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## InTransition Ep 99 - Sonya Sandham

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentleman and welcome once again to In Transition, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke and thank you very much once again for giving us a small part of your week as we discuss what I believe is one of the most fascinating practises of communication at a time when there is such fundamental change.

It's really interesting, actually. Before I get into the definition, and I will do that, and before I introduce my guest this week, I do just want to share some insights, actually. I was listening to some podcast, and I'm a mad consumer of podcast, and Barack Obama, in the final days of his administration as he was doing his lap of honour through Washington, made himself available to a number of people. There's a great podcast done on CNN by a guy called David Axelrod, who used to be his media and strategic advisor, it's called The Axe Files. It's a great podcast and he actually interviewed quite a number of senior Obama administration officials, but he did have the former president on.

It was interesting that in that particular podcast when he was asked about his future, the president was asked about what was the priority for this future, what was he going to be doing, and he spoke about his presidential institute and he nominated communication as one of his priorities. He spoke about the failing media environment, and the problem of trying to get messages through, and having to deal with the philtre of the media, and he wants to explore that. That's fascinating, isn't it, that he would nominate that as a priority for his work post his presidency of the United States.

Get onto The Axe Files. I think you would enjoy it. It is a really fine, fine podcast and he does some great interviews, and if you're interested in government and how government works. It's not always about communication, but there are some fascinating people there that he does interview week in and week out who are involved in government and the public sector. Just an insight there that I would share with you and, interestingly enough, I am going to approach, not approach him directly, but I've found the guy who is going to stay with him who used to be his speech writer. I've tracked his email address down, so he's in trouble. I am going to get him because I want him to get involved in the research project that we're doing at the A&U and I would encourage all of you to actually jump onto [contentgroup.com.au/research](http://contentgroup.com.au/research).

Understand what the project is about. Sign yourself up because we are really building some momentum around government at a local level, at a state level, at a national level, and at a multi-lateral level. Lots of governments want to participate in trying to solve this problem, which we are committed to, which is

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to help government to communicate more effectively. Wonderful research project and yeah. Please, jump online and get involved with that.

To the definition, as we begin the programme each week. 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, understanding now, it's specific, we have to be narrow, in order to achieve a desired citizen and/or stakeholder action. To our guest today, Sonya Sandham is so passionate about the power of storytelling in the public sector that she's doing a PhD at the University of Canberra. What Sonya and her supervisor are setting out to explore is the evidence base for embedding oral storytelling in organisational communication practises.

Sonya started her career as a journalist at the Sydney Morning Herald and the Jakarta Post telling people's stories. She now works as a strategic communication specialist and over the past two decades has helped Qantas and state government agencies promote their organisational stories. She joins me now in the studio. Sonya, welcome to In Transition.

Sonya Sandham: Thanks, David. It's great to be here.

David Pembroke: Why a PhD? How did this come about that you would go from a stellar career in organisational communication? What encouraged you to take that step because it's such a big step?

Sonya Sandham: As you said, David, I've been telling stories as a journalist, telling stories as a communication specialist, but it really came to a workshop that I did three years ago on storytelling, I was a participant in that, where I realised that power of personal stories, that anecdotes and personal stories could be used in a business content and they could pack punch. They had a lot of power.

David Pembroke: In terms of those insights, that was the workshop from the organisation Anecdote?

Sonya Sandham: That's right, yes. That was a workshop ran by Anecdote, and they have a story framework, and it's a very effective workshop in bringing people up to speed, giving them the skills that they need to be able to use stories in the workplace.

David Pembroke: How hard it is for public sector communicators to tell personal stories given the way that organisations are set up in that political realm where it's the minister who speaks or perhaps the senior executive, but not many others are able to tell their story at least publicly?

Sonya Sandham: That's actually one of the reasons why I was so interested to pursue a PhD because, you're right, at the moment, storytelling is very much the domain of leaders. You see chief executives, you mentioned Obama, Steve Jobs when he

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was CEO of Apple, they were excellent users of storytelling. As an individual in an organisation, it may seem a bit daunting. There are communication norms and it's not the regular thing that you would hear or see, but the reality is that more and more people are using it because they need to cut through. We are overloaded with information. We are drowning in PowerPoint presentation and dot points, and a story does allow you to cut through and it resonates with the listeners. You are able to be remembered. Your information, your message is remembered long after. It is something that everybody can use in a job interview, in a meeting, at a staff briefing. It's not just the domain of leaders.

