
Jerry Watkins Transcript

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome to InTransition. The podcast that explores the practice of content marketing in government. My name is David Pembroke and I am delighted that you have given me again some of your valuable time as we explore the practice of content marketing in government.

As I do each week I like to start with a definition of just what exactly what it is that we are talking about. Content marketing is a strategic and measurable business process that relies on the curation, creation and distribution of valuable, relevant and consistent content- to engage and inform a clearly defined audience, with the objective of driving a desired citizen or stakeholder action.

This week our guest is Jerry Watkins. Jerry is the director of the news and media research at the University of Canberra. He has over 20 years of high profile international experience in communication, design and strategy. He also led major projects for some of the world's biggest telecoms companies including AT&T Wireless, Deutsche Telecom, Telecom Italia and the Vodafone Group.

Jerry's research expertise is in mobile, social and online content devices and their impact on people and systems. He has designed and delivered digital literacy and content creation programs in Australia, India, Indonesia, Nepal and the Solomon Islands. Jerry thanks for joining me InTransition.

Jerry Watkins: Always a pleasure, thanks for having me.

David: Jerry you have been the lead author of a report recently released just in June, the Digital News Report which is part of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism from the University of Oxford, from their big global review and study of media practice.

What are the big takeouts from what's happened here in Australia?

Jerry: Well quite a few of them. It's the first ever that's' been done specifically for Australia. There are 12 countries that have been surveyed as part of the overall global review, but it's the first time that we specifically have looked at Australia. Australia is quite distinctive in many different ways, but for me I think the key takeout for Australia which has relevance to many, many other countries is that we're generally at a tipping point now in Australia.

Where people consume their news and receive their news basically equally between television and social media. Particularly news, you yourself know very well TV is seen in most countries as the most authoritative, the most watched and most important source of news. However we now know that in Australia they're almost neck and neck. I can anticipate next year when we run the survey again, we'll see that social networks, social media platforms will be the main source of news for most Australians. That really changes the whole news consumption landscape and it changes the way that news organizations must think about how they deliver news and produce news.

David: How quick is that change coming?

Jerry: I think by next year we'll see online social media will overtake TV as the main source.

David: Substantially?

Jerry: No, it's about one or two points difference. It's almost even Stevens but I think within five years one will see a substantial difference. Even less than five years. As we know Facebook for example, as I'm sure we'll talk about in the interview Facebook is becoming the de facto source of news.

I think within a few years as they start to do more and more deals with news organizations, directly to get the news content from them and put them straight on Facebook, I think we'll see very rapid change start to accelerate like I say in around five years.

David: In terms of the practice of government communicators, because really this podcast is really about trying to improve the ability of governments to be able to communicate effectively with citizens. What are some of the insights that you would take out of the report, not only here in Australia but globally about how governments should be looking at the way they are communicating.

Jerry: The report tells us a lot of things about what government could and probably should be doing for the Australian context, it's a stat that probably no government communication in Australia wants. Australians are officially, out of all the 12 countries surveyed- the least interested in political news of all countries. Which may or may not come as a surprise to people, but I think that's quite significant and I think government communicators, public sector communication and politicians should really be thinking Australia as quite a low from a number of other countries.

Actually they should be really thinking hold on. That's bad news.

David: Is that political news which I would differentiate from the day to day news of the government around the programs, around the services? Did you differentiate between those two?

Jerry: That's a very good question. It's going to be different for different responders. This survey was an online survey of just over 2,000 Australians. Definitions of news are quite difficult and political news is often interpreted to be about politicians and their goings on. It's not quite the same as government communication however, in many countries the two things seem to go hand in hand.

If you've got that lower interest level in news about politicians I think it hinders government communication in many ways. However it does also clearly highlight many, many opportunities. I'll just add also that Australians were surprisingly low on some other stats around news as well.

Australians were not that interested in sports news which I found terribly surprising. And we know looking at the global study, the ultimate consumers in all things online and social news wise are urban Brazilians, who seem to love everything to do with online and social news.

David: Wow.

Jerry: Yes indeed.

David: Was that surprise to you?

Jerry: Yeah a little bit. It is quite interesting to look at the international contrasts actually. Australia is quite a high player and I think if we put aside the bad news about political news consumption- Australians cite the highest rate of news consumption via Smartphone in all 12 countries surveyed. I think that is the key opportunity for government communicators. This is Smartphone communication, not tablet, not desktop, Smartphone.

That's a big story, 59% of Australians say they're getting their news via Smartphone.

