
Speaker 1: Welcome to InTransition, a programme dedicated to the practise of content communication in the public sector. Here's your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke: Well hello, ladies and gentleman. Welcome 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 once again for giving up a small part of your week as we dive a little bit deeper into what I believe is one of the most fascinating areas of government communication.

We have a great guest this week, who's going to talk a lot about transformation and the impact of digital technologies but also the policy frameworks that underpin those as we continue to wrestle with the great changes that are upon us at the moment. That'll be a great chat. I will introduce him in just a moment, but as we do each week, we start the programme with the definition of content communication.

Content communication is a strategic, measurable, and accountable business process that relies on the creation, curation, and distribution of useful, relevant, and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and/or stakeholder action.

To my guest today, Tim Conway is the founder and chief executive at C-Metrics and the Asia-Pacific director of the Global Digital Foundation, which is a think tank and policy network providing interdisciplinary framework for a three-way dialogue between policymakers, stakeholders and scholars in support of an evidence-based approach to policy, which is affecting the development and use of digital technology. He has a passionate interest in the transformational impact of ICT and the importance of ensuring that this is recognised and discussed in both national and global policies.

He joins me in the studio. Tim, thanks for joining me on InTransition.

Tim Conway: Thank you very much for having me, David. It's a great initiative you've done here. I hope I can do it justice.

David Pembroke: Great. Fantastic. This is such an exciting time, though, isn't it, for this great challenge that we all have in dealing with the great gift of technology and the great transformation? But it's so complex. It's so difficult. How are you and your colleagues going about trying to help government deal with this big change?

Tim Conway: You're right. The first thing is we're all very optimistic about the future. We've seen great things that the technology has done, and we expect technology to continue to make all our lives better, socially, economically in a whole range of areas, but technology is moving very, very fast. Much faster than the public policy environment that governments operate in.

Really what we're trying to do here is work with governments and work for governments and work for society in general to make them become more agile, more responsive to develop public policy that reflects the effects of technology with a firm evidence base, with a firm research base, with good open and transparent discussions.

The foundation has been established, The Global Digital Foundation. It's an all-encompassing name. Has been established to try and promote that dialogue to promote research but to be a non-partisan, very neutral player. We're not a lobbyist or anything like that. With just think we need to get a good level of discussion occurring and for policy to be developed rapidly that reflects what is happening in the digital economy.

When we use the word multidisciplinary, we really want to look at economic, social, cultural, all of those perspectives. To do that, digital knows no boundaries really. Once something is digitised, it can be here in Canberra tomorrow, and it can be in Washington in 10 seconds' time. We've got to take a global approach. Products, digital products and services are accessed and available on a global basis. The technologies, what works here works in America, works in the UK and elsewhere.

We're trying to build a network in Europe, North America, Africa and Asia-Pacific. We've got nodes in all of those at the moment. We're really trying to establish through those nodes a network of researchers, of politicians, of public servants, and of people generally, stakeholders generally, unions, what have you... Civil society, anyone who has an interest in the effects of technology and the impact of digitisation.

David Pembroke: That's a big, big, big job, isn't it? That's a monster.

Tim Conway: I do feel like the little boy that ... I was a son of a farmer. He used to have a big drum of molasses in the shed. My father used to go past and take a lick. He said, "If I ever fell in there, I'd never have the tongue for the opportunity." I think that's the case here.

David Pembroke: That's the thing, isn't it? A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Where do you get started on such a vast enterprise, which is going to involve cultural change, prices change, technology change, system change? There are so many pieces in all of that, where do you start?

Tim Conway: We've started by looking at some of the technologies that are here and now and some of the issues that are here and now and just sort of say, "Can we chip into those?" We're looking at technologies around cyber security. These new technologies, such as block chain, as its known, which are dynamic linked contracts, if you'd like, which have led to things like crypto currencies, so Bitcoin, people would've heard of. That's creating a currency that's beyond government regulation, it has implications.

We're looking at artificial intelligence and machine learning and robotics. All of those things were sci-fi a couple of years ago. They're all happening right now. We've seen autonomous vehicles. We know that there are cars that can drive themselves, various devices, drones, and so on.

We're looking at the additive technologies, the sort of customised products that through the combination of digital technology and biology and genetics, means that in the future, we'll have drugs and remedies that are customised for your body. Maybe there will be things that help your body do better than it will, like remember and all of those types of things.

