
InTransition Episode 103 - Sean Larkins Part 1

David Pembroke: Well hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome once again to In Transition, the podcast that examines the practice of content communication in government and the private sector. My name's David Pembroke and I am going to welcome you today to what I believe will be one of the most fascinating episodes that we have had so far. It's a big promise, but I can tell you what we are about to speak today is going to put the facts underneath the discussions that we need to have about communication in government and the public sector. A big promise, but let me deliver in just a few moments.

As we do each week, we start with the definition of just exactly what content communication is. 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. That's what we're talking about.

Today we are going to talk about a very, very large research project recently completed by the WPP government and public sector group. They have gone around the world in 40 countries. They have done interviews with two hundred and forty communications practitioners in 30 countries. They've done in depth qualitative interviews with 20 people, online surveys, they have done an enormous amount of work to put together the latest report. The person behind the latest report is a previous guest in In Transition, and that's Sean Larkins who's the director of consulting and capability at the WPP government and public sector practice.

Sean leads the practice's consulting and capability offering and he helps government and public sector organisations around the world to improve their communication functions and strategies. He's based in London, but spends most of his time on a plane travelling all over the world, be it Europe, the Middle East, and all the way through Australasia. He joins me now, and Sean, congratulations on this wonderful piece of research that is really probably for the first time, giving us a sense of where government communication is across the world.

Sean Larkins: Thanks, David. I think you're right. One of the reasons that we did the research is that we firmly believe, as you and I have discussed before, that alongside legislation, regulation, and taxation, communication is one of the four key levers of government. It's important and government communicators don't get the recognition and the credits importance of what they do. We also did the research because we hunted high and low and we couldn't find another piece of global research into government communications.

Now the UK government communications service this week has just celebrated the formal 100th anniversary of public communication within the UK government. Countries around the world have been doing communication for

century, but no one has looked at it from a global perspective until now. That, I think, is an indication of the degree to which government communication is underutilised and misunderstood and I think that's a real shame.

David Pembroke: So let's start because there is so much in this and I do really want to go through this in quite some detail because I think it would be absolutely fascinating to our audience.

Let's probably start with that first point that you raised in that the communication function in government lacks credibility. That seems to me to be a key finding from this report.

Sean Larkins: Yeah, when we first started doing this report I thought I would end up talking to someone like you who knows the profession and knows what we do. I thought I would be coming here and saying, "here are the key issues that Australia and New Zealand are dealing with," or, "here are the key issues in North America," or, "here are the key issues in Europe".

Actually what we found and we were very surprised about this, that in the end we probably spoke to more than 400, 450 people in terms of qualitative interviews and quantitative research, and actually everybody came back and said that they were struggling with the five key issues. An inference is one of those, but the five key issues were trust; audiences, how do we engage with our audiences in a time where the media landscape is fracturing; conversation, how do we move communications between government and the citizen from one way to two way; capability, have we got the right skills; and influence, we found that government communication is under invested in as a function of government.

We found that many government communication leaders don't report in to the boards of their organisation. They find it difficult to get access to the chief executives and their ministers. In part, they lack influence because they don't evaluate or they're not funded to evaluate communications against policy outcomes. They evaluate most of the work against communication outputs, but I think the thing that links this all together is that first point that I mentioned which is around trust.

The declining levels of trust in government have undermined the connexion between those who govern and those who are governed. We found that very few communication leaders know really why there's been that haemorrhaging of trust between government and citizens and what to do about it. They know it's happened, but they are looking for guidance and help in terms of how to bridge that gap. I think the four that follow on from that, engaging better with audiences, having a two way conversations, making sure we've got the right skills, and making sure that we are seen as influential within government and within our organisations are the four things that will help us get to that heart of the issue which is why has trust fallen?

David Pembroke: We will get to those, the bottom four, but let's just stay with trust for the moment because communication can probably only go so far, can't it? There are a lot of other things that impact on this collapse in the level of trust in government.

Sean Larkins: There are. What I would say is, look, good communication can't turn poor policy into good policy. Good policy can't be implemented successfully without good communication. There is that link between what a government is trying to do and how that's communicated to the public. We found the vast majority of government communication focuses on two things. It focuses on the what we're doing and how we're doing it, and it doesn't focus on the why we are doing it. Increasingly, I think citizens want that, understand the thinking behind where their leaders are taking them. That's a missed opportunity, to talk about the why to contextualise why we are implementing or why we are designing a particular policy.

