

InTransition Podcast 127 – Osama Bhutta

- 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: Hello ladies and gentleman 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. Today we speak to someone who's got a diverse background in communications, and I know you're going to really enjoy this conversation, because he's someone who draws from so many different experiences, and his job today is to represent the interests of a major international NGO on a daily basis.
- His name is Osama Saeed Bhutta. Osama started his career as an organiser in the Stop The Iraq War, as part of that movement. He was an advisor, but a junior member of the team, that really went about building up that support in the UK for the Stop the War movement. From there, he moved into politics where he worked with the Scottish Nationalist Party in opposition, and learned some great lessons in the way that you communicate effectively from opposition in politics.
- From there, he then went on to work in Al Jazeera, and he joined Al Jazeera at the time of the Arab Spring uprising and he was also involved in the global campaign to release the Al Jazeera journalists who were imprisoned in Egypt, which included the Australian Peter Greste. But today, Osama Saeed Bhutta is the Director of Communications at the International Secretariat for Amnesty International, and he joins me now from London, so Osama, welcome to InTransition.
- Osama Bhutta: Hi there. Thanks for the introduction.
- David Pembroke: Okay, Osama, let's start at the beginning which is probably a pretty good place to start. When was it that you found your interest in communication and you were identified or you yourself identified a skill or a passion that was going to lead you towards the career that you've had?
- Osama Bhutta: I think it was at the post 9/11 period, and your keen listeners will have noted that my name, I'm from a Muslim background. I'm called Osama, which has had its challenges as well in life, but I was at that point, a student, and I was thrust into the limelight. I don't know why, but my number was given to some BBC producers at the time and I ended up coming on television and radio, trying to make sense of the world in that time, post the September 11th attacks, in the lead up to the Iraq War. At the time of the Iraq War, I was a volunteer organiser and press officer for the Stop the War movement, and it was an incredibly vibrant movement.

We literally got millions of people onto the streets in historic scenes, in the UK, and that was replicated around the world as well. But it was a chastening lesson because while we had this kind of euphoria of having built a movement, the likes of which the country had never seen, responded to a massive global challenge. Ultimately we weren't successful, despite everything. That was a chastening lesson in politics, but also in positioning and messaging, and in communications. I was determined to learn more about this area of work and we were up against a formidable opponent at the time, Tony Blair, who was very good at putting his message forward, and ultimately he was more successful than us at the time, but obviously history has shown things to be different.

David Pembroke: So what worked for you at that point in time? What was your actual training or your skills base when you took on that leadership role within the Stop the War movement?

Osama Bhutta: Well, I wasn't a leader. I was one of the press officers. I was one of the young Turicks, but I was in the midst of everything. You were dealing with some of the biggest journalists in the country at the time, and it was self-taught. I mean, none of us were richly experienced. We didn't have an Alistair Campbell amongst us or anything like that, so we were learning. At that time, you were young and enthusiastic, you were watching the news, seeing how the people do it, and I always say that the best experience any young person can get is not learning it. I'm often suspicious of the people who've got public relations degrees and so on, because I don't think you can be taught what we know. As I said, it comes from experience.

David Pembroke: What did you learn in those earliest days about moving people, about gaining their attention and then ultimately moving them from attention to action?

Osama Bhutta: It was different then. At that time, things were far more command and control, so when you looked at the operation of the British government at the time, and the American administration, they were able to put forward a singular argument. Our game plan at the time was try and get as much coverage as possible, try and get our argument across, and this was pre-social media. I think if that was happening now, there would be a completely different tenor because ultimately what we achieved were certain peaks at the time, of major demonstrations on the war.

What you wanted was those big demos to cut through, but in between times, there was very little happening and now we live in a world where people's voices can be heard everyday of the year. That very much has changed.

David Pembroke: In terms of that development from Stop the War around that Iraq War period of time, what did you move onto next? Because I know that, you further down the track, you were involved with Al Jazeera, but post the Iraq War or post your involvement with the Iraq War, where did you take your knowledge and skills then?

Osama Bhutta: My first proper job was with the Scottish National Party, and what that involved, that would be Iraq War work because the SNP, which for those not aware of UK politics, and I'd imagine that many of your listeners aren't, the SNP are the party of Scottish independence, so at that time, they were in opposition, but very much I was attracted by the argument that Scotland as a country was against the war and it was a national sovereignty argument at the time that said that that sensibility should have expression in the will of the country. We shouldn't be dragged into a war against our wishes, which is what happened.

I was attracted to that, I was invited to work for the SNP by Alex Salmond, who later went on to become the First Minister of Scotland, and the figurehead behind the push for the independence referendum in 2014.

David Pembroke: What was your role there? Was it strictly in communications again?

