
David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and thank you very much for joining us once again this week. Today, we are going to update the Content Communication Research Project that we are undertaking with the Australian National University with our lead researcher, Ying Yi.

Before we come to that, as we start the programme each week, we look at the definition of just exactly what it is that we're talking about. 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 in and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and/or stakeholder action. That is it. That is content communication and I have to say that over the last few weeks and months, contentgroup has been hit with this massive growth surge because we are finally starting to see government agencies understanding that the great gift of technology as it relates to communication is that they can now be in the publishing business. The factors of media production and distribution have been democratised. To each and every one of you who is listening out there today, you are now in the publishing business, whether you like it or not.

The issue is then how do we make the most of this great gift? This is what content communication is about. It's about being able to put together the component pieces of a strategic communication planning process, add that to this great capability that we can now have of creating useful, relevant and consistent content and then being able to wrap it all together in an accountable framework that manages the various key elements of the project or programme be it from understanding the benefits realisation very early in the process so what are the benefits that we're seeking to create and how are we going to measure whether or not we can achieve those benefits? What are the governance structures that we need to put around our content communication programme because we are spending taxpayers' money, so we have to be accountable. Our governance has to be absolutely right so as we can understand and navigate the complex elements of public-sector and government areas, which we know are ever-present in everything we do each day.

Then there's the various elements of understanding why are we doing these projects? What are our objectives? Who is the audience? Then what types of content are we going to use? Through which channels, online and offline? Ultimately, how are we going to measure the impact that we're having? Importantly also, for all of those of us working in the public and government sector, it's about managing risk, identifying those risks and on those risk registers and then understanding, well what pieces of our content communication programme can help us to manage those larger risks which are ever present and things that we, from a governance point of view, need to identify and engage with?

My guest today, Ying Yi, is our lead researcher at the Australian National University and it might have been about eight or nine months ago, we were very fortunate that the National Innovation and Science Agenda identified this problem that small businesses and their engagement with university was a very, very weak part of the Australian innovation system. We were fortunate enough to apply for and receive Innovation's Connection Funding, which required us contentgroup to provide AU\$100,000 and in return, the Australian government would give us \$100,000 plus a subsidy for a graduate, which we're yet to appoint at this point in time, but all of that money rolled up that then has to go and be spent back at the university. The change basically was that we were a small business with a problem that we needed solved. Rather than from where it's traditionally been universities and academics are solving the problems that they think are important, the academics are actually solving the problems that we think are important. That was the purpose of this Innovation Connections Grant. We are well and truly into that.

Part of our methodology that we have developed over time really needed some evidence based and needed some toolkits put in place, and that's what we're starting to do at the moment, but another part of the process is we've actually engaged 20-plus governments from local, state, federal and multilateral, all around the world to actually test and validate and question our approach as to whether or not we are on the right track or not on the right track, and I know that we will speak to Ying Yi today about some of the feedback that she's been getting from those participating governments from around the world. We'll come to that in a moment, but first of all, Ying Yi, welcome to InTransition.

Ying Yi: Thank you, David. It's nice to be back.

David Pembroke: That's a long introduction, and I noticed you nodding your head, but it's a pretty simple story to follow really, isn't it? Is that the problem we're trying to solve is government communicating effectively with citizens and stakeholders in order that they will behave in a particular way such that the government can achieve whatever particular objective it may have. I think at its heart, it's quite a simple thing. The other, probably the upside of it is that it's a global problem. The WPP research has really told us that what we're dealing with is a global problem; the fact that communication isn't valued. It's all one way. The skills of the practitioners are not where they need to be. There is very little two-way communication, very little listening, and measurement and evaluation is largely absent from many communication programmes. Perhaps if we might just go back to your first engagement and just to summarise your views as to what you saw when we engaged with you and what you felt the problem was that you were going to be solving?

Ying Yi: Before I jump into that, maybe just a quick overview about the objective of the entire research project. What we are trying to address, the problem we are trying to address here is the communication problem in the government sector, which is a complex problem. In order for us to address or resolve a complex

problem, I always believe the easy way to do it is to first simplify the situation. Then its allow us to narrow the whole complex problem down to smaller, more focusable situation we are dealing with.

The objective here for this research project pretty much is to develop a toolkit, a framework evidence toolkit, that can help a practitioner or government agency manage content communication in the public sector in a more structured way. That's the ultimate goal for this entire research project, which is very simple and tangible. At the end of the day, we will have a toolkit that will outline the entire process, step-by-step process, and that will allow the industry practitioner to follow the entire practise or manage the entire process in a structured way.