Trust is also, I think low, because in the minds of citizens, the behaviour of politicians is indivisible from the functioning of government as an organisation. Those of us that have spent much of our career within government and public sector organisations are absolutely painted with the same brush as politicians. We see around the world, Australia is a good example, which is where we are today. If you were to ask the average Australian to rank a whole list of professions, politician comes somewhere between a banker and a journalist. As I'm sure you can imagine, that's relatively low in the list of trust ranking. We are also held to account by the behaviour of our politicians. We're held to account by the degree to which governments are developing and implementing good policy and trust is also predicated on the effectiveness of government services. We found, generally, trust in local government, in city level government, in state level government is higher than in federal government or national government because people can see more easily the benefits they get from services that are close to home.

For communicators those three things are very clear. How do we advise politicians on the tone and the content of their communications politicians? How do we use communication to influence the effective delivery of government services? How do we ensure that communication is there at the development of policy and isn't used, as one of our respondents said, "as a bit of a carwash". This particular respondent said he was sick and tired of communication being treated in government as a carwash. We've created our policy, you can see it there, it's in the back yard, it's got three wheels, one of the tyres might be flat, it's a bit rusty. The engine doesn't work, but put it through the carwash, polish it up and you'll be able to see that as good policy, won't you?

Of course when that doesn't happen because communication is no replacement for good policy, communication is used as the excuse for a failure of a policy, rather than the policy design itself.

David Pembroke: How then, and this is an issue that we've discussed many times over the hundred episodes of In Transition is this notion of, how does communication get that seat at the table? How does it get recognised by the people who are developing policies as a lever that they can use in order to achieve the objectives of the government that they serve?

Sean Larkins: I think that's a challenge in virtually all organisations that we looked at. As you said a few moments ago, we talked to people in more than 40 countries. That's probably across, when you take into account national government and federal government and city council, that's probably somewhere in the region of 60 to 70 organisations. I think all of them are struggling with that.

We've seen some really good examples of how organisations structure to make sure that communication is seen as an essential function. For example, looking a project in programme management approach where as soon as anything was being developed, or policy being issues, it's accepted that communication has to be part of the table.

We've seen some people out of despair use I suppose more tactical approaches. One organisation we came across, they turned their entire communications function into a team of chuggers for the week. For those of you listeners who don't know what the term chugger means, chugger is kind of a shorthand for what in the UK is called a charity mugger, almost kind of tongue and cheek. These are the people they're usually kind of young and very outgoing that might have a lanyard on that says they're from the Red Cross. When you're going to the coffee shop or you're going to the station, they come up and talk to you about their charity and they try to get you to sign up. They're doing a great job, but it can be quite annoying that the last thing you want to do when you're rushing for the train is to get engaged in a conversation with someone about development issues.

What we found is in one particular organisation the communications director turned themselves into these kind of chuggers for the entire week. They basically loitered in research and they had a hit list of their 20 key most influential internal stakeholders that they needed to educate on the impact that communication could make. Every time one of them came into reception or was in the canteen or heading for the car park, they basically accosted them and started talking to them and really wouldn't leave them alone until they had a one to one meeting promised in the diary. There are different techniques people use to make sure that communication is understood within the organisation.

For me the starting point is the quality of advice we give. How do we act to senior advisors? How do we not just say yes to a politician or a policy maker, but we challenge them in their thinking. The second is around what is the quality of our evaluation if we are, as 60% of respondents to the survey are doing, if we are only evaluating on the terms of communication outputs rather than policy

outcomes then we are selling ourselves short. That's a change we need to see across the board and across the world.

David Pembroke: Generally that accomplishment of the measurement of outcomes requires research of some sort to be able to give you that indication. I suppose if it's a programme of some sort and you're looking to increase the numbers, for example, you may be able to look at that. Often research is required and often people are reluctant to invest in research. How can you improve that when perhaps the resourcing is not there to be able to complete the work that you've done?

Sean Larkins: They seem to be reluctant to invest in research, but also they seem to be reluctant to share that research across government. What we found is we found that there were a number of key attributes. We identified 10 key attributes which is set out in the report that really are the top key requirements of effective government communication. One of those, of course, is having access to a wide range of data sources to inform decisions.