David Pembroke: We'll come to what makes a good story at the moment, but is what you're saying that it's equally applicable internally as well as externally because ultimately, by telling stories, the aim is to move people?

Sonya Sandham: Absolutely. I believe that there is an aspect of professional identity that you can project if you're using storytelling as an individual in an organisation. The person next to you may not be doing it. You're doing it, you do stand out, and it is something that you can use within an organisation, but it's equally something that you can use as a front-facing person when you're going out, that you can use too as an icebreaker, as a way to influence, and as a way to explain the direction of your organisation in language that people can understand.

David Pembroke: What makes a good story?

Sonya Sandham: That's a very good question because a lot of people, storytelling and stories are a bit of buzzwords these days and a lot of people think that they're telling a story, but they're actually talking about a story rather than necessarily having all those elements. There are many different frameworks that are out there, but essentially, one of the key things is a good story has to have a point. Why are you telling it? There has to be a reason that you're telling it. The best anecdote in the world is going to fall short if you don't relate it back to the point you're trying to make.

You mentioned Obama and he actually is one of my favourites in terms of a great story. When he was campaigning to be president second time around, for his second term, he talks at a big rally about a congresswoman, he asked for her support and she said, "Well, if you come to Greenwood, you'll have my support." Some weeks later, true to his word, he did that. He showed up late at night. He arrived the very next morning, got up very early, it was a long drive, two or three hours to get to Greenwood, and when he got there it was about 20 or 30 people. Everyone was looking very sleep, blurry eyed, as was he, and he's thinking, "How is this going to go?"

There's a woman in the corner of the room, short woman, big church hat, as he describes her, and she says, "Fired up," and everyone in the room says, "Fired up," and then she says, "Ready to go," and they say, "Ready to go." The room starts getting into this kind of chant and he's looking around, he's looking at his

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advisor, thinks, "What the hell is going on here? She's showing me up." What he said happened is that the mood in the room changed and he started doing it too. Later in the day, he'd see staff would say to him, "You fired up, Mr. President. Fired up." They'd say, "You ready to go?" He'd say, "Ready to go."

He talked about this at the rally about how one voice can change a room and he said, "If you can change a room, you can change a state, and if you can change a state, you can change a nation, and if you can change a nation, you can change the world." He used this as a rallying point, this personal story that he experienced to bring it back to that broader issue that one voice counts and to encourage people to go out and vote. That was the power of that story in that situation.

David Pembroke: Yeah. It's interesting when you tell that story, as soon as you started I was like, "Oh, okay. I wonder where this is going." As you were ... Okay, why is she doing that? It does automatically engage you, doesn't it? It engages not just the head but the heart. It's like, "Oh, okay. That must have felt great when you were there and all of a sudden, 30 people sleepy ... " There you go. There's a demonstration. I'm sure the audience was exactly the same that as soon as you dropped into that story, you grab the audience, don't you?

Sonya Sandham: Yeah, and it takes you there. This is the amazing thing about a story. It's something called double anchoring because what it does is you remember that you were sitting here with me when I told you that story, but you also transported to that room in Greenwood where that is transpiring. You're imagining it in your own brain and that is the difference between dot points on a PowerPoint slide. You don't remember were ... There's nothing emotional. There's no connection to it. It doesn't take you there. It's not to say that there's not a place for PowerPoint and dot points. It's just saying that whatever technique you're using, if you infuse stories into it, it really can take it up to that next level.

David Pembroke: Yeah, but there is that famous saying, and I think I'll get his name wrong, Donald Cole ..., I think his name is. He's a Canadian psychotherapist. It's a longish quote, but just to make it a bit smaller, it's essentially facts validate, but it's emotion that drives action is what he's saying. I find that that is certainly my experience and certainly the practise that we have here at Content Group is to actually try to find the emotion in order to inspire people to take action.

Sonya Sandham: That's right and that brings authenticity. People can relate to that and then they have affinity as well that you'll like them, that they can relate to you. It really is a way of connecting with people. Very powerful.