We're looking at the Internet of Things. It's not just the thermostat on the wall. There are going to be double and triple and quadruple the number of devices connected to the Internet that have no human in control of them, as it were, and they have the ability to turn things on and off. There're all sorts of things.

We're looking at big data and analytics, which is the sort of information that once people start carrying around a mobile device or interacting with a computer or digital technology in any way, they create purposely or mostly inadvertently. That leaves footprints, and there are ethical issues about all of those types of things.

We're looking at the skills issues and this issues space, so we're looking at digital skills. How do we have the skills for now and in the future that make sure that Australia and every country can participate fully in the opportunities that digital provides? It's not just people who have always talked about the old signs, technology, engineering and maths, but there's much more to it than that now. There's psychology. There's behavioural issues. There's understanding the way in which people respond to certain initiatives and so on.

We're looking at the future workforce because this technologies are going to displace jobs. There are a lot of 21st century blacksmiths activities out there. We have to look at those. We have to ensure that we help governments identify those that are going to be affected by this and to enable transition.

We have to look at things like man versus machine decision making. That's been quite in the news at the moment with issues around parole and bail decisions and all of those types of things. There's going to be some tricky issues that arise there.

The national border and cross border issues. Again, coming back to the ethical issues, so those are the things we're focusing on. How do we go about that? We have a couple of different ways in which we can ... a couple of different processes, if I can put it that way.

One is really to start breaking the issues down into their component parts. We're looking for example in Europe at the moment, on what we call the digital

consumer harbour. We believe that consumers need to have a greater level of knowledge about what occurs with their data when they interact digitally in the world. We're producing a website that we'll be looking at that particular activity and trying to promote ... Well, and it's all content, David, I might add. Some good information that people can use about what happens when you take certain activities onto your mobile device or into your house.

David Pembroke: That's a massive issue, isn't it? I know that's an issue here in Australia. This whole notion of government having access to our data, that we're quite happy to give it to the local shopping centre or give it to Facebook or give it to Google, but as soon as we hand it over to government, there's a resistance of sorts and really major central government agencies or a collective of government agencies really need the data because the better that they can get the data, the better they can design in services, which are going to deliver better outcomes to people. Trying to get people across that divide of sharing data in order to get the better outcome is a real challenge, isn't it?

Tim Conway: Absolutely. Nowhere is that more emphasised than in the case of health data. We all think our health data is, we want to keep it very, very private, but I can assure you that if you're a rare blood type or something along those lines and you get knocked out by the bus outside this office, you want that ambulance to know that straight away.

There is this sort of information sharing and trust. Trust is a big, big issue that sits underneath all of this. Government I think is having a real challenge as to how it works in gaining consumers' and citizens' trust. On the one hand, consumers have shown themselves to be very willing to use mobile devices to interact with all manner of services and so on, but when it comes to some government services, because of the way in which those services are presented, people just get a little bit wary as to where will this end up.

David Pembroke: How does government treat that trust deficit? We know from our OECD reports, we know from the Edleman trust barometer that trusting government institutions is not fantastic. How do we start at this time when we're asking more of citizens in terms of sharing their information, how do we get them to that point? How do we rebuild trust in public institutions?

Tim Conway: I think that's one of the first big challenges that government has to look at. I don't think it's done it very well itself. I think government itself assumes that it's trustworthy and that it doesn't have to gain trust with its consumers and citizens, that it just exists. That's reasonable because most public servants are noble people and all of these types of things.

However, we do also know and we see it all the time that there have been examples where information has been abused, has been lost, has been spilt. In the public sector, it does not go down well at all.

In the private sector, when a business does that, there's a very strong market sanction. People just stay away from the product. If a digital product is leaking your data, and it becomes known, that product is dead in the water, but I'm not sure that's the case for government yet or they don't realise that or maybe we just don't have any choice.

David Pembroke: In some cases, I think you're right that we don't have any choice, but I do think that there is this great movement towards citizen-centered design, which is really about respecting the audience and rather than where the government, "Here's the information. Take it or leave it." I think increasingly government is understanding that the expectations of citizens are different, and therefore, they have to actually stand in their shoes, be far more empathetic if indeed they're going to earn the right to some share of the attention of that audience that they need to influence.