David: So when you define mobile, that was very much not just untethered it was quite specifically talking about the mobile phone?

Jerry: Yes, we gave options on tablets, Smartphone including future phone, desktop, laptop were the main categories.

David: Okay, well if you were sitting there trying to organise yourself around developing a communication plan, a content marketing strategy to tell your particular story. Again not just for Australia but probably looking across all of the surveys across all of the countries involved, what are some of the things that must be there? That have to be incorporated in order for you to be effective?

Jerry: You start with Facebook, that's full stop no argument. Facebook is in Australia and in most of the countries I think all of the countries surveyed the number one social network for receiving news stories. You follow up with YouTube, which in Australia and many other countries is the number two network for receiving news, consuming news, sharing news stories, discussing news.

You don't bother with Twitter, Twitter is a network particularly in Australia is beloved by journalists, is beloved by news producers and much talked about. But consumers do not use Twitter for discussing, sharing, receiving news. Effectively the stats very sternly show it's Facebook far and away you need to deal with in your strategy and your strategy is basically based around Facebook and YouTube.

Particularly one of the stats we find is that news over a visual medium is still perceived as one of the most authoritative news sources. YouTube still a very, very important player although in percentage in terms of Facebook is by far and away the source of news via social.

David: Certainly the big news of recent time is Facebook's key emergence as a key player in the video space as well. They're really coming after that YouTube market aren't they?

Jerry: Absolutely and I think they'll keep eating into it but I think YouTube is established and it's still got the ability to quickly and easily browse channels effectively and browse content. Whereas Facebook having so many other different contents on the platform is slightly less conducive to video browsing but I think that's changing very quickly.

One of the things some people fear and I think this is important for government communicators, some people fear some people welcome this idea of what's called the opinion bubble or the information bubble. That's

receiving your news and content via social networks almost exclusively. The naysayers say it's a very bad thing if most of the news that I'm receiving say via Facebook is through my friend's circle. It's really limiting my outlook on the world, it also makes the ecosphere quite difficult to penetrate for outsiders like a communicator.

This is a bad thing and we should avoid it.

David: You can't do anything about it. It's sort of like it's a nice theoretical point but you've got to actually get into the game if you're going to be able to communicate your story.

Jerry: absolutely and I would think that people who are positive about it say, this is absolutely fantastic. It does open the door for someone with a well honest strategy and now to operate it to penetrate these opinion bubbles on Facebook. In fact, if we are receiving news through our circle of friend's recommendations actually that's a far wider source than the old days where you might read only one or two newspapers and maybe one radio program, which in fact is more closed and more of an information bubble.

It's a big debate at the moment, I agree with you. I think the horse is bolted and I don't believe in the opinion bubble, I believe you get more varied news from your friend's circle. I think the issue for government communicators is the quality of the information that you're getting. How do you differentiate between different news brands I know like Australia Broadcast or ABC is starting to think about this very carefully.

If you're not getting their content through a television set with a great big ABC logo in the beginning or the end of the program, how do you actually know it's the ABC and it's their quality of content.

The BBC in the UK for example really buttoned the trend there over 50% brand recognition as the most authoritative source of news in the UK much more than other countries. They've done it through their superb app and complete domination of the online space. They've worked very, very hard to ensure that they're in and they're feeding their information and content across platforms. They're doing it very well.

The ABC is doing it well in Australia, and I think it's just a demonstration that if you're really one of those people who still haven't grasped this massive

platform, hello. You're probably not listening this platform if you're one of those people.

David: In terms of the publishers, we'll focus on them just for the moment. Not so much because they're probably listening but I'm fascinating in just the future of publishing. This notion of being able to just distribute your content or get into relationships with Facebook where Facebook is publishing your native content. What do you think about those relationships where organizations are using Facebook as their perhaps primary platform to distribute their content. Not so much putting the effort into their own platforms because there's that massive allure of this huge global audience that they possibly can get their hands on if they can do the deal with Facebook and go direct.

Jerry: I think that's a big question, I think you need to think about it very carefully. I would say if I was a state funded content producer and I start to use Facebook as my main content distribution and that takes off. Someone somewhere is eventually going to say, why are we funding you for all these things if effectively it's Facebook which is your distribution channel, or production company if you're a state funded broadcaster. I think that can happen quite quickly.

For the state funded broadcaster I would be very careful. If I was a public service broadcaster but not necessarily state funded say like channel 4 in the UK which is advertising revenue driven but it still has a public service ethos you can go down that route. But again I think my fear would be you lose your prime recognition and the consumer starts to think, what's happening in the world today? I'll look at Facebook, and they don't really think oh well this is a channel 4, or an ABC, or a BBC content on Facebook so it must be good.

