
InTransition Episode 98 - Ruth Dewsbury

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government. My name's David Pembroke and thank you very much for joining me once again this week. We will have a great guest as we do each week, and a really good guest this week who's got a really fascinating background as it relates to content communication. She was a great journalist, a really important journalist, and a journalist who did a number of fantastic stories for some of the biggest news organisations in Australia and has worked in government communication for some time, so has a great background but we'll come to her in just a moment.

Before we do, we start as we do each week with the definition of just exactly what is content communication. It's a strategic, measurable, and accountable business process, and I might just say an evidence based 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. That's what we're talking about, and we will speak about content communication today with my guest, Ruth Dewsbury.

Ruth is the senior director of communications at the Department of the Environment and Energy here in Canberra, Australia. Ruth oversees the department's external engagement and communications, including media and social media. Her career began as a print journalist on the West Australian and the Sydney Morning Herald before she moved into politics as an Australian government ministerial media advisor and speech writer. Her career in government communications includes working with the Departments of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry, and most recently with Environment who she is with at the moment in their various incarnations. She's also worked on domestic and international strategies and campaigns ranging from forest management and biodiversity through to energy efficiency and climate change. Ruth Dewsbury, thanks very much for joining us InTransition.

Ruth Dewsbury: Great to be here.

David Pembroke: Ruth, journalism and the skills of journalism are really becoming more relevant, aren't they? On having an impact on the way government tells its story and communicates. Just from your point of view, that transition that you made from journalism into, it was politics first of all. Take us through that. What led you to make the jump?

Ruth Dewsbury: I think what motivates many people from journalism to move into politics or government communications is the need to feel that you can make some sort of an impact on policies and programmes rather than just passively reporting on them. Some journalists have fabulous careers effecting change through their journalism, and people like Kate McClymont come to mind with what they've achieved through their crime reporting. Many journalists feel that what they've learned, the beauty of journalism is that you range over so many different topics in your career and you cover it from so many different perspectives, but there comes a time when you think, "Well, it'd be really nice to actually effect a change here and be part of something that's bigger, and targeted achievements."

David Pembroke: It's interesting you say that, because that was my motivation to move out of journalism. I love journalism because it is the front row seat as history takes place and it's wonderful access and privilege to be there as close as you are, but I found I got frustrated with thinking I was reporting about what other people were doing as opposed to actually, "I could go and do something as opposed to report what other people were doing." I think there was, for me anyway, there was that, not a frustration as such but probably that next stage of my career. I wanted to move, to have a more direct impact by being able to apply those skills.

Ruth Dewsbury: Be part of the action.

David Pembroke: In terms of those skills, what were the skills that you found directly attributable to make you as effective in that role as media advisor and speech writer as you were working within the ministerial area?

Ruth Dewsbury: Well I think it comes down to what people very simply describe these days as storytelling. I find it quite amusing that there are whole conferences dedicated to stories and storytelling because for people who've been trained in journalism it's second nature. The thought that you need to learn how to tell a story is an interesting one for a professional communicator, so I think you bring that training with you and you're able to translate policy ideas and government department visions into compelling stories for your target audience. Journalism also helps you understand who those audiences are, and you can perceive and understand issues from a range of different perspectives.

I think sometimes if you come through one particular discipline that is very targeted, you will only see things from say the science perspective or the doctor's perspective if you're in the health industry, or on you could go indefinitely. The beauty of journalism is that you have the broad range of inputs and outputs, and you can see where a story is going to go and you can influence where it will go by understanding the reactions to it.

David Pembroke: But how did you deal with that different context? Sitting in a newsroom belting out a story, or a yarn as everyone calls them, once you move into a political

environment, what was that challenge then of applying the skills of storytelling but doing so in a political environment that is contestable, often chaotic, often contested by lots of different ... Contested not only from the opposition but from your own side as well. It's a fraught environment for storytelling.