Tim Conway: I think that's a really big point. I think at the moment, there is, and this may be my own perspective, there is a perception within government that social media, that the commentary that occurs on social media around things is a media issues, it is something, it is an attack, a response type issue, it's a criticism rather than seeing it as a constructive medium that enables government to alter and respond in a far more specific way.

David Pembroke: It's a real-time focus group in many ways.

Tim Conway: Absolutely. Exactly that. A lot of commercial organisations are using that type of information to respond very practically, almost very personally to the way in which you interact with them as a customer. I don't think we've gone anywhere near that with governments and their citizens. Maybe that's going to require leveraging out the trust sense a little bit more because the tax office certainly an MSM saying, "Hi, Tim. Did you know that you're a little bit late with your tax return?" I might say, "Hang on a minute." But equally, as we've seen with some of the work that's been done in exactly that space, if that message is conveyed the right way, it seems a very constructive and helpful thing.

David Pembroke: How do you build the confidence within public institutions to participate more constructively?

Tim Conway: I think governments and public institutions need to reach out, and that's really part of what we're trying to do with the foundation. I'm not saying the foundation is the vehicle for this, but the foundation's model is to gather evidence, to get the best minds with the best data to produce the best evidence for governments and all their stakeholders, their citizens, their industries, and businesses affected to hold a discussion about how they can go forward, so there's transparency and openness in that. I think that's a really, really important activity.

There's some great work happening here in Australia in the prime minister's department and in places like the Treasury, which are looking at open approaches to policy development. It's a great initiative and a great starting point.

David Pembroke: There's also the whole open government movement, isn't it? Globally where there's ... It was one of I think President Obama's first initiatives when he came in 2008 was to underpin the open government movement, which is to say we are going to move to this openness. Obviously, things have changed a little in that part of the world. How do we sustain that openness when it can be left to the vagaries of certain decision makers, and again, where we've seen in the United States, where a lot of that openness is being closed down very quickly?

Tim Conway: It has, but equally, we have seen that where things are closed down, information gets out, and it gets out in a way that is somewhat much more prejudicial than what have occurred had the organisation thought about taking a much more open and transparent approach in the first place. We've seen some institutions that have high levels of security suffer from this.

This is part of the transparency trust. Openness, try it if I can put it that way. One of the keys to trust is a sense that citizenry, governments operating transparently, openly, not sharing Tim Conway's data or anything like that openly or transparently, but the way in which they're going around gathering information and the way in which they're using that information and that they're not using it in ways that they haven't talked about.

David Pembroke: Sure, but again, I suppose I'll go back to the entrenched cultural issues of the default setting is in Western democracies, government, the bureaucracy support the political class. "Don't embarrass the minister" is sort of the mantra that everyone lives by. Don't push too far because if you open something up and that makes the minister embarrassed, they get a bad question at question time, and so on it rolls.

While on the one hand, we know that this is a good thing, the realities often are that the system is biased towards being closed as opposed to leveraging the benefits of being open. I just wonder how that changed or that balance moves or flips because the state of politics here in Australia and in the UK and in Western Europe and in the United States doesn't fill me with any hope that we're moving to any mature model any time soon.

Tim Conway: No, but I think we are reaching an inflexion point on that where we're seeing ultimately good people speaking truth to power. We've just seen that. I don't want to date your podcast, but we've certainly seen that with the former FBI Chief in relationship to his relationship with the current US President.

We see that from time to time in various different places. Ultimately where, and this is one of the focuses of the foundation. We've got to look at whether

something is enabling democracy or enabling autocracy. If it's enabling a concentration of power, then we need to reveal that. We need to show that to people and let them understand. If it's enabling democracy and most of these technologies are enabling democracy. They are enabling people to feed back, and we can be somewhat concerned about the current US President, but at least he's on social media. He may even be reading some of the stuff that's coming back at him.

He's not going to be insensitive to what his citizens are saying. I think that's part of the thing. It is this new communication cycle. It's 24 hours. It's not 24 hours. It's 24 seconds, but we need to embrace it, not fear it. By embracing it, take the lessons from it, take the information from it.

David Pembroke: There's massive opportunities, and we're seeing it every day in this business. We're in the business of helping government communicate more effectively, and so we are creating the connective tissue, as I like to call it. The information pieces and artefacts that are then distributed that stimulate the conversation, and then hopefully you are seeing that fed back in, getting that better information, which is hopefully informing better, more robust in a more effective policy.

