



**GOVCOMMS PODCAST**

**EPISODE #141 THE 2022 REWIND**

**TRANSCRIPT**

# TRANSCRIPT

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David Pembroke:

There's no lack of demand for information from government. People want to know what is going on, and we know that from a lot of the surveys that are done, and the gift of technology means that people want that information.

Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication.

Andrew Bell:

My name's Andrew Bell, and as regular listeners might have noted from the top of the pod, things are a little different in this episode. For a start off, the usual host isn't doing the introductory spiel, but he is not absent. David Pembroke is well and truly in the building, in the studio. Do I say, welcome, David, or thanks for the use of the hall?

David Pembroke:

Happy to be here and looking forward to this conversation.

Andrew Bell:

Now, we're here to look back at the last 12 months or so, here with David, and hear about, not only his personal experiences and his view of how the industry and the practise of government communications has fared, but what have we learned?

By the way, there'll be a companion episode to this one, looking ahead to 2023, and that'll be dropping in your feeds pretty soon.

Now, before we get to the nitty and the gritty, and for transparency's sake, David and I have known each other for 30 odd years. I think it's 35. We've shared newsrooms, offices, plenty of ideas and gossip about how communication should be done. Storytelling is in both our DNAs.

Now, David, 2022, or thereabouts, let's not get too prescriptive, for you and your company, contentgroup, went the year well?

David Pembroke:

Yeah, great year. Really good year, when I think back. Certainly, the beginning of the year, COVID was still a guest in the community, which has had a substantial impact on the way government and public sector organisations reach, influence, and engage with citizens and stakeholders. It has changed the game. Because during COVID government couldn't get out and about as they traditionally have done in the past, and so it really has changed the way they are reaching out. So they are using much more digital technology. More people are doing their stakeholder engagement online, or a hybrid version of it, now that COVID is less of a threat.

But I think government realises that it's efficient, it's effective, it's value for money, and so there is much, much more of it. So here at contentgroup, we've done a lot more podcasts, a lot more webinars in service of our government clients, and it's great to see them taking that up.

Andrew Bell:

When you go into meetings and when you went into meetings in the last 12 months or so, was the floor littered in the scales that had fallen from the eyes of people within government? That suddenly some of the things you and others in GovComms have been saying about how to engage, they'd suddenly gone, "Ah, we have to do this," and "ah, it actually works."

David Pembroke:

Yes. It has been a bit of a journey to try to get government to realise the potential of digital technology to reach, influence, and engage with citizens and stakeholders. Because as it relates to the communication function, that is what digital technology has gifted to every government agency, every government department, every programme. Whether they like it or not, they are now in the media business. They can create useful, relevant, consistent content to reach, influence, and engage audiences.

So yes, it has been a revelation. And what I see from here on in, is an acceleration, a building capability in government so they can do it themselves. I think that we're going to see much, much more of that. And it's going to be a big acceleration around that because the transformation's in two parts. Yes, it has transformed government's ability to be able to create useful, relevant, and consistent content. But digital technology has also fundamentally transformed the audience and the audience's capability to select what information, what education, what entertainment they're going to receive, at what time, on what device, in what channel of their choosing.

So it's much harder to reach people now because people have control of their time and attention. And so government is going to have to think very clearly and very hard about what these content programmes look like.

Andrew Bell:

You talked about whether they like it or not, have some of those, who perhaps were not liking it as much as they should, have they been led by the audience? And have they've been surprised, in your experience, to find that that's where the engagement is? And "Oh wow, we're suddenly getting this number on our live video feed of a press conference, this much traffic on our social media accounts?"

David Pembroke:

Absolutely, that's exactly what's happened. They can see the numbers. And because they've got the numbers, and they can see, for example, on a webinar, that there's a 1000, 1500 people who have dialled in to receive the information, there have been 40 questions asked from the audience, asked and often answered, and therefore they've got the data that can show that for X investment, we have Y level of engagement.

And again, a lot of government communication is very specific. It's very narrow. Yes, there are the larger campaign style, wider issues, whether it's a health campaign or whether it's diabetes or whatever it might be. But often government communication is quite narrow, and that's where it, in my view, becomes very, very effective when you're looking to those niches, who are looking for that detailed information. And webinars and podcasts and animations and other digital assets can be very, very effective in being able to engage with those audiences.

Andrew Bell:

Now, during the last 12 months, you packed your knapsack and you went overseas and you went to Paris to the OECD. So let's talk about David Pembroke's adventure...

