



## GOVCOMMS PODCAST

EPISODE #134 THE KEY TO  
CAPTIVATING YOUR AUDIENCE

- WITH TIM PRICE

TRANSCRIPT

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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:

Hello, everyone, and welcome once again to GovComms, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me.

David Pembroke:

Today, we welcome Tim Price, who is the new digital content and social media manager at the Federal Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Tim Price is a writer who's been creating content and managing digital and social media for over 25 years. He has project managed over 14 major website redevelopments, managed social media accounts for millions of followers, and filmed, edited and produced hundreds of videos. He is also the co-founder of the Government Digital Leaders Network or the GDLM.

David Pembroke:

Tim has created viral social media content and worked for universities, emergency services, all levels of government, including a time as the social media manager at the City of Melbourne and the digital media strategy at Ambulance Victoria. And he has also worked for entertainment icons such as Will Smith and DJ Jazzy Jeff. As a writer, Tim has published three novels and four children's books. He loves telling stories and connecting with others in a digital world, and that's why we're very, very excited to bring him on to the podcast today. Tim, welcome to GovComms.

Tim Price:

Thanks, David. Yeah, I'm glad to be here.

David Pembroke:

It's a great history, a great preparation for the big job that you've now got at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. But before we talk about that, let's go back some of those 25, maybe 30 years. When did you start to get interested in storytelling?

Tim Price:

Storytelling from a very young age, I was an avid reader as a child, so I'd go to the library and get out my 10 books every two weeks and go back again and get more books. So I was always reading, which made me interested in stories and writing. So I always had that in me. And then it was this weird way I got into digital in

that as the internet first began, I was very interested. My dad worked at a university, a professor, and he had access to a computer which had the internet, which I thought was amazing. This was in 1995. So I was looking at the internet then, and then I started a website in 1996. So it was a fan website about Will Smith and Jazzy Jeff. So that's how I got into digital.

Tim Price:

That fan website, back then, a lot of people created fan websites, became really, really popular, and then Will Smith became a big movie star. I was getting millions of views, and suddenly this thing that I was just a fan of something brand new became my career, but it all started from that early time of the internet and just being interested in things around the world and being able to create your own content. So that was the genesis.

Tim Price:

And then when I look back on my career, I was like, "Well, that's really where it all started." Back then, there was no such thing as a digital career. There was no such thing as a career in social media. So I travelled the wave of the constantly changing nature of digital and social media and into government as well.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. I can imagine back in '96 with the dial up, that very familiar sound back then.

Tim Price:

Yes, when I was at school, mate.

David Pembroke:

But listen, let's go back even further than that, going back to those 10 books every two weeks. What was it that drew you to them? What was the part of the storytelling that really came alive for you? What made a great story?

Tim Price:

I had a huge imagination, so things that captured my imagination and really spoke to me, and I love a human connection or an interesting story that draws you in. So I still use that. I really feel like modern digital communication, it's still got the elements of storytelling, which have existed for thousands of years. Humans want to connect with other humans and we connect through stories. And so I'm still applying those core elements and essence in social media or in modern communication. I still think I'm doing that. That all started from that just love of stories and reading books and different characters, different humans you connect with at the world around us. So that all was something I was interested in as a child. So when I look back now on my career, I'm still doing the stuff that I love doing and what captured my imagination as a child.

David Pembroke:

Do you think it gets lost in this day and age as we pursue perhaps the latest hack that may work in a particular environment or we look to capitalise on a short-term meme? Do you think that consistency and that classical storytelling gets lost in digital in pursuits of the short-term return?

Tim Price:

It definitely can be. I think the thing that's really changed, and especially maybe in the last five or six years, is people's attention span, and so that kind of storytelling becomes harder and harder. You might have had a bit more time previously, even within social media, to get someone's attention and tell a story. And now you've

got just no time, and people are bombarded with content, and there's so many things thrown at them, and people's attention spans I think are getting shorter and shorter. And so unless you get the attention very early on, you won't get a chance to tell a story. So, yeah, you can do things to, as you said, game the system, but I don't think you're giving people much value if you do that. I would much rather use those techniques to tell a good story and connect on some human level with another person.

