
InTransition 129: Annea Gregory

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practice of content communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke, and thank you very much for joining me again this week.

A podcast with a difference this week, as we come to you from the first ASEAN public relations conference, held in association with the Global Alliance, here in Bali, Indonesia. I've been here for the last three days. Started off by presenting the research that we've been doing with the Australian National University around the evidence-based content communication method, and more about that in just a moment. But then the last two days, spending time with the Global Alliance, and representatives from all around the world, but also representatives of the ASEAN countries, here to discuss ASEAN, but also to discuss the practice of public relations. Not only just inside the ASEAN counties, but presenting and positioning ASEAN in the global context, at a time of massive change and disruption as we know within communications.

But joining me is perhaps the star of the show, professor Anne Gregory, who has had more photos, more certificates, and more presentations, but really had a major impact here. She was first involved in setting up the academic side, and the presentation around the conference, and made a wonderful contribution around encouraging scholarship in public relations here in the ASEAN community. But then another few presentations over the last couple of days, and she joins me now. So Anne, from the bowels of the Trans Hotel here in Bali, thanks very much for joining me InTransition.

Anne Gregory: Well it's wonderful to be here with you David, and what an amazing place, and just talking about hotels and Bali, they do it right, don't they?

David Pembroke: Isn't it a great place?

Anne Gregory: It is, yes.

David Pembroke: It's a wonderful place, and wonderful people, so generous, so warm. I think probably the thing I took out of this, particularly for someone like you who has been around the business for a long time, such a thirst for knowledge and information, they really want to understand how to become better at this communications business.

Anne Gregory: They do. And thank you for bigging me up and saying I was the star here, I don't think so David, because for me, the stars of this have been the people here.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Anne Gregory: Can I just tell a little story about that?

David Pembroke: Yeah indeed, that's what we're here for.

Anne Gregory: Because we've seen some wonderful Balinese dancing, haven't we?

David Pembroke: Yes.

Anne Gregory: Last night we were treated to a Gala dinner, and we saw the amazing Balinese dance. I noticed about the headdress.

David Pembroke: Oh yeah?

Anne Gregory: The Balinese headdress, and certainly in Indonesia, if you see images of senior figures, they have exaggerated peaks around the ear, and that is because, and the responsibility of the Indonesian King, is to listen to the people. That's actually part now of the official headdress of a lot of people in Indonesia. I think what I've learned is listening is so important, in contexts like this, and I've learned so much while I've been here. For me, just that illustration that if we're going to be good communicators, two ears, one mouth. That listening part is a lesson that I've taken away from this.

David Pembroke: Yeah that's interesting, because it was mentioned today, wasn't it? That western communication is about our message, our communication, getting it out, that priority about getting that there. But that contrast was brought up, around the listening. But why is listening so important? You say two ears, one mouth, but why does it make such a difference to effective communication?

Anne Gregory: I think great temptation, particularly for us in the west, is that we think it's important for us to get our point of view over. But actually you can't do that unless you stand in the shoes of the other person, you're just talking at them rather than with them. For me, the listening piece is about understanding context in which you are, and understanding the audience that you're talking with. Listening is not only about understanding them so that you can persuade them even more, it's about actually you changing as well. So it's a dialogue, a genuine dialogue, begins with listening, not speaking.

David Pembroke: Okay. So listen, let's just go back through the couple of days of the conference, cause it has been such a wonderfully enjoyable experience.

Anne Gregory: Agreed.

David Pembroke: It started with the academic side of things, you were sort of the leader of that, with Greg Halff from the Singapore Management University. What were your impressions of the levels of scholarship, and the levels of understanding? And what would you like to see, perhaps, encouraged in this part of the world?

Anne Gregory: Okay, well let's start with that last question.

David Pembroke: Okay.

