**InTransition Episode 47 – Isabelle Oderberg**

Speaker 1: Welcome to InTransition, a program dedicated to the practice of content marketing in the public sector. Here's your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen, my name is David Pembroke and welcome to this week's edition of In Transition. The podcast dedicated to the practice of content marketing in the public sector. This week our guest is the social media lead for the Australian Red Cross, who is an impressive journalist who has done amazing things. Before we speak to our guest, it's time, as we do each week, to define just exactly what content marketing is as it relates to the public sector.

So here we go; content marketing is a strategic measurable and repeatable business process that relies on the creation, curation and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and or stakeholder action.

So to our guest today, it's Isabelle Oderberg the National Social Media Lead for the Australian Red Cross. Prior to that, she was the National Social Media Editor at News Corp Australia and Australia's first Social Media Editor for one of the country's biggest newspapers, The Melbourne's Herald Sun. She was the founding news editor of The Business Spectator and later Interview's Editor and China commentator. She was the lead mining writer for AAP, a big reporter for Dow Jones Newswire in London and she also had a stint on the online desk at Reuters.

Isabelle Oderberg thanks very much for joining us InTransition.

Isabelle : Thanks for having me.

David Pembroke: You've been very busy accumulating lots and lots of experience in the last few years. What's really interesting to you at the moment in terms of the creation and distribution of information and content?

Isabelle: I think that as we saw the advent in social media and especially online technologies as well, in any industry where you have news dissemination, in not for profit, in the news sector and everywhere. We saw this move towards really over complicating the delivery system to the audience and now we're seeing it simplified again and people trying and figure out really simple ways to tell compelling stories online.

I find that fascinating and I think it’s a really positive move.

David Pembroke: So in terms of that, that's a really interesting insight, just explain or perhaps if you could give an example of a transition from a more complicated environment to that more simplified approach and why it's working more effectively for you?

Isabelle: What's interesting, like if you look at the area of data visualisation which is where you take a story that's in data, any kind of data and you organize it into a visual format. That might be an animated graph or a multitude of different things but we got to a point with data visualization, it was all the rage and it was getting more and more sophisticated but the problem is that the audience was sort of saying, ‘hang on a sec, I don't need five layers between me and the story that the data is telling, I want to be able to actually absorb the story quickly and in a straight forward way’.

Now we're seeing a real pull back in the data visualization space where we are actually trying to get that story across using data, in a much more simple and straight forward and clear way. That would be an example of what I mean, it's sort of journalism for the audience rather than journalism for journalists.

David Pembroke: In terms of your career you had a great career working in the media but now you've jumped the fence and you're working for a non-government organization. I'd like to take you back to that time of consideration where you were in the media but then you were obviously starting to look around and thinking "Okay I've got these skills, I can imply them somewhere else. If you might just give us that sort of, that story as to how you made the change from working in traditional media and now working as a journalist for a non-government organization?

Isabelle : I think that it's interesting to me because people see journalism as something more complicated that needs to be, ultimately journalism is content handling and storytelling. Those skills can be transferred in a number of different ways. I had been working in newsrooms for well over 17 18 years; the news industry was getting me down. I felt it was a very difficult place to be and a very difficult place to make progress.

I had been thinking about, for a long time where those skills would be transferable to and the Not for profit sector is something that I've always had an involvement in. I've been volunteering from a very young age and social justice and volunteering was something that was always, I was interested in.

When I decided that I was going to leave News Corp and the news industry, the traditional news industry I should say, for the foreseeable future in a full time capacity. The Not for profit sector was a very simple choice for me. It was where I'd always gravitated in terms of my interests. There has been a real kind of boom in the non-journalism sector; I would say the non-news industry sector. Where we've seen private organizations have direct access to information.

Taking that information straight to audience, obviously you still have a media strategy and you still... but none of those things change. The advent of social media means that we can develop our own audiences. A really good example of this would be ANZ, who have an internal newsroom now and they treat their content like news and they give their content straight to the audience as well as the more traditional kind of media routes.

Australian Red Cross is where I work now and I felt there was a really good opportunity to take the stories that they have about what they do and the important work that they do and in so many areas and actually develop our own audience as well as using the traditional methods of information delivery.