David Pembroke: In terms of this structure, this approach to storytelling, I'm sitting down and I'm a communicator and I want to make a difference, but I also, as you say, want to spread it around so we'd get as many people as possible communicating powerfully, not boring, so as they can get it. I've sat down and I've taught,

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"Okay, I've got my point. I want to make my point and then I've got my anecdote to support my point." What do I do next?

Sonya Sandham: Don't sanitise the details. Don't take out the person's name. Don't take out that colourful, quirky bit. It's often just this small thing in a story that can make it so powerful. One of the things, I guess, there is some pressure in corporate comms culture where it needs to read like a good story, a press release, but the reality is that the detail, the messiness is what people can relate to. I guess the other thing to say is that we're lucky in this digital age that many of the platforms that we're so familiar with using nowadays lend themselves to story, so much more video content, which is great for oral storytelling.

David Pembroke: That messiness is often difficult, isn't it, within that structured hang on, we've got to get this right, we've got to spell it right, we've got to make sure that we present the facts? Do you find that in your experience that there is a clash between the existing culture within many government and public sector organisations and the freedom and expressiveness of storytelling?

Sonya Sandham: Without a doubt.

David Pembroke: Right.

Sonya Sandham: There definitely is.

David Pembroke: Okay.

Sonya Sandham: How do you overcome that?

David Pembroke: You get someone to do a PhD.

Sonya Sandham: Yes. Hopefully, yes.

David Pembroke: To create the evidence because we got to have an evidence base.

Sonya Sandham: We do need that evidence base because it is difficult to change those practises when we're so used to doing it a certain way. The change is scary, but the risk is worthwhile because the benefits are there. Just think about it from this perspective: the more stories you get, the more diversity, the different voices you get. There's not one dominant story. It's multitude of stories and that's what makes up your organisational culture far more than one dominant story.

David Pembroke: Sure, but the risk and the structures that there are. We've got ministers up there and they're the ones who are carrying the electoral risk, the political risk. Therefore, we have to be careful that we don't go too freestyle or too out there because they're the ones who've been elected and their job as public servants is to be in service of that particular elected government.

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Sonya Sandham: Imagine how refreshing it would be hear an anecdote when they're up speaking, when politicians are speaking and you get to hear that humanity from them. I think if you look at who's willing to make those kind of changes, I think you just have to look at social media and the way in which it initially started out very guarded, one-way communication, and then you start to see some changes where you start to see account holders, for example, giving over their social media account to one of their publics basically to tweet or to do posts. Isn't that refreshing to get rather than the corporate to speak, you get some personal stories, some individual stories? I think that you're seeing it increasingly. People can see the value. Are we going to be the same as everyone else or are we going to stand out? The risk is worth it to stand out.

David Pembroke: I totally agree with that. You have to have a point of view, you have to be saying something, and you have to be differentiated because of the competition for people's time and attention. That if you are not telling a differentiated story, well you're just going to be ignored because why would I give you some of my most precious resource when you haven't earned it because you haven't told me? If I've got my point, I've left the colourful and quirky bits in there, what do I do now in terms of becoming a bit of storyteller or getting acceptance and support for my storytelling within my particular department or agency?

Sonya Sandham: There's two things there. The first is practise. It is a skill. It is a skill that has to be practised. It's not something that you can do once and then you'll be great at it. Having a story buddy is good. I have a story buddy.

David Pembroke: Do you?

Sonya Sandham: Yeah, absolutely. We ring each other up. We share the stories that we're planning to use and it's actually fantastic because we learn of each other and we also help each other with that point because that's often the trickiest part. You know the story you want to tell. It might be too long-winded, or it might not have enough detail, or it might be a bit missing, but nevertheless, it often comes back to what is the point we're trying to make and is that the story that effectively illustrates it?

David Pembroke: I'm on the end of the phone and so you call me up. Hi, time to practise telling stories. I'm going to tell you a story about ... I have to define my point? I'm going to tell you a story, and this is the point that I want to make, and now I'm going to tell you the story? Is that how it works?

Sonya Sandham: It is a bit like that and it does vary depending on what kind of story patent that you're going to use, but in many ways, it is just the natural flow of the how's, where or when something occurred, and then you go through the detail a little bit. Then you are rounding it up with what was the twist there? What happened? What differentiated this from, you know, I bumped into someone in the coffee line? There is something that differentiates it.

