



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

**EP#174 TRUST, HUMOUR AND
BUREAUCRACY: THE SECRET
SAUCE OF GOV SOCIAL MEDIA**

WITH HEATHER LANSDOWNE

TRANSCRIPT

Heather Lansdowne:

That's another really important piece is having that managerial and executive all the way up the line, that real trust in the expertise of communications people, which is really important. And that goes two ways as well. You want to be trusted, but also to earn that trust, I think it's always really good to toot your own horn as I say. We're always trying to communicate up the line, "These are the things we've done in the last year, this is how they've affected our growth, millions of people have seen this piece of content and become more familiar with and more comfortable with the ABS."

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 and function of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin our conversation today, may I first acknowledge the traditional owners of the land from where we are broadcasting today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders' past, present, and emerging, and recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. And may I also pay my respects to all First Nations people of the lands from where anyone listening to the podcast today is joining us from.

So picture this, you're scrolling through your social media feeds and amidst sea of memes and pictures of food and holiday photos, you land on a post from the government. And it's clear, it's compelling, and it stops you in your tracks giving you information that you didn't know that you were interested in, but in fact, is directly related to just that. It's cut through the noise. Well, that's the challenge for government communication teams across Australia and around the world. How do they turn their content into citizen attention? Well, in a world where competition for attention is fierce and trust in institutions is low, government agencies and departments must step up to the challenges. Now, when you think about government departments and agencies, really what they are are giant content factories. They are full of the most useful, relevant, and interesting content, but so often it remains unloved, undiscovered, left to decay on spreadsheets and in reports that just never see the light of day.

Well, one Australian government agency that's taken on the challenge to connect through social media is the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which really, when you think about it, is an Aladdin's cave of valuable and interesting content. And our guest today is the boss of the award-winning ABS social media team, Heather Lansdowne. Heather and her team have turned heads with their eye-catching, fun, and engaging take on very interesting government statistics. Heather leads the charge turning data into stories, numbers into narratives, and citizens into active participants in the work of the ABS. And she joins me in the studio now. Heather Lansdowne, welcome to GovComms.

Heather Lansdowne:

Thank you very much, David. Happy to be here.

David Pembroke:

Now listen, before we get into the work of the ABS, the Heather Lansdowne story, what was your journey to social media manager out at the ABS?

Heather Lansdowne:

Well, I'm born and bred in Canberra, so I went to the University of Canberra, did a degree of communications. And pretty much straight out of uni, actually, I was lucky to get, back about 10 years ago now, one of the early jobs in social media. So now pretty run-of-the-mill job, but back 10 years ago, it was actually quite exciting and cool, I think, to be able to say-

David Pembroke:

What things were you doing back those 10 years ago? Can you reflect on what a typical day looked like and what opportunity that you did have to use social media?

Heather Lansdowne:

Sure. So I don't know, it was a bit of the wild west, I guess. So we were just figuring out how can we use social media to help get our brand's message out there? And I was actually working for a big web hosting company at the time, so I was doing a lot of customer service talking to customers, getting their issues fixed whenever they had any complaints or things like that. I was trying to be a bit more personable, which I think was where I realised people just want to talk to a human being and want to be listened to and heard sometimes, and that, in the end, can often just alleviate a lot of problems.

But also experimenting, I guess, with putting out different types of content on Twitter and Facebook, and testing things like what time works the best, which I don't worry about so much now, but back before we had these content algorithms, it was all timeline-based, chronological, so putting things out at the right time really mattered. So we'd measure things like that and see when our audience was online and what things they were more interested in hearing about compared to other things.

David Pembroke:

Was it hard to grow an audience and keep an audience engaged back then?

Heather Lansdowne:

I mean, I think, in a way, it was easier because it was the early days of social media and people were keen to look for different pages to follow, I guess. And they weren't maybe so jaded as they are now with... There's a lot of advertising and things like that on social media. So I won't say that it was really easy, but I think there's obviously a lot of opportunity at the start of when any social media platform joins the club, there can be a good opportunity there to-

David Pembroke:

So when did you leave the corporate world and move into the public sector?

Heather Lansdowne:

So it was in 2016, actually, I came to the ABS actually to work on the 2016 census campaign. So that was a really interesting experience to work on a really big campaign. The census actually affects every single person in Australia, has to fill out the census. So-

David Pembroke:

And was it a social media job-

Heather Lansdowne:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

... that you went to?

