
InTransition Episode 96 – Gillian Field

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and thank you very much for joining me once again.

Today we have an interview with a member of the contentgroup staff, someone who's just joined us. It's going to be interesting because this particular person has a similar background to me and wonderful, broad experience across the federal government as well, and in journalism. We'll be having that conversation in just a moment.

Before we do that, we start the programme, as we do each week, with the definition. 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 today. Gillian Field works here at contentgroup now, but she has considerable experience in internal and corporate communications at the federal government in Australia. She was the Director of Internal and Corporate Communication at the Department of Agriculture. She held a similar role at the Department of Defence for three years and also worked as the Manager of Internal Communication at Centrelink. She also worked as the Manager of Corporate Communication at the local water utility and was a journalist for just about 10 years, first of all, in Tasmania, but then here in Canberra with the Canberra Times. She joins me now in the studio. Gillian, welcome to InTransition.

Gillian Field: Thank you very much, David.

David Pembroke: Welcome to contentgroup.

Gillian Field: Thank you very much for that, too, David. It's a pleasure to be here.

David Pembroke: We've got a big job and we won't actually go into the details of the job we're working on at the moment because we don't have the permission of our client to be talking about it, but it is a very big job at the Department of Defence here in Australia. You'll be acquitting yourself and your skills to get some great outcomes there for our clients, but let's go back in time a little bit and talk about journalism and your time in journalism. What made you want to become a journalist?

Gillian Field: Well, what made me want to become a journalist is that it was quite obvious to me by the end of my education process that one of the things I did best was put a sentence together. I was told in high school that if I could do nothing else with my career, I could write. The more I thought about this after I left school, the more I thought, "Well, really, I enjoy writing." It's a useful skill. I'm very interested in what goes on in the world and in how it's positioned. I've always been a big reader. I love newspapers. I decided I would try and get a job in a newspaper.

David Pembroke: Did you take that as a positive thing when your advisors or the school counsellor said, "Well, Gillian, at least you can write"? Were you terrible at everything else?

Gillian Field: Look, I actually feel he meant it in a good way and I think anybody who marks hundreds and hundreds of essays for a living and finds somebody who can put a sentence together, who needs really very little help to get a point across, I thought that was a good thing. I was also told at the time that you could never accuse me of overwriting. I think that was another thing that made me think perhaps journalism was a good way to go because as you know yourself, David, the fewer words you can say something in the better.

David Pembroke: Correct.

Gillian Field: The clearer you are, the more concise you are when you're trying to get an idea across, then really it's a win-win for everybody, isn't it?

David Pembroke: What did you like about being a journalist?

Gillian Field: What did I like about being a journalist? I really enjoy having the information in front of me that I have collected through one means or another and being able to sort it through and turn it into a story. That was very obvious when I did the court reporter round for the Canberra Times. I wrote the Supreme and Magistrate's Courts, when sometimes you would have to spend days or even weeks gathering information about a particular case or a particular trial. You'd have to sit through legal arguments. You'd have to sit through witness after witness, some of which were interesting, some of which were not. You'd have to make sure that you wrote a really interesting balanced story at the end of it.

David Pembroke: You couldn't get it wrong.

Gillian Field: You could not get it wrong. If you did get it wrong, then occasionally you would be told so by the judge from the bench, which is very embarrassing, though fortunately it never happened to me. When you got it right, also, sometimes that was acknowledged, too.

I loved that process. I loved the process of being able to choose which stories I would cover and then perhaps even be in and out of a case for nine weeks, as I

was at one stage. Then at the end of that, have to sit down and write a really, really good, tight 25 paragraphs about what the case was about and why it was interesting. Yeah, I think that's what I like best was that crafting of the story at the end of the process. I think some people are very good reporters, but they can't write. Some people can write, but their reporting, collecting information side of it-

David Pembroke: Didn't have the nose for the story.

Gillian Field: The nose for the story.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Gillian Field: I think certainly with the legal stuff I had quite a good nose for the story, but I think I've always been more on the writer side of it than the reporting side.

David Pembroke: You moved on from there after a good, solid career, and you decided to move into corporate communications. What drove that?

Gillian Field: Well, a number of things. First of all, I think I just really wanted a change and to see what more I could do with my skills.

David Pembroke: Sorry, just to interrupt you there, what would you have summarised those skills as being when you were sitting in that interview with the water utility? What was it that you were going to do for them that was going to create value?

