InTransition Episode 94 – Virginia Haussegger

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication and government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and I am delighted that you have decided to give us a small share of your week this week to listen to a great conversation with someone who I know that you will really enjoy because she's a very experienced journalist and communications specialist. She's moved out of day-to-day journalism and into the world of academia but it's going to be a fantastic conversation as they are each week. As we do each week, we begin with the definition of content communication. Content communication is a strategic measurable and accountable business process that relies on the creation, curation and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and or stakeholder action.

To my guest this week. Virginia Haussegger AM is an award-winning journalist with over 25 years' experience in news media. She's held senior reporter and presenter roles in Channel 9, The Seven Network, and The ABC, and has experience in corporate and strategic communications. She is an adjunct professor at the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis at the University of Canberra and manages a busy portfolio of not for profit and community engagements. In 2014, she was made a member of the Order of Australia, for services to the community in women's rights, gender equity, and the media. She's also a board member of UN Women National Committee of Australia, and also the ACT Government's Cultural Facilities Corporation. Virginia Haussegger, thanks so much for joining us In Transition.

Virginia: Absolute pleasure.

David Pembroke: Hey, listen. Take me to that sense of when you were given that award, the AM. You obviously didn't expect it.

Virginia: No.

David Pembroke: You don't do the work to get the honour, but it must've been a pretty pleasing moment when obviously someone had nominated you and said you've done something special, and you deserve recognition.

Virginia: Yeah, and to this day, David, I don't know who nominated me. I have a few, if you ...

David Pembroke: Bread crumbs around the place!

Virginia: No, no, no. I think I've got a few ideas as to who it may have been, but look, of course I didn't expect it, and this is the bizarre thing, isn't it? As a journalist, I do the stories on people who get these things, and year after year, I've presented the news when I've been very excited to see people I know get these extraordinary awards, and on a number of years, I've found myself just before going to air, ringing someone up to say, "Congratulations. This is really exciting." I got this letter in the mail, and to be quite frank, I just assumed it was an official invitation to something at Government House.

David Pembroke: To another cocktail party.

Virginia: As a journalist, particularly in Canberra, you do get these occasionally, and I didn't open it for a while. When I did, I misread it, and at first I thought it was asking me to nominate someone for a member of the Order of Australia. It took a while to sink in, and then I went up to my husband and I said, "I think I've been nominated for an award." It was really extraordinary, and it ... Look, I've been very lucky. I've had some terrific experiences in my career, and I've had some great breaks, but this has been the greatest thing that's happened to me professionally. It was such a shot in the arm. Normally, you see people at an older age get these awards for decades and decades and decades of work and service to the community, and I like to think that I'm very young, but as you and I know that I am.

David Pembroke: We're both young.

Virginia: Of course, of course. In my 25 plus years in media, I started when I was two! I sort of feel like I got this at a time in my career when I've got a huge amount yet to do, and it was such, as I say, a shot in the arm. It was also a, I received it as a tremendous affirmation that all that stuff I've been doing has been valued, and little bits and pieces. Because my portfolio of work is so broad, and I feel often that no one would know what I do except me, and my husband, if he pays attention, which he often doesn't, of course. Because I would have a busy day where at the end of the day, I would be in at the ABC, I would be involved in the bulletin, I'd present the news bulletin. Outside of that time I was at the ABC. I'd be doing a whole bunch of other things, but often not related to each other, so no one would really know what I was doing. When I got the award, it felt like someone had been hovering above me watching and had seen the extent of what I was doing, and was saying, "Yeah. We value this."

David Pembroke: Yeah. Do awards matter?

Virginia: I think they do matter. Yeah, very much so, for that exact reason. So much of the sort of work that people do in the community, and that's what these awards are about, goes unrecognised, and you don't do it for the recognition, but it does in my case certainly help me understand that the work is valued, and that it's supported. I think that's probably more the point, that it's supported, that I'm not doing this entirely on my own. That meant a lot to me.