Anne Gregory: In the academic field, most of the literature, I've got to be technical here a little bit, is western. It's about western philosophy, it's about western theories of thinking, and unfortunately there isn't much scholarship that's come from Asia. Part of that is a language thing, because most of the scholarship and published books are in English, and so there's an immediate challenge there for our Asian colleagues, that if they're going to write academically, they have to do it in English normally. Because all the ranked journals are in English. Certainly, one of the great motivations for me around this, was to begin to hear those ASEAN voices, and they're great voices. I was just struck by the breadth of topics that we were covering, from the use of Islamic and Jihadist language in the western media, to things like defense of migrant communities living overseas, Indonesians living overseas, to some more standard things that we would recognise, like innovations in social media, but particularly applied to the ASEAN context. For me, that diversity is something that I'm not used to. I'm not exposed to that, because the academic conferences that I go to are all western, the big names are western names, and that has got to stop, David.

David Pembroke: Yeah but how do you get them up to the standards? How do you improve and encourage so as that the quality improves? So as that those voices can be heard in those bigger conferences and in those bigger journals?

Anne Gregory: I think we've got to work with those scholars. So, platforms like they've had this week are really good, so they can get used, if you like, to the way that those academic journals ... what their standards are, what their requirements are. So, they can get used to writing, and practice, as we know, makes perfect. I think we need to buddy up with them, so western

scholars, it's partly our responsibility to make sure that the literature is rich and diverse, so we could buddy up with them. But also, and this is happening more and more David, some of the journal editors themselves, I'm talking about Journal of Communication Management, who offered a platform to these scholars. And what will happen there is that their papers go in for review, and I know that the editor, Jesper Falkheimer from Sweden, will choose reviewers who are sympathetic, who will work with those scholars to get those papers up to a publishable standard. And a lot of this is about confidence I think, David.

Once they get the hang of this, and once they know that what they've got is something that we need to read, and to learn from them, then I think we will start a sort of virtuous cycle. Where they'll have the confidence to put things in, where they'll have the confidence to push back if this sort of western orientation of thinking comes their way, say, "Hang on a minute, we've got a point of view just as valuable as yours, and it might be from Confucian philosophy but that's quite as legitimate as Wittgenstein or anybody else, you know. We've got a right to have our place in the world." And I think that will be great.

David Pembroke: But, what about the challenges of establishing that? Because yes, it's great to say, "Buddy up and help," but where's the infrastructure beyond good intention and the hard work of people such as yourself who are prepared to give your time? But is there a better way to be able to develop this particular part of academia?

Anne Gregory: I think there are a number of things we can do. There are some universities in Asia, as we're hearing today, they're really high standing. So academia should do the right thing by those institutions, and we can twin, do institutional twinning. So there's an infrastructure under that, so the research resources that underpins a scholar like me, from the west, I get all sorts of research training, and that we can offer that to the Asian community. But, as I say, the danger with this sort of thing is those western ways of thinking that then are imported, and I want these scholars to be able to have the confidence to say, "We've got our way as well." So we'll take what's appropriate from ours, and if there's an infrastructure there, providing them scholarships to go to conferences and these sorts of things, and budding, twinning universities up, much broader agreements. Then, you know, we just need to put the spark under them. You heard some of those papers, David-

Anne Gregory: ... you know they're fantastic. They're new, they're fresh, they're untainted, some of those young scholars, 21 years old, and they're generating really good stuff. All they need is some facilitation, they could do it for themselves. They've got the incentive, they've got the energy, they've got the brains, they've got everything apart from opportunity, and facilitation. If we can do that, they'll fly.

David Pembroke: The thing that struck me was the perspective, and so often in some of the presentations I was like, "Oh, okay, I wasn't looking at it from that point of view." There was some wonderful insights into some of the research.