David Pembroke:

Adventure.

Andrew Bell:

... With the OECD and what that means to the practise of what contentgroup and the broader industry does? Tell us a bit about that.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well look, I think with the benefit of hindsight, we are going to look back on this last 12-month period as a bit of a tipping point. And I think a big part of that tipping point will be the OECD's research into public sector communication.

The key point is, is that the OECD is looking at the function of communication and exploring that function and trying to understand what does it look like? What does a new operating model look like? For government to be able to harness the power of digital technology, to meet the challenges of dis and misinformation, and to be able to connect usefully with citizens and stakeholders, to be able to explain policy in one direction, but also to listen. Because the really big step change is that this is, in my view, really the first major global organisation, a credible organisation.

And in government, the OECD carries such weight, it carries such influence. And so for many, many years, the communication function has been seen as an end of the line function. I call it the colouring in department. Just make it nice and pretty on the way out. Whereas what COVID has taught us, and what the OECD has recognised, is it will actually know, it's fundamental how you are able to communicate effectively to, as I say, address mis and disinformation to better explain policy, programme, services, regulation, but also to be able to communicate effectively to culturally and linguistically diverse audiences. It is now a very important function in government. It's recognised as such. The OECD coming to the party, to begin and continue this research, is a really big moment and...

Andrew Bell:

And you're part of that.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, I very happily accepted an invitation to join the expert panel on public sector communication. And there was that meeting in Paris, which was a really great meeting where there were countries from all over the world. Everyone sitting around the table trying to understand, well, what does this look like? And my view is that it's very much, this model is going to be about internal capability in government and government communications area looking much more like a newsroom than it does at the moment.

So it will have account management into line areas. They'll have larger graphic design areas, much more video and audio capability. There'll be behavioural insights teams involved in these particular areas. There will be the data scientists who are combing through the data, being able to understand, well, what sort of impact is our content having? And we'll be much more into that 24 hour, 24/7 movement, of content analysis of content, and working with line areas to be able to better reach and influence and engage audiences in whatever topic it may be.

Andrew Bell:

It's all very well, you've got this fabulous capability on the seventh floor, but if the first they hear of a campaign or a thought bubble or whatever comes in a CC'd email to them, it's not going to fly, or it will fly, but it's going to be a bumpy journey.

David Pembroke:

Sure. But this goes to the point of, what is the role of a central communications team, or people who have responsibility for the communication engagement function inside a division or a branch.

It's encumbered upon that person to know what's going on. As a comms person, you should be nosy. You should be getting out there and talking to people, not sitting behind your desk. You need to discover and know what's going on, and be able to invite yourself to meetings that perhaps you're not being invited to at the moment. And when you are there, able to explain to your policy and programme colleagues about this wonderful capability that you are going to be able to have, and the benefit that it can bring to the people that you're seeking to serve. So I agree that if you lock yourself away and don't open yourself up...

Andrew Bell:

Or are locked away. Rapunzel, Rapunzel, et cetera.

David Pembroke:

Well yeah, but kick the door down, but get out and get moving. I remember speaking to Conrad Bird, who's a very senior member of the government communication service in the UK, and his advice to young communicators was exactly that, was get up, get moving, find out what's going on. Don't wait to be asked. You've got to really get out there and understand what are the programme areas that are priority for the ministers, for the senior executives, and really get into those conversations. And bring that capability that communications area can have, and the impact that communications have, to be able to deliver benefit to citizens and stakeholders.

Andrew Bell:

I love it. You're smiling from ear to ear. I'm joyful as someone who once spent a period in comms in the public service. But then I think of two of the most frightening words in the English language, approval process.

David Pembroke:

Yes, indeed.

Andrew Bell:

Now, has that changed this year? Not in the emergency, but in the medium long term, or have people gone back to old habits?

David Pembroke:

I hate to say it, but it's probably moving back.

Andrew Bell:

Why is that?

David Pembroke:

Well, I don't think it's going to spring back to where it always was. I think there is improvement, but it's incremental. But this is where the comms function needs to continue to market itself and the benefit, and to be able to speak in the language of the executive, which is risk.

So to be able to talk about, this is what we're going to do, and this is how it's going to mitigate the risk, and this is why we need left and right of arc, and we're not going... you need to give us writing instructions, but

then trust us to be able to get on with it. But when it's elevated, we'll come to you, but otherwise, give us our writing instructions, left and right of arc, and let us get on with it, but report back so that you've got the evidence of the impact that you're having, which builds confidence, which over time allows people to take their fingers off the steering wheel.