Certainly if you're looking that deep I think YouTube is the easiest way around more visibility but it's a different issue. If I was some kind of private organization yes quite possibly, if I'm not too worried about my brand and I'm more worried about revenue generation, content production. I want to see news corps and news international having an interest in this in the long term. Again you've got two big brands going up against each other in the short term future. Is my news coming from news international or is it coming from Facebook?

I think people will say my news from Facebook, that's a reputable news brand and I think we're only a few years away from that.

David: In that, let's go back to the government communicator who's now taking your advice and okay Facebook all in. I've got to have a Facebook strategy because of its dominance. There's some limitations around that because of the way the Facebook algorithm works in terms of distribution, in terms of being able to get my message out because of the limitations. It's now a pay to play platform if I want to get to that audience.

On the upside of Facebook is this marvellous targeting that you can do. You can get very granular and very specific about the audiences that you're looking to get to. How would you advise people about there's the pluses, there's the minuses, how would you go about people starting to put together a program, a communication program to take up this opportunity of distributing your message through Facebook?

Jerry: Let me put a little cubby on that. There's plenty of people that would say traditional platforms are dead. I don't agree with them.

David: By traditional platforms you mean what?

Jerry: Broadcast television, news papers, printed newspaper. I don't think that's the case. If we go back to Australia as an example we see that as I said social and online media are level pegging with traditional platforms in terms of popularity of news consumption.

David: They're tied. Look at what's happened with Netflix in Australia. You're talking a doubling in the numbers of people who are choosing to subscribe to Netflix because they don't want the ads. They want to watch what they want to watch and they want to watch it at the time they're going to watch it. Free television is in all sorts of trouble and I really can't see a long term future for free to air television.

The only thing that's really holding them together at the moment is sport. How long before someone like the Australian Football League comes in and says, hang on we can actually do this ourselves. We don't need to use your platform, we'll do it ourselves. Long term, I'm not saying today and I'm not saying probably next year or the year after but I think the pace of change is such. Why would I watch it? What's the differentiation, what's the compelling reason?

Jerry: That's fair enough however and our colleagues at Oxford University have done some research on this, this year. The unavoidable advertising that's spreading

across YouTube videos very widely, plus the heavy and heavier advertising on Facebook. Sponsored messages, etcetera is having a similar effect. It is turning people off and we would expect to see those things generating ad revenue via online and social media starting to get trickier.

It's always been an issue for some people, it's starting to get trickier. And the more and more intrusive advertising, which is happening or is bound to happening will cause the same problems particularly on YouTube as it is on free to air television. Coming back to your question, what's my first piece of advice, yes absolutely it starts off with Facebook it's got to be multi-platform and I think from the digital news report of Australia. What it tells us is that people are consuming news content across multiple platforms.

I put Facebook first but it's not the only one. You still need to in my opinion, and we can beg to differ on it. You still need to consider your cable television, you still do need to consider your threshold television. Print newspapers are very entrusting, not doing well, we know that.

David: No but your online audience are pretty strong.

Jerry: This is the interesting thing. The print medium itself is significantly challenged.

David: It's toast.

Jerry: Yeah, however in Australia and we'll look at the data again next year so we can compare it. What people express , several of our responders express as their most trusted news source was print newspapers, slightly bizarre.

David: Surely that wasn't the response for millenials?

Jerry: No that's not the response across but it was certainly quite a lot of millenials.

David: Is that the brand or is that the actual printed material? For example in Australia The Sydney Morning Herald is the big newspaper in Sydney and I'm saying that I trust the Sydney Morning Herald and I consume it online, or I'm saying I trust what's printed on the page.

Jerry: I think there's definitely a crossover there and of course the way that they're having subscriptions I can't quite tell. I think you're probably quite right. While we're on that issue of brands though, if I go back to your best piece of advice. Stick with the Facebook that's number one. Do consider your traditional platforms but this brand issues I find quite interesting, we found in Australia

even though the newspaper section is significantly challenged as it is around the world- some of those pesky foreign entrants to the newspaper space. The Guardian Online, or The Guardian Australia, The Mail both UK brands, great established UK brands and you would kind of think, they must feel there's something worthwhile coming to Australia for and they've done very well.

The brand recognition the couple of years that they have been operating if that, shot through the roof. Another piece of advice is consider the traditional medium, not necessarily Australian traditional media.

David: The Huffington Post.

