Episode 35 Tracy Green Transcript

David: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, wherever you might be listening, welcome to InTransition. The podcast that examines the practice of content marketing in government. My name is David Pembroke, and I am delighted that you have taken some time to join us again as we explore this exciting world of content marketing in government from some of the smartest people in the world.

In the week's episode we head back to the UK to talk to a leader in digital services for the UK parliament. But before we do that, as is customary every week here on InTransition, we define content marketing as it relates to government.

The definition is an adaptation of the Content Marketing Institute's definition of content marketing which is, "Content Marketing is a strategic, measurable, business process that relies on the curation, creation, and distribution of useful, relevant, and consistent content with the aim to engage and inform a clearly defined audience with the objective of achieving a desired citizen or stakeholder action."

Our guest today is Tracy Green. Tracy is the Head of Strategy at Parliamentary Digital Services there in the UK. Previous to her role, she was head of online services for the UK Parliament, responsible for public-facing web, internet, and all the other digital channels including social networking. Tracy joins us this afternoon on InTransition, and welcome to the program.

Tracy: Hi, thank you.

David: Tracy, in terms of using content and using digital platforms and practices there to propagate and promote the work of the UK Parliament, where do you start in terms of your processes in deciding what types of content you're going to create?

Tracy: We have a big corpus of publications which is kind of our starting point. So Parliament is effectively a big publishing house. It publishes all the information about what's happening in Parliament every day, about what happened in the Parliament yesterday, information about select committees, and legislation that's going through Parliament, and lots of information about

the members who sit in Parliament as well, in both houses, in the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

So that's our starting point, really, it's the story of what's going on in Parliament. But lots of that material is written in a certain way it has to be for legal reasons and can be quite difficult to digest for the average reader. So we often take that material as a starting point and then we will rewrite that story to make it more interesting, a bit more engaging for people so that they're better able to understand it.

David: What is your process that allows you to publish amended versions, or interpreted versions of regulations, and black-letter law?

Tracy: We have some automated processes for publishing those big documents, and then we have a content management system. We've got a devolved editorial model. So we've trained over 500 people across Parliament to use the content management system and to publish content to its digital channels. And there are workflow processes within that. Often the sign-off process for a lot of that material comes outside of the system.

David: Give me some indication of what that sign-off process might look like on a typical day, how many documents or how many videos, or how many audio files might be published in a given day, and how do you get them up onto the web?

Tracy: Oh, dozens, dozens might be published over a day. But what we do is we try and plan ahead as well. So we have quite a rigorous editorial process. We meet every week and we plan ahead what's going to be on the website, on social media or other channels the week before. But we leave it flexible enough because things change as well. You know, things drop in. So that's kind of collaboration between the web team and the two information teams in each House. They're effectively kind of communications team for the Houses, so they'll agree for the week ahead what's going to go online.

David: Okay, so you sit down with them as like sort of a service provider that they come to you with their programs as such, their legislative programs and they're saying, "Okay, these are the assets that need to find their way 'on air,'" so to speak, "And Tracy, can you help us do that?"

Tracy: Yeah, and it's much more of a two-way process. So rather than being a service provider it's more of a collaboration because often we'll suggest things that

they might want to do to make the content more engaging or where to push it to get the best readership. You know, if they hit something for Facebook we might suggest pictures or video, something like that. So it's very much a team effort in deciding how are we going to communicate and engage the following week.

David: Okay, what sort of resources do you have as part of your team?

Tracy: So there's a content team with about 10 people, and the web team. I keep thinking of them as my team but I've moved on from that role now, there's about 10 of them that are managing content there. And they work with the two Information Offices, as I mentioned, and they have teams of I think between five and 10 who work together as well. But they're dealing with the media, they're dealing with print publications as well. So they're doing lots of other things apart from web and those other teams.

David: But you also mentioned that you have quite a devolved system as well where you have publishing rights by the sounds of things, at the edges of the Parliamentary ecosystem.

