
InTransition Episode 101 - Ari Sharp

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome once again to "In Transition", the podcast that examines the practise of content marketing in government and the public sector.

My name's David Pembroke and thank you once again for giving up just a short period or your time as we discuss what I find to be a fascinating part of the changing landscape in communication, as we all wrestle with how do we put those journalistic skills to work on behalf of our organisations? So as that we can cut through and engage with those audiences to encourage the behaviours we need in order for us to achieve our business objectives.

This week a great interview is coming your way shortly with a very talented journalist who is now working in corporate communications for the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

But before we come to him, we start with the definition as we do 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 in order to achieve a desired citizen and/or stakeholder action.

So, to our guest for today, is Ari Sharp who is the Senior Media Manager at the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. And he's held that role since January of 2015. In his role, it really is about shaping the Australian Chamber's external communications activity which include media engagement, interviews, speeches, social media, and indeed, content.

In 2014, Ari was a communications officer for the G20 during Australia's host year, which culminated in the leader summit at which more than 30 world leaders convened in Brisbane to discuss the state of the global economy.

From 2011 to 2014 Ari lived in Indonesia where he worked as the Chief Copy Editor at the Jakarta Globe newspaper and wrote a book "Risky Business" which was about the experiences of foreign investors in Indonesia.

Prior to that from 2007 to 2010, Ari was a journalist for The Age in Melbourne and Canberra, completing a traineeship before reporting on business during the global financial crisis and federal politics during the fall of one prime minister and the rise of another.

He graduated from the University of Melbourne in 2006 with a Bachelor of Commerce and a Bachelor of Arts, and he's currently studying for a MBA at the Australian National University.

A busy man is Ari Sharp and thanks very much for joining us "In Transition".

Ari Sharp: David it's great to be with you.

David Pembroke: Wonderful career. That's such a really diverse, interesting career isn't it?

Ari Sharp: Well, when you put 10 year's worth of a career in a minute and a half it does sound like you've done a lot, but along the way I have been very lucky with the things that I've been doing and the people I've met and the sorts of projects I've been involved in. I really enjoy it.

David Pembroke: Were you mindful from a young age, were you thinking, "This is where I'm going to go?" Or did you follow your nose through various opportunities?

Ari Sharp: I was always interested in politics and always interested in journalism but didn't know that I was going to make a career out of it. In fact, when I was studying my undergraduate degree, Commerce and Arts at University of Melbourne, I was thinking a career in banking was awaiting. So I was furiously filling in application forms for graduate programmes at the NAB and ANZ, and actually secured an offer at NAB and was thought that I was going to be bound for there after finishing uni.

But, in the end scored a position at The Age in Melbourne back in the glory days when newspapers were actually taking on a whole big chunk of trainees. Sadly, it's not like that any more. But was thrilled to get my start in a newsroom filled with people who I considered legends. People whose work I had read for years and years, who I really admired. Who were giants of their profession. And to learn from them was such an experience, I was really privileged.

David Pembroke: And what was driving that urge to go to be a banker? What part of your makeup was thinking about that? Was it about security? Was it about wealth creation? Or?

Ari Sharp: I think part of it was an expectation in my family and community that you sort out the job ...

David Pembroke: Security.

Ari Sharp: ... Security and income and you put yourself on a particular path that would set you up for life.

And journalism, even back then, was seen as something that you did for love rather than money. Whereas banking, I think, was probably very much the opposite.

David Pembroke: Yeah, indeed.

Ari Sharp: So, I think it might have been societal factors that were sort of nudging me in that direction. But I'd always had a strong interest in journalism and was thrilled when that's where I ended up starting my career.

David Pembroke: Take me back to the first day when you arrived in to The Age newsroom. Because I remember my first day so clearly, walking in to ABC Radio current affairs. I can feel it now, almost, when you think "Ahhh". It's almost like arriving in a land of promise and a land of discovery and opportunity.

Ari Sharp: I must say, after doing a month-long traineeship with the other new starters and then being unleashed on the newsroom, the first thing that struck me was just the physical layout of it. It was like a throwback to the 1950s. This was back at old offices of The Age in Melbourne that they pulled out of in about 2010, I think. So, they're no longer there, but, it was an old brick building. They used to have the printing press actually positioned in the basement of this building, so it was quite an industrial site.