Gillian Field: Originally, I was going to help them manage their media and make sure that their stories about the water utility, and what it did, and how it did it, and why it was good, were properly managed in the process of them becoming public. It was my first corporate communication job and it was at a time when I think the skill and the profession of communication was not very well-developed. Initially, it was seen very much as a media manager role, and that was an advantage for me because the media that I was dealing with at the time, were people that I knew very well, who had been alongside me at courts, and I was able to talk to them in a language that they understood.

David Pembroke: They trusted you.

Gillian Field: They trusted me. As time went on, we looked for more and more innovative ways to get the stories across. We would very early on in this kind of practise, we would package stories up. We would write the media release. We would write the story for them sometimes. We would provide them with vision, because as you well know, David, you don't get a story run on television without the vision.

At that time, there were quite a number and range of TV channels in Canberra. Of course, there aren't so many anymore, but one thing that was in short supply

was the people that operated the cameras, for instance. If you could actually pay somebody to package up some lovely vision for them, they would use it and it was a relief to them because it was one less job to cover during the day. Because I could write like a journalist, quite often we got the stories that were run with very close to what we wanted.

David Pembroke: What you wanted to put forward.

Gillian Field: Yeah.

David Pembroke: What's the secret of getting an audience's attention?

Gillian Field: Oh, look, I think it's a classic talent of journalism. You have to have the nose to pick the story and to tell the story right up top. You have to be able to see what's relevant to them, and explain it to them, and hook them as soon as you can in the process.

I think the training at Canberra Times is very good for that. We, as little baby journalists, would often be the ones to do the briefs for the paper in the time where you had 10 briefs down the side of the page. We would have 10 stories that were pulled off the wires or Reuters or whatever. We had to turn them into briefs. Some of them were very long. It was just the craft of picking out of those stories what people really needed to know and give it to them.

David Pembroke: Did you have a process or did you develop a process that helped you to apply that task? Were there questions that you asked yourself that had to be answered in order for you to be able to take a page worth of information and turn it into a paragraph?

Gillian Field: Look, I think at the time, probably at that stage it was a lot of trial and error and it was being taught a craft by the older, more senior journalists. My news editor at the time would say to me, "Well, what does Mrs. Canberra want to know? What does Mrs. Canberra need to know about this?" You would go through yourself asking the questions of relevance and interest.

David Pembroke: That's an interesting point though, isn't it? Because what it's about, that question is about, "Well, what does the audience want to know?" Really, fundamentally, it's a tenant not only of journalism, but of all successful communication, that it is about the audience. Always.

Gillian Field: It is. That is why I think at this stage in my career, after 25 years nearly in corporate communication, I will still look at a piece of copy, whether it's written by a journalist, written by a staff member in here, written by someone at work, and say, "Well, what is the point of this? What is it really that we're trying to get across to people? What do they need to know out of this?"

David Pembroke: Interestingly on your career as well, as you're in corporate communications there and obviously that was a media responsibility, but where you've really built your reputation and your expertise is in this internal communication space, which is obviously fundamentally important to the development of a high-performance culture or effective organisation. Often something that is really misunderstood, not valued, parked into the corner. It really is. If communications and external communications is the poor relation, what is internal communication?

Gillian Field: Internal communication is extremely important and it is often overlooked and misunderstood, as you say. Apart from being a little bit sick of answering phone calls from journalists at 10:00 at night, one of the reasons I moved into internal communication was because after ACTEW, I think I really became interested in organisations and how they worked and how they did the job. Once you pick up their interest, you look at almost the anthropology of an organisation, how it operates, how it talks to itself to get the job done. You start to become more and more interested in internal communication and the importance of it.

David Pembroke: Because that's interesting. That was part of your degree that you did at the Australian National University wasn't it?

Gillian Field: That's right.

David Pembroke: Was that organisational anthropology or was it just general?

Gillian Field: It was cultural anthropology.

David Pembroke: Cultural.

Gillian Field: Yeah.

David Pembroke: Yeah, okay, but the principles are the same.

Gillian Field: The principles are the same and you do end up looking at an organisation like its own culture and seeing what's the same and what is different. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach with internal comms, but the principles that you apply are the same. Just sometimes the outcomes are a little bit different depending on the difference of the organisation.