It's paid off, we have a really really strong social media audience now and we value their contribution as much as they value the stories that we have to tell.

David Pembroke: When you applied for the job or you were approached for the job, do you think the organisation, the NGO the Australian Red Cross, understood what they were doing when they were recruiting an experienced journalist?

Isabelle: I think they did and I think they do. I have an interesting role because I'm half based out the digital team which is marketing and then I'm half based out of the media and communications team. The fact that they were recruiting that role into those two teams really shows that they understood the way that social media works across several areas.

I think that they understood, but the interesting thing with social media roles is that, there isn't necessarily. I mean you'd have to talk to my boss if you wanted to know exactly what they were looking for when they initially placed the advertisement I wherever they did. To me if I'm hiring and when I'm looking at roles, there is no traditional kind of CV for someone who works in social media.

There are people that come from a sort of storytelling and information background like me, there are people that come from an advertising background, a marketing background. It's a question of finding the person who has the broadest, I think, the broadest experience but who is open to working with all areas and open to learning.

Social media is like a constant process of learning, so you don’t ever put all of your eggs in one basket when you're recruiting in this area, I don't think. You have to be really really broadly open to who comes to you and what skills they have and how they're transferable.

David Pembroke: Yeah, I totally agree that that skill set really, they could be coming from anywhere and increasingly we're finding that the appeal is in people who've got a science technology, engineering and maths background. Who can really work hard around the data side of things. Certainly the data can help you to drive and give you those insights that you need to create the stories, but increasingly to be able to drive the tools and make those channels perform for you.

Isabelle : Yeah and I think that there are a lot of industries that are comfortable, in journalism there's always a debate over "Do you take a writer and teach them how to write a story or do you take someone who has a natural ability to find a story and teach them how to write?".

As long as the person is open to learning and can demonstrate an ability to do that...I'm definitely not a math brain but I recognize the importance of data in terms of understanding the audience and insights into the audience and I'm always willing to learn. I'm never going to be a data analyst; I'm not actually interested in being a data analyst. I'm a story teller. The way I tell my stories is underpinned by my use of data, that's the difference.

I'm always open to learning and always open to doing another course in how I can deep dive better into analytics. Also it's about looking around the organisation that you work in and seeing where those skills are. If there's someone who's an experienced data analyst and I feel that they are going to get to go over my data and give me a better insight, great I'll do that.

Social media is not for one person, it's a cross organisational mandate.

David Pembroke: I'd be interested in your views on this, I was only listening to a podcast as I was driving to work this morning and there's these artificial distinctions that were looking at the different tasks and activities that need to be completed. There was this discussion as to whether or not that's PR’s role or whether that's marketing's role or whether that sits in the web team or whether it sits in the digital team.

I tend to think that all of these constructs that are in place are actually going to all disappear and it’s all really going to just morph into a single responsibility for a group of people to build trusted relationships from which you can then achieve business objectives, whatever they might be.

Isabelle: Yeah I don't disagree and I think it also depends on the background of the person that's leading that social media charge. You do have to have someone that has oversight, not in any kind of management, necessarily in a management sense, but more in having the ability to be looking at the social all the time and monitoring what's going on.

It depends on who that person is, what their background is and how the organisation is structured. I certainly think that there probably is no service area at my organization, that don't think they own me in some way. That's great because what it means is that they all feel like they have a little bit of a stake in what I do which is exactly how I want it.

David Pembroke: They see the value; you're obviously helping them solve problems. You're helping them create value so that's a good way to be.

Isabelle: Yeah, but I have to keep reminding people I do have two bosses I don't actually need any more.

David Pembroke: I'm really interested in your transition though. You came and you started at the Red Cross, you've come out a news room with all of the practices and the processes and the cultures and other things. Take me back to that time when you started, just under two years ago, what did you find and what was difficult and what was easy?

Isabelle : I think probably the difficulty was more around some of the elements that I loved around the news room that I had to adjust for. In the news room when you need something or when something has to get done, it gets done within a minute, that doesn’t happen in other work places. I had to kind of slow down a bit and understand that there's much more. Other work places are a lot more careful. They don't say ‘oh, we need this so we need it yesterday’.