David Pembroke:

So then just take me to then this period when you created this fan site that became very popular. What did you do that drew attention to the stories that you were creating at the time? Now, I'm sure Will Smith becoming famous. Same with DJ Jazzy Jeff. That fame helps to attract the audience, but what were some of the things that you were doing in that earlier period that were giving you success in terms of attracting and building an audience?

Tim Price:

Yeah. I guess one of the things I did on that website was ... So I wasn't a graphic designer. I wasn't a coder. I'm a content person. I like connecting with others. So one was building the fan community with all these fans from around the world and really building that up to be very strong. And I was coming from a fan's perspective. So I wasn't giving the corporate Sony or whatever the studio's version of what was happening relating to Will Smith and Jazzy Jeff. I was giving the perspective of a fan and other fans connected with that. They were like, "Oh, that's amazing."

Tim Price:

And the other stuff, I was really trying out some of these new technologies. I started to podcast I think in 2005. So everyone has a podcast now, but back then, it was only really techy people, but I had this podcast about Will Smith. I had over 300 pages of content. So when Will Smith and Jazzy Jeff actually saw the website, they were like, "Oh my, God, Tim. We never captured this information in our careers." So now they could look back on it and see all the things they had done, and they were amazed that there was all this information about their career and what they had done.

Tim Price:

It was connecting on a level that other fans responded to. So it was a very young audience, teenagers, early 20s, who were into music and movies but all over the world. And they came to this one website because the official versions of the website really didn't provide any of that stuff.

David Pembroke:

But interesting, I think you used the magic word really, community, and that opportunity to build community through authentic content that connected clearly not only for you with the subject matter, but as you say, these hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world who were connecting with exactly the same authenticity. They could see that it was a real thing, that there was a passion there.

David Pembroke:

What's your advice to people who are going out into this? The broadcast era, largely finished. We're now very much into the narrow cast world and you've got to build community. What's your advice to people who are working in government? How should they go about building community around their particular policy or their programme, service or regulation that they're dealing with? What are some of the advice that you have about how do you create a community when it's not someone like a Will Smith or a Jazzy Jeff?

Tim Price:

Yeah. First of all, it's very difficult. It's not an easy thing to do. So the core principles of what you would do still apply in whatever you're doing. So I still use these things, whether it's a Will Smith website or government communications. You mentioned authenticity. I think that authentic communication resonates with people. If it's this off-distant government department that people can't connect with, it's very hard to build that community. But if you tell personal stories, which tell that larger narrative of what is going on, what are the outcomes? What are the things that affect people in their day-to-day lives? That's when you create that connection and you can build that community up.

Tim Price:

We saw with the pandemic and COVID, in the health space, communities formed around what was going on in that space, and government communication became very important. And I think there was there some good examples of government doing very strong communication and trying to get into different various communities and target communities because they need that health information. But I'd always be on the side of authentic communication, personal human stories and thinking of the actual community, not thinking of I've got to communicate these key messages for a department, but thinking what we are doing, how does that relate to the person at home or the person you're communicating with and how will they respond to that? And I think if you just think of things in that lens, it really changes the type of communication you do and will often lead to greater success.

David Pembroke:

Well, look, there's a number of things in that answer that you've just given us that I'd like to dive into. And perhaps the first of those is the risk and vulnerability of being authentic in government. What's your experience of that, of people's appetite to tell those stories because to be authentic, you have to tell the good and the bad and often in a public sector environment, risk averse environment, people don't really want to talk about things when they're not working out so well?

Tim Price:

Yeah. It's a great challenge for everyone working in communications in those kind of environments. So I think I've spent my career fighting for things. You don't get these things easily. You often have to, one, fight for it, and not just say, "Oh, well, this is my opinion," but actually have some evidence to back up what you're trying to do. And then when you do successful communication that has more personal stories or is a bit more authentic, using that to give greater confidence to executives and people above, but it's not an easy thing.