Heather Lansdowne:

Social media and communication. So it was general, all that stuff, doing pamphlets and putting social media ads out, and stakeholder engagement, and all that kind of thing. I also had to work on the Australian Marriage Law Survey, which was the next year, actually. So another really big exciting campaign that went out to every household in Australia. And after working on those big campaigns, that's when I folded into what I call the BAU, business-as-usual ABS social media, and really found my love for that and have been there ever since.

David Pembroke:

So with that, and I think often risk is regularly spoken about inside government approvals, permissions, the stopping of the flow, the movement of the content, how is it or how have you seen that develop in an organisation like the bureau of statistics, which is traditionally not perhaps seen as really directed towards driving storytelling as such? It was much more, "Okay, here are the statistics, here's the crunching of the numbers, and here's what it looks like, and let's get the data right out," as opposed to really driving that narrative story behind it. So can you tell us about that story inside the ABS where the authorising environment has perhaps matured and allowed you to move to where you are to today? That was a long question, but... Sorry.

Heather Lansdowne:

No, that's all right. I think that's a good question for the answer I have, which is that it's not an overnight success, which I think some people will think that, "Oh, the ABS and social media presence has really come out strong in the last year or two years," or whatever it is. But as I said, having been there now for almost 10 years, I can see that even before I started, there was this push and a lot of really great humorous, funny, fun and personable content that the ABS was putting out, especially in talking about the census and that thing, on Twitter and Facebook. So even before I came on, that was already something that had worked and I think had built up a good level of trust within the organisation and executive. And I think that's another really important piece is having that managerial and executive all the way up the line, that real trust in the expertise of communications people, which is really important.

And that goes two ways as well. You want to be trusted, but also to earn that trust. I think it's always really good to toot your own horn as I say. We're always trying to communicate up the line, "These are the things we've done in the last year, this is how they've affected our growth, this is how many people have seen them, millions of people have seen this piece of content and become more familiar with and more comfortable with the ABS," and we try to really tie that into the ABS's mission as a whole. So it's collecting and disseminating statistics about Australia that really educates all the decisions, the important decisions that governments, communities need to make. They need that data to make those decisions. So part of that is just having the public on board and having be aware of us and have a good association with us so that when we come to their door to say, "Hey, you've been selected to fill out this survey," that they actually, "Oh, hey, I've seen you on Facebook. I really like that page. Yeah, I'm happy to do that."

David Pembroke:

Yes.

Heather Lansdowne:

So I think selling those-

David Pembroke:

Is it hard to measure the actual impact of the work that you do? You can come up with these vast numbers of opens, and clicks, and views, and all the other stuff, but connecting it to actual business outcomes, how hard is that for you?

Heather Lansdowne:

I think, as you said, there is one piece that we do focus on a lot, which is just those vanity metrics, impressions, engagements, that kind of thing. And I think that that does tie into what I was talking about with creating awareness and just a positive sentiment. So you can track likes and things like that if you want to see how people are positively engaging. But then there also is that qualitative side as well that is a little bit harder to measure, as you say, but we do try really hard to track that and to send those good news stories up the line as well.

So we'll hear stories from survey interviewers that do knock on people's door and they literally say, as I just said, "Oh, hey, I've seen you on... We had one person say, "Oh, my gosh. You're a celebrity. I've seen the ABS on Facebook, I'll do this survey." And we've had people reach out, educators, say, "Oh, we'd like to put this piece of content, a social media post that you've done into our textbook for year 12 economics," or whatever. So just keeping a record, I think, of all of those wins does help to paint that picture a bit of how what we're doing does feed into the greater mission of the ABS.

David Pembroke:

You mentioned humour earlier in one of your answers. And, obviously, in the early days of social media, certainly from a public sector point of view, the police departments, the New Zealand Police Department I think might've been first, and then Queensland kicked it off and... And they were hysterical, really, a lot of the great content and building that trust. How do you make that judgement about what's funny and what's not funny and where the line is?

Heather Lansdowne:

Well, I think the police is a really good example of that because we can often think as government communicators or communicating any serious subject matter, "Oh, this is a bit too serious. I can't joke about it." And then I always say to people that might have that concern is like, "Look at the police. They're talking about some of the most serious stuff, but they can still have a humorous presence on their page." So it's really good to study, I think, that content to know where to draw that line. And there are certain things that they probably wouldn't joke about, but that doesn't mean that there aren't other things like speeding or something like that, that they couldn't have a little bit more of a humorous approach with.

