



**GOVCOMMS PODCAST**

**EPISODE #127 BACK TO BASICS**

- WITH MELANIE GIBBONS

TRANSCRIPT

# TRANSCRIPT

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Melanie Gibbons:

It's about having that plan and that strategy. And I know that sounds again, sort of so basic, but rather than just being ad hoc and throwing content out and having a really clear plan of what you're trying to do in those channels, who are you speaking to? What's the content that resonates with them. So using those communication strategy skills and applying it to social media, I think is definitely where we can get some additional benefit in social media use for government.

Introduction:

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:

Well, hello everyone. Welcome once again to GovComms, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. Today, we have a returning guest, Melanie Gibbons, who is communications advisor at Elm Communications, which is her own consultancy, which she runs here in Canberra, Australia. Melanie has over 18 years experience in communications across government, not-for-profit, and the private sector in Australia and the United Kingdom. And before moving in into consultancy, Melanie worked in the Commonwealth government for over a decade. So with government experience, a focus on customer service, relationships and quality delivery, Melanie has thrived in the local private sector, providing communications advice and a support to a variety of large and small government departments and agencies. She's a passionate communications professional, and is now the local leader of the International Association of Business Communicators here in Canberra. She also has academic qualifications with a masters of strategic communications with a dissertation on the Australian government's use of social media. And she joins me in the studio now. Melanie Gibbons, welcome back to GovComms.

Melanie Gibbons:

Thanks, David. It's nice to be back.

David Pembroke:

Back in the day, you used to be in transition and you were a government regulator. That's what? Five or six years ago now maybe?

Melanie Gibbons:

I opened Elm four years ago. So yeah, a little bit of a break from government, which has been nice.

David Pembroke:

How was that move from government out into the private sector, but really back into government in many ways as an expert?

Melanie Gibbons:

It was look, a tough decision at the time. I loved my team and I loved the agency that I worked for and I was really passionate about what we did, but it was definitely time for something new. I'd been there for seven years and I realised that I was sort of starting to do the same things over and over again. So it was time for a bit of a new challenge and I couldn't quite decide what that was going to be. So having consulted with a range of different people, I think we talked at the time, David.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, we did.

Melanie Gibbons:

I decided just to go out on my own for 12 months, have a bit of a break from being a public servant. I never thought of myself as a very good public servant. I always tried to break the processes and break the mould a little bit, but now I've actually found that a really good grounding for going back and working into government because I understand procurement, I understand the hierarchy. I understand what's like working with the minister's office. So I actually understand the world that government communicators work in. So I think that really puts me in good stead in terms of working with a whole range of different teams and being able to provide support and advice to them.

David Pembroke:

What's the biggest change that you've noticed over the last few years now that you are back working in government? And sorry, you probably have never left government, but what are those big changes that you're seeing at the moment?

Melanie Gibbons:

Look, I think the story I always tell is when I did my degree sometime ago now, we used to get one class in the computer lab to be able to learn how to do typing and how to use email. And we got taught how to use a fax machine and how to send out our media releases via fax. And so I went back to uni because I found that I really needed a better grounding in what was contemporary communications practise and I wanted to think differently. I think when I was doing my masters, social media was still something that a lot of government departments were very hesitant about, and that was only 2016, 2017. And now what I've really seen is that a lot of government departments are really embracing it. And they've really taken to social media and have lost some of that risk aversion that was there a couple of years ago.

David Pembroke:

And is that because they've had to get over the risk aversion because that's where people are and that's where they're consuming information so government has to have its story in those places?

Melanie Gibbons:

I think so. I mean, you've got to go to where the people are. I think it's also because there's better understanding and better acceptance of it at a higher level, at the executive level. A lot of the executive now know what Facebook is, they know what Twitter is, they understand how Instagram works because they're using it in their own personal lives. And I think as that personal interaction with those platforms has increased, then the permission for government communicators to use it in a more creative freer way has come about.

David Pembroke:

So with that, what are you seeing at the moment in terms of on the ground inside some of those teams that you are working with? What are some of the new and emerging skills that government communicators are going to have to get across?