Tim Price:

You really need to think about things strategically. You have to think about the way you do things. In a high risk environment, it's how you mitigate the risks. So if you can lay all that out, that helps you. But I think if you are authentic and you tell the full story, you will get a better outcome or you'll get a better response.

Tim Price:

I think what happens a lot in government, I'm more like the sceptic because I think a lot of people take the less risky road, and it just means it might not be a risk, but no one even looks at it or engages with it. So if you did something that wasn't risky and no one even looked at it, what was the point? I don't think it's successful communication. It might be good internally. You might be happy internally that nothing went wrong and you didn't take a risk and people above you are happy. But if you're actually thinking about who you're communicating with and what you did, no one saw and no one interacted with, I don't think that's worth it.

David Pembroke:

I think that, for mine anyway and my experience working in the public sector, so much of what the public sector does is fantastic. They are solving problems. They are trying to improve communities. They are trying to strengthen and give value and benefits to people. So I don't know. I just think that risk appetite, if there's some way of influencing it, but I think your advice about being strategic, being thoughtful but also providing the evidence of the impact. And I think from a comms point of view as well, we need to do a better job of explaining to people what we're doing and why we're doing it, but don't just do it once, do it time and time and time again so it becomes we exercise that muscle where we don't just finish whatever we're doing and move on to the next thing, that we take a bit of time to make sure that we let people know about the impacts that have taken place.

Tim Price:

Yeah, it's so important just that point because you really need to have evidence. I spent a lot of my career driving change and driving big change. And I'm very much, I'll take roles where I feel like I can make a difference. I'm very community minded. So emergency services with Ambulance Victoria or government or working in health, I want to see those outcomes, but it is not easy within those environments. They're often very high risk environments. And if you're trying to make change within that the way you do things, you have to be able to back it up. You can't just go in, start a role and start doing all these great things that you want to do. That's just not the reality. You have to work at it, show the evidence, show that your ideas are working. And the great thing in digital and social is we have statistics, we have analytics, we have insights, which we can use. And that's how you go down that path of making change within an organisation.

David Pembroke:

And there's also that opportunity, isn't there, around co-creation? Because often, in the policy and programme areas, they have the subject matter expertise. They know the people. They know the stories. They know where they are. And I think as a comms person, if you can get up out of your chair and go around and build those relationships and enthuse people with the stories that they're working on, because often being as close as they are, they don't quite see the magic of what it is that they're working on.

Tim Price:

Yeah. Half the time, I would say people don't even realise the great stories that could be told on social media. So as you said, building the relationships with people and informing them of that will get you the stories. I have so many stories in my career. I remember I was working at the City of Melbourne, and there's a team who look after animals. They posted on their personal account a video of a cockatoo riding down an escalator to a Woolworths. And I saw that and I was like, "Oh my, God. This is brilliant social media content." They didn't even realise it. I'm like, "Send it to us. We'll post it on the City of Melbourne account." It had a hundred thousand views, but they didn't even realise. They just thought that was interesting for themselves. They didn't even think that other people might be interested in it. So a lot of the time, it's working within your organisation and finding the interesting stories is half the job.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So I think we often encourage people to get up out of your chair, go out and talk to people because again, comms people, content people, they're connectors. They're joiners. So head out, two ears, one mouth and see what you can find out.

David Pembroke:

Now, listen. You mentioned there another interesting point in that earlier answer around demand for government communications. Because over the years, I've often heard people say to me, "People don't want to hear from us. They don't want to hear from the government. They're too busy. They've got other things on

their mind." Clearly, a global pandemic is a unique circumstance that drew attention to government and demand for government. But would you agree that there is demand if indeed that information is packaged in a way that people want to consume in the form they want to consume it, in the channel they want to consume it, at the time they want to consume it? And really it's not so much that there's a lack of interest. There's perhaps a lack of thought being put into the way that we package that information.