I think those benefits are there. Perhaps to bring you back to a question maybe around that priority, that's big list that the Global Digital Foundation is chasing after. Many of those things that, they're almost all joined up aren't they, in a rosary of interconnectedness, to join them together. Where might be the thread that you pull on first that is going to lead you down this path of discovering and collaboration and improvement?

Tim Conway: Yes, you're right. It's indivisible, so we just have to pick chunks and look at those.

David Pembroke: That project sounds like a good one around that European use of data where it's, perhaps that's a point where you could really focus some real attention.

Tim Conway: Yes, that's a classic one, although the Europeans have a slightly different view of privacy and the way in which data is retained than the rest of the world. One of the challenges we have in doing this on a global basis is people don't necessarily want to say, "Well, we don't do it the same way as the Europeans do." However, we have to be cognizant of exactly those types of things because if it's not governments doing something like this, it can be private firms. We need to know where our data is today and what's happening to it and how it might be used against us.

David Pembroke: Do you think these massive global powers that are being driven by technology, that are spinning up these massive platforms and creating a uniformity almost, do you think they're having an impact on behaviours and that we may get a much more unified global approach to standards around information sharing or

do you think that they're so ingrained that that won't change, despite any amount of force being applied to it?

Tim Conway: There are number of different effects that are visible at the moment. One is this new phenomenon of the way in which people gather news. Once upon a time, we all went and bought a daily paper or a couple of daily papers. We listened to different radio and television news and those types of things. I can bet you that the way in which I got my news this morning is quite different to the way in which you got your news.

David Pembroke: Precisely.

Tim Conway: One of the things that occurs is we all have these cognitive biases, and we all have a particular bias around reading and taking in information that reinforces those biases. That is a little bit of a worry, yes. We need to be aware of those. Part of what we're trying to do with the hub is to try and educate people, particularly young people to take a broad perspective.

We think on the Internet, we have a broad perspective, but in fact, it can be very, very narrow. You can have this self-reinforcing echo of what is happening. I think we're seeing some adverse effects of that, looking at the terrorist type of activities and so on that we're seeing.

David Pembroke: It's an interesting point you raise around this notion of specificity and narrowness because I know that I curate the information that I receive when I receive it in what form and at what time. As you say, I'm different to you, different to the next person, different the next person, different to the next person. Interestingly, my habits, even in the last couple of years, have changed dramatically, but I curate my information now. I wonder how we might be able to change that.

I do read reasonably widely. I'm not drawing information to me with any ... I suppose I'm reinforcing a bias of sorts, but I think my driver is much more around interest, that I'm bringing to me stuff that I really, that I enjoy, that looks at my interest around business and technology and politics and those sorts of things.

It's infinitely fascinating, isn't it?

Tim Conway: Absolutely. As a communications professional, David, I'm hoping you'll come up with an answer in this space because-

David Pembroke: Well, yeah. We'll it's-

Tim Conway: ... or define the issue so that some research can take place because I think it is a really important issue.

David Pembroke: Yeah, I think it's a really important issue too. I'm not sure I quite have the answer now, but I think what we can do with government in terms of being able to communicate more effectively is to really borrow the best practise of the broadcasters and the publishers and bring those practises into government so as we can start to publish more useful, more relevant, more consistent, more engaging content that starts to get people's attention because I think when you are dull, you're consigning yourself to irrelevance, and you won't earn that attention, so I think that's step one is to really up-skill and then start to get better at telling stories and unlock.

So much of the valuable resource that sits inside government, there are so many good things that government does, but it just does a terrible job at telling stories that people don't accept that that benefit may be, or they don't understand that that benefit's there, so it's invisible to them, and so therefore, the government does any credit because they don't know it's there.

It's a huge challenge, but I think that's the challenge that we're going to try to take on at Content Group to try to improve that ability of government to tell good stories.

Tim Conway: Well, more power to you in that respect. Actually, this is one of the areas and on all of these issues, I have to say, the Foundation does not have the answers. We don't have any of the answers. What we're trying to do is identify the issues and say, "These are issues. They're going to have impact. We need to start researching those issues."