Jerry: The Huffington Post is remarkable, remarkable. I wasn't quite sure whether they'd be a market for Australia. I think it will be a limited niche market but it will be a very important niche, and the brand recognition is kicking off already.

David: I think that probably comes down to the fact that the infrastructure here, particularly in the large cities is pretty good. The uptake of digital devices is pretty good and people are now selecting the content that they want to consume. It's not just by I don't have a small choice anymore, I have a very large choice. It really gets back to that self selection around what's the content I'm going to look at.

Getting back to the challenge of people with a government communication story to tell, I often have people in government communication say the public don't want to hear from us. They don't want to engage with us, which I couldn't disagree with more. I think people do want to engage with government communications, they just don't want to communicate or engage with it the way it's being done at the moment.

I think if you create useful, relevant and compelling content consistently which helps people in their lives- which might give them access to a service, or a program, or something that's going to help them. That distribution around Facebook is obviously one piece of advice. Multi-channel is another piece of advice, what types of content should I be looking at creating? The videos, the audios, the graphics.

What did the survey find in terms of the preference of the type of content that they're looking for?

Jerry: First off I completely agree with you. I think there is definitely a market for government communication and I think the barriers you identify it's just not done in an audience specific way. My speculation on that if we chat about this again next year after the 2016 report, I'll be able to back it up further. Regional newspapers in Australia are still doing quite well so obviously the Australian newspaper market, arguable more similar to the US market than the UK market.

I think one of the reasons that the regional newspaper print market is doing well is that that's the place where people can receive, and consume, and interact with government communication that's relevant to them.

David: Regional TV, held up pretty strongly as well.

Jerry: Not bad. But regional newspapers, print newspapers stronger than we had expected. There's still a story there going on with regional newspapers. One of the kinds of content that would work well like we said via content particularly for news is always a winner. I think in government communication you would have to stand by that and again as you were touching on, that gives you the advantage of content that's suitable for Facebook and YouTube so I think that's absolutely right.

Frequency of course very important. I think it's at the strategic level. A lot of my research out of the digital news report at the moment is looking at new directs for health communication, health interaction. There's clear evidence that say health departments style communication often very successful around the world.

Major communication campaigns which have been done successfully with fairly traditional top down messaging done.

David: These are the preventative message.

Jerry: Cancer, drunk driving, etcetera. The issue with them in some cases and this is open for the debate hence why I'm researching it is people are getting the messages and they just don't care. For example if we look at sexually transmitted infection and that's something that's had very clear messaging over the last 20 years, HIV/AIDS. Everyone knows the safe sex messages around HIV/AID, they just don't follow them.

That's why I've done a lot of work for developing communication in some developing context. People know that they're supposed to use a condom, people know they're supposed to have fidelity to one partner, etcetera. They just don't follow it.

If you're looking at how to change behaviour over a lifetime and it's the same for HIV/AIDS as it is for let's say obesity epidemics where that can be a lifetime worth of mediation, etcetera- you've got to package up your communication into regular, frequent, engaging chunks. For health communication to deliver it over a lifetime.

I would almost use it as an extreme model but my best advice to any government communicator, this is about frequency, regularity, quality and being absolutely specific about your niches, your targets, your audiences however you describe them in your world. Yeah absolutely, you know as well as I do and probably many people listening know we all start off these things with a new social media campaign, or a new multi-platform campaign full of bings, full of enthusiasm, lots of content.

We just don't plan ahead far enough and we start running out of content. The frequency of updates, loads, shares decreases and suddenly we're not interacting anymore.

David: This is the gift of content marketing.

Jerry: Absolutely.

David: This notion that you are now in the publishing business, you are now in the broadcasting business. The factors of media production and distribution have now been democratised, they've now been placed in front of you and so you now have to take on that discipline. There is no excuse for you really not to do it and these are the skills that people need to apply.

Jerry: I completely agree and I think the emphasis on having it as a core part of strategy is essential because it avoids that drop-off. I think as some of your other guests have said, you've got to have that CEO side of. You've got to have not only that firm agreement and support, but also a direction from the very top.

David: It does take time, there's no questions it does take time to build that trust in the audience. Again another point that I would probably make around the

frequency point is do what you can do, often as you say people come out of the gates and they're going like mad things for two weeks. And then they run out of puff.

Be strategic, think about it, what can you cope with, what can you reasonably produce and deliver over a 12, 18, 24 month period and stick to that? Because if you can train the audience to think , okay well I'm going to hear from X, Y, Z agency once a fortnight or once a month because that's what they can deal with within the funding envelope or the capability envelope that they've got. Better to do that than to sort of create expectations that you're never going to get anywhere near.