Tim Price:

Yeah. That would be my theory, is that of course people want to hear from government, not because they want these boring government comms that go out. Because what government does affects their everyday lives. They want that communication. They want to see it. But if you do it in a way that's not engaging or interesting to them from a very lens of ... You could say we've spent 500 million on this thing, and that won't mean something to people. But if you tell that story about something that's affecting their daily drive to work or the hospital that they visit or something that affects their lives, of course, they want to see that communication.

Tim Price:

So yeah, I think the problem is a lot of the government comms is very standard stuff that just gets put out. And I think more thought needs to be put into how you engage the community with these messages. I think the messages, absolutely, people want to get, but I think it's us in the community to understand, one, the changing nature of digital and social, and two, how you do get that engagement with the community.

David Pembroke:

So you mentioned it again in that earlier answer, the real challenge of this time and attention deficit, it's massively competitive for people to earn a share of that most valuable asset, which they have, which is their time and their attention. And you mentioned it a few times now around this notion of it's got to speak to the people in their lives and in the lives that they lead. So what is your advice when you're working with teams to try to give people or try to encourage them to have that citizen-centred perspective? How do you go about building that into the conversation so people can start this journey from rather than this is what I want to tell them, it starts to become, well, what do they want to hear from us? How do you make that happen?

Tim Price:

I think practically, how you make it, and for people who work across various government departments, you really need to get in on the conversation very early. I think if you are sitting in a space where you just get things at the end and they're all approved and all you're doing is putting that message out, it's very hard to change things at that point. Whereas, if you're brought in early or you worked to build up those relationships where you get brought in early on a project, you can work on those things at the very start. And you start to talk about, "Okay, these are our key messages. This is what we're trying to communicate, but why don't we do it in this way? Is it potentially a video? Could we find a narrative? Could we find someone who's affected by the programme and we could talk to them and we could tell their story?"

Tim Price:

I often find it's those little stories that can tell the larger narrative. If you tell a story of one person who's affected by the change, people will connect with that person and understand it better than just going for a broad, oh, we're doing this and that's happening. So I'm always looking for that angle that will be interesting to people, and I always find that often takes a bit of work. So trying to get into those early meetings, those early conversations is so important. And if you get into those meetings, then you're having a real impact down the line. Whereas-

David Pembroke:

But how do you get in there? How do you get in there if you don't know the conversation? Do you just invite yourself? Do you just knock on the door and turn up and say hi?

Tim Price:

A lot of it is building relationships. I'd say when I was at Ambulance Victoria, I probably built, by the time I left, I probably built relationship with about 500 people. You build relationships not just talking about work, but just talking to people, connecting with humans, talking about their lives, getting to know people. And so that when I needed someone or when I needed to get something done quickly, you had built that relationship and you were in such a better position from it. And just from building those relationships, I would get people who would actually say, "Oh, so and so paramedic said I should contact you, Tim, about this." So once you build those relationships, then people are letting other people know that they should get in contact with you. So it's not something that just happens overnight. You have to really get in there and do the work and build up those relationships, and then you can start to change things.

Tim Price:

I did a lot of work in changing stuff at Ambulance Victoria. One of the best things I ever ... I've still got this email. One of the best things I ever got was the paramedic sent me this email when I left. He said, "In the 10 years I've been here at the organisation, the work you did in changing the communications had the most impact on me in my career. It made life so much easier on all these things that you did." I was like, "Oh." So see, it was really hard. I worked really hard. I had to build up all these relationships. I had to go into meetings. I had to change things, but to see the impact that it actually had on someone who was providing healthcare and helping the community, I was like, "Oh, it was worth it. It was so worth it when you get that feedback."

David Pembroke:

So how do you sell the value proposition of a digital content and social media manager in those types of environments? What's your pitch? Hi. I'm Tim and I'm here to help.