And I think humour really helps... It gets people's defences down. It actually helps communicate a message with them rather than just scary government department that no one's going to want to follow that and pay attention to that message. So if you add a little bit of humour in there, it can help build that audience and get people engaged and people go, "Okay, I won't speed. Okay, I'll wear my seatbelt," because you did it in a funny way so I can get-

David Pembroke:

But it's like any person, isn't it? You can be serious about some things, but in another context, you are actually joking with friends and family and other, and revealing another side of your personality. But landing on the

ABS's tone of voice, the personality as such, how has that matured over time and how do you continue to move with the societal expectations which are matched to probably leadership expectations around, "Where is that appropriate line for us?"

Heather Lansdowne:

Ever since I came onto the team and did a little bit of review, and I don't think we changed the tone of voice too much then, and I think we have tried to keep it quite consistent, which is important in social media, as you know, to have a consistent brand that people can recognise and know what to expect from you. And I think that's always been authoritative, as in we have good quality information, trustworthy statistics to inform Australians with whatever data they might need. So you can trust us. We're serious and trustworthy. But at the same time, we're talking to everyday people. We're not talking just to economists. We want to reach out and touch the everyday Australians.

So we want to talk to them in a way that's very... As you said, we can be serious about some things, but some things, we can joke about. And we also really want to have... We've had a big push in the past few years, I guess, with plain English and not wanting to try to sound fancy, and smart, and intelligent. No, we actually want to get our message across to everyone and not everyone can understand super long words and this intellectual discussion. Sometimes we just want to make it accessible for absolutely everyone and people that might not have English as their first language. So that's been a big push the last few years as well, is just to try to make things understandable and simple for everyone.

David Pembroke:

So most of our audience of people who work in government communications, and I'm sure they'd be interested to know practical things around what does your day look like, how many people are on your team, what tools are you using, what cadence are you looking at, what's the mix of graphics and video and audio and all those other things. So maybe what's a Monday morning look like? Heather Lansdowne's had a lovely weekend down the coast, she comes back into work, do your team sit together-

Heather Lansdowne:

Yeah. So we've actually got a couple of team members up in Brisbane as well as our team in Canberra.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Okay. So that's an interesting thing straight away, isn't it? That you've got a distributed team.

Heather Lansdowne:

That's right. Yeah. And we also have flexible work. We work from home some of the time as well. So we do a lot of our meetings, obviously... Well, all of our meetings with the whole team is virtual because we're dispersed. But Monday morning and, I guess, the whole of Monday is a day I think to plan the rest of the week. So we do have a catch-up with just the social media team where we go through all the content that we want to create for the following week.

David Pembroke:

How many of you are there?

Heather Lansdowne:

There's four of us, including myself. So we go through all the content for the following week, we assign, "Oh, I'll do that post," that kind of thing-

David Pembroke:

How do you know what's going on inside the ABS?

Heather Lansdowne:

Oh, yes. Well, we have a calendar.

David Pembroke:

Okay. And how do you populate the calendar? Have you got scouts out in the different areas and do you find that people is coming to you and saying, "Hey, we've got this story. We're publishing this data at this particular time. Can you help us put the content together for it?"

Heather Lansdowne:

Yeah, for sure. So it's partly that and partly us being really prepared and proactive as well. So the ABS actually has... If you're ever interested in seeing what's coming up out of the ABS, there's a calendar on the homepage and you can see what's coming up for the whole year, all of the releases that are-

David Pembroke:

Right.

Heather Lansdowne:

So we've already pre-populated our monthly calendar, our annual calendar with all of these releases that we know are coming out. So that's really good. We can see which ones of those are going to have maybe the most public interest and impact. And we also do, as you said, have people coming to us, saying, "Oh, we've got this really interesting article that we've written. We want to promote it. How can we work with you to promote that," and we'll give our opinion on what we think might be the best channels or video or what would work best for that. But as we said, we also do a lot of fun stuff, so it's not just dictated by, "Oh, what's the ABS putting out on this particular day?" We also like to tap into any relevant pop culture, things that might be going on.

So towards the end of each year or at the start of each year, we do a lot of research as to what are the movies coming out this year, what are the TV shows, are there any big anniversaries. We'll often do like, "Oh, it's been 10 years since The Lion King came out," or things like that. And we'll just be as creative as we can and try to find any way to link ABS data into any of those conversations that we think might be relevant or we think just might help people to get interested. It's hard to get people to be interested in a statistic, but if you say, "Oh, it's something about the movie Die Hard," then all the Die Hard fans might pay attention to that.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? Because if you have a look at the professional sports teams, for example, everyone's looking to culture, looking to where can they position themselves inside culture to be able to be more relevant to people, to be more engaging, and to be able to attract the attention of various people out there. So once you know and you understand, obviously you jump about depending on what contextual opportunities might arise, just out of whatever's going on, how do you turn the ideas into content? Do you have graphic designers? Videographers? Are you creating audio content? What does that mix look like?