Ruth Dewsbury: It is. It's very difficult to navigate when you're a newbie and you come straight from a newsroom where every story's a good story potentially. In government, every story is not potentially a good story and sometimes no story is the best story, so it is quite a new skill that people learn when they move into government communications. The main game is really the policy or programme outcome that you want to achieve, and that's your starting point.

David Pembroke: How long did it take you to work that out? That it was about the policy, the programme, the service, the regulation, that particular behavioural outcome that you were looking to achieve. How long did it take you to work out, "Okay, that's where I've got to put my focus. That's my North Star because as soon as I get involved in other things I could find myself on the mouse wheel spinning around."

Ruth Dewsbury: There's nothing like starting off in a minister's office to focus your attention on what's important. There are plenty of people who are going to help you in that regard.

David Pembroke: To focus on what's important, or to distract you?

Ruth Dewsbury: A bit of both really, but you do learn pretty quickly that the main game is to communicate to achieve the outcome, and that is not something that you're trained to do in journalism. You may be trained to influence the debate by raising awareness or exploring issues that audiences will be interested in, but you don't have a responsibility to communicate in a way that achieves responsible taxpayers' accountability, or that can be evaluated and reported on regularly. Ultimately you're accountable as a government communicator in the same way that your political masters are.

David Pembroke: As obviously a communicator at a ministerial level, a lot of our audience are people who work in government communication in similar roles to actually the role that you're in at the moment, but there's always that interesting relationship between the political and the bureaucratic, and how best to serve the political masters in order that their policies and programmes and services, regulation, those objectives that you're looking for can be achieved. As somebody who has worked in both, what's your advice to people who work in the government in terms of that service to the political level? What are the sorts of things that they should be focused on to provide the best possible service to their political masters?

Ruth Dewsbury: I think one area of focus which you bring from journalism is accuracy. You have to be absolutely fact based and there's often a misperception that if you're

working in government communications your job is spin, and that's highly unfair I think to the vast majority of government communicators.

David Pembroke: But does the spin take place at the ministerial level, or does the spin take place at the government level? I'd probably argue that it's the positioning at the political level that puts the best possible light on whatever the reality is.

Ruth Dewsbury: That's right. That's right.

David Pembroke: As opposed to the government communicator who is really trying to serve up a-

Ruth Dewsbury: That's right. On the one hand, all communicators need to tell a story and it needs to be compelling and engaging for your audience, but that doesn't mean that it has to have a political slant either way. I've found in my experience working with ... I've worked with six environment ministers over the last decade or so and consistently, no matter what political persuasion they are, if advice is based on good evidence, it's simply and plainly put, and you can see how the communication achieves an outcome, the minister's office will be very glad to take that advice. They might put a political spin on it. The media advisor might massage it a bit and put their own political slant on it that comes from Cabinet or their own political masters. But on the whole if you deliver quality, well written, evidence based stories and facts, they will be used and they'll be used productively.

David Pembroke: What is the best form in which to communicate that into those political offices? Is it important that you are in front of those people to make sure that you're presenting your side of the story? Is it best that they be written well? Is it best that they need to have strong visual elements to those presentations that you're making into the ministerial offices? What's the best way to get the message through?

Ruth Dewsbury: I'm not sure that there's one best way for all ministers. Ministers have very different styles for their own communications and they've got different ways of processing information. We've had some ministers that will devour briefs and want to absorb all the possible background before they will digest it and communicate it. Other ministers who want five short, sharp dot points and that's all they need. Then you have others who love infographics and that's how they consume their information. You need to be able to meet all those demands, basically, so it's a good idea when you have a new minister coming in, the head of communications needs to be very mindful of what's their preferred mode and what's their style? What's their writing style? What's their speaking style? And what floats their boat, basically?

David Pembroke: Well, it's true. Some of them like to talk a lot. Some of them like to talk a little. Some of them ...