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David Pembroke: There has to be that moment of twist, doesn't it, to make the story interesting?

Sonya Sandham: Yeah. For example, I worked as a journalist so I got the chance to interview many people and do many stories when I was at Sydney Morning Herald, but there's one story that really sticks in my mind and that was year into being a journalist, I was asked to write a story about Michael. He was a mountain climber. He was an office worker initially, answered the call of the wild and ended up going and climbing mountains. He became a bit of a legend around Mount Everest for the sheer number of times that he tried and on this occasion, I think it was his fifth or sixth attempt, and if he made it he was going to be the oldest man in Australia to have made the climb.

There were so many things that I wanted to ask him about what it was like to chase his dream. What was it like climbing Everest? Unfortunately, I was the journalist who was writing his obituary. I was the person who sitting there at my desk thinking, "I have to call his next of kin," and I called his brother and as I'm dialling I'm thinking, "Please don't answer. Please don't answer," but he did and he was so generous with his time in talking about Michael, and his dreams, and his adventures. When I hang up the phone that day, I really felt as though I'd been lucky to have had that insight into that person because he was someone who'd change his dream. To this day, I still think back about him and think we all have dreams and we don't always chase them, but he did and it is inspiring for me. You can never underestimate the power of a story to move you.

David Pembroke: No, indeed. You mentioned this patterns. What are these patterns that people can perhaps use to help? Once they're into their practise, they've identified their buddy. They know that there's got to be a point. They know they're going to keep the colourful, quirky bits in. They know that they've got to have a story twist and perhaps they may use the Joseph Campbell hero's journey as a structure. What are those patterns that people may be able to apply in their storytelling?

Sonya Sandham: An organisation like Anecdote, for example, they have some story patterns that they demonstrate in their workshop and I think they're fairly generous. On anecdote.com, you can see all the different patterns that they suggest, but you really have different patterns to choose for different circumstances. Having said that, even in the literature that I've been reading, there are multiple scholars who've identified what it requires, but it is essentially you're setting it up, and then you're building the problem, and then you're delivering the solution, essentially. It really depends on the kind of thing you're trying to achieve.

For example, a case study or a success story, that's a really useful patent to use and we should be using it all the time because if you think about it, you would say to me, "How do you know that storytelling is being effective?" I can say to you, "Well, I had one participant in my workshop, very shy. English was not her first language. She was really struggling with whether or not she should attend and she was certainly thinking that she was not going to be saying anything in

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the workshop because she didn't want to make a mistake, but about halfway through the workshop, she shared about a time before she came to Australia when she was a primary school teacher and she talked about how there was a boy in her class, and he kept coming to school, and his homework book was always pages torn out, and always a mess, and his homework wasn't done.

She really got frustrated over time and this one day, she did get him to stand up and she said to him, "What is going on with your homework? Tell me now." He just wouldn't say anything. Another boy in the class who knew him said to the teacher, later said to her, "He helps his dad after work at the market and his stepdad is not very supportive." Obviously, she followed up with the student. She apologised for putting him on the spot like that and she said to him, "Please tell me what's going on."

He explained to her that he helps his father at the market and whenever he sells some vegetables, he has to wrap it up in some paper. As a result, he tears a page out of the notebook, and he wraps up the produce, and he gives it to the customer. She realised that there was something that she could do and she started collecting paper for the stepfather so that the boy could give it to the stepfather at the market and that he could do his homework uninterrupted by this thing that was occurring.

I tell you what, it really brought a tear to everyone's eye that day. He was someone who did not think that she could tell a story and have an impact. It's very relevant, when you think about it, to a business context because everyone wants to be heard, everyone wants to be seen and here's someone who took a moment to make a difference and it really did have a big impact.

David Pembroke: What advice do you give to people in terms of the application of these patterns and this approach? Should you be telling stories in a meeting? Should you be telling stories when you're obviously in front of an audience, it's probably best to have a go at it rather than fact, fact, fact, fact, next slide, fact, fact, fact? What's the best way or where should people be applying these skills? What are some of the context that really work for storytelling?