Melanie Gibbons:

Look, I was thinking about this one in terms of the upcoming trends. I'm doing some work with the government department at the moment, trying to predict what's going to happen over the next two to three years. And honestly, what I think we need to do is go back to basics because we've gotten quite caught up in social media and creativity and video production and animation and delivering all the big shiny things, which I think are amazing. But what we know is that trust in government has decreased and continues to decrease.

The latest Edelman Trust Barometer came out earlier this month, and what it found was there was a real lack of trust in government. And so for me, it's about let's go back to basics, let's try to take some of the shine and the spin off everything and actually just provide quality information.

Melanie Gibbons:

And so for me, what I've been talking to a lot of people about is going back to those basic strategy skills, stopping and thinking about who your audience is, worrying less about the grand production that you could put on and going, "Well, where are my audience and what are they reading? What do they need to know and what's the information they need?" So for me, I look at it at a slightly different way. I think maybe we need to go back to some of those basic communication skills around integration and strategy and research.

David Pembroke:

Would you offer an assessment of strategy skills inside government? Do you think it's a capability that's perhaps lacking or may even have degraded somewhat over the last five or 10 years?

Melanie Gibbons:

I don't know whether the skills are lacking or whether the ability to produce good strategy has been diminished. I think as more people have sort of lent onto that social media, video creative production, there's less and less time to do the really great strategy work. And I know that can be really frustrating for some communicators. I've definitely spoken to people who were like, "Oh, I just want time to do a great strategy." Or, "I want to do the really good work. I want to do the strategic work." And quite often what they're stuck doing a little bit is-

David Pembroke:

Stuff.

Melanie Gibbons:

... stuff and things and fixing a fact sheet or fixing up some FAQs to go on the website, but not actually being able to get in at the ground level and do some of that strategy work.

David Pembroke:

What's your advice to people who may be faced with that dilemma? How do they convince their executive that more time spent planning and thinking is going to be ultimately more effective than more things?

Melanie Gibbons:

More stuff.

David Pembroke:

More stuff?

Melanie Gibbons:

I mean, I think my business's purpose and my kind of thing that really drives me is that I think as communicators, we need to be able to demonstrate value and we need to be doing that every day. What we really need to be doing is looking at that customer service aspect that you said, I kind of hold onto, because that's how we demonstrate value within an organisation. And it'll never be a quick thing. It's something that you build up over time. You build relationships, you build goodwill into what you do and you take some of those wins and then you tell people about it.

Melanie Gibbons:

I think the thing for me that's always really ingrained me in that kind of thinking and what I took to my team and what I bring to my business now, if I could tell a little story, is-

David Pembroke:

Sure.

Melanie Gibbons:

... my mother worked at Woolworths for her whole career. She worked as a checkout operator when she was a teenager, worked her way up to quite high in human resources. And she managed stores along the way when I was growing up. And so I spent a lot of time in Woolworths stores, a lot of time in lunchrooms and back docks. And a lot of time after school hanging around the shop, packing shelves. And every day, I just felt like, "Oh, I just want to get out of here. I'm done. Let's leave." And as soon as my mom had that bag in her hand, no doubt a customer would stop her because she was wearing a uniform and say, "Can you just tell me where the flour, canned tomatoes, beans are?" And my mom would always stop whatever we were doing. We were almost out the door. I could see light. And she'd go and show that person exactly in the aisle where they could find that canned tomatoes, flour. And that was really what drove her, was that great customer service.

Melanie Gibbons:

I think that's quite often what we forget in communications, is we are a service area. We're here to deliver something for the organisation we're working in. And without having that service and without people knowing that we can provide that service, we're not able to demonstrate our value. And so, really having customer service at the forefront of what we do and how we build our relationships and how we deliver and how we build expectations, for me, is really critical to them.

David Pembroke:

Inside a government communications team, this notion of customer might be quite new. So who do you think the customer is?

Melanie Gibbons:

For me, it's twofold. One, your customer is your internal customer. So clients to the business areas, the line areas, whatever you might call them in your department. And there, really first and foremost, the relationship you need to build. So if you're not building relationships with your business areas, with your executive, with your secretary or CEO, then quite often, you're not going to be brought in early. So if you don't have them as sort of at the forefront of customer journey for your area, then it's going to be very difficult to get your work done. But I think where we bring value as communicators is that we bring in that external view to those conversations. So then having your audience, the Australian public, whoever they might be in mind when we have those conversations with the executive. That's the value we can bring. Is that we have this different view of who we're trying to communicate to as an organisation.