Ruth Dewsbury: Some of them will pick up and run with an item passionately. We've had ministers who have been very engaged and very passionate and often divert from the script in a way that sometimes isn't helpful, but then you've had other ministers who are absolutely beholden, really focused on the facts, and they will go through the facts and so you need to present the facts in a way that's actually interesting and meaningful, because there's nothing more boring than just running through a list of statistics.

David Pembroke: That's right and that skill, that journalism skill again of being turn a set of facts into a narrative that is then able to assist a story to be told.

Ruth Dewsbury: And to provide a core of information that can be used for a whole range of different channels. You've got the basic story and you can run it as a podcast, or you can have it as an op-ed, or a series of tweets, or however you want to present it. It's the same story and you probably have the same up to three key messages, which we all know is the secret formula. Basically, deciding on your top messages is priority number one, and then how you package it depends on your audience which includes your ministerial audience.

David Pembroke: You've been around obviously awhile, as I have, and things have changed so dramatically in the way that we go about our business, which is where this content communication thing is taking off. This notion of being able to build capability within organisations, within government organisations, so as that they can go direct. So as that over time they can build trust through the publishing of useful, relevant, and consistent content to engage those audiences. While obviously media channels are always important, advertising channels are always important, there is this ability to be able to use your journalism skills to tell a story and be able to go out there and I said, build those relationships.

As someone who's working in the space, how do you see government ... I suppose it's a broadish question, but how well are we doing in terms of being able to grab a hold of this gift that technology's now given us and this ability, the factors of media production and distribution have now been democratised, how well are we doing at being able to use that in order for us to help the government achieve the objectives that they've been elected to put in place?

Ruth Dewsbury: I think we're not doing too badly actually. I think some departments are doing it better than others. Some have no choice, particularly the big programme delivery departments. They have to get the material out there and it has to be accurate and efficient, and they have to do it. It's more of a challenge for policy departments like ours I think, where it's not quite so clear exactly who our target audiences are. We know broadly who they are sectorally, but we don't have the direct engagement that some of the programme departments have. But on the other hand, our department is quite blessed in that our content is fantastic. We have such a rich source of content, and it comes both from the scientific research side ... there's lots of science, as there should be

underpinning environment policy. We have a weekly newsletter that goes out called The Chirp, which is because it's much more than a tweet. Usually that has about four or five stories in it which are absolute gold for Facebook, Twitter, blogs, particularly in the social media space.

David Pembroke: Who produces those stories?

Ruth Dewsbury: We work with the line area to produce it.

David Pembroke: So the policy people produce the stories.

Ruth Dewsbury: There's a communications person embedded there. Also, the research is done by six research hubs that are based in universities and they all have communications sections and responsibilities as well, so we've got a really good network of science communicators there. It comes to our central communications area from the line area, and then we mine that content for all sorts of different channels, and it can last us for weeks and months.

The beauty of that is that most of their stories, some of them would have attracted mainstream media attention, but we would've had to put a lot of energy into having a ministerial event or finding a location and then having guests and display materials, you name it. The usual things that go with events and launches. Whereas now we can package it up and market it directly and find the audiences that would have an interest in it, and probably it would be frustrating because they don't read about it in the Sydney Morning Herald or the Daily Tele, but they know they can come to our Facebook page or website and find it there. It's a very large part of our social media presence is just finding out those fascinating stories and facts about the environment and the people who are working in the environment.

That's another thing that we found really terrific about the new environment that we're working in is an opportunity that we've never had before to recognise the individuals, the Australians around the nation who are active on the land. They're actually working on all these programmes. Normally they'd be beavering away and they might have a community event or a ministerial visit once in a blue moon, but now we can showcase their work every day, every week. One of the social media channels runs a People of NRM, based on Humans of New York. That showcases people who are working on natural resource management projects around the country, and they love it because they tag their friends and their family and so it makes them feel as though they're part of a national effort and a national campaign to save the environment.