Andrew Bell:

That's something that Tim Price talked about in one of the episodes of GovComms, is about do the big shiny lovely thing, show that it worked, go back to the client and say, "Look, it worked. I now want to do an even bigger shinier thing."

But you have to have that combo of gut feeling for the project and the data to support. It's no good just going off and spending money to make a lovely video.

Tipping point this year, the opportunity in crisis. Who's done well out of that, which organisations, which government institutions have sort of thrived in those circumstances, do you think, when you look around the place?

David Pembroke:

Well, if we're talking just well, globally?

Andrew Bell:

Or in Australia.

David Pembroke:

Look, I think globally, we've continued to see the development and maturity of the communication function in the UK, which remains the gold standard. They do have a very robust model, great capability, a curiosity to continue to improve. And again, that old saying, the Americans talk about, we're in the bottom of the first inning.

And really when we think about what's coming in terms of further changes in technology, when we look at the impacts of artificial intelligence, the GPT technologies that are being able to create stories, the Dali image generators and these types of things, we're going to see continued fundamental transformation in the actual technology to enable us to do what we can do. And I think...

Andrew Bell:

But the fundamentals will still have to apply.

David Pembroke:

They will. No, they do, but it's that enabling power of being able to crunch down and get the machines to do a lot more of the work. Now look, I am no expert in any of these areas at the moment, but I am curious to see, how do we use those tools?

But some of the other highlights, I think, here in Australia, the New South Wales government, it was wonderful to see them receive global acclamation for the work that they've done. Now, Services New South Wales got started on this transformation about 10 years ago, this citizen centred delivery of services, but also communications and content. And I believe that they've produced a best practise model that is really going to underpin where governments are going to have to aspire to, which is really that genuine commitment to putting the citizen at the centre.

It's like the old story from Amazon where, at every meeting there's an empty chair, which is left for the customer. So it focuses people on the customer. New South Wales government is always focusing on the citizen, and how can we make that experience better for them? So they've done some marvellous things.

There's some great examples here in the federal government, the old Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment, which is now sort of into two, the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water, and Department of Agriculture, Forest...

Andrew Bell:

Fisheries and Forestry, Forestry and Fisheries.

David Pembroke:

So there's been some great work done in both those areas. DAFF, in particular, have done well. Social services have done well, the tax office continues to do well.

Andrew Bell:

Is there internal competition, do you feel, are people looking at, "Oh, look what they did." And it's not, "Look, there's, oh, we want to do that as well." It's, "Look, they did that. What could we do?"

David Pembroke:

Yeah, I think there is some curiosity, but I think again...

Andrew Bell:

Needs to be more.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, but there's no profession. There is no communication profession in the Australian public service, which I just...

Andrew Bell:

There's no career structure, is there?

David Pembroke:

No. No, there's not. There is no defined function. Well, and this is where the great story of the transformation in the UK, post global financial crisis, they needed to make change. And so what they did was to create the government digital service and the government communication service.

Now, Australia went over and saw the government digital service and brought it to Australia as the Digital Transformation Office, but they left the brother, the government communication service, behind. So we've never taken that up.

Now, I'm hopeful that over the next 12, 18 months, two years, that will change because we do now have the HR profession. We do have the data profession, and we do have the digital profession. So I hope that the communication profession is not too far behind.

Andrew Bell:

That's something we might go into a bit more detail in the looking ahead episode, I think.

David Pembroke:

Sure.

Andrew Bell:

One thing that jumps out for me, for a success story, is the Australian Electoral Commission, this year. Which showed that, in risk there is great opportunity, and came out smelling of roses.

For overseas listeners, we had a federal election in May of 2022, and the AEC, as it's communications whizz explained in two episodes of GovComms, was ready for that. But I guess they had a success. Part of that was being ready to respond, but also there was almost like a force of nature in persuading SES to go along with it. So despite that success, it was still meeting some resistance early on, from what I could see.

David Pembroke:

So yeah, I would commend people to go back and listen to those episodes with Evan Ekin-Smyth, because it belled the cat around a few things for me. One, trust. He has spent years building trust and building confidence in that organisation. So again, that's this whole idea of getting up, getting around, explaining yourself to people, explaining the benefit of what you can do, explaining how can it can help. And then demonstrating that change and taking it back to people and saying, "See, this is how we can improve and be able to deliver on our promises and priorities." So he built trust.