Anne Gregory: Yep, that's right. Things like the importance of face-to-face communication. This is absolutely an IT-savvy society we're here in, you know, more IT-savvy than we are. But when it comes to things like this, the face-to-face, when we're talking about get down and dirty on the business, face-to-face is so important there. This ability to actually, they've got a tremendous ability to empathise with people. They've got tremendous emotional intelligence, so that's something that we need to take on board. Recognise that, it's incumbent on us, we've got the cash, to get out here and start working with these people. And we will be enriched.

David Pembroke: Indeed. Some of the cultural stuff is ... Well I suppose it's a cross between amusing, at a certain level, but also so endearing, when you see the numbers of photos that are taken, and the numbers of presentations. Someone such as yourself, in this conference, I laughingly before this referred to you as the Ronaldo of this particular conference, because everyone wanted to talk to you, everyone wanted to speak to you. But those cultural differences are great, aren't they? In that it's such a different thing, that there is this recognition and respect of authority, and seniority, and leadership. But then also, the use of technology, the fact that everyone's got a smartphone, everyone's using their smartphone, everyone's taking photos. It's just a different way, it's a different place, isn't it?

Anne Gregory: Yes, and we heard why today. Part of that reason is because they don't have a media system like we do, so other opportunities for publishing are limited for them, so they do it for themselves. This is what I mean about, you know, give them the opportunity, they'll grab it. They're quite capable of saying, "Right, we're going to take this forward." Good on them.

David Pembroke: You can see it's the powerhouse, it's going to grow, the economic growth is going to be here, and I think it's a very smart thing that the Global Alliance,

as part of that, are here, really seeding your contributions now, because it's going to take off like a rocket.

Anne Gregory: Well, it's not just about that David either, it's about recognising reality, I think. The fact is, the west, as world economic forum says, power is shifting from the west to the east, from the north to the south. The reality is, that these are the ascendant nations. You know, good old whiteys like me, living in the west, have got a big wake-up call coming. Because they're going to start teaching us, and so I regard it as a great privilege to be actually here, when this is happening now. I'm really thirsty to know how they're going to take things forward, because they will.

David Pembroke: So away from the scholarship side of it, what were some of the other things? What were some of the other highlights for you, of the last couple of days, of different presentations from the different ASEAN countries, and the different people who were involved?

Anne Gregory: I think one of the things that struck me is that there is quite a deep understanding, at high levels, about the contribution of communication. We heard a presentation this morning, you know, CEO of one of the largest companies here in Indonesia, and he knows what communication is about. It was quite interesting, some of the explanation of that is because our profession has been regarded really as a delivery system, in a lot of companies, and actually the knowledge about communication, what communication can do, resides in the C-Suite. Exactly reversed from us, we keep knocking on the C-Suite door and saying, "Do you know what communication can do for you?" So that was new for me, the fact that there is a profound understanding at that level, and that public relations, the profession here, has to catch up with the demands of the board. That's exactly the ... You and I would say, you know, we need to educate boards.

David Pembroke: Yes indeed.

Anne Gregory: So that was a highlight for me, profound understanding of that.

David Pembroke: I was massively impressed by the minister's speech yesterday, the minister for communications, who came and said, "This is important, we are supportive of this." There's no doubt that the Indonesian government, and ASEAN, have both supported this conference, because they understand, perhaps better, as you say, than leadership in the west, that communication can be a fundamental driver of value to organisations, and benefit to community.

Anne Gregory: And an interesting point for me was, how many of these really senior people had actually changed their diary so that they could be here.

David Pembroke: Yesterday was a public holiday, and they all turned up.

Anne Gregory: Absolutely, and the CEO this morning was in bed yesterday, ill, and he was still quite poorly today, but he was determined to come, even though he couldn't speak yesterday, he was determined to come here.

So this is about ... They understand what communication is about. They know that actually, organisations exist, they are communicative things, you know, they are entities which are bound together. The glue is communication, what makes them work is communication. You can take money away, you know, we know you can take buildings away, Uber and all the rest of it make ... If you take communication away, the organisation doesn't exist, and they know that. It's there. And we've got some catching up to do, I think, with educating our own CEOs that still are in the old school, of think ... Too many still think that we're still the messenger boy at the end of the process.

