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## InTransition 134: Libby Varcoe

Intro: Welcome to InTransition; a program dedicated to the practice of content communication in the public sector. Here's your host, David Pembroke.

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 is David Pembroke and thanks for joining me.

Today we speak to Libby Varcoe, who is the Content Community Lead for the Digital Transformation Agency here in Canberra, Australia, but with responsibility for government transformation, not only at the federal government, but certainly influential with state governments as well.

But we'll come to that discussion just about that role that she has at the moment but just as a bit of background, Libby, as I found out in an earlier discussion, has been in this business for pretty much as long as I have, which is around the 20 year mark, where she has been involved in copy and content role, and she has run, most notably, her content agency, which was called Write-Minded, from 2002 through unto 2015 and what a stellar list of clients, from the Digital Transformation Office, The Australian Museum, The National Museum, AMP, MBF, St George, Arts NSW, Qantas, The Art Gallery of New South Wales, so a very, very experienced content communication professional and with a very, very big job.

And she joins me now in the studio. Libby Varcoe, thanks very much for joining me InTransition.

Libby Varcoe: Thanks David, it's lovely to be here.

David Pembroke: Let's go back to 1997, because I thought that was a great story, you were saying you were working in a café when someone said "Libby, let's get into the content game."

Libby Varcoe: Yeah, the 'c' word came up and we'd never heard of it before, of course. I think I might have even still been at university, I studied communications at the University of Technology in Sydney, and had finished my degree, was waiting as all good comms graduates do, and basically I was working with a friend and he was actually working as an editor and he said "look, I think we need to break into this content world."

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David Pembroke: Yeah. It's funny isn't it because I remember back in those very earliest days, I would go around and I would have my card called 'The Content Group' and you'd give it to people and they'd look at it and go "oh that's nice. The Content<sup>1</sup> Group."

Libby Varcoe: I had the same experience David, yes. I certainly was content with content but yeah, it was an interesting start.

David Pembroke: But what about your journey through content? So it's been based really around those journalistic skills that you acquired through journalism and storytelling?

Libby Varcoe: Yeah absolutely, and I did go on to actually do a degree in professional writing majoring in screen, so that storytelling aspect has always really interested me. I think my journalistic skills really have been probably the most useful, I think, out of all of my different skills, but I think it was just a nice coming together. And then a lot of learning along the way, lots and lots of learning, which continues right now.

David Pembroke: In those earliest days, what did you find were the most common requests that people were asking for in terms of content, and what problems were they seeking to solve?

Libby Varcoe: I'm pretty sure they're the same ones as I still hear now, which is, "what do I do with this? We're either producing way too much of it and we've lost control, or we don't really know where to start. We tried this, we tried that."

I feel like in many ways, I've been having the same conversation for 20 years. But I do feel like we're at a very lovely tipping point now with it in many ways as well.

David Pembroke: Yeah, I tend to agree with you. Because I think people now understand this great gift of the democratisation of the factors of media production and distribution mean that they can go direct, that they can build audiences, that they can have conversations, create experiences through content. And, really, help them to solve whatever particular business problem it might be, whether it's in the public sector or the private sector.

Libby Varcoe: Absolutely agree.

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<sup>1</sup> As in content, like a state of satisfaction

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David Pembroke: But what about the skills? So now in this, you have a very, very big job and a very big responsibility in terms of the Digital Transformation Agency. So perhaps maybe one step back to describe what it is the Digital Transformation Agency is trying to do at a macro level, and then we'll dive into this sort of content challenge that you've got.

Libby Varcoe: Well I guess our main focus now, and in fact my title has recently changed to Content Capability Lead, is around capability and this is something that we are really keen to focus on and I think it speaks to the fact that we know that content doesn't just sit necessarily with the content team, it often sits with the policy, the business areas, the line managers. It's not a siloed product, if you like, so for us it's actually about how do we (a) work with our communities, so we actually are looking at those who do have a content skillset, particularly who are working in government teams and (b) we know there are many very strong people on the front lines, doing this day in, day out, but how do we actually also expand that awareness, I suppose, and the understanding of the value and the strategic advantage of actually having great content, beyond just those who know it already.