David Pembroke: Now how will you use that? How will you apply that privilege, that honour that you've received in order to achieve the objectives of the work that's coming?

Virginia: That's a really good question, because interestingly, an award such an AM, and I'm sure it's the same for OAMs and all of these awards, it feels like it provides you with further obligation to do what you do. I feel now that I have been given this honour, that I am even more obliged to continue this work. That's what it should do. On the one hand, it's an affirmation. It's support. It's encouragement, as I say, a shot in the arm, but it also ... There's a commitment involved, too, in receiving something like this. I consider I have an ongoing job to do to honour this award.

David Pembroke: Okay. You're not here to talk about that. I just thought I was just interested, as to reflect on the fact that you had. Really the thing I am interested in, as well as I'm interested in the award, of course, but you've just taken the step out. You have left the profession, so to speak. You are no longer, and we do have listeners all around the world, and Virginia, as I read out in the intro, has a long and distinguished career, but your most recent job has been reading the news here in Canberra, the Australian capital, for the national broadcaster. An important role, a significant role, but the last full-time role in the media. At that point of moving on, obviously you take your skills with you, but as you sort of peer back over your shoulder, what are you leaving behind?

Virginia: Another good question. After 15 years, I'm leaving behind a very extensive wardrobe as a news anchor. I've got way too many clothes.

David Pembroke: You'll still use all those clothes. You always look a million dollars.

Virginia: I've been giving them away, honestly.

David Pembroke: How can you?

Virginia: I have, because I look-

David Pembroke: Grab a blazer!

Virginia: Yeah. I've got at least 60 to give away. I look at them, and I see work. I see studio. I see news, and I'm over that, and I've finished with that.

David Pembroke: We're going to see some very snappily dressed people around town.

Virginia: Oh, yes. I've been giving away to waitresses in cafes. No, seriously. What do I leave behind? Look, it's an interesting question, because in the, it's actually 30 years since I began my career in media. Yes, I was two, or actually two and a half. When I began my career as a television news cadet with the ABC, media was very, very different. Over those 30 years, the changes have been absolutely remarkable. In terms of what I leave behind, I leave behind an industry that is

not the industry I certainly set out in as a young journalist. I leave behind an industry that I think is going through dramatic change. One of the reasons I stayed in my role as news anchor for 15 years here in Canberra is that when I arrived here from Sydney to set up the ABC TV news local news service, what was being set up by a wonderful producer, Bill McCloud, but I came along because I knew Bill was one of the best in the business, and I wanted to work with him. I was excited by the idea of basically a startup.

We didn't even have an office. In fact, we're in a portable room in the car park at the ABC radio studios. We had an old, really old beautiful studio that was built back in the, gosh, I think it was the late fifties to be honest, or sixties, and we built a building around that. Every couple of years there was something new to do. First there was the building, there was collecting the staff, building the staff, training the staff, then training the staff for weekend news bulletin, which we didn't have for the first year or so. Then developing the staff. We had a move towards digitization, and then getting rid of our old control room, for example, getting rid of all the old analogue, moving to a digital news service, which also meant getting rid of a lot of staff, retraining people. We moved from journalists being journalists who just did the job of journalism and reporting, to making those very people content makers, along with editors. They became content makers, and we all became content makers and providers.

Journalists became desktop editors as well, and editors became reporters. There's been a massive merging of roles, and a change in what we do, and also why we do it.

David Pembroke: What's it done to the product? What's it done to news? Has it defaced it?

Virginia: There's two ways I can answer this, and I ...

David Pembroke: I'd like the honest answer, please.

Virginia: I'm debating here. Look, what's it done? I still have connections to the media of course, and I still will continue writing and doing columns. My husband is very much a media person, and a senior political correspondent, and my friends are journalists. I still feel a great fondness and connexion with the media, but in truth, I think all of us are grappling with the, not just the rapid change in technology, but the way the rapid change of the news cycle has changed the way we do what we do, and why we do it. I don't think we've got our heads around how to rebuild the news model around a 24 hour cycle in a way that's sustainable, and that maintains a level of quality that we can be proud of. By the time I've left television news, I no longer feel a need to watch a TV news bulletin. Once upon a time, I would never have said that. Once upon a time, it was vital for my day that I would listen to a, wake up listening to radio news and a radio current affairs programme, that I would read at least four newspapers, three or four newspapers properly, and I would never miss watching one or two news bulletins each day.