Then they prepared. So they did the training. So as that they got their experts, their subject-matter experts, ready to be able to quickly respond. So when the misinformation and disinformation found its way into public discourse, they were ready with their subject-matter experts, but they also had their capability ready.

So they were able to use the iPhones, if they needed to, very quickly. Get the content up, get it moving and challenge, at the source, what in fact was being said. So they were putting out fires very, very quickly, but they were doing it in an enormously agile way.

But there was a permission-based culture that came from the commissioner at the top, who had bought into this, the senior executive, who had bought into it. And the team, that Evan had, that was able to work with all of the various instruments in the orchestra, whether it was the advertising campaigns, or whether it was the website, whether it was the socials, whether it was the audio, whether it was the video, whatever it was. They were able to very quickly assemble the most appropriate asset to meet that audience's need and to get it out and get it moving.

So yeah, I'd really encourage people to go back and have a listen to that because you'll enjoy it. Because again, for me, that's a bit of a snapshot into the future as to where we're all headed.

Andrew Bell:

I've worked mainly in radio and TV, but as someone who works slightly in the public service, the structure there and the decision-making was very much like, what's called broadcasting station, where responsibility was... irony alert... delegated out. So if you're in charge of a programme, you make the decisions and rarely do you refer up.

And I think one of the things Evan said, which was very interesting, is, "We got it out, however bad it looked," aesthetically or whatever. That was the most important thing.

And I don't know if this is a question or a comment, I wonder how many other government instrumentalities, because there was a lot of chatter about the AEC, have actually picked the phone up and said, "Can we have a yack? Can we talk about how you did this?" I wonder out loud.

David Pembroke:



Yeah, I don't know. But look, there are curious people and so I don't know, but I would suspect that some have. Because I do know in other areas of our work in the APS, that some of our clients who are doing practise leadership, who are recognised as leaders in particular areas, they do get phone calls from people who turn up and say, "Hey, how is it that you've stood up this agency? How have you organised your people?" So I don't think people are so locked away in their castle that they're not interested in what's going on.

But the challenge often, at the moment, is that people are just so busy. There is so much going on. The world is a busy place. Government is being increasingly expected to solve pretty much every problem. And so the demands that are there on the APS, on a day-to-day basis, really often make it challenging for them to get out as much as they possibly would or they could.

Andrew Bell:

That's an interesting notion, which has just popped into my head. Perhaps the future is also, again, similar to newsrooms, where editorial decisions are made, which in public service speak is probably prioritisation, that it's not the directors or the secretaries or the... It's not their obsession that is going to get the love. You're going to have to have some, not hard conversations, just say, "This is a better idea." So the functions are going to have to change, I think.

David Pembroke:

Well, they're going to have to mature, but certainly the governance processes and approvals processes and other things that... Because speed is going to increasingly play a part in government being effective, in both explaining and listening.

The world is moving a lot faster than it ever has in the past. And you are seeing it everywhere. You are seeing it in all sorts of behaviours. You're seeing it the way that the news cycle chews through information now. It is moving quickly. And so those traditional slowish, structured, risk averse approaches, are going to be challenged because of the impacts of digital technology. So it is going to become much more to this notion of left and right of arc. I trust you. Yes, this is what we're working towards, but you're going to have to get on with it because it's not going to work.

We've moved out of an analogue world into a digital world. And with digital world, with technology, comes speed. And so government is going to have to get faster. Now, but it's also going to have to get faster inside that public sector risk, understanding the risk to the government of decisions, the primacy of minister's offices and the prime minister's office. You've got to have all of that. You've got to understand all of those things. But you're going to have to make good decisions and fast decisions. And people are going to have to let go of a bit of control, if government is to better use this gift of technology that they have.

Andrew Bell:

It almost as if it evolves into something that sits alongside traditional newspapers, broadcast radio, broadcast television, on demand radio and TV, it becomes another part of that industry, which overhangs in a big way, the public service.

David Pembroke:

Well, there's no lack of demand for information from government. People want to know what is going on. And we know that from the surveys that are done. There is interest in what government does. People want to know.

Andrew Bell:

Can I ask a cheeky question? You worked in news and radio current affairs. I worked in news and current affairs. Is part of that demand, the fact that too often in traditional newsrooms, people go, "We won't do that. That's a free kick for the government." Whereas, actually, it's information for the citizen.

David Pembroke:

Entirely. And the gift of technology means that these factors of media production and distribution have been democratised. So you don't have to buy ink in 44 gallon drums. You don't need to have fleets of trucks taking newspapers and delivering them all over the world. You don't need transmission towers anymore. The monopoly and oligopoly of the media power over the distribution, that's what digital technology has digitised. It's miniaturised it, and it's democratised it.