Tracy: Yeah, so we have for example, a big team that looks after all of the visitors that come to Parliament. So they manage the visiting program. They have teams of people who kind of give tours and things like that, and look after to people when they arrive, they look after a lot of the merchandise that we sell in Parliament.

           And it's quite a big body of material on the website and on social media about all of that aspect of Parliament's life. It's not just about the legislation. We're a heritage site as well, so people come and visit us including school children. And they'll have about five people managing their content online, so making sure all of the information about tours in Parliament are up to date; what's going on, what can people come in and do there, and they disseminate that out through social media also.

David: So how have you gone about making sure that there is quality and consistency? What has been that process that has enabled for you to achieve the outcomes that you're getting now?

Tracy: Primarily, it's about – well, in the Web Team, recruiting people with the right kind of skills and expertise. But then when we've gone on to train people across both Houses of Parliament – because actually, publishing material to

the web I think is part of everybody's job. It's no longer the reserve of the Web Team and an organisation to do that. Everybody has a role in doing that because the web touches every part of business, every part of an organisation.

So we do quite a lot of training and we not only train people how to use a content management system which runs to get their material live but we also teach them how to write for the web, how to optimise the search engines, how to make things usable and accessible. And that training cost which is a couple of days before they start using the CMS, that's the starting point, really. We then have – the Content Team and the Web Team, they have a kind of – I suppose, a customer service role towards all those other teams in Parliament.

And so that is the point of contact in the Web Team, and they're there to provide advice if people have new ideas for online, they'll come and talk to those people. If they want to set-up new sections or create new content, they'll come and talk to them. So right of point of being trained you have a kind coaching mentoring from the Web Team all the way. So we're building that capability, I hope, through lots of other teams in Parliament, so people become much more proficient in what's good content, how to really promote effectively to your audiences, and how to make it work, really, and have an impact, get people better understand what Parliament's all about. Does that make sense?

David: No, it does, and it sounds like a fantastic program. And it also sounds like a wonderful commitment from your leadership, and understanding of the importance and the power of content in terms of achieving the objectives of what you've just identified right at the end which is all about the people understanding what Parliament is, what it is trying to achieve, what are they trying to do, etcetera. And that commitment to training, where did that come from?

Tracy: Well, it started with bringing in a new content management system and knowing that the Web Team can't do everything. If we wanted to be able to publish all the material that we have, and just do that from the web team, you'd need a web team of 50 people at least. And of course you don't have the resource for that. But actually, it makes better sense for the subject

matter experts to be publishing content and for us to have trained them to use digital tools effectively.

So I suppose, when we brought in a new CMS back in 2010 I persuaded my boss that part of doing that was not just the technology and installing that, and implementing that but actually making sure that we had some funds to train people. And they bought into that, I think people are really – ever since 2010, we've been running a training session every month pretty much training groups of between eight and 10 people. And I think as time has gone on, people have really started to see the difference it can make to the way they work. So they're starting to see that.

I think one of our big challenges is presenting Parliament in a way that people can understand because the content it naturally produces is so complex and often quite long, often using written using terminology people don't understand. So that's still our big challenge, is to take that content and make that more engaging and digestible for the audiences that we know come in to find out about what Parliament does.

David: Now, I'm really interested in that point and I will come back to that in a moment but I just want to go back to 2010 and the conversation with your boss. Because I imagine Westminster, risk averse, if it's like a lot of places and you've got the great idea that you're going to give lots of people publishing rights. Was that a difficult conversation to have and how did you go about having that conversation around risk?

Because this is a fundamental point for so many content marketers working in government, working in risk-averse environments, how do you convince people that it's not going to be the end of the world if we give people publishing rights and if we prepare them to be able to tell the story effectively?

Tracy: In a way, it wasn't such a hard-sell because Parliament is very information-focused, very publishing-focused organisation. People were already creating content in different ways anyway. So to actually say, we want to give people the ability to publish to the internet and to the website didn't seem so hard.