Everybody still wants to know about an issue to do with change. What's in it for them? It's a matter of how you get that information across to them. You always need leaders to step up and deliver strategic messaging. It's about how leaders do that and how you get them to connect with their workforce.

Communication is about that consistent, reliable message. I tend to think some of that's been a little lost recently in the tendency internally for us to want to start using social media, internally use blogs, this kind of thing. I think they are

very useful tools, but you'd still have to remember that people need reliable, consistent communication channels and messages as well.

David Pembroke: Okay, we'll pick that apart because I think that's interesting. There's a lot in that last answer that you just gave us, which I think we can really drill into. Interestingly, around the process of content communication, we talk about for a specific audience. Now, we're not just talking about a specific external audience, which it can be applied to, but a specific internal audience. This notion of creation, curation, and distribution of useful, relevant, consistent content is perfectly applicable to internal communication. I think that's something that we can discuss as well.

Maybe if I might pick up one of the points just to start with and it's that sense of abundance and access now in terms of communication, that there are so many channels and we can all become publishers. There's just waves and waves and waves of information. People think that they're communicating by continually copying people in on emails and thinking that that's doing the trick. Yes, it's a great gift, but at the same time it's a huge challenge as well. How do you get people to understand how to best use this gift that they now have, to be the media on behalf of their organisation internally?

Gillian Field: Well, I still think that even in this age of self-serve news, internally you need some discipline. People still need to be able to rely on the channels and know what they're going to get when they receive an email from the CEO, when they receive an email from part of the business. They need to be able to rely on the relevance of that information, and on the quality of that information, and on the consistency of the channel. I think everything else can happen around that, but if people know that there is a source they can rely on to get information about what they need to in their job, then they will still rely on that source.

David Pembroke: This is a point that we come back to time and time and time again on this podcast is this sense of consistency. This notion of building a habit in your audience around that consumption and managing the expectation to know that this particular piece of communication is going to arrive whenever it arrives and it's going to deliver whatever the value is that the sender has put into that particular piece of communication.

Gillian Field: That it is probably part of a story the organisation is telling you and has been telling you for some time.

David Pembroke: You would hope, rather than it is an indiscriminate piece of another bit of information thrown out there.

Gillian Field: That's right. That's what people like me, internal communication specialists, are for is to make sure that people get that story in the right sequence. They get the parts of the story that they need at the right time. That the information that they get that's part of the story is useful to them and that they can go off and

use in their job. If you do that for them, then they will rely on what you tell them, and they'll act on it, and it will be useful.

David Pembroke: Yeah. It's such a good point and I think it's something that, if people take nothing else out of this particular half an hour, is that sense of consistency and commitment to consistency. Because it shows respect for the audience that you're speaking to, that you're seeking to engage with. Because they're busy. They've got loads of other things to consider. If you book that appointment and say, "Okay, I'm going to turn up every Tuesday at 2:00 p.m. I'm going to knock on the door and here is this useful, relevant information, which we hope is going to help you" ...

I always tell the story when I was a kid, and I think this is, again, part of what we're doing now is borrowing the practises of the great publishers and the home delivery of the newspaper. Again, I've told this story before in the podcast that they had me hooked. If that newspaper wasn't there at 7:00 in the morning on the front lawn of my house in Sydney, I would start to get edgy. I would be looking in the bushes. "Where is it?" I would have this visceral sense of, "I want that information."

That's the opportunity, isn't it? If we can build habits and routines in our audience and make it as easy as possible for them, particularly in this age of abundance, if we can do that, we're going to have a much better chance of imparting that piece of information, that knowledge, that education, whatever it is in order to enrich the lives of the people who we're seeking to engage.

Gillian Field: That's right. Once you've developed that trust with them, you need to make sure that you don't do anything that is going to break the trust. If they are used to, as you say, receiving something extremely useful and relevant at 2:00 on a Tuesday afternoon, you have to keep doing that. You have to make sure the information is relevant. You have to not dilute the value of the channel and of the brand and reputation that channel and that information has built over time.

David Pembroke: Okay. What's your advice then in terms of that consistency and continuing to be able to deliver that value? Is it committing to a cadence of publishing that's manageable? Or how is it that people can continue to serve up good, relevant, useful information over a consistent basis?

Gillian Field: I think there's a keyword and that's "manageable," is don't bite off more than you can chew. If you've got-

David Pembroke: Done that. Guilty.

Gillian Field: Yes.