David Pembroke:

And so that is to provide what? A richer picture around that customer, to your customer so to speak about what you are seeing, what you are understanding, is to that behaviour that may be relevant to that particular group.

Melanie Gibbons:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, if you are not bringing the audience-centric view as communicators, then who's going to bring it? So that's really what I always saw as when I had a team and I worked in house. And now is thinking about who that audience is, who are we communicating to? And as I said, going back to those basics and going, "Well, where are the audience and what do they need to know?" So I think that's always the practical overlay that we can bring to some of those conversations in house.



David Pembroke:

What about the reputation of communication? Have you seen a change in that because the key thing you mentioned there a little bit earlier was brought in early, which is the eternal lament of a government communicator saying-

Melanie Gibbons:

Sitting at the table.

David Pembroke:

That's right. A hand on the steering wheel, but it doesn't happen or it's not perceived to happen because brought in too late. Decisions are made, budgets are allocated, it's all over. How do you go about that? This notion of getting in and getting in early, it's just about credibility, it's about value, it's about delivering?

Melanie Gibbons:

Absolutely. And it's about relationships. So if you are not out talking to people and finding out what's going on and what's happening with them and understanding their perspective... I've always said, I wish I had a psychology degree as much as a communications degree, because for me building those relationships with your executive is much about understanding them and what drives them and what they're interested in. And only through doing that and understanding their perspective, will you be able to actually get into those meetings, get invited in, be allowed to share your views and perspectives.

David Pembroke:

And with that strategy piece then, that builds the credibility I imagine from your point of view. That if you're able to demonstrate here is a well-thought through articulation of how we might go about influencing stakeholders, citizens, whoever it might be.

Melanie Gibbons:

Absolutely. And that's where research is key. And you don't need to spend months and months doing research. What you need to know is where your information is that you can go to and rely on. So, as I said, I've got the Edelman Trust Barometer front of mind, I've got a range of other research reports when I think about audiences and I'll go, "Oh, let's just go find out what the Yellow Social Media Report's saying about social media use in Australia." So it's about having access to those resources and access to other people so that you can actually do some of that research and then put forward really compelling data and information about audiences that's not just based on gut feel sometimes.

David Pembroke:

You mentioned social media and really the impact and the change of social media. What's your advice around how government communication teams should be using and thinking about social media in order to deliver benefit to citizens?

Melanie Gibbons:

Look, again, I'm a communication strategist at heart. It's what I do. It's the bit that I love. And for me, I think it's about having that plan and that strategy. And I know that sounds again, sort of so basic, but rather than just being ad hoc and throwing content out and... I know that is hard, particularly in large government departments, because they do have so many masters and so many people trying to get content into their channels. But having a really clear plan of what you're trying to do in those channels, who are you speaking to? What's the content that resonates with them? Taking that opportunity to do some evaluation and have a look at what's working. What time of day is posting well? When do you get the most engagement? What type of

content works for you? So using those communication strategy skills and applying it to social media, I think is definitely where we can get some additional benefit in social media use for government.

David Pembroke:

And in terms of the content creation piece, because again, this isn't an evolved skill that all of a sudden, we now have to be able to create podcasts, run webinars, be able to film video, edit video, be able to have basic graphic design skills. What are you seeing around that space, which is feeding that beast where there is such demand, because everyone is asking for more? How do GovComms teams deal with that?

Melanie Gibbons:

Yeah. A lot of people are struggling with it at the moment. So I think a lot of are trying to battle through and do much as they possibly can, but with very few frameworks that are sitting around that about how to prioritise or what goes on to which channels, what content works well, and it's... I've worked in house. I know what it's like. It's sometimes you're just keeping up. You're just getting through day to day and trying to get the next thing over-

David Pembroke:

People come in with an order, don't they?

Melanie Gibbons:

Yeah.

David Pembroke:

Rather than a problem. I want a podcast, or I want a webinar as opposed to-

Melanie Gibbons:

And definitely a video. Everybody needs a video these days.

David Pembroke:

But that's the issue, isn't it?