David Pembroke: But I think increasingly, and this is our experience, is that those central comms areas are going to get smaller and the responsibility for content is going to be, as you identified before, distributed to the edges: into these program areas, into the policy areas and so that's where, really, that capability challenge is going to come isn't it.

Libby Varcoe: Yeah, absolutely, and I don't think that's necessarily new, I think decentralised publishing models and I know that both the private sector as well, from my experience, and government have experimented "well, which works best for us."

But one thing I sometimes hear when I'm out and about is "well, in my other job this kind of separateness of content is not actually part of my role" and it's like, "well actually if you pretty much have a computer and you come to work there's a fairly high chance that at some point there will be a touch point with content." It might just be that you answer the phones and you understand what users, what people, are actually calling up and repeatedly asking that needs to be fed back to the content team to address it online.

So it's that kind of, I guess, lifting onto the balcony of this as a discipline and actually really deconstructing it and getting that word, and kind of an understanding, out there is part of our vision.

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David Pembroke: How mature do you see the Australian government is in accepting that that is a challenge and an opportunity really, to become more effective at explaining their policies and programs, regulations, services, to citizens?

Libby Varcoe: Look I think there's some really great comms teams in government who are very, very good at it, but that skill might only be with them. So I think that kind of extension of that skill, and also understanding the interplay between those teams. So how does comms relate to the web team? How does web relate to policy? At the DTA a lot of the work, or the way that we've actually structured ourselves, is trying to really break down the silos. For example, we work in multi-disciplinary teams, so we actually bring the right people who might be from quite disparate areas, typically, traditionally, sitting next to each other. For example, to pair write something together, a content person and a policy expert or a tax agent or whatever the specialty is. Trying to get us to work side by side as opposed to these being seen as a very separate, almost like baton-like approach, where things get passed on to each other with very little conversation or understanding of each other's needs around that bit of content.

David Pembroke: That's a sort of modern balance matrix sort of approach to it, but do you find that that's difficult in government agencies, more traditional government agencies? Who are "This is what I do and this is my job and this is who I work for and therefore that's what I'm going to do", as opposed to looking over the fence and thinking, "Well hang on, maybe I need some help in other areas"?

Libby Varcoe: Yeah, look I think this is a time of change, I suppose, in that way, and we understand the way that we recommend that this be done does make some people feel a bit uncomfortable and others incredibly keen. We run meet up events and are trying to really work with our content community. We have a community of practice of around 500 content practitioners now connected to each other, talking, sharing, whatever. Troubleshooting, solving issues together, which I don't think has ever been done before actually and our role as the DTA is to create a comfortable space and conversation and dialogue around this to really try and get ... it's not just the DTA saying that this needs to be the way, it's industry talking to the ATO about it. Really kind of breaking it down so it becomes a whole of government conversation, not just us.

David Pembroke: Yeah, sure. And in those conversations, those 500, is that government at a local, state and federal level? It's not just federal government?

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Libby Varcoe: We opened it up, it's a mixed bag. So it's every level of government is represented from all over the country.

David Pembroke: And if you were to sort of say "And the biggest problem that they've got is..."

Libby Varcoe: I have to think about that one. Very careful here.

David Pembroke: Is there a common set of challenges that perhaps you often find, "oh hang on, we're back at creation", or distribution or evaluation ...

Libby Varcoe: Yeah. Last year we commissioned a piece of research with ThinkPlace, I'm not sure if you've heard about that?

David Pembroke: I do, I know ThinkPlace.

Libby Varcoe: And it was looking at basically the content lifecycle from birth to death because we recognised, we know anyone who has worked in content knows you could have the best bit of content in the world, but there will be potentially problem points along the way. For example, if the intent of a piece of content isn't communicated up the line early on, there's a high chance that that content will be changed, shot down, modified, unrecognisable, because there's just been a lack of communication and understand around its purpose. Things like analytics not being shared, that business intelligence kind of communicated across the organisation, missed opportunities.