We start the journey with an investigation into content group's communication approach and their methodology, and we try to understand how this is managed in industry. The content group's framework and approach were developed over many years of experience. What we are also trying to do here is to incorporate the latest research from the latest literature from multiple disciplines, so we try to build some evidence and also credibility into contentgroup's approach and also framework.

David Pembroke: Are you saying it lacked credibility before?

Ying Yi: Yeah...Oh, I did...did I? (laughs)

David Pembroke: (laughs) I'm only joking, I'm only joking.

Ying Yi: That's the starting point of the whole journey. We look at the industry practise and we also look at the best practise proposed by multiple researchers.

David Pembroke: Because interestingly, as we put this methodology over the years, strategic planning, strategic communications planning practise is as old as the hills. It's been there forever. Essentially, what we've done though over time is really just to find different pieces, be it from project management or benefits realisation or risk management and nailed them on into the area that we actually thought was the appropriate area. Now, it was a bit ramshackle, a little bit higgledy-piggledy, but you seem to be smoothing some of those edges out.

Ying Yi: I think structure is the key here. Basically, we have all those tools and concept available in industry, in research area, but it's just like I think the way I see it is it's lacking a structured way to link everything together, and I think that's the value this toolkit will add. We incorporate the project management methodology or framework to link everything together, to look at everything in a more structured way.

So we start, we incorporate the practise and research into a structured framework and what we have done in the past one month or so is that we start to select feedback as you mentioned at the very beginning of our conversation.

We start to talk to different advisory group members from different government agencies. We want to make sure the framework, the draught framework we come up with right now is aligned with the industry practise and then, we try to conduct interviews with different representatives from different government agencies.

I think the feedback we have received so far has been very positive and they all believe the framework we've come up with is comprehensive. It's covered the best practise, but they also point out some area that we may enhance or improve in terms of the or some challenge they face in their daily job, which are wrong, the measurement communication goal. I think that's the big thing. We need to continue to address in a framework, which is the communication goal so how we are going to measure that, how we are going to define that. That's one thing we are going to continue to work on in the toolkit.

The second part comes with the evaluation. After you set a goal and then you implement the strategy to try to communicate or achieve the goal at the end, how are you going to determine whether the goal has been achieved or not? Overall, we have received some assurance. In terms of the framework itself, the feedback has been positive and I think it's captured the over...comprehensive view of the content communication and we just need to add additional elements to make this more practical or more comprehensive too ...

David Pembroke: It's my understanding too that some of the feedback though is that, "Oh, this is so big. It's too much. I'm on a hamster wheel at work. I have the minister's office calling. I would not be able to do this because there is too much detail." I think I like that element of it being challenging because this is all about transforming the practise within government of communication that it does need more rigour and that's what we want to introduce, which is different to what people ... As they say, they're on the hamster wheel. Everyone's busy and they're producing lots of stuff and they're sending lots of stuff out and they're creating lots of assets, but perhaps they're not being quite as strategic as they need to be and don't have the credibility to push back and say, "Hang on, that's not part of the plan. We're following this plan that we haven't actually developed because we haven't had time because we've been too busy." Just maybe explain to me perhaps some of that resistance that there may have been about, "This is all too much."

Ying Yi: No, I think it's understandable because each time when a new concept or a new technology comes around, there will always be a bit of a learning curve, like you need to get your head around the new methodology, but over time once you get to understand the concept and also the benefit it would deliver, over time you will find it is easier to follow.

David Pembroke: It's faster, yeah.

Ying Yi: Yeah. I think the first thing, one of the reason behind this kind of question might be because of the learning curve comes with that. I think we probably need to deal with that training and also get to know the framework a bit better.

The second thing I also want to emphasise here is that when we develop the toolkit, we aim for a comprehensive process, but I also understand all the communication projects are different. Some will focus on more like a daily communication and some communication will focus more on strategy level, more important strategy level. The framework here is comprehensive, but that does not necessarily mean that you have to follow every single step like rigorously for the entire project.

Instead, I believe it allows you, the framework, the comprehensive framework and toolkit actually provides you the flexibility to draw something unique and then out of the toolkit available to you, you can just pick some of the toolkit or the concept that is relevant to the project you are managing. For some less complex projects, then you may follow the framework in principle, but you may loosen up some of the steps. I think the framework actually gives you the flexibility to tailor the framework to your project and then, you can just use some parts of the framework for the needs of your project.