Which is very much in newsroom and telly and it is necessary in certain contexts. I think also I've learnt much more here, about being more strategic and more considered in the way the way that we do some of our planning. The news industry was a really difficult place to be and you just couldn't book more than 6 months to a year head because people were being more redundant and there were restructures, we didn't know what the future model looked like in terms of financial model for journalism. Was it going to be subscription? Was it going to be advertising? Was it going to be native advertising?

There were all these question marks over there, and there still are quite frankly. Whereas the industry I work in now is a lot more stable and we are able to look for those 2 3 4 years ahead. While obviously any strategy that we put in place has to be flexible and dynamic, because that's what social media is and we have to mirror it. At the same time we do have the ability to plan a little bit further ahead because we have a much [inaudible 00:13:56] of what the future looks like.

David Pembroke: Yeah indeed. In terms of some of the quick wins in the places where you were able to add value quickly, what are some of the examples of the things that you were able to introduce that helped the Australian Red Cross quickly?

Isabelle: Definitely empowering people on the ground and services areas like the areas of the organisation that actually provides direct services to the clients, to identify what makes the social media content. It was like an educational task really. It's not that they didn't know, it's that we'd never really provided a huge amount of training for them previously, because my role was a new role when it was appointed.

It was cases, going to the service areas and saying ‘this is what makes good social content, this is what we look for, come to us with your stories, come to us with your wins’. I don't think anyone can truly appreciate until they're actually inside this organization, how big it is. It is enormous and the amount of work that they do is so interesting and so compelling that you know, it's my job to tell that story. It's a big story and there's so much content out there to be heard.

It was a question of empowering people to be at a spot, what makes a compelling story about what we do and not being frightened because we have very very strict guidelines around things like child protection and privacy and all of those things. I think people were nervous like ‘are you going to take a photo of my client and put it on?’ Of course we're not, we do this in a way that it completely maintains integrity.

It was an educational piece and it was really fun and it was really exciting and it’s worked. We get a lot more content coming our way now. A lot more stories to tell and we're proud of them, that they have these wins and we want to tell our supporter base about it. A good example is, we have a tracing service that helps families trace family members that have been separated by war or crisis.

That's internationally or nationally but also internationally and they have wins, they have people that have been separated by horrific war who they can bring back together and put back in touch. Wins like that. A lot of people don't know that that's something that we even do, I think they do more so now than they did before we ramped up our social presence.

We're incredibly proud of that sort of work and we want to have a space where we can demonstrate that to our support base.

David Pembroke: Those sorts of reunification stories it's almost the ultimate emotional human story, isn't it? Separated by war and then bringing back together.

Isabelle: I think there were misunderstandings around, that you'd have to have a photo of the client and the client's traumatized and they don’t want to take a photo and so on. And in reality we don't need a photo of anyone we can just put that up as a line of text and it's just as powerful. That's where the education piece was, it's not a brochure it’s a way to update people in real-time about the work that we're doing and the wins that we have and the needs that we have.

David Pembroke: Just take me to those education sessions and training sessions, when you've got a group of people sitting in front of you. Just give me the sort of shorthand version of what the advice is and what the education is?

Isabelle : We have different styles of...depending on who it is and their comfort level with social and a whole lot of different factors, it really depends on who it is and how I run the session. It could be anything from a coffee at a cafe where we just talk about social, all the way through to a meeting to 5 people where I have a laptop in front of me and I'm taking them through the page and the way our processes work.

What I've been doing in the last week, which is I've been in Canberra and our branches in Canberra and Tasmania where I'm actually a workshop lecture style session where I'm actually pulling the examples of what works and what doesn't work. Not just for us but for our competitors, for our peers for organisations that are completely in a different space to us but I think have learnings that we can absorb in our own work.

You can't be too prescriptive about how the training takes place; it's a lot about the comfort level of the person that you want to educate.

David Pembroke: Ultimately at dividing the staff and the network that you've got, has really got to be where that high value has got to be created because again, you can do what you can do. If you've got a team of 30,50,100,1000 who are eyes and ears, looking, identifying and helping you to create that content well you're obviously going to be a lot more effective.