I think the bigger challenge was around giving those rights was one thing but then working with teams, because one size doesn't fit all. So the HR Team wanted to work in a slightly different way to the Library for example. So

working with those teams in different ways to help them set-up processes and mechanism for how they could publish their work for them. It wasn't just kind of a single model, so that was the harder bit, actually.

And often, we were pushing people to be able to be empowered and have some autonomy to be able to publish. But their lack of confidence meant that they would often come back and say, "Oh, you know, I'm not sure how to do this. Can you help?" or, "So and so who you trained last month has now left, we need you to do this." So we would keep going back and pushing back on them saying, "No, this is your responsibility, actually." Because otherwise, the Web Team would've just been swamped. We wouldn't have been able to do anything else.

David: So how then were you able to adjust and what sort of needs were there that differed between say, HR and the Library Team, what were they looking for that was different? And how did you meet the needs of that particular area of the organisation such that they were satisfied and confident to get going in terms of publishing content?

Tracy: I think for the HR Team, publishing content was a very new thing for them. It wasn't something they were used to doing. It hadn't been part of other tasks and ways of working that they had done before. So the idea of just the basics of how a publishing tool might and things around metadata, and optimizing for search, and how you write for the web was quite new to them.

Whereas a lot of the staff in the library, they're the Research Section, their kind of day job, if you like, is writing briefings, making it – indexing content, so they were already up-to-speed with a lot of that. So in a way, that was straightforward process. But for the HR Team it was quite new so you have to kind of start from a different point and you have to focus on some training that perhaps the Library folk had already got in other ways. So it was different training needs in some ways.

David: It's wonderful how you started it and you've kept it. And it's obviously a core part of building the capability that's now generating fantastic outcomes. But how then do you go about helping these different areas such as HR, such as the Library, such as the different Chambers to understand about the personas that they're trying to connect to? What sort of work did you do in that space in terms of building out an understanding of the audience that they were seeking to engage?

Tracy: Well, people often come with assumptions about who it is that's looking at the website, which is often not reflected in facts. So we focused quite heavily on showing then the data. So it wasn't our subjective view of who was coming to the website or who we should be engaging with but it was based on some data.

So we used Google Analytics and parceled the kind of account management relationship and the Content Team, they would practically go out the different teams in both Houses and say, "This is the data on who's looked at your pages in the last month, this is how they're behaving, this is where they're coming from, this is where they're going," to try and get them to think about the behavior of how people are using their content.

But alongside that quantitative aspect, we've also been doing a survey on the public-facing website for the last six years. And we've always had really amazing response, actually. When I first went to work, I was quite staggered that they were getting over 1,000 survey responses every month within about a week. And it's quite a simple questionnaire. We just ask how satisfied people were with their visit, what they were looking for, that kind of thing, about five questions in total. And we've got some great data there which really tells us who the people are that are coming, or gives us an indication – it's not Science. People are self-selecting. Although we get a good indication of who's coming, what they're looking for, where they're having problems, and challenges that our content to help us to do better, really.

So on that survey as well, people kind of tick a box to say whether they're a journalist, or a member of the public, or a student, or an MP so that we have some idea of who they are. So we share that data with our colleagues to help build up a picture of the end-user, and how the content's been used, and how we can improve it.

David: And I imagine they'd be very engaged with that data.

Tracy: Yeah, but it's also, like I said, it's not a Science so often it's quite challenging in the interpretations so I think sometimes there would be quite some debates how much it reflected the real users. The 1,000 people who fill in the survey, how representative are they of the people that are coming every month. So there's quite hard work we have to do in the interpretation to kind of build up an argument, and to build up some plans for what you do next.

David: So in terms of finding a standardised approach, obviously, there are different needs from Education, to the Library, to HR but do you have a single templated approach that then people might sort of adjust depending on their emphasis in terms of developing their content marketing programs?