David Pembroke: Yeah, and interestingly though, isn't it, that at the point of economic growth, 5.5% here in Indonesia, across ASEAN very powerful, so the growth is going to be there. But what sort of impact do you also think transformation driven by technology is going to have in this part of the world? Given that 263 million people here all have access to devices, all have access to be able to create, curate, distribute content. What sort of impacts do you think that that is going to have on the way that the, not only the profession, but perhaps the practice of communication is going to develop in this part of the world?

Anne Gregory: I don't think any of us know, profoundly. Because as we know, technology develops every day, and so there'll be many twists and turns along the way. But, again, as we were hearing today, the fact that this is a youthful part of the world, there's a lot of young people living here.

David Pembroke: What was that, 172 million people in Indonesia under the age of 30? That was the statistic that was given to us about half an hour ago.

Anne Gregory: Yeah, so you combine that with IT-savviness, and you think what a powerful combination that is going to be, and it goes back to what I was saying before. These young people get that actually life is about communication, and therefore, the opportunities I think for organisations to harness that

understanding here, and the number of people involved in that understanding already I think is going to be quite transformational. Again, this, for me, is an indicator of why, in the west, we're going to be left behind. Because old fogeys like me, who aren't digitally savvy, are going to be behind the curve of these young people.

David Pembroke: But I suppose the flip side of that is, there is the opportunity for us to go together, really, and I think there was again that African proverb was used by a few people, if you want to go fast, go by yourself, if you want to go further, go together, whatever it is. But to me it represents just a wonderful opportunity, and I know, God, how lucky is Australia, that we are on the doorstep of this opportunity? This is here, and I know that Australians need more encouragement to get here, to integrate ourselves into this part of the world.

Because the thing that I've taken out of the last couple of days is not only the courteousness of the people, but the welcoming, and this thirst for, "come and talk to us." Like just as we were going through the final goodbye session upstairs, as the songs were being sung, and everyone was taking photos, and all the rest of it, that three academics came up to me and said, "Okay, let's get involved, let's work together, we really want you to come back. When are you coming back?" So, it is such a great opportunity, isn't it? That welcoming attitude, it fills me with such great enthusiasm.

Anne Gregory: Yeah, absolutely. I think it goes back to what we were saying before about, this is a nation on the move, and they're not afraid of change. Innovation is almost part of their DNA, and it's not about conserving, it's about moving forward. That's the mindset here, and isn't that energising?

David Pembroke: Yeah, I think so.

Anne Gregory: I think, if you get a combination of that energy, and that desire to move forward, combined with, and maybe this is where our contribution can be, sort of worldly wisdom that comes with having been round the block once or twice.

David Pembroke: Sure, and I think you also made a good point in some of the presentations the other day, that everything that's old is new again. The principles of good communication are the principles of good communication, whether you've got a smartphone, or nothing, or smoke signals, it is the same. I think that's where the benefit and opportunity is, to bring those frameworks, those well-known, trusted methods, into this environment, and just to see what might

happen from there. The innovation that might fly out of here is going to be stunning.

Anne Gregory: Yes, I think there are one or two constraints that were indicated today, which are different. There isn't a media system, a developed media system. Government is all-important.

David Pembroke: All-powerful, yes.

Anne Gregory: And they set the framework for the innovation, don't forget, you know, sometimes we think government is a constraining force, but it's also, government is there and ever-present.

David Pembroke: Indeed.

Anne Gregory: There's no doubt about that.

David Pembroke: I did take some encouragement from a couple of the last presentations, where people were poking at the government.

Anne Gregory: Oh yeah, don't think the ... But what I mean here is there's a real purpose here. So if you take countries like Singapore and Indonesia, the government plan is known. The government plan is known by the people.