Heather Lansdowne:

So we create most of our content just within our social media team. We do the design or the video ourselves. We do have a graphic design team within the ABS as well who we would sometimes reach out to for

something if it was quite complex. But I think we've gotten pretty good actually at creating content ourselves. And I think that's been part of our success as well, is just being able to be really agile and create stuff ourselves, not have to have a back and forth with the design team-

David Pembroke:

And what tools are you using to create that?

Heather Lansdowne:

So we use Canva.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, okay.

Heather Lansdowne:

Yeah. Which, very simple, easy to use. There's a free version. And I think all content managers probably love Canva, Australian-owned, lady. So big inspiration story. But, yeah. And we created a new style guide many years back now, but within my time, and part of that was to simplify the whole thing so that we could design things ourselves. I'm not a graphic designer, but I can populate a title and search for some stock images and things like that. And we found that actually that performed just as well or better than something that was really intricately beautifully designed, which would take a lot longer. So from our-

David Pembroke:

And your video, what's that capability look like?

Heather Lansdowne:

Video, we do some things in Canva as well. It's got some great capability in terms of bar chart races, which are animated bar charts go through a time period and show change over time. Those are really popular. People always want to say, "Oh, who's going to win the bar chart race?" So we'll do some stuff in there. And then we've also been doing a bit more of that trending short-form type of content that everyone knows is very popular at the moment, and we do that through Instagram Reels. So sometimes we would film that ourselves directly in the app or just on our phones and use just an easy editing tool like CapCut or Canva to stitch those things together. So, yeah, that's all in-house within our team.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, within the team. Yeah.

Heather Lansdowne:

So big job. Yeah.

David Pembroke:

Audio?

Heather Lansdowne:

Audio, we don't have anything that's just audio, I think a podcast or anything like that. No, just video and still images.

David Pembroke:

And where do you sit then inside the wider communications team and how do you work in with obviously the wider ABS communication strategy?

Heather Lansdowne:

Yeah. Well, our section also includes the media team, so we're very plugged in with the media team and that's great to know what are the economic releases that are coming out that's the stuff that's being reported on the news. So it's good to be aware of what they're doing, the media releases they're putting out, and also just any topical things that might be going on in politics or in around the world that's good to know for sensitivities and things like that. And then there's also another section that we very closely communicate with as well, which takes care of all the internal communications, all the project work. So if there's a big campaign to hire a bunch of new graduates for next year, that would be the team that's putting together a larger campaign around those things or other changes that might be going on with the ABS that need to have multiple tactics like stakeholder engagement, internal comms, as well as just social media.

David Pembroke:

And you mentioned also a graphic design capability that's there as well.

Heather Lansdowne:

Yes. And, yeah, the graphic design, the digital media unit. So they do video, graphic design, internal videos, things that go on YouTube, potentially, as I said, creating those ads that might go into recruiting graduates or something like that.

David Pembroke:

You said 2016 you joined the-

Heather Lansdowne:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

... ABS? It's 2025. That's a long time. Not many people stay, stick around in places that long. Why have you stuck around?

Heather Lansdowne:

It's a good question. I think, as I said, the first couple of years were working on a couple of different campaigns, so that was really interesting and fast-paced and I learned a lot from that. But I actually really enjoyed coming into the business-as-usual unit, as I say. And I think part of what I like about that is that it's such a quick turnover, there's really quick deadlines, and this is probably a result of my using too much social media, is that I have a very short attention span.

So having to work on a campaign that's like, "Oh, we're going to put this campaign out next year for the census," that's a long way away, whereas I'm thinking, "Oh, what can we put out next week for... If the Grammys is coming out?" And then you get to make something and work on it for a week and put it out, and then you get immediate feedback from the audience of, "Oh, we love this. This was so funny," or, "We didn't like this." So I think that works really well for my attention span, just getting to put stuff out constantly, work on things in a very short timeframe.

David Pembroke:

Are you constantly surprised by what works and doesn't work? Sometimes you think, "This is an absolute smoker, this is going to work, this is great," and it's crickets.

Heather Lansdowne:

Yeah.

David Pembroke:

As opposed to, "Wow, that's blown up."