Melanie Gibbons:

Absolutely.

David Pembroke:

It's preordained that this is what is going to happen. Now, it may or may not be the right thing, but-

Melanie Gibbons:

It's reality.

David Pembroke:

... it's what's going to happen because they've got the budget and you are going to do what they've asked you to do.

Melanie Gibbons:

Absolutely.

David Pembroke:

But again, your advice to people around that, that there is such demand. How do they go about best managing their resources, their capability, their individual capability to be able to deliver?

Melanie Gibbons:

I think it's about knowing where your capability and capacity is. So having those frameworks around prioritisation and how you can make sure that you're getting through the high quality work and not just doing everything that comes your way. So making the right decisions around which battles to pick and which ones not to pick and which ones to let go of when you can. But then also within your team, understanding where some of that capability is and being willing to work together as a team. Quite often, it's hard when you're in a large government department, you get a little bit siloed by just trying to get through the day-to-day business as usual churn. And you forget that there might be someone else in another team that's maybe not as busy today that you could ask for help for. So I think there's a lot of opportunity in government at the moment for us to be working better together.

Melanie Gibbons:

The other thing I would say is there's a whole network of comms people out there. If you are trying to desperately write a new social media policy, because the high court just made a decision, which I know happened at the end of last year and got everyone in a bit of a flurry, ask the network. There's a big network of comms people that are all doing the same thing. So I think we can be better utilising our network so that we're not all reinventing the wheel all the time.

David Pembroke:

That comes to a good question or leads into a very good question I think, around the network or a network, the International Association of Business Communicators, the IABC. As I mentioned in the intro, you are now the boss here in Canberra. There's value in networks, aren't there? Real value in networks.

Melanie Gibbons:

Yeah. I don't think I quite realised how important my network was until I went out on my own and started my own business. I found this little community, I think, within Canberra of comms people who are willing to help and willing to support you. And I really thought when I went out on my own that it'd be a bit of a competitive environment with different consultancies and a lot of contractors out there. But actually what I found is this really lovely group of people who all want to help each other. David, you and I have had a heap of conversations and you've always been great providing advice. And so have so many other well-established consultancies. And that for me is so invaluable as a new business owner, but it's the same across communications teams. So having IABC there means I can tap into a whole range of different comms teams and I can be connected for my clients.

Melanie Gibbons:

I know that I'm not the first one to write a social media plan. I'm not the first one to write a comm strategy. And I know that I'm not the first one to probably make up something in government. And so I can reach into those networks and say, "Who's written a policy on this? Has anyone got something I can use as a base?" And I think that's what everyone should be doing because we should all be working together to make communicate easier for ourselves so we can focus on the really good strategic, interesting work.

David Pembroke:

I'm interested, what are the topics of conversation that you are hearing at the moment inside that local community in government at the moment? What are the say, the top three things that people are talking about?

Melanie Gibbons:



Recruitment.

David Pembroke:

Yes.

Melanie Gibbons:

Recruitment comes up in almost every conversation I have. So we have a lack of communicators coming through, which is a pretty big challenge for everyone.

David Pembroke:

Is it a lack of communicators coming through or is it that the demand has gone up so much higher?

Melanie Gibbons:

Yeah. Both. I think there is increasing demand for communicators. I hope that COVID's had a role in that. Maybe that's one of the great things that came out of having a pandemic for communicators, is that our roles actually much more appreciated. People all of a sudden saw the benefit of internal communications and great employee comms and having to communicate really clearly to the public. We've learned some lessons from that and I can definitely see there's an increase in the need for communicators across Canberra. And so there's definitely more roles than people at the moment. I think every day across our board, we're all sharing jobs that we've heard about to see if there's anyone out there. And then there's about shifting expectations, I guess, as well. Our recruitment agent, I know told me the other day, she's really glad I'm not in government at the moment because my expectations would be too high and that I really need to-

David Pembroke:

What do you mean by that?

Melanie Gibbons:

I always had extremely high expectations about the people that I was trying to recruit into my team.

David Pembroke:

Oh, right. Got you.