Isabelle : Yes and I think it’s also a question of letting our Red Cross people lead the story that they want to tell and telling us what stories there are to tell. I am not a social worker; I don't work on the ground. I want those people who are doing that job to tell me what story I should be telling. That's what being a good story teller is, it's not about being prescriptive about the story you want to tell. It’s about finding the story that's out there and letting other people lead you to it because you don't know everything there is to know.

David Pembroke: Is your process though that those people who are in those service line areas, that they bring their information back to you and then you publish, or do they have publishing rights to your platform as well?

Isabelle: No, we work slightly differently. I work with the media and communications team, every services area has its own media and communications representative. Some cover more than one area if it's a slightly smaller area. I work very much hand in hand with them and together we develop the content because it is their services area that they are merging in a media and communication sense.

If a person has a piece of content that they think is worth bringing, they may bring it to them, to the media and comms team, they may bring it to me or they may bring it to both of us at the same time. Either way the process is that we work on it together and then we go through our approvals process and then it is generally the media and communications person that will publish.

David Pembroke: Take me through the approvals process, how onerous is it for you to be able to publish?

Isabelle: It’s not at all, we've stream lined the processes; we have very very clear reporting lines. If it’s not urgent, I can give it a couple of days for approval to come through but generally speaking approval is almost instantaneous now.

David Pembroke: So what are the threshold questions that people have to satisfy for the approval to be activated?

Isabelle: I don't think that necessarily that the managers who are approving are so prescriptive about having a set of ideas that they need to meet. It's more just a question of ensuring that there's no other context that they're unaware off. I don't think that our approvals process or the process that they go through in approving is any different to any other organization that has an approval process in place.

I certainly wouldn't want to be putting out content without the head of media and comms knowing what was going out even as a courtesy. We put out about 3 posts a day on Facebook, any number of tweets. I want her to be engaged in what we're putting out because she has a much greater visibility of what's going on across the organisation and context is everything in social media.

She's the right person, she's incredibly savvy and brilliant and she's the right person to say, ‘oh no, there's something else that's going out this week and we should wait on that because otherwise it would get confusing’, or whatever the case may be.

David Pembroke: Understanding that that person is not only savvy and brilliant but also vary busy and lots of other responsibilities and other things to do. How do you then ensure that she's got that comfort, she obviously doesn't want to be looking at everything that goes out because she doesn't need to.

Isabelle: No.

David Pembroke: What's the structure or framework that you've got put in place from a planning point of view that has given her the confidence to know that, ‘okay Isabelle just get on with it’. Is it a monthly calendar or is it something else?

Isabelle: No, no ultimately there's 2 media and comms teams, there's two teams of media and comms. There are 2 managers, they approve at the first instance and depending on which team the contents come out of. It is only escalated in the cases, issues that are potentially, things that we think she should have greater visibility over and otherwise she is just cc’d in so she can see what's going on.

David Pembroke: When you're reporting, how often are you reporting back up the line about your activity, the conversions you're achieving, the value you’re creating, how often are you reporting?

Isabelle: Weekly.

David Pembroke: Weekly, yeah okay.

Isabelle: I also do a monthly deep dive analysis of us and our peer groups.

David Pembroke: What sort of peer group meeting competitors or notional competitors?

Isabelle: I don't know. I'm very tentative to use competitors; it's not quite the right word. I'd say other organizations operating in this space.

David Pembroke: I think peer is a nice way to look at it really.

Isabelle: Yeah I definitely feel more comfortable with the word peer because no one does what Red Cross does. It's so much about what is unique to Red Cross then we don't really have traditional, competitors in the traditional sense. I would you the word peers, yeah.

David Pembroke: In terms of your dashboard, what are you reporting against?

Isabelle: It depends on the report, usually we're reporting against our own numbers. Usually were reporting against... we're looking for constant improvement in our own performance so that's how I'd describe it.

David Pembroke: Activity based?

Isabelle: I would say engagement based rather than rate post if that's what you mean, yeah.

David Pembroke: Yeah, okay.

Isabelle: We're looking to engage as many people as we can in issues that we think are important.

David Pembroke: Getting them to do something, to act?

Isabelle: Sometimes yes sometimes no.

David Pembroke: Just information?