Tim Price:

It often starts with so if you're ... What's the key message? Who are you trying to communicate to? And what do you want them to get out of it? Just asking those questions often will get you in a better place. And I guess I win by being able to assist in that and get that greater engagement and make those posts perform better and uplift those channels. And so that's what I've generally done. And then once I've got that, then you build that trust. You've got that trust with people and they can see, "Oh, I took Tim's advice and look how well my comms has done. Look at this report that's got massive engaging compared to the one last year."

Tim Price:

And then people, once you got that trust, they'll actually come to you and say, "Well, Tim. How do you think we should do this one? Or should we do this a bit differently? Or should we try something here?" I really use, I've mentioned it before, but the statistics and the insights and then use them back again to try and inform the content again and make it better. I'm always trying to strive to make things better, make them more engaging and reach the audience. That's always a challenge, but again, it's building those relationships. It's having those conversations. It's looking at the outcomes.

Tim Price:

I would say a lot of problems with the government comms is there's a lot of work that goes on internally to get something out, and there's a lot of approval processes and all that work goes in, and then the content goes out



and there's no real evaluation. So internally, it might be successful because you got it out or it went out, but there's not a lot of evaluation on the other side as to, well, did it perform well? Was it successful? Should we do it the same way again? Does it need tweaking? That kind of stuff. So there should be a lot of work on evaluating your comms as well.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, I think that's a good point. It goes to that, again, finding time for the evaluation, but then as we mentioned before, finding that time for telling the people who you did the work for just how successful it was and how it might be improved the next time around.

Tim Price:

So just on that point. I'm not just talking about stats here either. I'm not like, oh, here's a report and we got stats. It's like, no, it's insights. It's looking a bit deeper and trying to figure out why things did well or didn't and then informing the approach next time.

David Pembroke:

But there's also that benefit, isn't there, of if you have a genuinely engaged community around a particular issue, the benefit of being able to find ideas and insight that improves policy, that improves programmes, it's there. If you build that community up over time, it can become a massively valuable asset because you're able to ask questions of that community over time that give you that information that you need to improve the outcomes that you're looking for.

Tim Price:

Yeah. And so a lot of my strategies were, especially in social media so at the City of Melbourne and Ambulance Victoria, it was the content in between the government communications that we had to get out. I was letting people know this is a strategy up above so it made sense. And it took a lot of explaining, but it was all the content in between that did really well, all that viral content, all that social media stuff, or if it was paramedics doing the running man, which would get hundreds of thousands of views, or I did this video about a man who carried a carrot around the city, which got hundreds of thousands of views. People liked it. But all that stuff elevated the channels. So when you had something really important to say, a key message, then the people got the message because you've got an engaged community, engaged audience that likes your content. And so when you're doing something that is critical, then they're engaged and they're seeing it.

Tim Price:

So I was always trying to explain this that it's not just the standard government comms that we have to do every time, but it's that stuff in between, the stuff that might do well on social, the lighter posts. Those are really valuable because they make the other ones performing better.

David Pembroke:

So listen, you are now heading into a really big job. You are the digital content and social media manager at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, which is the preeminent policy department of the Australian government. You have a government that is very committed to the public service. You have new leadership in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. It's a really interesting challenge that you have ahead of you. And Ambulance Victoria, you can see the characters, you can feel the stories, you can see the really interesting content there. Certainly again, the City of Melbourne, what's not interesting that's going on out on the street? There's so much of a diverse story to tell, but this is policy. This is centre of government. How are you looking at how you're going to take this area of government and make it more engaging?

Tim Price:

Well, yeah. So I still think the principles of what you do to improve communications should work wherever it is. I remember when I did a social media presentation about Ambulance Victoria. They were like, "Well, you're not always going to have stories like that that are life and death from a local council." And then I went to local council. I was like, "Well, I was making stories about collecting rubbish, interesting or engaging." It doesn't matter what it is. There's ways to find those stories and make it more engaging.

Tim Price:

So in my new role, I'm still looking for those stories. It's such an interesting department. There's this great history of things. I want to give context to the communication that goes out, not just this is happening now, but why is it happening? What's happened before? What's the impact going forward? And still pulling those stories and threads out, that's the goal of what I do.