Heather Lansdowne:

Yeah, absolutely. I think it's disappointing when you do something... It can be disappointing when you do something, especially-

David Pembroke:

I was so right. [inaudible 00:23:33].

Heather Lansdowne:

... it's worked before, and then maybe it doesn't work again the next time, or there was just some magic thing that you didn't quite understand. We're always trying to understand that magic of why do things work.

David Pembroke:

What's your relationship like with the algorithms?

Heather Lansdowne:

Do I like them or not or-

David Pembroke:

Well, yeah, how do you think about them in terms of your job? Because they do change regularly, they move in different ways, they're quite mysterious. You have to be, particularly, I imagine in your job, very aware of those change yourselves that you can find where different parts of it are moving at particular times that are going to give you that lift that you're looking for. Yeah. How do you think about those things? And the four of you, I'm sure, are talking about it all the time.

Heather Lansdowne:

Yes, all the time. We're talking about that at the moment actually, because it's the start of the year. So making our plans for the rest of the year, what our goals are going to be, what split of content in different pillars do we want to look at. I guess it can seem very mysterious, but then we are very data-driven, as I'm sure most people in social media are. So I guess taking that mystery out of it and trying to expect what the algorithm wants. We just look back at the last quarter, the last year, and we go, boom, boom, boom, "These ones performed really well. Why?" I think that's a really important piece that maybe some people are missing of looking at all of your content, circling the ones maybe that did really well, maybe circling the ones that didn't do well as well. That's a really interesting exercise to go, "Oh, okay. Well, the ones that did well only had one line in the headline and the ones that didn't do so well had three lines in the headline."

You could find even small things like that that you realise, "Oh, we need to keep it much more simple." And we were finding constantly comparing just two things would work really well. So rather than trying to compare 10 different things, we're just like, "This is one piece of data and this is how it compared to 10 years ago," or, "This is how it compares to a different country," or whatever. That thing always works really well, so I guess I would say, to not stress yourself out about it too much, and we just go with the data and we go, "Those things working well, we'll keep trying them," and just constantly iterate every quarter we're doing this so we can't go wrong for too long before we realise like, "Oh, there's a change, and these things are performing better now."

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So as you mentioned, planning, it's a great time of the year to really be sitting and thinking about what's coming. You have your calendar, you've got a bit of a road map. So what does that mix of pillars, and content, and channels, and cadence and all of that, what does it look like for the ABS in 2025?

Heather Lansdowne:

It's a lot. Yeah. So we've got our four different channels. So Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and I say Twitter, but X as you know. We also have YouTube, which we are looking to expand a little bit more this year. Maybe put some more short-form content on there, which has been going really well on Instagram.

David Pembroke:

And so are you using the subject matter experts inside the ABS for that short-form stuff or what does it look like?

Heather Lansdowne:

Most of that short-form stuff is people within the social media team presenting that, or it's just data-driven. It's a data visualisation that's moving or telling some story through just a slideshow, basically. But I think, yeah, really interesting to lean on spokespeople within the organisation as well. And we have some great spokespeople that will put out stuff on their personal LinkedIn programs as well, which is another really interesting thing to think about I think is almost that influencer marketing. It's like people don't want to necessarily want to hear from a big organisation. It can be better to have experts within your organisation doing that through their private channels and being a bit more personable that way as well. So we do get that through those personal LinkedIn and sometimes X profiles as well. So we have a few different pillars. We do focus quite heavily on what we call popular data because that's the stuff that gets the most engagement, gets us more followers, gets us more views, and as I said, that's feeding into that key driver that we have of just creating awareness and a good association with the ABS-

David Pembroke:

So what is the most popular data?

Heather Lansdowne:

The most popular data is always data, it has to be very simple, it has to be informing them of something you didn't know before. And important point is that it has to be contextual. So we can't just say, "Oh, this is the GDP this year." You have to say, "This is the GDP compared to last year," or compared to a different country or something like that. So that was something that we learned quite early on as well, that you need to provide that comparison point. And I think that goes into storytelling of one piece of data, people don't don't know what that means. You need to tell a story for them. How has it changed? Is it good or bad?