David Pembroke: Okay.

Ari Sharp: You had desks piled up with newspapers everywhere. You had half-drunk cups of coffee. You had a certain smell about the place. It wasn't that many decades prior that they actually stopped people smoking inside the office.

David Pembroke: Yeah, yeah.

Ari Sharp: So, it was that sort of atmosphere that it created and if you see some of the magnificent films about print journalism, you really get a feel for what it was like. If you see "All The President's Men" for example, you get a feel for what it was like.

So that was the environment that I found myself in. And then the people, they seemed like people that belonged in that environment. You can see why some people go in to print and some people go in to television. There's a certain look and a certain way you present yourself. But to be among these print guys who had broken incredible stories, who had covered great events in history, who had reported from all around the world, and to actually get to see them practise their craft up close. This is the beauty of being in a newsroom, where you get to overhear their end of the conversation, you get to hear the banter between different people, you get to hear how the editor relates to staff. Those little tips and those little nuances just make such a difference to how you go about your craft as a young journalist trying to learn how things work.

David Pembroke: What were some of those things that you learnt, that you still hold on to to this day that help you to be a good story teller on behalf of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry?

Ari Sharp: The most important thing is relationships. That you've got to build a connection with people. Whether it's your colleagues, whether it's your boss, or whether it's your sources. And show them that you're genuine and sincere in your intentions, that you're not just there for a quick story, or there to take advantage of them and then you move on to something else. People want to know that you're actually really listening to what they've got to say and that you believe in what they've got to say. So that building of relationships, I've found is really important, as a journalist and also now working as a corporate communications specialist.

David Pembroke: But in terms of the craft of being able to tell stories, 'cause actually I do want to explore that notion. You wrote a blog recently on the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry site around presenting evidence to moving to stories which we'll come to in a moment. But what did you learn in that crafting a story? How do you tell a good story?

Ari Sharp: I think you've got to put yourself in the shoes of your reader, or your listener, or your viewer. Understand where they're coming from. What's on their mind, what are their interests? What's the base level of knowledge that they have? And then build up from there.

Don't assume that your audience are very sophisticated in their understanding of the topic. Or don't assume that they really care passionately about it. Find some emotional hook, find some way to connect with them on a very human level when you're telling the story.

It might mean that you've got to sift through a lot of really dry material to find that little angle. If you approach the material as an ordinary person yourself, you'll feel that kind of leap of joy, or that leap of anger, or that leap of excitement. Some sort of visceral emotional response to a bit of information that you hear, and you think, "Okay, that's where I've got to start my story. That's what I've got to impart to my reader, and that's how I'm going to bring them along with me on the journey."

David Pembroke: And how important is it once you've identified that, to communicate that straight up front? Is it all about grabbing attention?

Ari Sharp: One of the things I learnt in the newsroom is that you don't have long to grab your audience's attention. People are busy, they've got lots of different things that they can sample, you've got to grab them not just in the first couple of paragraphs, but the first sentence, the first word. You've got to put that attention grabbing detail right up the front and bring your reader along, grab them by the throat and don't let them go. That's what you've got to do. Don't bury the lead. Don't wait several paragraphs before you put that juicy bit of information in.

It was interesting, when I was working as a sub-editor at a newspaper in Indonesia, where a lot of the journalists there were fantastic young Indonesians, bilingual, very talented, very switched on. But they'd learnt the Indonesian craft of writing stories which is that you bury the lead. That you put that juicy bit of information six or eight or 10 paragraphs in.

It emerged that the reason why that happened is that during the New Order period of President Suharto censorship was really prolific. But the censors were lazy. The censors would read the first couple of paragraphs and if they found something really provocative they'd put a big red line through it and it wouldn't go out. But if they got six paragraphs in and they didn't find it you'd be okay. So journalists and readers had a winking relationship with each other, where they'd know where the juicy details were buried and it wasn't in the headline or in the lead paragraph.