Government is stable. It's not like our governments where, you know, from one week to the next you're not quite sure what they're going to do. But there is a plan that people know about, and the sense of togetherness, and building a nation together ... This is where the culture comes in, they are warm, they are friendly, it's face-to-face communication as well as IT. And yes, there are process models that we can bring in to help them and guide their thinking, et cetera, et cetera. But the overall ... That vision of the nation that we are building together, is really helpful to them.

David Pembroke: Oh massively.

Anne Gregory: There's a real sense of direction, you know.

David Pembroke: Yes, indeed.

Anne Gregory: So it isn't activity for activity's sake, it's activity with a purpose, and I think that that's quite different.

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- David Pembroke: Again, one of the statistics quoted was that the OECD report said that Indonesia has the highest levels of trust of any government in the world. What would you put that down to?
- Anne Gregory: Well, it's interesting because the Edelman Trust Barometer also says that China has the highest level of trust. Now, what do you mean by trust? I think is a legitimate challenge to that, because they have no choice. So it's interesting, but I think it is about this sense of purpose. We understand what the government is trying to do here, we can be a part of that, and we know what's really liberating and empowering for people if people think they can contribute. It goes back to the old quote, doesn't it, by the guy sweeping the car park at NASA. When somebody asked him, "What do you do then?" And he replied, "I helped put a man on the moon." You know, everybody plays their part, and there's a real sense of country identity here. I think that's really exciting and energising.
- David Pembroke: But it's interesting, isn't it, that policy, cause Widodo, Joko Widodo, he is a communicator, and he is known for his communication, and also the collaboration between business and politics. The gentleman who spoke this morning, Mr. 4.9 billion, you know, the sixth richest man in Indonesia, was a minister in Yudhoyono's second government. So, there is that sense, isn't there, of oneness about what they're trying to do here, and I think communications is really going to drive them very quickly to the place where they want to get to.
- Anne Gregory: Yes, and some people would say that maybe that's a bit too cosy. Actually sometimes a gap between the two is quite healthy, because the one challenges the other, and actually get more innovation when there's slight tension there, and a slight distance there. But yes, there is a sense of common purpose, I would agree with you. Also there's a sense ... You remember Dan Tisch was saying about part of our job as communicators is to get this idea of purpose and character. What are we here to do, and how are we going to do it? That was some of the stuff that came from the Melbourne mandate GA [Global Alliance] came up with. Fortunately I was part of developing that. It seems to me that there is that sense of, "We're here, we know where we're going, we know how we're going to do it. And do you know what? We can do it our way, we can maintain that culture."
- There's been an interesting discussion, I think, around, is there an ASEAN way? And some commentators, people here, were saying, "Well what have we got to learn from the EU?" And I would say, nothing, apart from how not to make mistakes. Again, it comes back to this confidence-

David Pembroke: I think it's confidence, I definitely think there's a real confidence, yeah.

Anne Gregory: But you sort of think about how young these democracies are. There is something about, you know, when you get long in the tooth, you do have a confidence that comes just because you've been around a long time, you know. So I think there is a sense of purpose, and a sense of, "Let's do it our way." I do worry sometimes that culturally they're going to lose some of that identify, because one of the challenges of globalisation is it becomes a bit amorphous, and I do hope that they really hang onto that.

David Pembroke: Yeah. I did notice actually, through the three days where there was all sorts of performances and everything else that the influence is western culture, you know, singing songs of Adele, rather than giving us songs from Indonesian-

Anne Gregory: Yeah you go down the street and it's, you know, Wendy's and McDonald's-

David Pembroke: Wendy's and McDonald's, yes.

Anne Gregory: ... and who's in there? It's the Indonesians, you know, yeah.