There's no longer a need to do any of that. In fact, before I've actually lifted my head off my pillow, I've flipped through my Twitter account and pretty much got what I feel I need to get for the day, at least for the first half of the day, and then I'm checking throughout the day. It's no doubt you are, too. These are tremendous changes, and it has of course had a tremendous effect on the quality of news, and the sustainability of news. Once upon a time, again, we would never have published, we would never have gone to air with a story until we're absolutely, completely, 100% sure it was right. That doesn't happen now, not even in my own news service, or the one I've just left, because we now have the opportunity to correct online what we've put out there. If we do a bulletin now in an hour, we've got another bulletin which we can then correct something or change it if needs be, or reedit it. There isn't the emphasis on the importance of being correct that there used to be, nor is there an emphasis on, or even a level of care, I suppose, about the quality of production that there used to be.

A television news bulletin now gets away with a whole bunch of things that you never would've got away with even 10 years ago. Look, for some of us, that can be ... When you've been brought up in a very strict sort of environment of production, high production values, and very high journalism values and ethics, it can be quite hard to sort of grapple with this new world.

David Pembroke: This is the point though, isn't it, is that a time of de-industrialisation, dramatic impact on the way that we live, the jobs that we have, the way that we work, this deconstruction of quality in the media, how is that going to affect the community? How is that going to change the way the community knows about ... With any sort of certainty, because again, we used to rely on, let's use the ABC as an example, rely that you wouldn't put something to air if it wasn't right. You wouldn't go if it was half, because we knew, and we could trust that that was the case. If in this transitory world that we're in now, how do we know, and how do people know, and how do they get confidence, and does it open up the opportunity, as we see, for populism to find its way through the cracks to be able to establish itself? If nothing's got credibility, well, you can say whatever you like, so the rules of the game are now so different.

Virginia: The rules are entirely different, and yes, in this post-truth world of populism, it is very concerning as to where do we go to find information about the world around us that we can trust, and that we can rely on? Look, I am an optimist by nature, and therefore, I'm not going to say I'm terribly concerned, and it's all going to hell on earth in a big basket. I think one of the things that concerns me as that we are all, as consumers of media, engaging in narrow casting, and we're following what we like, who we like, consuming what fits with our own worldview. That narrow casting is bad for all of us. It's like eating junk food all the time. Do it occasionally, it's delightful, but do it all the time, it makes you sick, or make you fat. This is a concern, and I have to pull myself up on this.

I have to stop myself consciously following, and particularly in social media, the pathways of news and information that suit me, and every now and then, make myself branch out and read things that I wouldn't normally read, graze over things that I wouldn't normally even open. I make myself do that, so that I can be broader in my, at least in my knowledge of what's going on.

David Pembroke: Where are the incentives for you to do that, to leave your comfortable patch, to leave your niche, beyond the intellectual?

Virginia: That's a good question. Yeah, that's a very good question. I guess, being a journalist, once a journalist, always a journalist. I know that I need to do that, and also I have a ... Curiosity is my second name. I am deeply curious. I want to know what others are reading, and thinking, and talking about, even if it's not particularly of interest to me. In answer to your question, what does it mean for the wider community, talk about disruption. The disruption in media has changed all our lives, and will continue to. I think it also presents tremendous opportunities, and it presents tremendous opportunities for organisations, for government departments, for government entities to be delivering information and telling stories directly to their stakeholders in a way that they haven't done before, by parsing mainstream media, or legacy media, and by dealing directly with those they need to inform.