David Pembroke:

What are the topics though that get the most interest? Is it population data, is it-

Heather Lansdowne:

Yes. Mostly, I think we draw a lot of our most popular data from the census, which does have a pretty broad range of questions in there, and population demography data about people's ages, and the different sex breakdown, and things like that. And I think that's just because, on social media, we are trying to be really personable and just relate. So people can relate to, "Oh, I live in a house with two bedrooms," or with two cars or, "That's my salary," whereas not everyone can relate to, "This is how much iron ore was exported from Australia this year." That might be interesting to some people, but it might not be interesting to everyone.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. In terms then of artificial intelligence, I can't not ask a question about it because it is as important really, and as comprehensive, and as impactful as we're seeing in all of the work that we do, all of us who are working in this part of the world, how are you thinking about it? How is it changing the way that you work? Where are you applying it in your work? What benefit is it creating for you?

Heather Lansdowne:

Yeah, sure. It's a very interesting one these past couple of years, isn't it? So I think it can be really good to use as an assistant. It's not something that we're going to say, "Oh, create a whole social media post for us," because we don't want the internet just be populated by, as people say, AI slop, that's just... It's good enough, but it's not really anything special. So I think anytime that we can get it to just help with any just administrative tasks that we have to do, I don't know if there's some email you have to draught or something like that, it can be really helpful. And just with brainstorming, I find it really helpful to say, "Oh, I'm thinking about whether I should join this new social media platform, Bluesky," or whatever. You could just ask a question, "What questions should I consider when trying to join a new social media platform?"

So sometimes I just use it as a bit of a sounding board and brainstorm so it can get you thinking along, "Oh, yeah, these are the questions I should ask, and now let me research the answers to those questions," or you can have AI do that, but obviously you always have to check because it can make things up. And I think it's really good for... Creatively, we've tried a few things with it of, "Oh, can you write a joke for Father's Day about statistics?" And sometimes it will come up with something good. Maybe one time out of 10 or 20, it's decent. But I have found, a lot of the time, it's not as good as a regular person. And we do do a lot of... Something that's really popular is we'll take a poem or a song and we'll do a parody of that. We did Eminem's Lose Yourself, which is really, really popular last year. And the sad thing is we'll get a lot of comments on those type of posts of like, "Oh, AI just wrote this."

And let me tell you, I've tried to get AI to write things like that and it doesn't understand at all. It can't make anything nearly as good as what a person can in those instances. So it's a shame to be accused of doing AI when someone worked really hard on that. But I do think it can be really good for puns. That's another thing I'll say, if people are trying to be a little bit more fun on social media, but they're having some concerns internally, I would say, "Oh, well just put a pun in there. It's a dad joke. It's not offensive. You can't worry too much about that." And ChatGPT or AI is really good at coming up with 10 different puns about wombats and statistics or whatever. And one of them will be probably-

David Pembroke:

Have you trained models and agents that are servicing all four of you in the team that you're using, so you're all inputting the data into the agent, which is making it more useful or it's more at this stage, more of an individual?

Heather Lansdowne:

No, I think, at this stage, it's more of an individual and we haven't training models on anything like that. I think as I said, we just sometimes use it a bit more of an assistant. I think some of us probably use it more than others. Some people just have really great creative brains that come up with stuff, but I'm just lazy. So I say I work smarter not harder. So if there's something that's a small administrative task that I could maybe get some help with AI, I'm going to see if it can help me with that.

David Pembroke:

What's your biggest challenge this year in 2025?

Heather Lansdowne:

Biggest challenge, I think, is... I guess I've been talking about this with my team of continual growth. It's like what you see with capitalism as a whole. Is it enough to just be successful or do you have to keep getting more and more and more successful? And how can you do that when you've already optimised your strategy so much to be getting such a high level of output? Is it then possible to keep growing that 20, 30% every year, year-on-year with the same resources? So I think that'll be a big challenge to us, whether we can do that, whether we want to do that, [inaudible 00:33:18].

David Pembroke:

Would you be getting more resources? Would you be thinking that you could make a case to say, "Hey, listen, we've got four and we've achieved these results, which are recognised and award-winning and outstanding. How about you give us eight and we might go to-

Heather Lansdowne:

Well, that would be absolutely amazing. And I think that's definitely one way that you can generate more bang for your buck as you said, or if you want to keep growing your results, using more resources. But at the moment, I guess I'm not expecting that we would necessarily be growing the team this year any more than it is. So I guess we're looking at any more... I think we've probably got a lot of the low-hanging fruit in terms of getting really good increases, so it's probably getting a little bit harder now to get those extra results we're looking for. But that could look something like looking at new platforms, as I mentioned, Bluesky, we've had a lot of requests from people asking us if we're going to get on there, when we're going to get on there-

David Pembroke:

And Threads? Have you-

Heather Lansdowne:

And we're not on Threads either, but that's something that we might look into as well, that people are moving to these other platforms. So that can be a really good way, I think, to do work smarter, not harder.