Thankfully, in Australia, and nowadays in Indonesia it has changed. We have freedom where we can speak our mind and we can put those juicy details up the top. And I think in any piece of communication really should be doing that.

David Pembroke:

Now you have transitioned, or you've moved across from, journalism in to the world of corporate communication with a very important job really. Telling the story of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Which is the, really, peak body for Australian business. How do you go about finding the stories? How do you get about going the stories? And there's actually another interesting blog that you wrote, this notion around winning hearts and minds of people beyond this bubble that we live in in the political world. And we'll come to that as well.

But, how have you found that transition? Because I know many people who work in government communications do have a background in journalism. How have you managed that transition and that change?

Ari Sharp:

When I started at the Australian Chamber a couple of years ago, part of my brief was to help tell the stories that were going on inside the chamber. Traditionally, the way that lobbying was done was that it was behind closed doors. Up on the hill of parliament or in congress or wherever it might be. And it was very much between the decision makers and the influencers or the lobbyists, and they'd decide what they wanted behind closed doors and present it as a fait accompli.

What's happened in the past 10 or 20 years is that now you need to go and make your case to the public. You need to build popular support for whatever reform you're looking for.

Politicians in any democratic society are governed by what popular mood is. No politician is going to go and put forward a proposal, no matter how much they agree with it, if it's on the nose of the public. It means that the job of a lobbyist is not just to get the ear of the minister or the senator, whoever it might be, but

is also to build mass popular support for the particular initiative they want to see put in to practise.

When I started a couple of years ago at the Chamber, we were and continue to be very strong at doing that behind closed doors type lobbying, but we realised there was a bit of a disconnect in how we're building popular support for the things that we were advocating.

So part of my role is to go and tell those stories and build popular support for what's going on. And to do that it means a lot of close contact with our policy directors. We're really blessed to have some of the best policy people in Australia in economics and industry policy, in employment, education, and training, in trade policy. And those guys know their stuff. In a policy sense they've got the context, they do that really well.

What I can do is help them to communicate that to a mass audience. To take all the jargon and technical detail that might be in a submission or report that we write, and finding a way to make that comprehensible and to build sympathy among the public.

David Pembroke: It's interesting you say that, because obviously this particular podcast does focus people who are working in government communication. And we often talk about that massively untapped resource which are the policy areas of these great departments that we work for, these incredibly smart people.

I actually had a meeting with someone today that was just such a joy, such a smart person. I really, really enjoyed the conversation and I thought, "I can't wait to get in to this guy's head to get those stories out", so as that we can start to build that understanding of exactly what the detail of the policy is to address that particular problem that their seeking to address.

We do talk about it on this programme quite a bit, is that how do you do this? How do we get to policy people to give them the confidence and to give them the skills to become better story tellers and to understand that there is that audience out there, and that is the role for everybody is to build understanding of what they are trying to do?

Ari Sharp: I come back to something I mentioned earlier and that's relationships.

You've got to build that relationship, build that trust, show that your, as a communications specialist, not trying to take advantage of the colleague whose material you're working with. But that your trying to help them tell their story.

What I find is that it's better to listen for a while than just to go and to talk. To read what they've written and to hear what they've got to say. To find some way to turn it in to accessible material. And then go back to them. Have a

feedback loop where you might redraft some of the material or you might suggest a way of putting it.

And you ask them, "Is this right? Is this what you mean? Have I captured the essence of your message?" And listen to what they've got to say. If they're ambivalent, or if they're a bit hesitant, then have another go. Clearly there's something that's not quite right there. You've got to build that trust and it might take several draughts. It might, in the short term, be less efficient, if you've got have this constant feedback loop, where you propose something and then you hear what they've got to say. And you go back and forth and back and forth. But that's the only way that you'll have buy in in that project and that they'll be happy with the finished product, and that they'll be more willing to engage with you next time.

David Pembroke: Now this might sound like an odd question, but, how important is it that you get up out of your chair and not use the phone and actually walk to where that person is and sit with them? To be human with them?