David Pembroke: Listen, before I let you go, and I know you're busy, there's another photo to be taken somewhere I'm sure in this building, but pulling you up sort of to the 20,000-foot level, looking down on the public relations practice globally, what are you seeing? What are the big challenges? What are the hopes? What are the opportunities? But what are the challenges as well? Big question, and you've got to answer it under five minutes time, cause I know you've got busy.

Anne Gregory: Right, yeah, it is a big question. Challenges for the public relations profession. I think they're the ones that have been there from the beginning, and Professor Gregor Halff was saying some of those, you know, we come back to, "What is our strategic role?" All the time. Certainly in the west, we come back to that question, and I just had the embryos of some thinking today, which I think, we're at a transformational moment, we clearly are, and you're in the content develop business.

David Pembroke: Indeed.

Anne Gregory: We know that the way content is being put together is changing, and access to all, et cetera, et cetera. But I think that it's not just about us knocking on the door of the CEO and saying, "Look what communication can do for your organisation." I think what's happened, the transformational shift for me is

that it is not so much that the core of our profession needs to change, or is changing. The way we do things might change, but actually organisations have fundamentally changed, and there's a dawning realisation, going back to what I was saying earlier, that is that everything is about communication. You are what you communicate. You are defined by how you communicate, how you do things, what others say about you, and I think, at long last, that penny is dropping.

Now that puts us centre stage, so organisations are changing, we are being called on to go centre stage. So we then come back to the questions of ourselves, which is, "What is the purpose of our profession? What are we here to do?"

David Pembroke: And are we ready? Are we ready for the opportunity?

Anne Gregory: And are we capable of delivering that? You know because this is one huge job, and I think one of the big things about, and the challenges for us as a profession, which makes us different say from ... You know, if you are an accountant, you look after the finances, you see the organisation as a bundle of resources, and you know, you know what your role is. If you're a HR person, similar with our job that is helicopter view, seeing the context, seeing the organisation and pulling that all together. I can't think of a bigger job within an organisation. To be responsible for its reputation, its positioning, how it talks to itself, how it talks to others, how it listens to others, how it actually positions itself within those networks, and in those conversations. For me, that's the biggest and most exciting job there is.

David Pembroke: I wish I was 20 years younger.

Anne Gregory: Exactly.

David Pembroke: That's what I always think. Every time I come to work, every day I go, "Oh, I just wish I was about 20 years younger."

Anne Gregory: Yeah yeah. Absolutely.

David Pembroke: Anyway. Anne, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today, and thanks for your contribution, not only to this conference but your contribution to the practice, and to the community, and your leadership, over many many years. You have published books, and articles, and led a lot of the big thinking that I think is just about to mature into this space now,

and I think a lot of what you've done has set us up for this great opportunity. So, on behalf of everyone listening, thanks to you.

And to you, the listener, thanks very much for joining us here at the Trans Hotel in Bali, it's been a great conference, and Anne, final words?

Anne Gregory: Yeah. I know you work a lot with government.

David Pembroke: Yes.

Anne Gregory: I do too, and I think there is so much for us, who are in that government space as well, working with government, to do in communications. Because that sets the context for everything really within a country.

David Pembroke: Exactly.

Anne Gregory: So thank you David, and to your team for the work that you're doing, and I know that there are great things ahead for government communications. Which is changing quite as much as that private sector sphere as well.

David Pembroke: Yeah indeed.

Anne Gregory: So thank you for your contribution.

David Pembroke: No Anne, thank you very much. And it is, it's an exciting time for all of us in this space. I think, as we grow this global community, as we work to improve the way that we do things, the way that we can improve the way governments communicate, hopefully we can improve, strengthen communities, and improve the well-being of the citizens who we serve, really, in the work that we do.

So, yes, back to you. Thank you very much listener, grateful for you to tune in once again this week, a lot of fun, really enjoyed Bali. Petra Masinova from contentgroup has been with me here all week, so we've had a great time, met lots of people, and there's a lot to come, I think, particularly in this part of the world. Stay tuned. So, for the moment, it's bye for now.