Osama Bhutta: Yeah. It was press, advising and strategy. It's politics so it's a little bit of everything, and we were in opposition at the time, so there was lots of scrapping. It was a great place to learn the trade, because again, we were very much backs to the wall, trying to get as much attention for our arguments as possible, and we were, at that time, largely ignored by the mainstream press. You always had to be innovative and try and stand out in what you were saying. It was a great place to start my career.

David Pembroke: Are there things that you learned there, given that the context of communication and the landscape, and the channels, and the ability to create and distribute content has changed so dramatically, but are there any essential truths that you discovered in this early part of your career that hold true to today?

Osama Bhutta: Yes, but at the same time, I would say my career has developed in different ways as well. I have far more of a differentiated output now. When I began my career, I started off as a press guy, dealing with journalists, creating press copy and trying to get coverage for it. Whereas now, and I think this possibly is common for a lot of the PR industry as well. You're trying to make big vision arguments about who you are and what you believe in, and why anyone should care. So, it's different what I do now compared to how I started off, but I think most people would say that.

David Pembroke: Indeed but I think that point about belief is an interesting one, and how is it that you go about establishing belief in an audience and belief in such a way that it creates action, or commitment of some sort that is going to help you to achieve your particular objectives?

Osama Bhutta: That's the million dollar question. In my current job, Amnesty, we grapple with that a lot, particularly when on our side of politics, I think generally we're bad at really grappling with those types of big ideas. We like to deal with facts and we think that because we have the right arguments, we've researched issues

thoroughly, that that somehow is going to bring people round to our way of thinking. Whereas, the other side of what we believe say at Amnesty, are better at putting compelling values laden arguments forward. A lot of NGOs probably suffer from this, but as an industry, probably we are getting better at grappling with it.

David Pembroke: Why is it that you've lagged, the other side perhaps, if I might express it that way, in being able to build more emotive, more compelling, more effective content to support your argument?

Osama Bhutta: Because we end up feeling that we need to research the heck out of everything, that we've got to be very careful. Take at the moment, what's burning in America with racial divisions, so we're dealing a lot with that through our office in the US as well. The other side make very emotionally laden arguments about what America is, what they believe the history of the country was, and therefore what the future of the country should be. Quite often what I find with colleagues on the anti-racist side is that they're trying to make more compelling arguments about the economy of the country and how it's benefited from migration, and how diverse societies do better and so on.

Guess what? When you're trying to get into people's hearts, that kind of fact based approach, which has historically been the approach of NGOs, is less successful, and at the moment, we are being eaten for breakfast as a movement.

David Pembroke: Do you feel that that's still the case at the moment, that you are ineffectively competing with the other side, and therefore not winning what you would hope to be your share of the hearts and minds of communities around the world?

Osama Bhutta: I think we're getting better at it. When I look across colleagues from across the NGO sector, I'm seeing people who are starting to look far more carefully at how they present arguments and how we win arguments. The last year in particular has been chastening, not just in the US, but we look around the world. You've got the rise of far right authoritarian popular regimes, who've won elections or come close to winning elections across Europe and Turkey, and India, in the Philippines. They profess a complete disregard for human rights and we're getting better at it, but I think it's going to take a year or two before we're really at the races in the same kind of way.

David Pembroke: What about the power of the image? I think the image certainly of the refugee crisis that sticks in my mind is obviously of the child being carried in the arms from the beach, and the impact that that has, and the power of the image to really say everything without anything else needing to be said. How do you treat images such as that, which are so powerful and so compelling?

Osama Bhutta: We've had to move away from that, because I agree with you, the images are compelling, and from a news perspective, say the most famous image of all is

probably that of Alan Kurdi, the three year old boy who was washed up on the beaches of Europe. It grabs people's attentions, but what we have found is that it's also incredibly disempowering because when people see groups, large numbers of refugees, it's actually quite frightening to mend members of the public, and when we're trying to galvanise solutions those images don't represent solutions. They represent the problem.

David Pembroke: Yeah, right.

Osama Bhutta: What we've been doing far more of is showing the pictures of people in action. So, refugees have come to richer countries throughout history. This is nothing new. We celebrate the second world war. The second world war created thousands upon thousands of refugees, and we like to think we rose to the occasion at that time. There's a lot of mythology around that, but sometimes you grab that mythology and run with it, and there are fantastic examples, for example in Canada, where the governments had a scheme where individuals can sponsor refugees to come to Canada. 20,000 refugees have come to Canada for many, many years, per year.

Solutions like that we've been focusing on. The stories of integration, the stories of refugees have gone to countries like the UK, France, and Germany, and the US, made new lives, settled in, contributed to society, and to try and normalise that process is far more useful than solely focusing on the camps, which is often seductive from a news perspective, but isn't necessarily taking the debate or the argument forward.

David Pembroke: Perhaps if we might just take a step back and peer behind the curtain of the role of the Director of Communications at Amnesty International, perhaps just describe for us the role that you play, and the team that you have working for you there, and how you go about your daily work of telling the story of Amnesty International.