Tim Price:

So I would say for other comms people listening to this, it shouldn't matter what area. You're not always going to be working on something that's got obviously very exciting, engaging social media content for digital, but it's your job as a professional to try and find what's the interesting story elements? What will people connect with? Is it something that people would share or like? And look at from the community's perspective. What are they interested in? And then you can evaluate from what you do as well, and that can keep informing you.

Tim Price:

So yeah, I'm still, in this role, I'm still applying the principles I applied all the way back when I started on my website 20 years ago, is trying to build a community, build engagement, connect with other humans. Like the Department of PM&C, its goal is to help change people's lives in Australia, change Australian's lives. And I still think that's just a great thing to be working on. So I'm still going to be doing exactly what I did in other organisations and other government departments, looking for those stories and engaging the community. That's what I'm going to be doing.

David Pembroke:

Well, good luck with that. I'm not sure there's too many cockatoos heading down an escalator in the middle of PM&C, but I am absolutely thrilled to pieces that someone with your background, your experience, has come to town and is really taking on one of the big jobs. In the past, sometimes could be criticised for being a bit of a black box and a lot of things going there, but we don't often see inside the black box decisions come out. So it's going to be a great challenge. And I don't know. I'm a bit optimistic around all of this stuff because I think there's mood for change, and I think COVID in particular has opened up people's eyes to the opportunity of the ability for direct connection, more storytelling, more citizen centred, more people focused, human focused storytelling from government. And I think there is that opportunity.

David Pembroke:

And certainly, you can see it in the senior ministers of the government that's been appointed that they know and understand this. Retail politicians know and understand the ability and the potential of connection with community and going direct. So it's going to be a great opportunity and challenge for you, and we certainly wish you all the best here at GovComms. And thanks so much for sharing some of your time with us today.

Tim Price:

Yeah, I appreciate that. Thanks. I would say just to anyone working in government across Australia that there's always such interesting work going on and, as you said, it's finding those stories. You'll always find some

interesting stories and interesting work and things that affects people, and it's bringing those stories out and telling them. Often, I would say there's so much that's untold, but I think if we work to tell those stories, that can only benefit Australians.

David Pembroke:

Now, listen, I look forward. I'm going to invite you back in six months' time because I've also got about half a dozen other questions that I'd like to ask you that I won't jump into now because we generally promise the audience that we'll be around half an hour. We've gone a little bit over today, and people sometimes get out of sorts when their walks have been interrupted by, hang on, it's not that time. This week, you've gone a bit longer, but I'm sure on indulgence, GovComms's audience, you'll understand why I kept talking to Tim because he was so engaging.

David Pembroke:

So a big thanks to Tim Price, who is the digital content and social media manager at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet here in Canberra. I'm really going to look forward to see what Tim does in the next little while and also to get him back on to the programme to share his thoughts once he's got his feet under the desk a little bit more. So a big thanks to Tim Price today, and a big thanks to you for coming back.

David Pembroke:

Once again, the wonderful world of government communications, again, leading professionals like Tim Price, working in the public sector, bringing that skill, bringing that knowledge, bringing that attitude is just really going to continue to enrich and deepen the quality of storytelling because there is no question. There are so many good stories that are waiting to be told. The job is to unlock them and get them out. And I think Tim really hit it on the head there. If in doubt, head to the people. If in doubt, find where it's impacting and tell that story. And again, Tim, great advice there from Tim, tell a small story, tell a little story, tell a human story, and that's where that connection and engagement will take place.

David Pembroke:

So the GovComms podcast is part of the GovComms podcast network. We also have the Gradcast, which is a podcast by APS graduates for APS graduates. And also, Work with Purpose, which focuses on the work of the Australian public service. So if you'd like to take a listen to either of those podcasts, please jump over to your favourite podcast catcher. A rating or a review of any of the podcasts also helps us to be found, but we're certainly very grateful for you coming back once again. I'll be back at the same time in two weeks with our next guest on GovComms, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

Outro:

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