Isabelle: Yeah, it depends, like our International Humanitarian law section, for instance we're doing a lot of work in the moment on health care and danger. Like with the bombing of Médecins Sans Frontières Hospitals and things like that, we've been posting about healthcare and danger. That's about getting public support for something that we see absolutely crucial to humanitarian assistance.

We don't necessarily think that there's nothing they can physically do, but they can be aware of it and they can rally for that to be more prominent on a national agenda basis. Sometimes it's about educating the public about things that are really important.

David Pembroke: Ultimately all of your activity is connected to some sort of business objective overarching business objective that business objective that the Australian Red Cross has.

Isabelle: I would say organisational objective because obviously we do fund raise, we want people to donate because we can't do the work unless people donate that goes without saying. Not all our objectives are based around financial incentives.

David Pembroke: No, sure

Isabelle: I would definitely say organisational objectives, we're not a business so I wouldn't say business objective.

David Pembroke: Okay, very good. Couple of minutes left, what's the future? Just for the audiences benefit. Isabelle is 6 and a half months pregnant so she'll be going away for a little while to have a little one and then obviously she'll be back at some point in time. If you think about that, if you think sort of 18 months, 2 years down the track, what are you seeing and what are you thinking is going to be happening?

Isabelle: I think that one of the areas we're going to see some progress is in, is analytics. I think that Instagram for instance is becoming more important in terms of reaching younger audiences but they have no analytics to speak of, no available analytics. I think we are going to see that changing, because if they want to attract advertising they've got to give us analytics so we know whether it's worth spending money on the platform.

There are a few other platforms that are like that as well. I think we're going to see more insights for sure. The actual news industry in Australia is changing, we're seeing more entrants, we’re seeing more varied content and different ways of delivering it and I think that only going to get better and better.

Mainly I think my future holds dirty nappies and quite a lot of early mornings yeah. I'm being honest.

David Pembroke: It's interesting though, it's that the world is going to spin so fast that by the time you come back it's going to be ‘Oh, really?’

Isabelle: Yeah, look and at this stage I may need to take quite a short, not too long off, I'm hoping for something like 6 months before I come back. I'm actually looking forward to getting off the merry go round and seeing what happens while I'm not here and coming back to a fresh new start in what I'm sure is a space that will have shifted yet again.

It shifts every week, let alone over 6 months.

David Pembroke: I think the key thing is though; the audience is your foundation, isn't it? That's not going to change. Telling stories is not going to change; connecting with people through emotional stories is not going to change. Ultimately we're still people, the context and the delivery and the this and the that, all around it the sort of mechanical architecture that sits around it, but really at the essence is that it's about people and about engaging with people.

Isabelle : Yeah and everyone in the news industry, uses the line of content is king and it's terribly tried but it's absolutely true. If you start at the nucleus with an interesting story that's compelling and makes people feel something, people always say, ‘what's on social media, what works?’ and I say, to start with, it has to make me feel something, it has to make me feel interested, and it has to make me want to learn more. It has to make me laugh, cry, sob, I don't know what but I have to have a reaction to it.

If I don't then it’s a waste of my time and I'm not going to spend any more time engaging with it. I'm not going to share it with my friends or whatever, but you're right. The absolute nucleus in everything is a compelling interesting story and Australia is full of them. The thing is as the news industry shrinks and there are less people in that industry telling these stories. We as a non-news industry organisation have the ability tell some of those stories for ourselves.

We can, we have them, we just have to put them out there and that's what we've been doing and it's working beautifully.

David Pembroke: Isabel Oderberg, thank you so much for being very generous to give us some of your time today just to really discuss what going on there at the Australian Red Cross and to reflect on your insights into this fabulously interesting and changing non-news world. I really like that. I haven't heard anyone talk about the non-news world before maybe that's something that we can start to build at as well.

Just for the audience, how could people perhaps learn more about you and learn more about The Australian Red Cross?

Isabelle: The Australian Red Cross website is redcross.org.au and in terms of me I am @oderberg on Twitter and I have a website which is Isabelleoderberg.me so feel free to get in touch.

David Pembroke: Okay fantastic, Isabelle thank you very much for your time and good luck with the dirty nappies.

Isabelle: Thanks so much.

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