Quite often those data sources already exist somewhere within government or they exist somewhere outside of government and we are not looking for them. We had conversations with a number of colleagues in government across the last couple of weeks. For example, one we've been talking about this research and we've seen some really fantastic work going on in terms of like road safety. If you're trying to evaluate the impact of the road safety campaign, then of course you can go to the policy service and the ambulance service and the hospital services and find out what's happening in terms of the number of arrests for drunk driving or the number of people taken to a hospital because of an accident or the number of people being treated with road traffic accident injuries in hospitals.

That data already exists and quite often we can pull up that data and we can look at cause and effect. Can we see a fall in the number of road traffic accidents that's related to the period of time when we are putting out communications? I'm surprised the degree to which many government communicators don't look outside their organisation for data that already exists.

David Pembroke: That's a very good advice and a very good point. I think people are probably scribbling that down right now. Where are those data sources that they can go and interrogate that would help to give some sort of signal that perhaps the impact of their communications programme is working or perhaps not working?

Beyond trust, we then go to that second point around audiences and this challenge of fragmentation. What did the research tell you specifically about the challenges of identifying reaching and influencing and engaging with audiences?

Sean Larkins: You and I know, and your readers will know that there's been a fracturing of audiences over the last 10 to 15 years. The historic model of broadcast

communication has been shattered. We found from the research only 25% of respondents actively tailor their messages to citizens. The vast majority of respondents struggled to move beyond uniform messaging and putting out communication to what you and I might call a general audience.

Nearly half of respondents say that they lack an understanding of digital and social media. We found some respondents who acknowledged that 90% of communication from their governments is broadcast only, it's one way. That's a real challenge and it links back to a point you made a few moments ago. It's difficult for us to tailor communication our audiences if we don't have enough data on audience behaviours.

It absolutely comes back to that research and insight development. It comes back to where can we get information that tells us more about our city, more about our audiences if we haven't the funds to commission it internally within our organisation. If you look at an organisation like Google, for example, Google is really interesting. It's not just a search engine, it's a content provider. It's actually a communication channel.

In many parts of the world one of the most important customers for Google is government communication because we communicate increasingly online, for example. We're not asking organisations like Google about the data they have that helps us to better focus and better target our communications. I think that's a real challenge for us and there's another challenge here of course that one nirvana for most private sector markets is to personalise information as much as possible.

Of course there is a valid reason why some government communications need to be broad brush and need to, I suppose, need to encourage a sense of civic community. We're in Australia, at the moment. When there are bush fires, for example, we want an entire community to act in the same way at the same time. There is the balance between personalisation and broad brush communication. For that to be effective, we need to understand our audiences, where they are, what they think, and how they act. That kind of evidence isn't be procured within government.

David Pembroke: In terms of attributing the importance of the various elements that you found, how important is this notion of understanding the audience to achieving effective and successful outcomes? When you're weighting these various elements is it the most important thing?

Sean Larkins: It's absolutely critical. For me, it's one of the key foundations and bedrocks on how we should be communicating with citizens. Just as an example, we talked to people in more than 40 countries, we found very few governments and very few public sector organisations that had an insights hub that coordinate all of the research that's commissioned within that organisation so that it can be shared and the importance of it can be understood. If there are any organisations in the

world that should have access to great citizen focused information, it should be government and government agencies. We keep it in our own pockets of the organisation and we don't share it. The problem is then we either reinvent the wheel, we're duplicating on research with very limited budgets, which is not the smartest way of operating, or we just work blind because don't have the money to fill those gaps. I would bet you that in 80% of organisations, most of the information you need is already there, but no one has responsibility for bringing it all together so that it's used more effectively.

David Pembroke: How do you solve that problem?

Sean Larkins: I think you need to start to look at what communication should be doing as a function. The vast majority of people that responded to our survey are people that have journalism backgrounds. Now media management is of course an important function of government communication, but it's not the only function of government communications. I would argue increasingly, it's not the most important or impactful function in government communications.

What you need to do is you need to start to look at all of the skills that you have within government communications and you need to look a fresh at how you are functioned and how you operate on behalf of the entire organisation.

I mentioned a few moments ago that we identified 10 key attributes of high performing government communication functions. One of those, of course, is about access to a wide range of data to inform decision making. The other is the responsibility that government communicators have for driving focus on the citizen, not just throughout communications, but throughout the entire organisation.

This is a function that I think government communication teams should be taking on board. We see in a couple of incidences where there are high performing teams that's what they do in the vast majority of teams, they don't. I think that's a gap in their armour.