Melanie Gibbons:

So she was happy not to be working with me, but I think that's the thing. Expectations need to change. We really need to be focusing on how can we upskill people once they're in house? What's the professional development we can provide people to maybe get them that extra bit of skill we were looking for rather than expecting people to come in already having those skills? For me, I guess if I was to provide any advice around the recruitment story, it's about really hunting for attitude and the right person, but maybe not necessarily the whole skillset you were originally going out for.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. And I think that's an important point that you raise that there is then very deliberate learning and development plans that are put in place to help people to stay with this ever evolving, changing, adapting context that people have to be effective in.

Melanie Gibbons:

Absolutely.

David Pembroke:

That's two things. If we talk about recruitment, we talk about skills. What's a third thing that might be involved?

Melanie Gibbons:

What do we always talk about? I think everyone's talking about how busy they are in Canberra at the moment. I mean, that's how we started this conversation today. It's an election year here in Australia and that means that for communicators, we are ramping up until we get to a caretaker. And I think it's been a busy year. It was a weird year last year. It was probably the best description, and not a lot of people got the break I think they were expecting over the summer. So the year's definitely started on a pretty fast pace, but hopefully caretaker gives everyone a little bit of breathing space and a bit of a chance to regroup and reconnect with their teams, hopefully back in the office for a little bit. And take that moment to do some of that evaluation and regrouping.

David Pembroke:

I want to take you just into the future a little if I may, just to wrap up our conversation today because I'm intrigued with people's views. Interestingly, you mentioned that you're being asked already by clients to take a bit of a look into the future around what's going to be required, how it's going to be required, where comms teams are ultimately evolving too. Because I have a bit of a theory that because of the demand, because of the change, the role of comms areas is going to evolve into much more around sort of centres of expertise, providing guidance, but increasingly the work is going to be done in the line areas at the edges of organisations because of the need for speed.

Melanie Gibbons:

Yep.

David Pembroke:

Do you agree with that? My little theory that I've got?

Melanie Gibbons:

Yeah. I think the hardest things for comms people to do quite often... We're high achieving. We want to be involved in everything. We want to have our fingers on all the different things that are leaving our organisation. I don't know many comms people who aren't a little bit perfectionist deep down that really want a good quality comms outcome and it's not possible. It's not possible for us to do everything. It's not possible for us to be in on every meeting, doing every strategy, delivering every single piece of content. So I absolutely agree with you. I think there's got to be a way that we can be a centre of excellence in the centre of the organisation, but be providing the tools and the templates and the resources and the training out to the business areas so that they can be delivering great quality comms that maybe we aren't hands on with all the time.

David Pembroke:

Because I don't think the that sort of central resourcing component is not... I can't see it getting to the size that it's ultimately going to need to get to in order to meet the needs of citizens who are demanding more in different formats at different times faster. So therefore, it is that evolving role, isn't it? From a doer to teacher as such, but then how do you go about that? How do you go about evolving a capability such that it is seen as an expert and it's able to teach and build capability as opposed to being expert at doing?

Melanie Gibbons:

Well, a great example of this is accessibility. It's a topic that I talk about with communications teams over and over and over again. And I got pulled up on a lot during my time in house and it's that we try and do it and deliver it. So we're trying to make every government document accessible. We're trying to make sure all of our

images are accessible and that we're applying that ourselves. But what we're forgetting along the way is that we could actually be training the business area to do some of that work. We got some feedback from an executive once in my team saying that he wanted us to stop doing the doing and be more strategic. And I thought, "We write strategies all the time. What do you want from me?" And he was saying, "I want you to stop formatting documents and making them accessible. Tell my team to do it. They can format a document."

Melanie Gibbons:

And really, it's a shift in thinking, because quite often you think, "Oh, you know what, I'll just do it. It's easier." But actually once you've done four or five or six or seven, it's not easier, it's time consuming. And so it's about really trying to shift that thinking into, "Well, how can I do this as a self-service? Can I do one training course for that whole area, and that would actually stop me having to do some of the work." And it's hard. It's absolutely a mind shift. And I know we want to do a great job all the time, but you're right, the speed is picking up. It's continuously ramping and the demands on comms teams are continuously increasing and I don't think that's going to change.