There are tremendous opportunities in this. I'll just tell you a little anecdote about this. Almost a decade ago, I was sitting at a Walkley Conference. The Walkley is the organisation that journalists are involved in, and we had a panel discussion. It was a long time ago. On this panel were a number of senior journalists and a couple of politicians including one Malcolm Turnbull. He said at the time, he had a website, and he was one of the first politicians to really tackle social media, as you know, but he had a website, a personal website in which he was posting at the time blogs about his dog, which I thought was really crazy. We got talking about why he was doing that, and he said, "The time will come," referring to the audience of journalists, "The time will come when I don't need you. I will talk directly to the people I want to talk to, and I won't need you."

People scoffed, and laughed, and thought how arrogant this man was, but I remember thinking at the time, "I think he's got a point there." I'm not interested in reading about the blog about his dogs, but the fact he was doing it I thought was really quite interesting, and the fact that he was reaching out to his constituency in a way no other politician was at the time. Fast forward 10 years later, and I think that was an example of someone who could see the future, and was trying to engage with it, and I thought that was quite profound, really. The opportunities that this new way of communicating, a new way of talking, a new way of learning, a new way of seeking information has opened up are tremendous. I don't think we fully understand those opportunities. Whilst we get miserable about what's happened to mainstream media, we're right on the edge, I think, of understanding what the opportunities that have opened up really are, and that's exciting to me, really.

David Pembroke: I completely agree with you, because content communication is precisely that. It's about equipping organisations so that they can be their own media for their own story. What advice would you give to government departments and agencies, and people working in government departments in agencies, that would help them to be good at this? It's a different skill, and it's a different capability to what ... Traditionally it's been about buying advertising, and talking points, and supporting the minister, and media releases, whereas now the transition is to creation, and curation, and distribution, which is a journalistic skill.

Virginia: Absolutely. Look, there's a stack of things that I would say, but I guess ...

David Pembroke: Okay. Let's start at the top.

Virginia: All right. I'll try to break it down to just a few, but one in particular is certainly to government departments, there is a tremendous need to understand better that communication is primary. It's not something your communication department does. It's not something that should be a bottom line on your budget. Those days are over. Now every single member of your team needs to be a communicator. We need to be able to tell our stories. Everyone needs to understand that, so understanding that communication is now what we all do, first and foremost, is critical, and I'm surprised at how it seems very difficult for some people to get their heads around that.

David Pembroke: It's true, and I think communication still is seen as the end of the line, the colouring in department. Get us the brochure. Get us the video. There's not that appreciation.

Virginia: Good bye to those people. They're not going to be around for long, David. Really, they aren't, are they?

David Pembroke: It's true.

Virginia: Completely.

David Pembroke: It's true, because I think the change in technology has made communication far more important, because everyone who we need to talk to is actually there. They're connected. They're carrying around those supercomputers in their pocket, that if we are smart enough and good enough to tell an engaging story, hopefully they might get some of their attention, where they want to look at it.

Virginia: Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah, and link directly to you, to you.

David Pembroke: Correct.

Virginia: To tell you what they want, and you to feed back what they want. As I said, the opportunities are tremendous. First and foremost, understanding that

storytelling and communication is primary, is critical. It comes first. It must. People who talk to me about, "Oh, yes, we're doing this fantastic campaign, and blah, blah, blah, and then we'll get to the communication strategy when we get around to it." For goodness sakes. As I said, those people won't survive. Those organisations won't survive. Understanding it's primary is first. Secondly, language. I am so tired of really poor use of language, a tremendous, particularly here in Canberra, a tremendous propensity for organisations and government industries in particular to stick to an old-fashioned, formal language of their sector that is idiotic.

David Pembroke: Can I tell you a most recent favourite from a document I saw this morning? We're talking about a particular task that they're asking us to do, and one of those tasks was dialogue enablement.

Virginia: Dialogue enablement.

David Pembroke: Rolls up the tongue, doesn't it?