David Pembroke:

And YouTube. That's a lot of work to get your YouTube strategy and-

Heather Lansdowne:

Yes. And then YouTube as well. But something we do like to do, we call it COPE, that's our acronym.

David Pembroke:

Okay, what's that stand for?

Heather Lansdowne:

It's create once, post everywhere. So some people will say, "Oh, you have to have different content on LinkedIn, and Facebook, and Twitter." But we have found that, actually, you can post the same content on five different platforms and it might perform better on one of them, but that doesn't mean that you're not still getting some pretty good results on the other platforms that I feel like you're getting for free, basically, because you only had to create it once. So we'll be probably doing a lot of that if we do venture onto some of these new platforms. Bluesky and Threads, that's very similar to X. So we'd be creating that same content on there. And then YouTube Shorts, that's very similar to Instagram Reels, so we'd probably be cross-posting a lot of content on there as well.

David Pembroke:

So let me travel in time to the end of the year, December 2025. You're still there, because you're still having fun. What does a successful year look like for you? What would you... Put your pens down, go on your holiday and think, "We kept improving"?

Heather Lansdowne:

Yes, exactly. Well, it is a big job, as I mentioned. I think we've got a few different things to do. We have a few different projects that we have that we split up between the different team members and some of those can just be administrative type things. I think it's really important to keep your in-house stuff in line as well, and it can get pushed to the back-burner when you're so concerned with doing external things. So we'd like to get a few of those housekeeping things in line. We have a few big presentations and conferences that various people within the team are speaking at. So that's a big win, I think, for us.

And then in terms of... Well, another big project would be YouTube, as I mentioned. I think we'll see that as a big success if we can get on there and if we can start seeing some really good results on there and potentially even looking at any of the other social media platforms that are out there and considering those. And then in terms of numbers, as I said, I think it's getting a bit scary when we look at the projections and what we might be aiming for. So for context, when I started, maybe five or six years ago, we would get maybe 11 million impressions per year, and now we're pretty much at 50 million.

David Pembroke:

Wow.

Heather Lansdowne:

So I was saying to my team, I was like, "Guys, a few years ago, we were at one million per month and now we're at one million per week pretty much." So this year-

David Pembroke:

You're rock stars.

Heather Lansdowne:

Yeah. So that's very exciting. But then it's almost a bit intimidating, but it's a good challenge I think to then go... We're going to go for 60 million, 70 million this year, really big numbers, but I think we'll be looking at that in the next few weeks and deciding on a goal and breaking it up month by month, week by week, and just chipping away at that and hopefully we can achieve that as well.

David Pembroke:

A final word, perhaps some wisdom from a leader, from a grizzled veteran of the social media world and space, what advice do you have for people who perhaps don't have quite the authorising environment, and the support, and the skills, and other things... What would you be encouraging other communicators and social media teams across the [inaudible 00:37:50]? And indeed to government communicators, local government, state government, multilevel, we've got all sorts of people who listen to this program, what advice would you have for them?

Heather Lansdowne:

Well, I think for any government, we would definitely say being on social media is a big plus. As I said, we've reached 50 million people this year. That's a lot of people that you might want to reach for your message and you might want to consider how many hundreds of thousands of dollars it would cost to reach that many with traditional advertising. So I think that's a good way to look at it. If you are hoping to get on social media or hoping to make your social media a little bit more fun as you might see other departments are doing, but there is a bit of that internal concern, which is fair because it can be a bit scary, I guess I would say one is to look at other examples of social media.

So, as you said, you can look for the most funny extreme ones, and you don't even have to try to be that funny. You could just be a little bit more funny. So if you look at all the police departments, if you look at New Zealand in particular, they're different councils that they have, police as you mentioned. I think because they're a smaller country, they can get away with doing a bit more. So have a look at them, have a look at any agencies overseas as well. We'll look at all... Stats Canada and Stats New Zealand and see like, "Oh, what are they doing that's working," because that's probably going to work well for your content, your subject matter as well. So I would say if you're not allowed to do anything fun for yourself, then get together a case of, "All these other agencies are doing all these fun things and they're getting X times more engagements than we are."

And if you can try as well, I always say just like, "Try to be 1% more fun." So if you can't do a post about Barbie or Taylor Swift or whatever, maybe can you just put a pun in the caption. Instead of having a really boring one, have a funny pun. And then you need to measure that. You need to say, "This is the one without the pun, and this is the one with the pun. And the pun one performed 10 times better," and then you need to educate the people within your organisation that may have concerns. And I think through an iterative process of getting 1% funnier, 1% better, 1% more interesting, and continuously feeding that, educating people within the business, then I think, over time, you'll have really good results and get to the place where you want to be. But it does take time and that's okay.