So that is now a capability that government has, to explain policy, programme, service, regulation, to be able to go direct to citizens. Now, it's not propaganda. It is explanation of, "This is what we are doing and this is why we are doing it, and what do you think? Could you tell us if you believe this is a good idea or not? And we can better inform you about why these decisions are being made, how they're being made. Here is the grant programmes. These are the things that are available to you to be able to improve."

People want that information, but what they don't want is to work hard to find that information. They want that information in the channels, in the forms where they're consuming their information, at the time and preference for them. And this is the challenge. It's no longer enough to be able to say, "Well, it's up on the website over there, you can go and find it."

I think government needs to be more respectful of citizens and stakeholders, and be able to pick up and better package the information that it's got. So it doesn't have to be dull.

Andrew Bell:

Or worthy.

David Pembroke:

There's no statute that says all government communication needs to be boring or it needs to be dull or it needs to include everything. This is where the practise and the skills of journalism, it's not journalism, but it's the skills and the practise, and the mindset is going to make its way into the best government and public sector organisation. And that's going to be this operating model that the OECD is exploring at the moment.

That's what's going to happen. It's going to become, as I mentioned before, it's going to look much, much more like a newsroom. It's going to feel like it. You're going to have screens with data up everywhere. You're going to have all sorts of inputs. And the world is going to be moving a lot faster than it does at the moment.

Andrew Bell:

As we wind up this episode, I'm going to ask you, probably the most predictable question ever on this kind of podcast. Are you more or less optimistic than you were this time last year?

David Pembroke:

Always optimistic.

Andrew Bell:

You're always optimistic.

David Pembroke:

Much more. Much more. Much, much, much more.

Andrew Bell:

Much more?

David Pembroke:

Oh, of course.

Andrew Bell:

Why much more?

David Pembroke:

Because the change is coming and you can see it.

Andrew Bell:

Change just is, Don Draper says.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, but you can also see it in the behaviours that are being, again, driven by the digital technology, in citizens. They are behaving in a different way. They have different expectations, and elected officials, politicians understand that. And they are very, very connected to the mood of the citizen. And they know that this is what is being asked of them. And they know where this priority is coming.

Now, I'm not going to mention the name of one of the federal government ministers in Australia, nor the department that they have responsibility for. But in terms of their staff allocation that they can have, there's an allocation of around 13 staffers that they can have to operate in their office up in Parliament House. This particular minister has decided that communication is a priority. Half of the staff, of this particular minister, is working in comms, because they have prioritised openness. They have prioritised transparency, and they want to show people what it is they're doing, why they're doing it, and doing it in a way that is engaging, that is visual, that is interesting. And they're building an audience.

And so again, it goes back to this whole practise of building the skills, so you can, over time, create community, build engagement, build an audience for your story to better explain, but also to listen.

Sanjay Pradhan, from the Open Government Partnership, made that point fantastically well, that it's not just about one-way communication, it's the two-way. It's about putting the questions out there and feeding it back. And look, we're seeing fantastic things across government on a lot of those, the YourSAy platforms and these other places, where consultations are put out.

But again, I think there's a step change that can take place there, where there's much more engaging content. Where it's a better experience than, "Oh, I've got to read through a PDF that's however long. Well, how do we do that in a better way?" And again, I just see that this is going to continue because you're not going to be able to change it. And the citizens are going to be demanding it. And as they become more demanding, governments are going to have to respond to that. So this is the change that's coming and it's being driven by the people.

Andrew Bell:

Whether government likes it or not.

David Pembroke:

Or not. That's right. Well, and it is. It is a big change. And it is a big change. And it's not just government. It's every sporting team, it's every not-for-profit, it's every business. Everybody is now in the media business. And so we all have to think about that. We have to build the skills, we have to build the mindset, and we have to really build the governing processes so that we manage risk, but we better engage with citizens and stakeholders.

Andrew Bell:

That was looking back, pondering, and slightly looking forward. Big thanks to you, David Pembroke, for coming all of seven metres from your desk to the GovComms studio. But seriously, some very important ideas and views and experiences, as you would expect from David.

And he and I, I'm Andrew Bell, we'll return soon into your feeds with our eyes 100% on the future. And the changing of the years is also being marked by GovComms, with some highlight episodes featuring some of the people you've heard reference to, but many more besides.

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