So, this piece of content ... Sorry, research was very important to us because it pointed out, gave us some evidence around what we felt was some of the pain points, and that's something we've been able to share back to government and actually also continue our work and investigation around that as well.

David Pembroke: So, where are you on your journey at the moment? What's the next sort of 12 months look like for the DTA in the content space?

Libby Varcoe: Good question. It's going to be a big 12 months I think. We've certainly got a number of different content based products, strategies underway at the moment. A key part of our work is the digital service standards, so we are looking at providing support content around that as well. I think generally speaking, as I mentioned, our main focus is about enabling. So we have our own work in house, a lot of that role is guidance, and then there's this extension of that is we're taking that into the world, into government, into

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where it needs to actually be and working with our communities, testing things, kicking the tyres, making sure that we're actually on the right track.

David Pembroke: So, with that capability, is there an education element to it as well? Like a formal training around certain content skills?

Libby Varcoe: We're certainly working that out at the moment, how we as a fairly small agency could deliver that on scale, but it's certainly something we're super keen to explore further.

David Pembroke: In terms of content, and the management around content strategy and the development of content strategies and the task of information management, content hygiene, etc. Does that responsibility lie with the DTA or does that still reside with the National Archives around records management and information management and the various standards that they've got.

Libby Varcoe: Yeah, we're working with them at the moment actually as part of the strategy work, to really unpack this because we know there is a lot of confusion around it. The ThinkPlace research pointed out very clearly that we aren't archiving enough, we leave content up - when I say 'we' I mean the whole of government - because we're either unsure, or we think "just in case" so there's kind of a ... We know also there are around 44 million '.gov.au' webpages floating out there so this is big area, and certainly this is something that we see really does disrupt the user experience. I mean, in any one day, as we all know, if you try to google something and it's really ... The KPMG report that we speak about talked about half of us will fail any day, just trying to go through, access, complete an online service. And a lot of it has to do with the fact that there is just too much there.

David Pembroke: But there is also, I certainly get the feeling going about the place, that there is a real enthusiasm for change. People wanna do a good job, and they wanna make sure that their content is better, and they wanna make sure that the platforms that they publish their content on is better as well so there's sort of, I dunno. I feel like there's a real optimism around the space at the moment that people are understanding that they can be media companies, on behalf of their policy or their program and regulation, and that they're really taking on the challenge of getting better at it.

Libby Varcoe: Yeah, I think there's a lovely awareness. It's so lovely when I go to a conference or you hear a CEO's speech and the word 'content' is actually mentioned. This is big stuff. This is something we've been waiting for, for

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quite a long time, people like yourself and myself. But I think you're totally right, I think there's a great sense of optimism and yep, a sense of "We can do this, we can actually, we can get on top of this, we know what we're doing," and we're really excited by that.

David Pembroke: It's interesting isn't it because if we take it up at a higher level, and looking at ... Well what are we actually talking about here, because what we are talking about is really strengthening communities and improving the well-being of citizens by better explaining or informing them about what it is that government is doing. And that really is a fundamental underpinning to our democratic system.

Libby Varcoe: Absolutely, and we know that people don't typically go to government websites because they want to. It's because they have to, or they need to, we're telling them to. So that really frames our thinking in many ways.

David Pembroke: That also, at the same time, doesn't mean that that experience need be anything other than a joy, that when people do come to a government, why not make it the best possible experience you can? Because that's what you're there to do, if you're a public servant you're there in service of the public.

Libby Varcoe: And I think for us it's, in many ways, about efficiency is actually a joy. If you can just get in and get out and or find that bit of information that you need and move on, that's the joy. For us it's really about making sure that it's an efficient process in the same way that if you went to a banking website it would be equally as efficient.

David Pembroke: Do you see then that there is less value in trying then for government organisations to create community online, and to create value and it should be transactional? Or should the aspiration be perhaps, a little bit higher than just purely transaction?