Tracy: I suppose we do. I suppose it's a templated starting point and then we'll tweak it depending on the parts of the business that we'll work with. Often, people come to us and say, "Oh, I want a link on my homepage. Not enough people are seeing my content," but we use that as a starting point to try and build with them a proper kind of campaign approach to how we might get more users to the content and get people more engaged.

And we take a really holistic, integrated approach as well. So we're thinking about how they're writing their contents, where they're putting it on the website, kind of language they're using, and how they're feeding that through to social media. So we take a much more integrated approach. And that, I'd say it's a systematic one whether that's about visiting information, about how people can visit Parliament, or if it's about information about select committees.

David: But again, I think the thing I love about this whole system is that it's a very collaborative approach and that the experts are not too far away at any given time to be able to talk about and to work with the different lines areas to ensure that their content marketing is working.

Tracy: No, absolutely. I mean, we depend on our colleagues on both Houses because they are the experts on Parliament. They are the experts on their area of the business. And they come to us for advice and guidance on how they can best use digital channels to achieve their goals basically. In 2015, you can't achieve your goals unless you use the internet. So it's very much collaboration from that perspective.

And it's interesting because I've just been – as part of my new role as Head of Strategy I've been doing a lot of workshops with colleagues in both Houses to see what we want the strategy to be going forward, and what we think's been good and bad in the past, and all of them have said, "We need you as the experts and the Digital Team to show us how we can properly use the internet to achieve our goals. And it's got to be a collaboration." Sometimes that's more challenging and sometimes that comes easily but it's the same in any organisation, I think.

David: Yeah, and in those consultations, what's the number one challenge that people are coming up with all the time?

Tracy: Gosh, I mean, those sessions have been about everything in the IT and Digital in Parliament so I think the challenge has been between how we really provide good service to our members, everything from giving them their kit, to giving them apps to use in their tablet devices, to how we can really open Parliament up to the public. Because it's so, as I said before, so kind of mired in history. History is great but often it can be a barrier to engagement because it uses language and it can be quite difficult to understand, and be quite complex. I think it's everything between those two points, really. But those are two of the big ones that came out.

David: And just in terms of that complexity, again, for government communication and people working in government often there is that challenge that a lot of the regulation, the black letter law is complex. What do you find are the best ways to turn complex documents into documents and videos, and audio, and other content assets to make them more accessible?

Tracy: I think a really good example of that for us is what we've done with select committees, and select committee reports particularly. So we've been working quite hard with those colleagues over the last couple of years to really look at how we can make reports more engaging. So they have been using things like info-graphics, and video, and more imagery but also trying to write the document in a slightly different way, using language that's more optimised for search.

Often, select committees would report on something and the kind of title they would've given the inquiry is not the title been used in popular media. So somebody searching for that, they would never have found it. So kind of thinking about the language you use while still making sure that it adheres to the kind of formality that it needs because of the process it's reflecting.

Yeah, and I think often we'll have like a report or a call for evidence but the team there, they're writing new stories which are much more engaging so they give a summary of what an inquiry might be about without somebody having to read a very long document to get that message across. And they'll promote that on twitter, and we use Facebook to get people engaged.

If there's going to be an inquiry where they're inviting members of the public to come and give evidence about something, so we've done that with healthcare issues in the past, they'll use social media, and particularly health-focused forums or things like that to get some input from people. So it not only changes the way the content works, and actually makes the content more engaging but they actually get more – they get better content because they're reaching out to a much broader audience.

In the past, select committees may have had a kind of narrower pool of people that they went to get evidence but now with the use of digital you can really open that up and you can get evidence from a much wider group of people. So it benefits the process fundamentally as well which is quite exciting because it should make democracy better.

David: I was about to make that very point, that really, if the objective is about strengthening democracy and improving the way Parliament works, it sounds like you're doing a very good job.

Tracy: We try.