David Pembroke: How then do people learn to make choices about what's in and what's out, or what can be left in or left out?

Ying Yi: I think that will come with the case studies. The framework we come up with will be generic, but in the toolkit, we also aim to provide some case studies that demonstrate how different toolkits or how the framework can be tailored to different type of projects. That's what we are trying to do next, as well, yeah.

David Pembroke: To get the case studies so people can learn from what other people have done and how they've gone about applying ...

Ying Yi: Yes, yes, yes, yes and how some parts of the concept can apply in that particular context this way. It can incorporate some kind of contextual variable into our framework.

David Pembroke: Now interestingly, in the meantime while you're beavering away with our federal government funding grant to be able to do the primary research around the methodology, evidence-based methodology and the toolkits, we've also been fortunate enough in applying to the ACT government and been able to receive additional funding now to help us with the education component. So, how do we teach the methodology so as people, that learning curve is accelerated and people are able to acquire the skills and the practise as quickly as possible so they can get about developing their rigorous programmes. What's your view on what that might look like in terms of education? How are people going to learn to be able to develop and apply content communication programmes?

Ying Yi: So, I think the way I picture it in my mind, because I'm teaching project management so that's my background, so I think the way I see it, this framework or toolkit we develop can be used to guide the structure of a particular course. That means for each of the ... It can be divided into individual topics in the entire course for the semester, long course, it can be divided into different topics. For each of the topic that a lecturer can first give some introduction to the theoretical concept behind a toolkit we introduce and then allow students to apply what they have learned from the course to one particular real-life communication project they select.

So, over the course of the semester, each week it will come with different topics and different challenges and they apply what they have learned to the same project over time. At the end of the day, they will be able to see how all those tools work together and then that leads to the final complete project. They will also be able to see the connection across different concepts.

Say, for example, if you are going to change your goal, of course that will affect your selection of communication channel. If you are going to make some adjustment to your communication channel, of course you need to go back and see where they still well aligned with your goal. That kind of approach like a weekly topic and then a semester-long project application will allow them to see that kind of connection across different project and topic. I think that approach worked very well in the project management kind of education, yeah.

David Pembroke: Because essentially it is that rigour and that discipline isn't it wrapping around the specific task of communication with citizens and stakeholders so that's really what we're trying to do here.

Ying Yi: Yeah. I also think individual topics cannot be treated as a standalone. In the communication world, everything are linked to each other and the goals are related to the communication strategy, the communication strategy are related to the target audience and then the communication strategy and goal will affect how you're going to measure them. So everything will be interrelated to each other to some degree. So I think when we talk about education, we cannot just treat individual topics as a standalone topic. We need to figure a way to allow student to at least understand that kind of interrelation in this kind of framework.

David Pembroke: What were some of the other feedback that you were getting from the advisory group? What were the other governments... because they are at that local, state, federal, multilateral level, there's a big group of them who are providing their input. What other things did they ...?

Ying Yi: I think two things actually comes to my mind. One is that communication, there are different type of communication in government. One is more like a business as usual daily communication and if that's the case, I think only part of our toolkit can help them with that kind of communication. But the other type of

communication is more like a policy level strategy, a communication about a particular government programme and project. I think those two different kind of communication in government may require slightly different approaches, but again, our framework will give them that kind of flexibility. If it's about daily communication, the future uses of the toolkit can just focus on the step that relates to the content communication, production can focus on that aspect, but if it's a strategy level communication project, then you need to follow the entire process step by step. I think the toolkit comes with that kind of flexibility to address that.

Another comments or feedback I have received, actually, it's something more like an observation or something, I feel like there seems a lack of coordination within the government. I think different government agencies and different level comes with their own communication team, but sometimes different communication team, they are actually communicating with the same group of target audience. Say, for example, the service department may be communicating with the children or something like that, but there seems no structured coordination within the government. They may be sending different pieces of a message to the same target group and from the target audience point of view, I may be a bit overwhelmed if I continue to receive different pieces of a message like from different government agency. I think this is another issue that we touch like briefly ...

David Pembroke: Yeah, that's a structural issue and there's again that lack of coordination and collaboration and discussion. I could give you any number of examples where not only inside different agencies where there's been a lack of, but outside as well where different departments have been coming at trying to explain the government's position on a particular... but from four different areas and nobody's sat with each other to say, "Hang on, it's one problem. We're one government and we have a series of target audiences we need to talk to. How can we work together with our own platforms in order to be able to make sure the message gets through?"