Virginia: I love it. I love it. I love it. There is so much of that shit about. It's amazing. I've just done a conference. I won't name the organisation, because I know I have great respect for them, but it covers a particular sector that's a terribly important sector. Honestly, I kept going back to the organiser saying, "I need another brief," because I couldn't understanding the briefing material. I'm not stupid, but it was so laden down with jargon, and acronyms. Acronyms, that's another thing, but just jargon, but also I think where people have trouble really understanding what it is they're trying to say, they hide behind this very formal language.

David Pembroke: Yeah. I think that's a good point.

Virginia: When I started ripping through these briefs, saying, "I don't understand this, and I don't understand that." At one point, I even spoke to the secretary of the department to say, "I don't get this, and I'm not stupid." He had to admit he didn't understand it either.

David Pembroke: I think that's a very good point, this notion of hiding, finding words, assembling words because you don't know yourself, and you sort of put up the barriers of this impenetrable language. There's nothing there. It's just-

Virginia: Yeah, and it doesn't mean anything.

David Pembroke: No.

Virginia: People seem to think also, if they think they do understand what it means, that it sounds good, it sounds important, and it's worth paying for. It's nonsense. We have to simplify language. I do a lot of reading of reports from the UK and the US, particularly in the area of gender equality and diversity and inclusiveness,

which is where I'm working now. I'm so impressed by particularly some of the, well, both the UK and the American reports, but some of them are just so sharp and clear and concise and short. Here in Australia, I think we've got a long way to go in our public information to understand that, and know or appreciate that short is actually better. It's often more profound, and it's certainly sharper, so language is a terribly important one. Might I just say, on this issue, I'm going to be critical of the media here, too. Media also is guilty of this.

A number of times, I have said to journalists in our newsroom over several years, when they've written an introduction for a report that I have to present, and I've gone up to them and said, "I don't understand this, or I'm trying to rewrite this," because I'd rewrite a lot of my stuff. "I don't get it. What do you mean?" They'd say, "Oh, that's what's on the press release," and pull out the press release, because there is a lot of cutting and pasting that goes on these days, as you know, which is an issue of time, the very short amount of time journalists have. So often yet, they will rip from press releases, and I'm appalled to say that, but it's true. That's why the press release needs to be really clear, but we'll then have a look at various press releases, all accompanying documents, any reports or budget papers, although the budget papers are getting better.

Some of the language used in these formal pieces of communication are just impenetrable. Unfortunately, journalists are regurgitating that because in fact, they don't understand it themselves.

David Pembroke: How do people get the courage to continue to ask the question, to say, "Look, I don't understand or why."

Virginia: If you don't understand ...

David Pembroke: Keep asking.

Virginia: Absolutely, and as I say to young students, to cadets all the time, it's the first question you should be asking at a press conference, is, "What does that mean?" Or, "Can you explain that?" Ask a politician when they give you a ridiculous answer, "What do you mean," and you'll quickly find that sometimes they really have trouble explaining it themselves, because they don't know, or they haven't thought it through properly. The most powerful questions can be, "What do you mean," or, "What are you saying," or, "What do you want?" That's another thing about communication, David, and I'm sure you've come across this every single also. The number of times that we can sit down with people when we're trying to get our heads around their brief, or their particular aims for a seminar, for example, or they'll call me in because they want me to facilitate a panel discussion. When they don't really know what it is they want to get out of it, and that's what I often find myself saying, is, "What do you want? What do you want people to understand from this event, or this discussion, or what do you want people to walk out the door saying as they leave? What do

you want? What do you mean? How do you think people will understand that? What behaviour change do you want in them? How do you want them to think?"

All these sorts of really basic questions we don't ask.

David Pembroke: Yeah, but if we get those, that can really put us in a good position to then tell the story. Then how do you get the story out into that world of fragmentation and change? What's maybe some tips about getting people interested in what it is that you have to say?