If I can come back to this and think out loud a little bit. One of the things that artificial intelligence will do is that it goes through this podcast, it goes through all the material that can be produced and is produced in the last nanosecond on the Internet, and it can do processing of that. It could through an intelligent agent, advise me, hey, I might be interested in this particular aspect, and so it brings that to me. Part of the problem is there are things that are happening out there, your podcast, there are various other bits and pieces, that people just don't find. You can do what you like to try and get people to find. We actually have to use the technology positively to enable us for that information to be discovered and for us to find it.

David Pembroke: Yes. Look, I think that's massively important. Again, it gets into this point of creepiness of, as you were saying before, "Hang on, the tax office has just sent me a message about my tax return. How did they get there?" Whereas, let's take another example. If I'm a business person and I am researching something around perhaps grants of some sort that I'm a small business and I'm going to maybe an export marketing development grant of some sort. I know as the artificial intelligence engine should be able to say, "OK, we've got information about export marketing development grants. Here is the search and need that we've identified. Why don't we connect them up?"

I'd be probably quite happy to, "Oh, that's good." Now, my front door is being knocked on, and someone's sending me something that I really want. Again, where is that balance between creepy tax guy as opposed to really useful export market development guy? Or girl, I should say.

Tim Conway: That's why the skills of now and the future are not just going to be this technology, engineering, maths; they're going to be around psychology. They're going to be about understanding human behaviour, about crafting and constructing communication in a way that grabs my attention, is non-threatening, elicits a response, those types of things. That's going to be really-

David Pembroke: It sounds like you're saying that you think that you're quite optimistic that this will be able to be done.

Tim Conway: Yes. Absolutely.

David Pembroke: In the near term.

Tim Conway: Yeah, I can see it now. One of the reasons being that ... I subscribe to a few music services, and I notice that they notice what I listen to. They don't just give me what I've listened to before. They give me new music that I might like, and when I listen to it, I do like it. I do like it. The reason is not just-

David Pembroke: It's learning.

Tim Conway: Yeah, it's learning the patterns of whatever, whether it's chord structure, the rhythm, the beat, all those things. It's going, "Tim will like this."

David Pembroke: As I say, infinitely fascinating. I love having these conversations, but we are coming up hard against time, Tim. I'll certainly get you back in the future as we explore more around the work of the Global Digital Foundation because I think the aspiration of the Global Digital Foundation because you know, one of the values of Content Group or the mantra is "dream big dreams," and I think we're fellow travellers there in that space.

I love the idea of being a connector in this space and prodding people and trying to find because all of this work is taking place. There's so much of this good that's happening on, but obviously, what the Global Digital Foundation's trying to do is to stitch some of this together and being able to be a lighthouse of sorts to be able to say, "Hey, if you're interested in this, look over there...Hey, what about if you're interested in that, look over here," and bringing this all together into a useful collaboration of sorts so that we can start to find the solutions to some of these challenges.

Tim Conway: Absolutely. We're in the connection business as much as you. If anybody wants to engage with us, please come to our website,

www.GlobalDigitalFoundation.org. I don't know why we have GDF. It wasn't that old. That's why. But GlobalDigitalFoundation.org is the place to talk to us.

David Pembroke: Excellent. Great. Well, I've got plenty to talk to you about off air as well, but thank you for coming in this afternoon. Thanks for coming in for a chat.

Tim Conway: My pleasure and thank you for inviting me.

David Pembroke: No problem at all. To you, the listener, thank you very much for coming back again this week. A great conversation. I love these conversations that we're having. It's a bit broader than just those narrow areas of government communication because I think these contextual pieces are so important for us to understand because listening to Tim there and what he was saying there about machine learning, artificial intelligence, this is going to become meat and potatoes for us, working in government communications very, very soon. We're going to have to understand how the machines are working and how can we can leverage those benefits because if you can imagine how much better we will get at targeting and understanding and creating value and serving the citizens out there in order that we can strengthen communities and improve the well-being of citizens. It's an exciting time I think for all of us, but yeah, these broader contextual pieces are great.

I would encourage you to actually take up Tim's invitation there and get involved in the Global Digital Foundation because certainly contentgroup will be very much involved in the weeks, months and years ahead.

Thanks again for turning up, and we'll be back at the same time next week. For the moment, it's bye for now.

Speaker 1: You've been listening to InTransition, the programme dedicated to the practise of content communication in the public sector. For more, visit us at contentgroup.com.au