David Pembroke: Moving on to the next large problem that you identified. The global problems that's one of conversation, this sense of two way communication. What did the research tell us about governments preparedness to engage in two way conversation?

Sean Larkins: Only 31% of respondents said that they see citizen engagement as a priority for their government. If the citizen isn't the focus of what you're doing, who is the focus? If it's not the citizen, then it's perhaps that the trust levels have fallen. Only 31% see citizen engagement as a priority for their government. Only 14% of people have had any training on public engagement whatsoever. The majority of respondents struggled to move beyond one way conversations that represent the majority of today's government communication.

One of our respondents said to us, this was a key frustration of his, about how too much government communication was broadcast, it was one way. He said, "to illustrate how limiting that is, I'd like you to go home and talk to your partner tonight, but never listen to their responses and I want you to do that for 40 days then come back to me and tell me how quickly it is you're getting divorced". The nature of a conversation, particularly today when we have access to the media is it is two way.

If I have a very bad service experience with an organisation or a retailer, I can go online and I can make my feelings very clearly known and no doubt within a matter of minutes or certainly within the hour, I get a response from someone in the organisation apologising or asking more detail on what was wrong and telling me what they're going to do about it. Of course it's difficult for governments to have that degree of immediate responsiveness with citizens, but increasingly, we see those countries that do high quality communications talk more about engagement and less about communication.

How do we go out and understand the views and the needs of citizens? How do we listen and reflect that back into policy making? They are very, very different techniques and skills and perhaps are found ordinarily in government communication teams. The other thing I find slightly frustrating when we look at the research is that we do see a number of countries that are out doing very brave attempts at setting up platforms for greater citizen engagement, but then not defining the role they want citizens to play.

If I go out and talk to you as a citizen, am I trying to understand your concerns? Am I trying to understand your views on a particular policy? Am I telling you I want you to decide what decision is made for me? Am I talking to you because I want to understand how better you can access that survey? Quite often we see citizen engagement as we just go out and hopefully we listen a bit, but we also need to give people a sense of what we are asking them to do. Are we asking them to design a policy? Are we asking for their approval? Are we asking for their opinions? I think we see people struggling with that. As I've mentioned, very few people working in government communications have had training in citizen engagement.

In many of the organisations that we researched and spoke to, engagement is not seen as part of communication. It's seen as part of the policy team's responsibilities. I think that's a structural failing. Engagement is a core part of communication and government communicators need to be involved in that.

David Pembroke:

In terms of that, though, again this is this notion of pushing communications further up the value chains into these discussions around policy development and listening to the citizens to understand what those challenges are, what their needs are, what their problems are and indeed seeking those views. How do we overcome that problem if engagement belongs to policy and it doesn't belong to

communication, how can the communicators listening to this podcast close that gap or cross that chasm?

Sean Larkins:

Cross that chasm? Well firstly, I think one of the things we found time and time again, and you and I have discussed this before, is the degree to which government communicators. Someone had talked about the tyranny of pace. Too much is happening. There's a difficulty in prioritising what we should be focusing on and how. In that kind of tyranny of pace and lack of time, what we find is that many government communication teams are rather inward looking into their own teams rather than engaging fully with policy.

The strongest communication functions we've seen, they're actually going actively into policy teams and challenging them to bring the thoughts and the views of citizens further into the policy making. It comes back to the point that you made a few moments ago. We absolutely need to have people within government communications that are influential and that are engaging with policy. Where they see a very poor brief come from their colleagues, they are challenging that. In the words of some of our respondents one of the respondents to the research said to me that, "quite often a policy team will come and say, look we've got a, for example, we've got a major investment programme in infrastructure and the government's spending half a billion dollars on infrastructure, so I've decided to spend two billion pounds on communication. What can two million pounds of communication buy me?"

That's the wrong question. The question they should be asking of their communication teams is if I'm spending half a billion dollars on infrastructure, here are the things I need to citizen to understand. How can you deliver that for me? The relationship between policies and communication is too often transactional. I've decided arbitrarily here is the pot of money, how can you spend that for me without going back to the key point which is around your objectives. What can communication do to help deliver policy objectives?

David Pembroke:

That's certainly very good advice for people I think is to build that credibility and get out from there.

Sean Larkins:

I get that none of this is easy and I just wanted to make it very clear that look, there are frustrations here, and there are frustrations because public organisations and governments are big organisations. They are complex. We found time and time again, people have the right intentions, they desperately want to do this, they absolutely believe in the power of communication, but the bureaucracy and the structures that they work within preclude them from doing so.