David: But also this notion that you introduced right at the beginning of the discussion, I think, is this sense of Parliament being just one big publishing house and everyone sort of playing their role in the publishing house. And it sounds like you've made great progress, really, over a relatively short period of time in terms of being able to leverage the utility of digital technology and content marketing. But what's next? Where are the next big improvements for you in order for you to continue to do good things?

Tracy: A big thing for us at the moment is data and making all of that information available in data form so that people can take that data and reuse it outside of Parliament. And they can also interrogate it more effectively. So when I talk about data, I'm talking about everything from the record of what happened in Parliament to information about what interests MPs have. Some MPs are more interested in particular topics of interest than others. And information about when they were in Parliament, how they voted, all of that kind of stuff.

And people are really interested in that data. Over the last four years, we've ran four hack events in Parliament where we've invited the developer community to come in and play around with our data and build apps and websites with it. And we've always been inundated with people keen to do

that. So last year we had about 80 people who came in and they built about 20 different apps. So there's a real appetite there; people want us to be open by default, if you like, and make all of that data available.

And because of the legacy systems that it's been sitting and how they were published now, that's been quite a challenge. But I'd say that's a big priority us; making that data freely available in a kind of standardised open format. We launched, we just launched our B version of our data. Parliament platform so we're already making a number of those datasets available but we've got lots more to do there.

David: And in terms of the publishing of assets be it video, audio, stills, text, graphics, what's next in terms of those content assets?

Tracy: We've been using Facebook much more effectively over the last year and I think we've tripled our kind of following there. And that's because we've been using those assets much more effectively, we've been using video and imagery there. So we're looking at the social channels, actually, and about how we can use assets like photos, and video there as well.

David: It's a fascinating time, isn't it? For story-tellers working in Parliament, working in places like Westminster where there is just – it's just a wonderful sandpit really to start to try to tell a better story.

Tracy: No, absolutely, it's all about stories, I think. And opening those stories up to people, and doing in a way which is personal and engaging because I think when people think about Parliament they think about that big, iconic building with the clock tower on one end of it and they don't necessarily see the stories behind it.

So one of the other things that we've just gone live with is a blogging platform and I'm encouraging lots of different teams from across Parliament to blog about what their jobs are, what it's like to work in Parliament, the different types of things they do.

One of the blogs that's going to go live in there is from the Archives Team. So we've got a massive archive, wealth of information there, has lots of image and video assets that goes with as well. So from the Death Warrant of Charles I to lots of other historical documents you can investigate those. So they're going to be blogging about the work they do and the archive that they hold, and everything that's in it.

So I think that's really engaging. If you can hook people in with that kind of content to Parliament you can then – you've got an opportunity then to course them to all the other things that perhaps they didn't know were going on too. So if they're interested in a particular topic, they can go find out about that.

I think that's also one of our big challenges for the future, is really focusing on how we can get our content more effectively tagged because we know the people are really interested in politics on a topic-basis. Somebody that cares about cycling, or somebody who cares about energy, or fracking, or something like that. So tagging our content so that they kind find it without necessarily having to know what the kind content is before they look I think would be a big win for us if we could do that in the next year.

David: And I imagine that will be a big part of the on-going training program.

Tracy: Absolutely. Absolutely, yeah.

David: Well, Tracy, thank you very much for giving us some of your time this afternoon. I think it's an intriguing story, really, as to the way that the UK Parliament has taken on this opportunity to become a publisher, to be its own media company and to really put at the core not only good function but also to start to put in place the training that enables to various human assets that work within the Parliament to be able to tell their own stories. And to be given permission to publish, and to connect with people.

Thank you so much for the insights today. It's been wonderful for our audience and I know people would've got a lot of insight out of that. So thank you very much for coming on to "In Transition," and best of luck with your next endeavor. It sounds like you've got a very big work plan in front of you.

Tracy: Thank you. Absolutely, yes. Thank you very much for the opportunity, enjoyed it.