Ying Yi: That actually reminds me of one benefit. I asked the participants, like the advisory group, about their views around what would be the benefit in delivery if they have this toolkit in their organisation, what will be the benefit? I think they mentioned something around credibility and also consistency. So if they have a structured framework available, they can make sure different communication groups working in different government agencies or even within the same team, they will have that kind of confidence saying that we are all following the same approach or at best have some consistency across the teams and across different communication strategy, and I think that's related to the coordination and also one benefit that this toolkit can deliver.

David Pembroke: Yeah, I completely agree with you because ultimately, I think it's a methodology that can be applied at a local, state, federal and multilateral level; doesn't matter which government. It can be used for internal communications. It can be

used for external communication. It can be used for policy development, service delivery, regulation enforcement and education. So it does have a wide applicability. And we're wrestling with the idea at the moment that it be perhaps made an open standard so as we let everybody wherever you are just use the standard and we just let it out there. What's your view on whether something like this should be open or whether it should be closed or whether they should be partially open, partially closed? How would you go about solving that problem?

Ying Yi: I'm kind of leaning toward opening the toolkit because I believe that say, for example, this toolkit, even if we have the toolkit ready by the end of this research project, I still believe that development of the toolkit is an ongoing process because the new technology and the new definition of communication, all those things will be changing over time. So I think the development of the toolkit is going to be an ongoing process and individually, we are constrained by our intellectual like say, for example, knowledge or something... so I believe if we open it, it will give us better room for improvement for this particular toolkit and it will also benefit a wider community because I think government communication is not an issue that can be resolved by one single company or one single party. I think if we open the methodology, then it will give the entire communication community where we can equate a wider community with the appropriate tool to tackle the challenge all together.

David Pembroke: That's right.

Ying Yi: So that's my personal view on this one.

David Pembroke: Another vote for open, which I ... It's interesting as a private sector organisation, developing open standards is in the industrial mindset, you don't do that. You hold onto your IP and you lock everything down. But our mission as a company is to help government strengthen communities and improve the wellbeing of citizens, so consistent with our mission, I think we are compelled and required... because ultimately, we want to try to solve those problems because at the heart of effective communication I believe can be the rebuilding of trust and if we had the rebuilding of trust, we can probably perhaps bring a bit more stability back into the global political situation and therefore hopefully, things can get a little bit calmer than they are the moment.

Ying Yi: I like that, because I think it comes with the social responsibility of the company. I do like the idea of opening up the toolkit and allowing the entire society to actually benefit from this, yeah.

David Pembroke: Yeah, and as you said before, I think that idea of people innovating on top of the standard and being able to find ways and practises and technologies that could be incorporated... Because we're now moving into this time of machine learning, deep learning, artificial intelligence, and machines are going to have an

increasingly important role to play in communication with citizens and stakeholders, and who knows where that's going to take us...

Ying Yi:

True.

David Pembroke:

I'm interested also, I know the distinction was drawn to you between communication and engagement, that sense of one way and then engagement being that two way, that listening piece. What insights can you give us about what the advisory group were telling you about engagement?

Ying Yi:

I think pretty much the general consensus here is that those two concept are different as you just mentioned and engagement emphasises more on the two way like interaction and then communication is more like a one way, but I think the consensus here is that both of them goes hand in hand, so that means you won't be able to engage the system without communicating with them.

David Pembroke:

That's right.

Ying Yi:

I think in a way, communication is embedded in the engagement, but without communication, there's no way you can engage. I think those two concept needs to be considered all together, but the emphasis will be slightly different.

David Pembroke:

And again, the WPP research tells us that the preponderance of government communication is about, OK, this is what we think, this is it, and they're not in the habit of listening and therefore, responding and understanding and building those deeper and clearer understandings of the needs of the citizens and the stakeholders. It's a habit perhaps that needs to be developed and a skill that needs to be developed in government. I know the UK government are investing a lot of time and effort into listening because they believe that that's the next era or the next part of innovation in government communication that will help them to be more effective.