I would hate for your listeners to think that I'm sitting here and criticising government communicators. I am sitting here expressing my frustration at how governments communicate, and how quite often the communication function isn't given the influence and the authority that it needs to do its job. That's what

I think we need to do. We need to claw back some of that influence and authority.

David Pembroke: Indeed. I think you're right. Some people are sitting there thinking, was okay for him, but I'm working in the carwash.

Sean Larkins: Exactly. We've all done it, we've all worked in the carwash.

David Pembroke: Again, I was in a carwash only the other day. That is such a great way to express the work and the frustration around and that tyranny of pace is another great insight. We're so busy doing the doing that, yes, we'd love to get more involved in this strategic, important critical thinking evaluation side of it, but we're a little bit too busy doing what we're doing. Interestingly it seems that the behavioural economists have found their way higher up the value chain. What's your observation as to how communications teams can now work with the behavioural economics team who seem to be claiming some of this strategic insight role that communicators perhaps felt might have been their role?

Sean Larkins: That's a very interesting point, David. I think for me the behaviour economists have positioned or marketed themselves incredibly well over the last five to 10 years.

David Pembroke: Because they're not in the carwash.

Sean Larkins: Well, I think that sometimes they are, not always. I think they benefit from being seen as kind of new kids on the block. I think in some respects, communication teams suffer because, yes, 15 years ago 20 years ago, before the internet, the big game in town was basically the media management or advertising. It was one or the other and there was quite often crossover between the two. Of course the world that we live in now and the context we communicate in now are far more complex. Yet we are still seen as the people that the press office that we prevent a minister from being on the front page if they've done something silly, or we get them on the front page if they've done something that they think is important. We're also seen as the people that just do some advertising.

What we do is a much broader, a much more complex ecosystem of communication. I think behaviour economists have come in without being tarnished with a kind of outdated idea of what they do. They also talk very cogently about nudge and actually we can take some simple steps and on many occasions we can. The issues that we deal with, if we're talking about behaviour change around drunk driving, for example, if we are talking around increasing competence in trusting public governments, small nudges won't have that effect.

What we are doing, is that we should be laying the foundations for long term strategic programmes of engagement. I think they've come in and marketed

themselves very well, but I'm firmly of the belief that while nudges on occasion are helpful, they're not the be all and the end all of the challenge that we have as government communicators.

David Pembroke: How would you see perhaps communication and the behavioural economists working together effectively? What would be a good structure where they could come together as a team in order to address some of these wicked policy problems that government is dealing with?

Sean Larkins: If we go back to the research, one of the things that is very telling from the research is that when we look to organisational structures, of course people have an external communications function. Nine times out of 10 that will include media management, it will include advertising, it will include PR. They'll have an internal communications team. They will have very little in terms of a strategic or planning function. I think that's very telling in terms of our influence. If we had stronger strategic and planning functions and that we were taking a more leading role in coordinating communication across government, then we would be natural partner if you like for the behaviour economists and the nudge functions.

In many of the organisations that we looked at, that strategic communications function isn't developed enough, or if it is there, it's kind of hidden away in-. We quite often use language like corporate communications, for example. Now I'm a bit of a critic of the term corporate communications because I've never completely worked out in all of my years working government communications what exactly it means. Let's be very clear. Yes, we do external communications. Yes, we do internal communications. Increasingly we need to do citizen engagement, but the thing that enables us to do all of those three things well in an integrated way is the need to have a strong strategy and planning function.

If we get a reputation for being people that understand and can develop and deliver strategy, then I think we will have an easier relationship with behaviour economists.

David Pembroke: Well, ladies and gentlemen, what we'll do is leave it there for this week. This is an extended interview, and I'm sure like me, you are absolutely fascinated by this piece of research which really does describe the challenges that we are facing in government and public sector communication. But also, I think Sean's giving us a lot of great insights into some of the improvements and changes that we can make. There is more to come. There will be part two next week so please take the time to come back next week because there is more good stuff coming here from Sean Larkins. Again, if you do want to go and have a look at the research you can go to WPP.com/govt practice or just go to a search engine and type in the Leader's Report and you will pick it up there. We'll be back next week with part two of this very special interview with Sean Larkins from the WPP government and public centre practice. For the moment that's all for this

week. Thank you so much again for your time. I really do appreciate that you do come back each week, but for this week it's time to go, and it's bye for now.