Libby Varcoe: I think it's contextual, I think that it really depends actually. It depends.

David Pembroke: So, from your point of view, just give us a bit of a guide then around your team at the moment. Who do you have in your team, and what sort of jobs do they do on a daily basis in trying to carry out what is, I've got to say, a pretty, you know, it's a fairly big remit that you've got isn't it?

Libby Varcoe: It's big remit, yeah. We're very lucky. So we have our disciplines, I suppose, in house that are part of our capability focus. So we have our service

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designers, our interaction designers, our user researchers, our content designers, and our tech and accessibility peers as well.

So we're really looking at things, we work, as I mentioned before, together, so typically a content designer will be embedded into one of those teams. We try to have content designers wherever we can find the opportunity to put one because we recognise this is a critical role. Even sometimes people say "No Libby, I don't think we need a content designer," and then about four weeks later they say "Can we have a content designer please?"

David Pembroke: And when you say "Content designer" what does that person do?

Libby Varcoe: So content designer, that's a role, I suppose, that we picked up from [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) and there's little bit of contention around this. I had a conversation with a consultant in Sydney from McKinsey around what they would define a content designer is and what we call a content designer. Essentially it's the role of designing the content. So that might be on a micro level. So actually; how do the words sit on the page, how do things get shaped, but also then there's extension into; well how does this actually layer itself, what is the overall user experience in terms of how the user interacts through this information-

David Pembroke: So they're not designing strategy around the content as such, they're more designing the actual artefacts.

Libby Varcoe: Yeah. We have also a content strategy stream that we're now working and developing in-house as well who work with our content designers, very closely, and then also as part of this larger team. So we may have a content strategist and a service designer looking at a service or unpacking it, so we're really experimenting with the way our disciplines work together.

David Pembroke: And how's that going?

Libby Varcoe: It's great, it's very exciting. Yeah. It's really, and for anyone I think who has been in content or knows content, typically that content role isn't something that's picked up until the very end of the line so you're kind of the last person to hear about something, or you inherit a hundred pages of mess and you're like "Well why didn't you just ask me before, I could have really helped you here."

So I think for most of our content ... Well I'm pretty sure, for all of our content designers, I think probably one of the biggest buzzes is that we actually come in very early, we work very, very closely. We may be out



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sitting in, participating in user research sessions, sitting in on testing sessions where we're actually getting our content, the whole experience reviewed, which gives us great opportunity to finesse and improve what we're doing.

David Pembroke: Yeah right. So, with that thought, and that probably tells what is one of the largest problems around communication as much as it is around content, that it's perceived largely as an end of the line function where it's tidied up on the way out. You know, WPP refers to it as the car wash as it goes out the door.

How best then can the content communication people get themselves involved? Do they have to knock the door down or should they wait for an invitation?

Libby Varcoe: I'm a big believer in just knocking the door down, personally. And I think this is part of the work that we do in our communities and with our capability work. We want our content peers across government to be able to insert themselves into those conversations or put their hand up and say "Can I come along to that meeting? I'd love to hear what you're up to and see how I might be useful." This isn't something that everyone is comfortable with, we know that, and it depends on the environment that you're working in. But we really feel that there's an empowerment, kind of this groundswell of change that we really want content people to feel that they are valued, and to actually take that sense of value back into their workplaces and to speak up.

David Pembroke: And I do agree with that, and they do have great skills, but I also think at the same time there is responsibility on the content people to be motivated and interested in the policy discussions that may be going on as well. You just can't go in there and sit and be mute, you've got to get in there and add some value.

Libby Varcoe: Yeah completely, and look I think the same way ... We've been very spoiled, I think, from my personal experience, at the DTA where we, that way we're working in the open, that kind of transparency around the work that we're doing is very encouraged. So there is opportunity to say "Oh, I think this" or "I just read this" but that doesn't always happen in other workplaces, but it's something that we speak about ourselves a lot and we really, we would love others to ... Even if it's just one little thing, just to kind of think, "Maybe I will speak up, I'll have an opinion." Because content people can be very quiet people as well, so that's the other side of it, as a generalisation. I'm not one

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of them personally, but I probably would have been a lot quieter early in my career so I get it.