Jerry: Absolutely and you're quite right. Frequency certainly doesn't mean five times a day. If you've targeted the right audience or the right segment, once a month can be appropriate.

David: Yeah I totally agree. That is so important that people understand that consistency is not negotiable and frequency is what you can do. You really have to think very clearly about that. What other insights might we be able to just draw out from the research report that you did that are going to help people in their planning and in their execution of their government communication programs.

Jerry: We can get slightly more technical. There's evidence from a number of the countries that news delivered via apps has some moderate popularity, very big in the UK because the BBC has an online app. People like mobile browsers, that's how they like to get their information.

I personally think there's a lot of logic to that.

David: You've got to have a really compelling story don't you to really ask someone to put their app on their phone and then to deliver.

Jerry: And then what, the app's on the phone and some people will disagree with me. If you look at the snaps, number of apps on the phone fantastic budding all the time. Okay we've downloaded the app, they've used it once. We get better data directly to some of the organizations.

David: It's an investment though, big investment to make it really spin. To make it really work, and you've got to have a bureau of meteorology classic, fantastic

plugged in 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The story continues to change but not everybody is the bureau of meteorology.

Jerry: Indeed. I think as the mobile platform's diversified. Android doing very nicely now with the windows platform takeoff probably enough that you really have to think about end strategy. You've got three minimum app platforms that you've got to maintain.

I certainly think unless you have the resources of the bureau of meteorology as you have quite rightly pointed out, that's probably a mobile browser story than an app story.

David: So are you optimistic then for government communication that really this evolving environment which again has put everyone in the publishing business is really a great opportunity for them to be able to tell that story, to be able to communicate with citizens?

Jerry: Yes I do as long as there's a genuine commitment to communicate. How could this be bad news, I think this is fantastic news. Let's face it, many in government communication and all other forms of professional communication there's stories we don't want to tell. That's probably a different discussion but I think that if the strategy is firm and you talked about this very well so I don't need to talk more about this.

If the strategy is firm, if you know what you're doing and you've got your audiences probably segmented and identified, I think this is just good news all around really. Probably harder work straight up of course, once it's rolling how could this not be good news for government communication?

David: All right Jerry well thank you very much for coming in and sharing your insights and results from the research this year. I will hold you to that, that in 12 months time we'll get you back and we'll go through it. We actually might even have a look at some of the specific things that we thought were going to change.

I tend to think that the speed of change is going to be something that we just can't get our heads around. I think the behaviour change that's going to happen in citizens is going to be so rapid and going to be so dramatic that this notion of agility and particularly for government communicators being able to move quickly is going to be a real challenge. I think the audience is going to continue to move and adapt.

Whether or not government can be as agile as it needs to be to deliver that value, I think that's going to be a real challenge for them. Exciting times I think we're seeing it now in our daily business, in our daily engagement. People are now starting to see yeah right, we can actually get into this content business.

As I keep counselling them on a daily basis just do what you can do, get started, don't wait for it to get perfect but just start it to get up. Test and learn and you will start to build over time that trust in the audience with the citizens that they can get that real value.

Jerry: Absolutely, I will agree. Get in the game.

David: You've got to start.

Jerry: If you're not in the game that would be the most worrying thing.

David: All right, well thanks again and thanks very much for being InTransition. Thanks to you ladies and gentlemen wherever you may be in this big wide world of ours. I look forward to speaking to you again next week as we get further into this InTransition podcast.

Thanks again for the growth in the audience; we're seeing great growth again this month. These are really exciting times for the podcast and the numbers that we're seeing all over the world as well. A couple of things next week, I am actually going to be in Washington in early September so I'm really looking forward to hopefully meeting a few of you in Washington.

I'll get some details out there about where we might be able to catch up. Any suggestions that you might have of people who I can speak to when I'm in Washington, that would be great. I'm also on my way to content marketing world in Cleveland, Ohio. If I could just encourage as many of you as possible to get to content marketing world. It is a place of great learning.

I travel halfway around the world every year to get there and I learn so much. Content Marketing World, jump online and have a look. I would strongly encourage you to get there particularly for those of you who are in North America. It's not far for you to travel.

Even those of you who are in Western Europe, there's a really easy way to just jump over there and get to the conference. We could catch up there and do

some conversation, have some more fun talking about content marketing in government.

Thanks once again, I look forward to talking to you next week. Thank you Jerry Watkins for joining us.