Sonya Sandham: Definitely in a presentation, kicking off by telling a story really connects you with the audience. Telling something like a success story in the context of the presentation as well really helps people to say, "Okay, this can be applicable." In a team meeting, it is an opportunity but it's probably not as obvious an opportunity as say a presentation, but I think the thing is give it a go. Try it in different circumstances. See what works.

I think the bottom line is when you tell a personal story, you are putting yourself out there. You are being vulnerable. You are exposing something about yourself, but it also makes you real to the other person and for me, with my colleague that I just mentioned, I'd sat three desks away from her for seven years, I never knew that about her. It just opens up this collaboration and desire to work more



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closely and get to know people around you because it's so easy to just sit in silos, it's so easy to sit at your desk and not collaborate, and this breaks down the barriers. It's a great thing for team building. It's a great thing to use in practise as well.

David Pembroke: Now, this podcast is dedicated to the practise of content communication, which is really aligned to what you're talking about, is really to find those stories that we can tell that will engage with the audience, that will move them to behave in a particular way. With your PhD, just exactly what it is that you're trying to discover in terms of this evidence base? Is it to prove once and for all that storytelling is an effective way of organisations to get their message across? What is the actual purpose of the PhD?

Sonya Sandham: There is lots of research out there in the neurosciences and elsewhere that really show the effectiveness and the power of story, so I'm not going down that path as much. I will obviously be pointing to those kind of things, but it is really looking at how do you embed the practise and particularly for communication professionals because we're really the frontline of that content communication. In saying that, we can't generate it, we have to go out there looking for the stories and sometimes, the stories can be more authentic if they're told by the person rather than ... It doesn't always necessarily have to be curated.

David Pembroke: Relayed through a third party. You want the actual authentic voice to be able to say tell us your story.

Sonya Sandham: Absolutely. One of the things that I'm going to be doing very soon with Glen Fuller is to be looking at in a pilot project to actually be looking at what's happening out there on social media platforms in terms of that authentic content that is coming from the stakeholders themselves. We're going to be looking at that and seeing is it represented out there? What do practitioners think about that? We've talked about the risks here already, but there are some accounts that we're handing the keys over, essentially to their accounts. How is that working? What do other people in the industry think about it? We're going to try and look at how widespread that is and what we can learn from those that are practising it. That will form part of what I'm looking at.

David Pembroke: It is key, isn't it, if the communications people have got responsibility for the content communication to put it together? They can't do it by themselves and so therefore, they do need the contribution of the various teams, be they in a policy area, or a programme area, or wherever. Really, the whole idea then is to try to acquire the skills themselves, but then to transfer the skills throughout the organisation to say, "Okay, maybe the better way of presenting that information might be or could be enhanced by a story, an anecdote, whatever it is to be able to make a better point or to help encourage these sorts of behaviours that you're looking for to achieve those business objectives."

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Sonya Sandham: That's right. Decentralising that voice, going out there for those stories, and using them within the context of the communication, making it part of your strategy. Yes, definitely.

David Pembroke: I think that's really interesting because that authentic voice, which is, and I've spoken about this before, this theory that I've got around the requirement for government organisations to get the voice distributed and get it as close to the citizen or stakeholder as possible and empower those people with the skills to be able to have conversations and to be able stories as we have discussed today, so that engagement point is a lot more authentic as opposed to here's a set of talking points produced by head office that really are not going to resonate because they're being created by somebody who is not anywhere near that relationship and therefore, can't communicate because they're not involved.

I think that increasingly is going to be how we devolve and that responsibility for communication and storytelling is not going to be residing centrally in a communications team, but it will be distributed throughout an organisation because it's the only way that you'll be able to meet the demands of an increasingly demanding citizenry who are looking for more information, more accountability driven by technology. Anyway, that's a bit of a rave there.

Sonya Sandham: No, but that's absolutely right and that's where the comms professional is so crucial to all of these because those skills, journalistic skills in many ways, in eliciting those stories, and then being able to upskill as you do when you're prepping someone for a media interview, for example, you're upskilling them. In many ways, the ability to upskill people in your organisation with those storytelling skills is a really big part of that because people need to feel confident that they can do it and you're the inbuilt story buddy when you think about it.

David Pembroke: Yeah, that's rights.