David Pembroke: So just as a bit of a personal reflection, you had this consulting business and you were working for the DTA and then they said "Actually can you come on full time, we want you drop all the rest of it and want you to get involved."

What was it that convinced you that that was going to be a good idea? Apart from perhaps the scale of the challenge?

Libby Varcoe: Oh, it just was an interesting... Look, I think I probably... The last thing I was expecting, I thought it was going to be a great, really interesting, nine week contract and I'd be in and out and back to my other clients. Look, I think it was just this sense of change, that this was actually something that was real and a bit of a sense of purpose, I suppose, around the work. Not that my other work wasn't interesting at all, it was fantastic. But here was a chance to, I remember in one of my interviews saying that, "I feel like everything I have learnt over the last 19 years has led me to this moment."

So without sounding too deep and heavy, it was definitely like a bit of a "Wow, this probably isn't going to happen again. I should probably get on this bus."

David Pembroke: Yeah, I agree with you. I do think that that deeper level purpose, it is so motivating. The fact that you are doing a good thing, you are doing something that is strengthening the community and it is helping people by applying your knowledge and your skills, and your behaviour and your attitude so it certainly does ... I can understand the appeal, why you went and did it.

Libby Varcoe: Absolutely, and you often get reminded of the purpose. I think, I have elderly parents and they're going through that elderly parent point in life where you clearly interact with government services more than you would have been previously. And I see them struggling with that, and they come to me and Mum complains regularly.

David Pembroke: "Haven't you fixed this yet?"

Libby Varcoe: She did, she actually says that! But I get it, and for me that's a motivator to try and do my bit.

David Pembroke: Okay, 12 months time we're sitting here. What would you have liked to have done, inside 12 months, that would make you think "I can go on my holidays

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in December 2018". Give me three things that you'd like to see up on the wall with ticks against them.

Libby Varcoe: Hmm. It's a really big question.

Yeah, look I think, I guess a sense that the work that we are doing, and I've been in my current workplace for nearly two years, that we're moving forward, that we actually are seeing some great traction and seeing some big changes.

I think, I'd love to look around government and see lots of content designers. That would thrill me to bits to actually see that role, and content strategists, those two roles. I would love to see a flurry, an expansion of those roles, specifically with those titles.

And the third thing, I can't think of a third, just a nice big holiday would be good, I guess.

David Pembroke: You'll need one, you will need one, because it is a big job.

But yeah, as I say, I think the mood's right, I think we're getting there. I think we're in a place now where, and certainly we're seeing it here, increasingly people are "Okay, can we have more assets and can we publish those assets in a more logical, ordered, coherent way so as that we can build an audience over time, so as that we can convince them and explain to them what it is that we're doing." Because, as I said to you before, my view, and this comes from many, many, many years of experience, is that 99.9999 percent of what government does is to help the community. They're not there to do anything other than help, but perhaps sometimes, at the moment, not quite as good as we need to be about telling that story.

Anyway, it's going to keep you busy, going to keep me busy, and we will get after it. So Libby, congratulations on the job, congratulations on the work you've done so far. Thanks very much for coming in to the studio today, and for the conversation and no doubt we will speak again very soon.

And to you the audience, thank you once again for coming back for our conversation with Libby Varcoe. Inspiring conversation I think, because this is the work that we are all in. People who are involved in government communication and in the content business. We have an opportunity and we've gotta get after it. And with leadership from people like Libby, we will be able to strive further and fly higher into this particular challenge so thank you very much, Libby.

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Libby Varcoe: Thanks David, that's very kind.

David Pembroke: And thank you everyone, we will be back at the same time next week but for the moment it's bye for now.

Intro/Outro VO: You've been listening to InTransition, the program dedicated to the practice of content communication in the public sector. For more, visit us at [contentgroup.com.au](http://contentgroup.com.au).