Ari Sharp: It's interesting. We had a bit of a natural experiment like that. When one of our media team was based out of ... Our head office is in Canberra and one of our media team for a while were based in Melbourne. We just thought we'd give that a go to see how it worked out and we did find that what was lacking was that incidental contact. That chance to ... The water cooler chat or the chance to actually sit side by side with someone and have a discussion or go through a document. And so we ended up deciding that we really do need to be all centrally located in the one office in order to achieve that sort of close bond.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

In terms of that challenge of trying to capture the essence of it without dumbing it down and trying to take the comprehensiveness sometimes out of, "Well you've got to actually put that bit in and that bit in and that bit doesn't make sense." How do you go about that? How do you go about shaping that? Is that where those journalism skills come in?

Ari Sharp: Very much so. The first day I had in the office at The Age, my editor jumped online and printed out George Orwell's Rules of Writing. And he's got six core principles on clear expression. And I must admit I can't recall them all now, but the gist of it is that you keep it short, you don't use cliches, you don't use jargon, if you can leave a word out you should do that.

If you apply those sort of rigorous editing principles to your own work and to other people's work you can find that you make quite complex documents and quite complex bits of communications a whole lot easier to understand.

The other thing to remember is that very complex ideas don't necessarily need complex language. There's an old saying, I think it might have been Einstein that

said, if you can't explain it clearly you don't understand it. There's a lot to that. A lot of people hide behind jargon, hide behind bureaucratese. Deep down it's because they're unsure that they understand the material and this is how they're hiding behind it.

I have seen in the past, you can have incredibly complex ideas, incredible nuance and subtlety, expressed in very simple, plain accessible language.

David Pembroke: How important do you find, or would you propose journalism skills are becoming, now that the factors of media production and distribution have been democratised? That they no longer belong to the media, they now belong to everybody and therefore, my argument and my thesis is in fact journalism skills and journalists are becoming more valued and more important than they've ever been in the past. Would you agree with that?

Ari Sharp: I think there's a lot to that. I think that anyone who's using Twitter or using Facebook or any of those other social mediums is a storyteller and is aiming to be a clear communicator. I mean there's a constraint of the format that if you only have a 140 characters you can't afford to waffle. You've got to cut to the chase. And Facebook is not much different. Similarly, the way that visuals are becoming more and more prolific in these forums, you've got to find a way to show your story as well as to tell it.

I think those skills are essential not just among people who are officially practising communications but among anyone who's using those platforms and wants to get a message out.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Now let's just go back to this task that they said, "Okay, Ari, your job is to help us to tell our story better than we are at the moment. So the one on one stuff we've got that covered up on the Hill so we don't need you there, we need you over here."

What was there when you arrived and what are some of the changes that you've made to the way that the Chamber of Commerce and Industry goes about its business in order to achieve its objectives?

Ari Sharp: In the past the organisation was producing a lot of material that didn't have a clear audience in mind. So it would often be driven by a policy director who had something on their chest they wanted to get out. They'd put pen to paper and it would be disseminated either among our membership or attempting to place it in a mainstream outlet, but there wasn't, from what I can tell, there wasn't a really clear strategy.

So what I've done in my time there is to try to develop a pathway where we can take ideas and policy proposals that staff might have and actually find ways to

build a mass audience for them. We've developed a weekly product that we call Oz Chamber Insights which is a chance for each of our directors to write a couple a hundred words of analysis or commentary on something that's going on in their space. These are people who know their stuff. They know their area incredibly well and this is a chance for them to show what they've got.

And so that's written with the intention of reaching out to our membership which is dozens of industry associations, hundreds of staff in total. A very influential audience. From that we say okay, what's the strongest of that content? What's the stuff that really has legs? And then we think well, maybe we'll put it up on our blog.

We've launched a new blog called Commerce and Industry which is a thought leader space for people to express ideas amongst staff and among the membership.

David Pembroke: But who is that for? We get the first bit that's the membership so here it is and we're going to give you that stuff ... And I'll come back to that in a minute because it's how do you get busy people ... That's another question, how do you get busy people reliably to produce content, quality content?

So once you've got that, you've sifted through it and you've said okay this is our strongest ... Who's the audience for the blog?