David Pembroke: Guilty.

Gillian Field: If you've got a small team, you have to look at what your small team can produce and can maintain and not introduce a channel or a product that is going to fade away after the first three months, and therefore annoy people because you've started something good and you've stopped it, or is going to end up with rubbish in it because you don't have time to collect and to plan the right kind of content for it. I think that's really important. I think there are times that you may build up a really reliable, nice channel framework that people rely on for their everyday business-as-usual activity and you may feed change information through that, which is fine.

On top of that, you may have to do additional work about particular change programmes or particular innovations that you bring into the organisation or new policies or whatever. You have that basis that is manageable. Because you've decided what's manageable, you've planned what each of your team members can do. You've set up something that within your own technical limits will always be achievable. You can keep that reliable source of information going.

David Pembroke: Something that's increasingly interesting me is this introduction of science-based principles into the production, the creation, curation, distribution of useful, relevant, consistent content. Because ultimately what we're doing as we go from our objectives to our understanding of the audience and the story we want to tell, we're going to make choices around channels. We're going to make choices around particular content types, be it a newsletter or be it a video or webinar. Whatever it is. Whatever that execution is.

There's this increasing trend to run tests - A/B testing of particular activations. What's your view of being able to stand up some of those science-based testing where you think, "Okay, I'm going to run a control group and another group, and we're going to send different types of information to the same group or different types of groups"? That you can build that evidence to understand whether or not one is more effective than the other. What's your view on that? That's my first question.

Gillian Field: I think that's very important, but I think it goes to a broader issue in many of the larger organisations I've worked for. An organisation will say it is science-based or it's evidence-based, except when it comes to comms. I think many organisations do not realise that comms is an activity that is testable, measurable, and that it should have research at its call. I think many communication, marketing, and PR graduates come out of university expecting that their careers will be based on that kind of evidence and that kind of research. You find out that it's actually very different to get your boss to invest in a proper piece of research about communication.

David Pembroke: Why?

Gillian Field: They just don't think it's worth the money.

David Pembroke: That might be a large, say, big piece of research, which has a large price tag attached to it, but what about this sense of being able to test different ideas and being able to A/B test a particular programme? Have you had much experience or involvement in doing that?

Gillian Field: Some, but once again, I'm trying to get people to invest in the time and the activity is actually quite difficult. I think you can usually manage to do that on a small scale, but the other issue I think is especially with internal comms. Everyone thinks they can do it.

David Pembroke: That comes more generally. How hard is it?

Gillian Field: It is. How hard is it? I don't think people realise that it actually is better if the time and investment is spent on that kind of testing. Your outcome is better, and you hone your message better, and you can deliver the results a lot better.

David Pembroke: I certainly think as we roll into the future, technology's transformed the importance of communication now. Everyone we connect to is, by and large, on the grid. They're connected. They're carrying around those supercomputers in their pockets and purses. We can get to them. That problem has been solved. It's then, how do we do that?

I think, increasingly, as it becomes more important, it really is then how do we assemble the evidence for the higher-ups to understand that the investment in communications that will achieve a particular benefit is then worthwhile? That if we can achieve a behaviour change of some sort to stop people from doing things or increase productivity and, therefore, gain a couple of percentage points in productivity, multiply it by salaries, could end up in millions of dollar's worth of benefits.

I think we as communicators have to take on the challenge of quantifying the benefit that we can deliver, but then we really need to commit to that evidenced-based approach where we continue to test and learn around the experiments that we're largely putting in place. Because, ultimately, that's what they are, aren't they? We're just taking our best guess based on experience, and perhaps whatever data we've got, to think that that's the best execution that's going to meet the needs of that audience to achieve the particular outcome that we're looking for.

Gillian Field: I think it increases the credibility of the profession to be able to do that as well, which is always a benefit for us.

David Pembroke: Yeah. What about those skills? Those data skills and the A/B testing skills and the science skills. Traditionally, we're like you - people who can put a sentence together. We're not mathematics people. We're not science people. We're like, "Really? It's a little bit too complex, a little bit difficult." We're the creative

element of it as opposed to the hard science. Really, I don't know what your view is. Is it either/or or is it a little bit of both?

Gillian Field: I think what you have to do as a communicator is once again recognise where your skills are and, if that type of measurement is not part of your skillset, you buy-in or you make sure that it's something that you've got access to. Because you have to realise that at the end of the day, it will be a great benefit to you and your career and your ability to do your job if you recognise that that is something you need. It should be.