David Pembroke:

Well, I think that's a good message to land on, isn't it? Because that was probably the first point you raised that it didn't happen. These numbers haven't happened overnight, this success happened over time, and it's been a result of perseverance, resilience, continuous improvement, holding to the data and really understanding the mission of the organisation and how you can engage with the Australian people. And I'm sure you've got lots of audience around the world as well. You wouldn't be getting those numbers just... How many people... Do you track that or do you have any understanding as to where the audience is? It couldn't be exclusively Australia, you'd have to be getting people from-

Heather Lansdowne:

I think it's mostly Australia. But then I guess if you look, we do get some comments sometimes from people that, "Well, I'm in America, but I just love you guys and I follow you anyway," that kind of thing, which is really great-

David Pembroke:

Do you find that when you're out, do people turn around and go, "Oh, you're the ABS girl"?

Heather Lansdowne:

I don't know.

David Pembroke:

"You're really funny."

Heather Lansdowne:

I don't know if it's that big of a claim to fame. I think when you're in a government space, if you go to a government conference, then people go, "Oh, the ABS, we love you." I did actually see... Someone sent me, it was an online dating profile and the person said, "Oh, my favourite thing is the ABS Instagram account." That was their answer on their dating profile, and I thought, "We're helping people find love. So..."

David Pembroke:

Very good. Very human. And I think that's when you roll it all back, isn't it? It's about telling good stories and being human.

Heather Lansdowne:

Yeah, absolutely.

David Pembroke:

So being fun and really connecting with people around. Because this is the thing, I have another podcast called Work with Purpose, and we have these wonderful public servants coming in, telling the great stories, and you just think, "Oh, my God. This is so interesting." And we really need to unlock so much more of this content. We really need to invest so much more in the function so as people can discover, and so it can be in the formats that people are consuming this content.

And as I say, giant content factories. Every corner that you turn around in a government department or agency, someone is doing something important and someone is doing something interesting. And I think, as a communicator, your job is to ask a few questions and try to turn that interest into something. And as you say, prevail on the leadership with data about the impacts. Because return on investment for four people, I reckon ABS is getting a fair return. Have you ever done that? Have you ever looked at the numbers to try to say, "Well, listen, to generate this in a traditional media market, you would have to spend X"? Have you done that?

Heather Lansdowne:

We have had a bit of a look into that, yeah, as well. So as I mentioned, I think it's in the hundreds of thousands.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Heather Lansdowne:

Yeah.

David Pembroke:

Oh, easily, I imagine. Yeah, much more. Anyway, Heather, thanks for coming in. Really appreciate that. That's a wonderful, insightful, generous insight into the great work of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. And congratulations to you and to the team. Good luck with 2025. I hope you get to December, and I hope you do reach your goals. I'm sure you will, keeping your eyes on the prize. So thanks so much for coming in.

Heather Lansdowne:

No. Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

David Pembroke:

And to you, the audience, thanks for coming back. What a great interview. What an intelligent, lovely, charming, and again, probably what drives the personality of the account and really the passion for great storytelling, but the passion also for the value that the ABS creates in there, and the impact and the awareness that it can help people with to get greater understanding of what is happening in the great country of Australia. Just a favour, if you could rate or review the program, it does help us to be found. So wherever you're listening to this podcast, please jump on that. Just keep it short, to the point, but it's really valuable to us. So thanks very much, and we do appreciate all of those. Now, listen, you can keep and find all the latest information, updates, insights, and everything else, GovComms episodes on LinkedIn at the GovComms Institute.

And indeed, we're thinking about some things, and I don't really want to talk about it too much at the moment because other things get in the way. But it's interesting what Heather was saying about her team and the skills that her team have now acquired to do the job that they need to do in social media. There's data analysis, there's graphic design, there's strategic thinking, there's storytelling, the changing model of what is required. And I think in these really challenging times where we do see such transformation in the information ecosystem, there's going to be a need for skills and training more people, such as the ABS team, to be able to achieve the storytelling outcomes that they do. So anyway, stay tuned. We'll update you on that when something happens. But, yeah, a joy to speak to Heather today. And we look forward to bringing you more great stories from the important world of government communications in the next fortnight. But for the moment, thanks for coming around. My name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

Voice Over:

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