David Pembroke: This is a reasonably newish initiative. Am I right to say that?

Ruth Dewsbury: It's new and it's modest. We still need to grow our audience a lot bigger because we've only been in this space less than six months now. We started off with Twitter using Twitter as a broadcast service mainly.

David Pembroke: What sort of messages would you put through Twitter, as a news-

Ruth Dewsbury: Twitter is all our news.

David Pembroke: Okay, so any sort of linking tweets to get people back to-

Ruth Dewsbury: Take people back to the website, because people need somewhere to go rather than just having the information floating there in cyberspace. If they want to follow it up, go to the website. There's still a lot of work we need to do there, as I think most departments do in the web space. There's a lot of movement government-wide. It's baby steps, but Facebook really is a terrific medium for us because of our content.

David Pembroke: But what's ultimately the purpose of publishing? Why are you doing this? Yes it's nice to get the information out there, but why? What's the why, and then the objective from a what point of view?

Ruth Dewsbury: Great question, and it's one that I started off saying we should always ask. That was our objective. I guess the reason why is that we need to ... There are a number of reasons. One is that the Australian taxpayer needs to know how their dollar's being spent in the environment policy. Another is that there's a large population of people around the nation who are intensely interested in the issues that we cover, in environment and energy, and they want to be part of it. They want to know what they can do, where they can go, what's happening.

We have intense interest from the academic community in what's happening in environmental policy. We have a responsibility to get information to a whole range of industry groups about their rights and responsibilities under environment law. Groups like farmers and how they can access grants, how they can ensure that they're not encroaching on threatened species when they're harvesting. The whole range of communications objectives that we are hoping to achieve that actually the mainstream media only offered us quite limited opportunities to do so because you're never going to get that sort of coverage.

We have a very strong focus on regional communications as well, because the diversity of the Australian environment means that how you ... What you're telling people in Far North Queensland is completely different from what you're talking to Tasmanians about. So we really focus on the regional media strongly, and we've noticed that while it used to be the case that regional rural Australians didn't have good enough Internet access and they were still stuck with regional print, but that is changing. A lot of those remote communities do have access now.

Its exploring how different sectors use the different channels, but we've got so many more opportunities now, as you said David, to get the information directly to the people who need it. There's people who need it to get their work done, and there's people who are just interested in it, and in that latter category there are a whole range of people who want to see how their local work, what's happening in their local environment, fits in with the national picture. They want to see what they're doing. If someone's cleaning up a waterway in Wagga or something, how does that fit with the national water quality agenda? How does it fit with invasive species work that they're doing? Are they going to get rid of the carp? They want to get rid of carp, what's happening there? So it's making those linkages across the country, which is one of our responsibilities.

David Pembroke: Which is so massively important when you think as this content communication that you're implementing as an enabler for the mission of the actual department. Essentially you are building an infrastructure and a capability within the organisation, which is really delivering on behalf of the organisation. Is it seen that way, or is it just seen as still as a bit of a curiosity and, "Oh, okay. That's great. That's Ruth and her guys just playing around," or is it seen as, "This is something that we're going to have to invest in in order for us to achieve our strategic objectives?" Have they made the link, or is it still something that's just happening over there?

Ruth Dewsbury: I think the links are made in some areas and not in areas, and there are obviously some people who are passionately wanting and eager to play in the space.

David Pembroke: And we did have the endangered species commissioner on this very podcast a few weeks ago.

Ruth Dewsbury: It's good value, isn't it?

David Pembroke: He has drunk the Kool-Aid.

Ruth Dewsbury: You could have him back for weekly appearances. He'd be very happy ... He had an amazing post the other day on fox control, and it had 265,000 likes in about a week.

David Pembroke: But isn't he just the perfect person with the right personality, the right engagement...

Ruth Dewsbury: Absolutely.

David Pembroke: He is really a one man thrashing machine. He's a one man CNN almost.