Osama Bhutta: So I'm the Director of Communications at the International Secretariat. So, the secretariat is brought about by our 70 or so national offices around the world. We call them sections, so we've got one of our oldest and most successful sections is in Australia. They look to us as their international secretariat to provide them content and campaigns for their to use and market. We also operate in countries where we don't have offices, so places where we're relatively new and there are a lot of them say in South Asia and the Middle East, and in Latin America. The team I oversee includes news and media, digital engagement, video design brand, and publishing.

David Pembroke: How many people would you have working with you at your central team?

Osama Bhutta: So in communications at Amnesty, we've got about 55. Just to complicate things further, the secretariat itself is distributed, so it used to be the secretariat was solely based in London. We now have 10 global hubs across all regions, and they

were established in the last few years, just recognising the multitude nature of the world now. That communications team is distributed across all those offices.

David Pembroke: Is there such a thing as a typical day for you in the way that you go about your task?

Osama Bhutta: Gosh, not really. Every day is different. Sometimes we're on the front foot, we've got an exclusive piece of content that one of our brilliant researchers around the world has got from somewhere where no one else is, say in South Sudan or Yemen or somewhere like that. We're trying to get that out to the public or through the media. Sometimes we're reacting to what's going on, and it's incredibly diverse. There's just things happening around the world all the time, that we're having to be nimble towards.

At the same time, we're very mindful of our overall organisational objectives, so we want to help create change rather than simply highlight problems, which probably it would be fair to accuse of Amnesty having done in the past. We want to grow as a movement, so we're about a seven million strong movement at the moment, about seven million supporters, and we want to grow that to 25 million in the next three or four years.

David Pembroke: How are you going to do that? From a content point of view, and from a communication point of view.

Osama Bhutta: Well, we want to inspire people. That's what I was alluding to a moment ago, that when you solely present problems and the pictures of refugees in camps, or on boats is one of them, then that isn't necessarily the most inspiring thing. We now want to show people doing things, people making really quite seismic changes in their countries, through small ways. It could be writing a letter, it could be organising a protest, it could be lobbying your politicians, but there's brilliant work happening around the world. It usually goes way under the radar.

We exist to help galvanise people that want to see positive change in the world, and as a communications team, our job is to reflect that and show people that no matter how bleak things might seem sometimes, there's always hope and the capacity for humans to make change is infinite.

David Pembroke: In terms of the way that you allocate resources in terms of reacting perhaps or to being strategic and on message and on plan, how do you manage those inherent conflict between those two things?

Osama Bhutta: Sorry, between strategy and the planning?

David Pembroke: Between the strategic elements, so for example, you may have put together a plan and you've looked at say the next quarter or the next month and said, "Look, this looks about like what we've got" but then all of a sudden something

jumps up and you think, "Well" ... I know it's judgement call, but how do you go about making those judgments?

Osama Bhutta: It is difficult. In the past, we probably could be accused of having that kind of reactive element and going with what the flow is. The key to this is how you allocate your resources. So, I would imagine a lot of organisations in a similar mode to ours need to do the same kind of thing, so you've got people whose job it is to react to stuff, and deal with that, and you've got people whose job it is to put that forward plan down. Within our comms team, that probably is delineated by the media team typically doing that kind of PR work, are by nature more reactive and then you've got people who, for example, our creative managers who are developing those longer term campaign ideas, and brand ideas.

David Pembroke: How do you guard against that sense of the house is burning down every day of the week? Because obviously within the network of Amnesty, there are always things that are happening that particularly to local audiences, meaningful, important, but at the same time, from your point of view, looking at it from a more global perspective, perhaps it might not have the resonance and therefore to you, not the importance of a local team as such. How do you balance that particular conflict?

Osama Bhutta: It's probably actually the opposite that we have. The International Secretariat, our national offices are always keen to point out that they're the ones on the ground, having to react to things. So, we're close to them and they are telling us constantly what it is that they need within their markets, and we exist to serve that, but laced within all of that is our foundational principle at Amnesty. If you look at our logo, there's a candle there, and that idea was that it was from our founder, Peter Benenson, that it's better to light a candle than it is to curse the darkness.

That hasn't always been there and that tussle is taking place every day, with the things that we're having to respond to, making sure that we're on top of them and presenting them in a way that does indeed light that candle and give hope to people that things can change.

David Pembroke: How important is that candle, is that essence that you've got, which helps you to make decisions from that frame of reference? It must be absolutely fundamental to your decision-making.

Osama Bhutta: Yes, it is, and change is possible. I mean, we had a fantastic presentation at our international council meeting just a couple of weeks ago from people involved in the marriage equality campaign in the US. That was a brilliant example of ... They showed the transition that the campaign went under over the last 50 years or so from being an argument of old school equality, you could say, that "We demand this, and we want this" to becoming far more nuanced and smart, and embedding itself into people's hearts by presenting it as an argument of family, that these are modern families. These are people who love each other, as units,

and therefore the argument then springs from there should be equality and opportunity for that.