Sonya Sandham: People can come and practise with you. You can help people bring them up to speed. For example, if you're doing a video, putting it on your YouTube channel, sharing it on Facebook, and you have someone who's telling a compelling story in that video, it's going to have a really great impact as opposed to something that's more promo, pushing information out might look really sleek, but it doesn't have that element that really touches people through emotion.

David Pembroke: That emotional connection, yeah.

Sonya Sandham: Absolutely.

David Pembroke: It's interesting. I can almost feel organisations coming to life if this practise can be embedded and distributed throughout an organisation where at all levels of an organisation they become stronger and better storytellers because not only,

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as you said before, will it enable and propagate more positive internal discussions and engagements, but the organisation will be communicating much more effectively at multiple levels as people more authentically engage around the very many stories that sit within and reside within government agencies because we're replete with stories.

There's no lack of content to tell the stories, but perhaps we just lack those skills to be able to do that and perhaps wear the straight jacket of I can't say that. I bet not do this. I'm worried about that. Maybe technology is coming in at such a pace that we need to throw off some of those shackles, understand the risks, mitigate those risks, but really build that skill level in the organisation. Good luck with the PhD. How long is that going to take?

Sonya Sandham: It'll take three years and I'll have that evidence base for you. As you're saying, it really does bring back the humanity to communications and that's what we need.

David Pembroke: Yes, indeed. I like that. I like that. I think I'm animated by the prospects of improving. I try to do it here within my company and it's probably to the point of something happened, just let me tell you a story. You can tell, as soon as you say that, it's all of a sudden, ooohh! Everyone lowers down, and they all lean forward, and it's like, "Okay, what's he going to tell today?" I don't know if I'm as scientific as perhaps I need to be and maybe I probably need to be a bit more considered about the point that I want to make because sometimes you find that you start rambling and it's like, "Hang on, why did I start telling that story?" I think I need to be more disciplined around that story.

Sonya Sandham: That comes through practise.

David Pembroke: Yeah, there you go.

Sonya Sandham: Practising with your story buddy and that will help hone you and that's how that happens. There's one other thing I was going to say is you know that TV show Undercover Boss? Have you ever seen that one?

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sonya Sandham: There's an American version. There was an Australian version.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sonya Sandham: That for me is like storytelling on steroids, that show, because you see the undercover boss, he goes in and he's with the workers, and all he's hearing is stories about innovation, stories about problems, personal stories, and he goes back and he wants to change things. He or she wants to change things, make a difference. There are so many stories in an organisation that can improve the way things are being done, that can improve what people think of the

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organisation. They are all there to be found, and it is about getting people to share, and it takes giving a story to get a story, so you got to start telling stories.

David Pembroke: Indeed, but the leadership also, I think, has to show the way, don't they?

Sonya Sandham: They have to value stories and have to value the stories of the staff.

David Pembroke: Empower, and give people permission, and to understand the value because perhaps, some of them don't. Anyway, that's for another time. We'll have another session on storytelling, I think, because I do see it as fundamentally important to the practise of content communication because once we've got the story, we actually have to assemble the story. We have to apply it through video, audio, stills, text, graphics.

We have to get the story out so we have to then think about a distribution online, offline, third party channels. Who can we work with? Then we want to measure the impact of that particular story. Story really does sit at the heart of effective content communication as it seeks to not only engage with an audience, but drive behaviour that's going to help an organisation to achieve its specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound objectives. There we go.

Sonya, thank you so much. I am so grateful that you have come into the studio today to have a chat with us and I know the audience would have really taken a lot from that and I'm sure they'll all be ringing up trying to find a story buddy. I think that could be great practise for everyone, and I'll see if I can find a story buddy for myself, and see if I can get better at telling stories. Thanks for coming in. Really appreciate that. Good luck with the PhD.

Sonya Sandham: Thank you.

David Pembroke: He's a great supervisor, a very, very bright guy, Glen Fuller. We'll get him on the podcast very soon too because he is a fantastic journalism academic out at the University of Canberra here in Australia. Thanks again, audience, for turning up once again. A few minutes overtime. I'm sure you'll forgive me that indulgence. Again, Kylie, sorry for ruining your walk to work. I know you like to do it in 30 minutes, but there we go. Thanks again for coming this week and I will be back at the same time next week. Bye for now.