Ari Sharp: The blog we think among people with an interest in policy. We know that we're not going to attract a lot of Joe Public just browsing upon it. The sort of subject matter doesn't really lend itself to that. But there is a big community of policy specialists, people that love a good argument. People that have got ideas about the future and feel strongly about it. We think we can attract them to our space. That we can be the area ... This blog can be the place where people go to discuss and debate ideas.

David Pembroke: That's a really interesting insight, too, because I think often people think that audiences have to be large. Whereas in this day and age, I think increasingly audiences are getting narrower and narrower all the time. As people sort of draw to themselves precisely ... This notion of the audience of one, and that the wider you go the harder it is to be relevant and you really have to ... I can almost see that person who you are trying to talk to in terms of the blog, so those guardrails must be very helpful in terms of selecting that wonky policy stuff that it can be as wonky as you like because that's what that particular audience likes.

Ari Sharp: Yeah, very much so. I think there's in communications these days a big focus on niches rather than mass audiences.

David Pembroke: Oh, yeah.

Ari Sharp: In a commercial sense that's where there's revenue opportunity.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Ari Sharp: And people likes things that are particular to them.

David Pembroke: Yes, precisely.

Ari Sharp: That's what we're seeing more and more in people's media consumption.

David Pembroke: Now are you finding ... Is the blog working for you?

Ari Sharp: Look it's still early days. We are getting really good engagement from staff. We've started to find that members are interested in having some of their content shared on it.

David Pembroke: Okay.

Ari Sharp: And we do give it a push through our social media channels and through our own member communications to draw traffic to it. Still numbers are fairly modest and we know that we're in a busy marketplace where there's a lot of outlets there.

But it does lead to the third element of our comms strategy which is to take the ideas that work well in a blog format and then say, "Okay, how can we push that out to a major audience? How can we turn that, for example, in to an opinion piece that might run on a mainstream news website? Or an op-ed that might run in a newspaper? Or indeed use that as a basis for an interview? Or use that as the basis for a media release?"

David Pembroke: How are you finding that strategy working for you given that nationally in traditional media numbers are down. They're looking for quality, they're looking for spaces. Are you finding that the opinion pages are looking for the sorts of content that you're offering? And the uptake's pretty good?

Ari Sharp: Very much so.

David Pembroke: That's good.

Ari Sharp: Yeah we find that particularly here in Australia, the Australian Financial Review and the Fairfax papers, The Age, and The Sydney Morning Herald, and the Canberra Times are very receptive to it. The Guardian seems to be interested in that sort of material but does have a particular ideological bent that doesn't always fit in with our world view and we understand where they're coming from.

So there are spaces, and more and more now you're getting online only platforms like Crikey for example which is quite receptive to it.

David Pembroke:

Okay.

Now just to backtrack a couple, cause that insight you gave us in terms of that first gate of your particular strategy, and I like the way that you've described it there. But getting busy people reliably to turn up with good quality content that resonates. How have you cracked that nut?

Ari Sharp:

I've got to confess that it hasn't been easy. There has been some resistance from some people who as you say they tell me they're busy and they do have a lot on their plate and I absolutely understand where they're coming from and I wouldn't want to impose on them.

What we've found is useful is to establish a routine. We have an expectation that each of our policy directors once a fortnight will contribute an item of 400 words. We don't think that's an unreasonable burden on their shoulders. We've established that routine. They know what's coming up, they've got plenty of notice. We also work with them to suggest some topics, suggest some angles that they might want to pursue. Getting in the habit makes a big difference rather than having it as an ad hoc process.

David Pembroke:

One of the other really important things in terms of content and content strategy that you are outlining there is this notion of consistency in your publishing. So as that you are building the habits and the routines in your audiences so as that they're looking forward to the next piece of content that's coming from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

How good are you at taking on the skills of the publisher? To be reliable, to be consistent, to hit those time slots, so as that people can hopefully get in to the habit of engaging with you?

Ari Sharp:

Lunch time on a Tuesday is our time. We will be in our member's inboxes pretty much like clockwork between one and two PM every Tuesday. And we've had to build in a sort back-in process so that we meet that deadline with extraordinary reliability. Because we know that if we're going to build an audience people need to know where we are and when we're going to be there and that they're going to get something decent to read every time they open it.