It's not just that people are trying to be smart and present things in different ways. Looking at these issues, whether it's refugee crisis, equality for LGBT communities, all of these things will benefit from a smarter approach to communications. This is what probably going back to the Stop the War discussion at the beginning, we learned from that as well that if it's just a negative argument of, "Stop the war. This is terrible, people are going to die" to something more positive of, "We live in peaceful, secure societies. We want that for other parts of the world" and to be able to present a vision for what say the Middle East or Iraq could be, and how we get there will be far more potent than just shouting in the dark.

David Pembroke: That's an interesting insight, I think, when people come to consider how it is that they frame the particular story that they want to in order to create that engagement and that action that you're looking for. If I might just take you back to an earlier answer that you gave, when we were just discussing the channels, and off the top of your head you said writing letters, staging protests, approaching politicians, these are all offline activities, and these are activities that are happening in the age of multimedia and digital first and mobile and other things. So, are you still a great fan of the offline activity, of that face to face activity, and that it's an absolutely key and fundamental part of the mix of channels that you use to tell the Amnesty story?

Osama Bhutta: Everything has its place. I do feel that particularly in our realm of work, that there is a greater emphasis clearly on digital modes of campaigning. Personally, I'm not convinced that they've been proven to make change yet. I think they're good at galvanising people, they're good at educating people, but that crucial next step of will it make change, from my experience working in the political system, working in a major international newsroom, that stuff doesn't cut through the same way. But it's a great first step, and for Amnesty, it's a great organiser, but then really there needs to be a important of mix of both the online and offline in order to take things to our ultimate objective.

David Pembroke: Yeah, and do you have any evidence for that or that's just your lived experience?

Osama Bhutta: That's constantly evolving. If you'd got different parts of our organisation on this call, you'd probably have a decent debate amongst all of us on this. People would bring their arguments to support all of that, but the important thing is not to take ... I don't think any of my colleagues would take either of those approaches to an extreme. I don't think you'd get anyone saying, "Yes, we need to be totally old school and campaign in the way that Amnesty always had," because clearly everyone sees the need for us to evolve, but if we were a media organisation, we'd be one of the legacy organisations. We've always been offline.

We started offline in the 1960s, so we're trying to change. We're in essence, the Walmart or the CNN of the NGO world, so we're not one of the new upstarts. But we're good at it, and we've got good people at it. We've galvanised a lot of people behind it, but I think we're in a strong position because our brand is such that politicians listen to us. Media, when we put out a statement or a report on something, we get pickup in a way that the newer, more digitally focused organisations simply don't get.

David Pembroke: So, where to from here for Amnesty and for you in terms of your planning for the future? Obviously we're now moving into the next age of voice activation modes of delivery of content, artificial intelligence, big data, smart machines, virtual reality, pick your favourite topic. As you sit there at the centre of Amnesty International Secretariat, how do you feel, first of all? As in, are you overwhelmed or are you positive? But then, once you've dealt with that emotion, what are your plans to continue to press on as this world continues to change almost by the day in terms of the capability available to us?

Osama Bhutta: Look, I love all that, and I encourage the team at Amnesty to explore all those things that you mentioned, if they're going to take us forward. But if I'm brutally honest, at the moment the main thing I'm concentrated on is getting our story right. Because we're not quite there. If you were to ask the typical human rights advocate somewhere in the world to make a case for what they believe, there is still a tendency to start reciting from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as if everybody around the world buys into it and understands it, and viscerally and emotionally is connected to it, and they're not.

We've got to get into a situation where we're better able to articulate what human rights are, what the benefits of them are, and why people, no matter where they are in the world, should care about them and cherish them and advance them. The main journey we're on right now is getting that argument right and getting that story right, and then the way that we tell it will follow on from there.

David Pembroke: Yeah. I think that's great advice, I think to anybody, is that if you can sharpen the spear or the tip of the spear, to make sure that the story that you want to tell, finding the aspiration, finding the language, finding the emotion of what it is that you're trying to move people with is going to be just as effective, because a bad story told through multiple channels is-

Osama Bhutta: Exactly.

David Pembroke: ... not going to resonate with anybody. Some good advice there. Osama, mate, thank you very much for coming onto InTransition. A lot of great advice there I think for people as they consider just exactly how they are going to go about telling their story and working with their teams to go out and there and make an impression and make a difference as we tell those stories to engage communities and indeed, improve the lives of citizens all around the world. So, thank you very much to you and to the audience, thank you very much for

joining us once again, and we will be back at the same time again next week. So for the moment, it's bye for now.

Speaker 1:

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