It really should be part, I think, of the makeup of a communication organisation. It often isn't. A communication branch or part of an organisation, you'll see they've got web publishers, they've got graphic designers, they've got editors, they've got writers, they've got-

David Pembroke: Videographers.

Gillian Field: Videographers. All sorts of speciality, but that evidence-based research collecting function is often not there and not considered as important as it should be.

David Pembroke: Sometimes seen as a threat as well in some of those areas. I know of a couple of examples where innovation, data, design-thinking types, behavioural economics have been seen as barbarian to the gate, from the comms people thinking, "Oh, they're going to come and trample all over my turf here."

Whereas, what I think you're outlining is a much smarter way to go about it. It's to really, well, how do we integrate given that there's so much data in the digital realm and we know that that's where the future is? We know that that's where people are going to be consuming most of their content. How do we use that? How do we work together to be able to formulate far more robust solutions, so is it you can get the outcomes that you're looking for?

Gillian Field: I think for a long time communication professionals have relied on their instinct. I think our instincts are often pretty good, but they're not perfect. I think that as communication becomes more complicated and becomes more digitised and more instant, the more we need the research specialisation to help us.

David Pembroke: Yes, indeed. To the future, let's go five years down the track. What do you see as driving success in organisations as technology continues to rip through organisations and turn them upside down? The principles won't change, will they?

Gillian Field: No. I don't think the principles will change.

David Pembroke: Because people are people, aren't they?

Gillian Field: People are people and they still need what they need to do their job. They still need to see leadership. They still need to know what the business is doing and how they fit into the business. They still need to know when they turn up at work today, "What am I going to do today that might be different to what I did yesterday?"

I think the principles are the same. I also think that technology is a tool, but there are times that you have to go back to the basics. Ultimately, whether you get that message across by tying it to the leg of a carrier pigeon or on your handheld device, the aim should really be the same and that is to support that business to achieve its goals.

David Pembroke: You're a massive believer and supporter of face-to-face communication, aren't you?

Gillian Field: Absolutely. I think these other mechanisms should, first and foremost, support face-to-face, but I still think we need to remember the value of those face-to-face interactions.

David Pembroke: Yeah. Just a final question around leadership. How do you get leaders who aren't particularly focused on communications interested in communication? That's not a bad question. How do you do that? You've worked with lots of different people over time and you've seen the great communicators all the way through to the person whose got their door locked and don't come in, but they've got a brain as big as Texas and, therefore, they've massive value, but they're perhaps not valuing communication quite so much. How do you get people who are perhaps reluctant communicators to embrace and engage and take on the challenge of becoming a better communicator?

Gillian Field: A couple of things. I think firstly that there certainly are people at the heads of organisations who are not personally comfortable as open communicators. That's where you really need to offer them-

David Pembroke: Training, skill.

Gillian Field: The support of your team. Training, skill. Offer to take some of that burden off them as much as you can in terms of your own suggestions and observations about what would work for them. The other thing is when you get around to it, people like this actually really like evidence. They are the communicators, the CEOs, the leaders who are natural at it. With the ones who aren't, I think actually having the evidence to show them how it will benefit their organisation really helps. It's always, it's always, too, about access and making sure that your communication advisors have access at the top and that it is not a function that is filtered through many layers of bureaucracy, because that's certainly the cases-

David Pembroke: That ain't going to work.

Gillian Field: It doesn't.

David Pembroke: Okay. Well, Gillian, thank you very much for joining us on this week's edition of InTransition. Lots of value there, audience, I think. Lots of things to think about. That sense of consistency. That sense of taking on the challenge of getting the evidence so as it you can sell it up the line. We've spoke about this many times over the last few weeks - sorry, last couple years, I should say - about that importance of an evidence-based approach and being able to get those numbers and the proof that what we do does create value for organisations.

As I've said many times in the past, technology has changed the importance of communication. Everyone who we need to connect with is there. They're on the grid. Our job as communicators is obviously to create that content in a consistent, compelling, useful, and relevant way to activate that connexion and then start to build that trust, which can ultimately lead to behavioural change.

Gillian, thank you once again for joining us InTransition. To you, audience, thank you very much for coming back again this week. I will be back at the same time next week with another guest, but until then, thanks for joining me and bye for now.