David Pembroke:

In terms of the implementation of this strategy, and I know you're only not that long in to it really in terms of the process. What are the things that have really worked for you well and what are the things that have been a couple of air swings? Because I think one of the other things that people need to understand when they get in to this content game is that not everything is going to work.

The best possible evidence you have to make your decisions, sometimes it just doesn't happen. Sometimes you have to retire initiatives that you thought that were going to work. So maybe best things and perhaps things that haven't been so good for you so far.

Ari Sharp: That's an interesting one. I think where we've perhaps misfired is in trying to push people in to something that is not their natural fit. I had a background in journalism where I was surrounded by other journalists who considered themselves as storytellers and thought and wrote in that way. A lot of the people I'm working with now are brilliant policy people but are not natural storytellers. And it's not going to work, and it doesn't work for me, to try to impose a particular structure on them. To tell them, "I think you should write this way" and to be the style police. I've found through trial and error it's much better to -

David Pembroke: Here comes Ari! Get away from him!

Ari Sharp: You're telling it like it's a joke!

So I've learnt from experience, don't try to force a particular style. Don't pretend that people are journalists and storytellers if they're not. Help them instead find their own voice. Write in a style that their comfortable with, that captures their personality.

David Pembroke: What about the future? I find the times we're in just infinitely fascinating. And I'm curious about everybody and what they're up to, because it's just such an exciting time to be in the communication content business.

Where do you think we're going to be heading over the next couple of years? What are you looking at in terms of the role that you've got and some of the changes that you'll be making in terms of capability and process and structure.

Ari Sharp: Visuals. I think visuals are just making such a difference now. When you scroll through your Twitter stream or your Facebook stream, overwhelmingly content has got a visual to go with it. And occasionally it'll just be a stock photo, a bit of a lazy effort. But often it's bespoke visual content. It's an infographic that might help tell the story, or it's a stylized quote and a particular photo that evokes an emotion.

That stuff is so important and it's an area where we're still in the very early stages of learning. We're still trying to gain that capability among our team to be able to do that. Then the extension of that is video content.

We're seeing fantastic things put together by some lobby groups and interest groups with a short turnaround. The sort of thing that you used to just see during an election campaign in Australia, where an event happens one day and the next day you'd see a TV ad. Now you're getting something that happens in the morning in the afternoon you'll get a snappy video that has a strong point to make and that'll be going viral online.

And because the cost distribution are almost nothing and the costs of production are coming down really rapidly, there's a lot of great potential out

there to have video, to have infographics and things like that that can really take off.

David Pembroke: Which goes back to my point again that the journalism skills, the content creation skills, those video skills, the graphic designs, the data visualisations, the videographers, increasingly going to come in to this space.

Well listen, mate, we are hard up against time and I'm very grateful that you have taken the journey across town here in Canberra to join us in the studio today. Thank you very much for your wisdom. I'm sure the audience got quite a bit out of that. And there are things that I alluded to during the interview that we didn't actually get to discuss.

So what I will do in a few week's time, actually maybe a couple of month's time, is get you back in, 'cause I think we can continue the conversation. Because there is so much to talk about, at a time of such great change and opportunity. And an enjoyable and fun and all the rest of it that we do have in the content game.

Do you enjoy it, you like your job?

Ari Sharp: Absolutely.

David Pembroke: You sound like you like your job.

Ari Sharp: It is great subject matter, great people to work with, and we feel like we're pretty close to the action, so I'm having a ball there.

David Pembroke: Very good. Okay.

Ladies and gentlemen, Ari Sharp, from the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Thank you very much for, as I say, giving up a bit of your time this week to listen to the podcast today. Very grateful for that.

If you would like to jump online there is the research project that we're doing with the Australian National University that I am encouraging as many of you as possible to get online. Have a look at the start of it, we're going to have some update towards that content. It's a very interesting project for those of you who are interested in content communication. So jump online, register, and we'll start to send you out some more updates about how that project is going. It's going pretty well and very enjoyable.

So anyway, thank you very much again, I'm very grateful always for your time and your attention, and I will be back at the same time next week. Bye for now.