grateful if you did take the time to do that. You can find all the latest information, updates, insights, and other things from all around the GovComms world on LinkedIn at the GovComms Institute, certainly, a delight to speak to Stephen today, and we look forward to bringing you another great story from the world of government communications in the next fortnight. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

Voice Over:

You've been listening to the GovComms podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to rate and subscribe to stay up to date with our latest episodes.