David Pembroke:

I can't see it changing anytime soon. And again, well, I think you sort of look at the whole system from ministerial offices all the way through the organisations. A lot of those central comms resources are directed towards the needs of executive, directed towards needs of ministers and what's left over is what's left over. I think the bigger risk is that if the central comms areas don't take that pastoral view, you're going to have lots of shadow teams doing all sorts of different bits and pieces and that's when risks go up, that's when mistakes get made, and that's when trouble arrives.

Melanie Gibbons:

Yes, absolutely. Reputational and brand risks left, right, and centre.

David Pembroke:

Melanie, thank you for coming in once again. Thanks for coming back. As I say, it was a while ago In Transition. That was the podcast many moons ago, for those of you who don't know. It was called In Transition, as we were discussing this notion. Even back then, it was this notion we were moving and we were changing, but I tend to agree with you that there has been almost this step change, this moment in time through COVID and the requirement to particularly using digital channels to be able to go direct to citizens, to better explain policy, programme, services, regulation. And there is the demand. And I think this is one of the other traditional perhaps mindsets within government of people don't want hear from us. Well, I think they do. And I think that's been proven now that they do, but what they do want, they want it in the form, on the channel, as you mentioned before at, at the time of their choosing when they want it.

David Pembroke:

So I think, yeah, the capability of the profession, the maturity of the profession, the changing of the profession, I'm very glad that people such as you are going to lead that, because I think it's going to have to take place over this next little while in order ultimately to restore some of that trust because... How do you feel as a communicator when you see trust in government as low as it is, knowing that it is that trust that comes through storytelling, through accurate reliable statistics. How do you feel about that?

Melanie Gibbons:

Disheartened? No, that's not fair. I mean, I think quite often when the public thinks about government, they think about politicians.

David Pembroke:

Politics, yeah.

Melanie Gibbons:

And what's often forgotten is the people that are sitting behind that, which is the government communicators. I worked in climate change for a lot of my career in the public service. So it can be pretty demoralising some days where you think, "We thought that was great. We thought that we explained that so well." And you realise pretty quickly that maybe you didn't. And it's hard, but it's really about...

Melanie Gibbons:

The Edelman Trust Barometer found that one of the biggest things that you can do to increase trust in government is to provide quality information. I'm a small business owner. I use government services. If you can make it simple for me to figure out what I need to do, I will love you for life. And so I think I bring a lot of that into role now too, is I can put myself in the shoes of a small business owner. I can understand what it's like to be a consumer. I can understand what it's like to be someone living in a capital city. And I think really we've got to be doing a lot more of that, is putting ourselves in the shoes and going: what do people need to know? How can we build trust? What is the information they need?

David Pembroke:

Human-centred design's been around for a long time and it's certainly at the core of good communication planning, but would you give us a rating or a ranking on how pervasive it is at the moment, or how much more needs to be done to get people working in government to think more about that perspective of the citizen?

Melanie Gibbons:

Yeah. I think there's definitely still opportunities there. I think it's the speed at which we have to produce communications. It's the external influences that we may not necessarily always get to decide how communication goes out. And it's really the churn. A lot of communicators I know are just getting through every day. And so quite often what falls aside is that, as I said before, some of that strategy in planning and research.

David Pembroke:

Interestingly, I've seen an advanced copy of the OECD's first research into government communication, and one of the big takeouts is lack of strategic planning. And it's not just here in Australia, it's everywhere.

Melanie Gibbons:

Absolutely.

David Pembroke:

And it's a major problem. Actually, we may even come back and talk about that at another day, but thank you so much for coming in today, Melanie.

Melanie Gibbons:

Thank you.

David Pembroke:

Great to see you again. Great to see you. Well, congratulations on that appointment to the IABC as well.

Melanie Gibbons:

Thank you.

David Pembroke:

Great to see a very important organisation in such good hands. So best of luck with that role as well. Thank you, the audience for coming back once again. What a fantastic conversation today with Melanie. So many bits of wisdom there that you can take away, and I think optimism too. I think the tone is optimistic. Yes, it's sort of a little bit like... Some days it can be a bit like that, but the mission is important. And I think Melanie described that and explained it beautifully today. So a big thanks to her.

David Pembroke:

A big thanks also to Olivia Casamento, who is the show runner who makes these programmes and each week, and also to Ben Curry, who is our technical producer. I'm very grateful that you've come back for another episode of GovComms. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

Outro:

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