Virginia: One of the things that I think is very easily done, and again, it's not done often enough, is simply when you are thinking of your target audience ... In fact, first and foremost, understand who your target audience is. How often have you prepared something for someone when they've got no idea who they're actually talking to? You're wasting your time, and money, and efforts, and resources, and all the rest if you don't understand who your audience is. Audiences these days are very diverse because of narrow casting. We can break down an audience over pages, and pages, and pages if you want. Once upon a time, when I was early days, when I was in commercial media, we used to talk about the audience, and one particular commercial station, they used to refer to them as Mr. and Mrs. Maude. It was one audience. It was that general audience. There's no such thing as the general audience now.

David Pembroke: Yeah. It's true.

Virginia: Understand who your audience is. Then get out of your chair, and take your shoes off, and go and sit in their chair, stand in their shoes. See what you're doing from their perspective. Literally go and stand in their shoes, and look back at what you're doing, and see how the audience might understand it, or comprehend it, or what they might be wanting from it. When you flip something around and try and see it from an audience perspective, that changes the nature of your communication. So often organisations will send out key messages that are organizationally oriented. It's all about them. It's all about what the organisation might do, or say. It's not actually directed at the target audience, so it's not directed specifically at what the audience might want.

I'm always saying flip it around and think about your key message being recipient-oriented. It's got to be about the person, or the audience. It's not about you, the organisation. Understand where your audience is standing and sitting to see, in a sense, how your message is going to be received by them.

David Pembroke: Would you agree that the bar is even higher now because people have so much choice?

Virginia: Yeah, I think it is. Yeah.

David Pembroke: There are so many places where they can apply their attention that unless you are communicating in a way that is useful, that is relevant, that is consistent, that's adding value, why would I bother?

Virginia: Exactly. Yeah.

David Pembroke: I'll go somewhere else.

Virginia: I think the bar is much higher, but the opportunity there is that it makes us all need to be a lot more honest, and a lot more transparent. That public, or that audience have a tremendous radar for insincerity, and for bullshit, really. They do, and I've been saying this in news organisations for a long time. People see through the crap. They see through the nonsense. They see through the spin very, very quickly. Because the bar has been raised in terms of people's ability to consume such a vast range of media now, and go to so many different sources, it is all the more important to be honest and transparent, as well as clear.

David Pembroke: Excellent. Virginia Haussegger, thank you very much for joining us In Transition this week. Congratulations on all your success. Congratulations on a wonderful career, because you really lived the way, I think pioneering in many ways around really credible voice in presenting the news. You weren't just there. You were a journalist presenting the news, and I think that brought a weight and a depth to it, and I think we also enjoy going home and watching you on the news.

Virginia: Thank you very much.

David Pembroke: Good luck with the next part.

Virginia: Thanks a lot.

David Pembroke: I will get you back to talk about all of that stuff, because it's an interesting path that you've chosen around gender, and as the father of two young daughters, it's something that fascinates me, because again it's this sense of well, let's keep changing this world if we can to make sure that all of the biases that are there, whether they're inherent or they're obviously real, but whether they're deliberately put in the way or whether they're just through the thoughtlessness and carelessness. I think there's so much work to be done in that space.

Virginia: Huge.

David Pembroke: I think that's such a great thing for you now. I like this idea of a second career, almost. It's like, okay, now I can turn myself up, and use those skills, those communications skills, to really apply it to an area where you can make a difference globally, I think in this space.

Virginia: Yeah, well, look, hopefully, and thank you very much for it, David. Look, as I say, I'm very glad I started my journalism career when I was two years old, so now I've got plenty of years ahead of me.

David Pembroke: Excellent. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for joining us once again. I'm sure you'll agree that so much insight there, so much wisdom, so much experience. I think you need to just take some of those points that Virginia mentioned, that notion of standing in the shoes of the audience to see what it is that you're saying from their point of view. Get that bit right, and get the language right as well. That's a real bugbear of mind, is keep it simple, keep it clear, keep it to the point, and engage consistently over time, because you're going to need to do that if you're going to build and rebuild trust with relationships, relationships with citizens and stakeholders. Thanks again for joining us this week. We'll be back again at the same time next week. Thanks very much for your time. Bye for now.