Ying Yi:

Yeah, I think that's actually that comment reminds me of the one frustration I observed during the interviews with the different government advisory groups. I think the view here is that they believe communication needs to be brought earlier into the entire process. So I think the frustration here sometimes they are, the communication teams or communication will be engaged in the government policy or government initiative too late in the process. At that time, there's really not much you can do from the communications point of view and there's really not much benefit you can actually get from communication. So I think one consensus or frustration I have experienced during the interviews is that they all hope that the communication can be engaged earlier in the process. So at best, you can use communication as a means to collect the input from citizens and in a way that can help you shape the direction of the programmes or policy to more align with the need of the citizen, yeah.

David Pembroke: Yeah, and I think that is one of the clear purposes of this particular piece of research is to be able to equip communicators with a process that is credible, that will show the leadership that this is a well thought through, well governed, well organised way of adding value much earlier as opposed to the traditional role of communication in government, which is, WPP refers to it as the carwash or I refer to it as the colouring-in department as in, get us brochure or organise us a meeting or interview, but not taking the strategic impact or the strategic value that communication or content communication can bring to the shaping of views and the understanding of citizens' views much earlier in the process.

So, Where are we up to? How far through the process are you at the moment? When can people start to think that they might be able to have a look at this?

Ying Yi: I think what we are doing, what pretty much we have finished the initial rounds of feedback collection and so, what we are trying to do here is to incorporate all the feedback we have received and then we are moving into the writing process. This research project will finish in mid-September. We anticipate-

David Pembroke: Stage 1.

Ying Yi: Stage 1, yes.

David Pembroke: Stage 1, because we're going to have stage 2.

Ying Yi: Yes, that's true. I think by the end of stage 1, we will have a more mature like toolkit than the initial draught so we will have pretty much a draught written like a document for associated with the framework and approach. We also anticipate having some mini case around some of the step along the way so we can demonstrate how certain tools can be applied to certain contexts. By the time of mid of September, I think we will have that product ready. As I mentioned earlier, I anticipate the development of the toolkit is going to be ongoing process. The end of stage 1 will not be the end of the development of the toolkit. So, over time after mid-September, we will continue to revise and then add additional polish the ... Yeah, the toolkit.

David Pembroke: Yes, and get more case studies as people start to apply the methodology, we'll start to see-

Ying Yi: Yes, and more case studies, yeah. We will able to-

David Pembroke: Yeah. Incorporate those, but it's a good point you raise because I think that we will never stop iterating around this because technology will change. Attitudes will change. The attitudes of political leadership will change. The attitudes of the leadership within the public service will change and so it really is that ambition to build the capability, build the skills, build the familiarity, get the runs on the board because we know it works. We've been using it now for a couple of years. We know it does get results, but it's then that matter and that continued and

consistent commitment over time that we improve and get those inputs from all sorts of places because I know that it is applicable at a local government, state government, federal government, multilateral anywhere in the world. It is a method that will deliver great value to each of those governments. Thank you once again.

Ying Yi: No worries, yeah.

David Pembroke: Yeah. Thank you very much for your hard work.

Ying Yi: Thank you.

David Pembroke: It's been great so far. Things are working really well. Our partnership and collaboration with the Australian National University has now been in place for a few years and long may it continue. I think there is so much that we can get as a private sector, small private sector company dedicated to this mission of helping government, but working with a major global university like the Australian National University and I know some of the feedback that I've had just informally from people and leaders of government communication around the world is that everyone's pretty excited that this could be something that is another small step forward to us getting better at this communications caper.

Ying Yi: Can I just add one comment to that? Actually, I asked my research assistant the other day about her feeling of the involvement in the research project and her comment is that she enjoys working on this and the reason being she can finally work on something that will be used in industries. So I also enjoy the journey a lot because I can see the potential impact of this research on industry and on the entire practise. It's different from my other theoretical research, which will end up on a journal no one will read and so... (laughs)

David Pembroke: (laughs) Yeah. It is, it's exciting times. It is exciting times. We're continuing to gather a coalition. Jump online and register your interest in the communication project. Thank you, Ying Yi for coming in today for-

Ying Yi: No worries. Thank you for the opportunity.

David Pembroke: No, it's great fun. To you, the listener, thank you very much for joining us. Once again, great conversation, very, very smart lady who's doing wonderful things for contentgroup and indeed for global government communication. I think we're getting closer to something that's going to have a real impact in this notion of being an open standard that people can access and use I think is something that makes great sense. We look forward to delivering that to all of you.

Thanks again for giving us a small part of your time this week. I know that it's your most valuable asset and the fact that you've been able to come over to our

place and have a bit of a listen to our conversation this week, we do certainly appreciate it. So, we'll be back next week, but for now, it's bye for now.