Ruth Dewsbury: And he's just won an award for it, by the way.

David Pembroke: Has he?

Ruth Dewsbury: Yeah, the Walter Froggatt Award.

David Pembroke: For? What did Walter do?

Ruth Dewsbury: Walter was amazing. In the 1930s, Walter was the person who alerted Australia to cane toads, and said, "Watch out, these things are nasty." This award was named after him because it's run by the Invasive Species Council.

David Pembroke: Okay, so it's a science communication-

Ruth Dewsbury: It's an invasive species communicators' award.

David Pembroke: Okay, great. So Tony Peacock probably put that in place sometime. He's another great science communicator, by the way, Mr. Peacock. Getting back to this point of ... Actually, I should get him on. I'll get him on the show. He's a character, Tony. I just wonder though at times, and we're seeing it more and more. My belief is now, they're getting it.

I think, and this is a little bit of an editorial, but I gave a presentation, and I won't mention which senior department that I gave it to at the end of last year, actually just after Trump had won the election. It was about government communication, and it was talking about where we'd been and where we are now and where we're going in terms of ... This is the gift is that you can now go direct. Build the channels, build the audiences, et cetera, and how traditional channels ... Particularly with Trump.

I think one of the great lessons out of Trump is the media and the effectiveness of media in terms of influence and whether or not that is ... It's a very influential channel, but obviously was seen to be ... They ran 18 months very hard up against Donald Trump, and he still won, so there's got to be a recalibration of where do we see the role and how effective is it in terms of a channel to get a message out?

Advertising the same, fragmentation of channels and all the rest of it. But I remember walking in and thinking ... Everyone was on their phones and on their iPads and I thought ... It was the senior executives and it was a big department. There was a lot of them, and I thought, "Oh, this will be good. No one's going to listen." Fascinated. They were all fascinated because you could see all of these people who were in charge of these large divisions and these large programme areas thinking, "Ah," and it was almost like the light went on thinking, "We can actually embed this capability right at the beginning of our processes so as we're thinking strategically about what we want to achieve, how do we make this happen?" As opposed to communication being, as I call it, the colouring-in department at the end. Get me a brochure. Get me the video. Get me the whatever.

In terms of achieving that, what's some of your advice to the communicators out there who are doing this sort of work? How can you demonstrate to the people who've got the budgets and who've got the leadership positions that this is a very, very powerful way that they can start to help them to achieve those objectives that they're working towards?

Ruth Dewsbury: That's a good question. Case studies I would present immediately, in policy areas that are as close to the ones that you're targeting as possible.

David Pembroke: People like us.

Ruth Dewsbury: People like us. I'm just thinking that if you're ... There is a really strong appetite across government I think to do it now, but there's still a lot of nervousness about the risks attached, so reassuring people that you can manage conversations without massive resource implications is possible and that you can act quickly and responsively. It's not going to require lengthy approval processes. You can trust your communicators, and I think if you start off with a very clear strategy that outlines the objectives that you want to achieve, who you're going to talk to, and you're very clear about what tone and identity you want for the page, then you'll be much more likely to convince them that it's a strategic

David Pembroke: But would you agree with me that that movement is certainly well and truly on?

Ruth Dewsbury: Oh, yeah.

David Pembroke: I think tactically people are opening up channels all over the place, and I think there is still a distance to travel before they are strategic where they are thinking, "Hang on, before we start the doing ..." Because often I find that you come into places and they're doing lots of stuff but there's no understanding of the why and the what and the audience, and they haven't really done the heavy lifting before they've flipped open a few channels and starting pushing whatever out there and they've not really thought too clearly about that.

Ruth Dewsbury: No, that's right.

David Pembroke: But we'll get there. Where is the next stage for you? How do you improve what you're doing at the moment? Twelve month's time ... Sorry. I'll interrupt you and ask you another question. We're sitting here in twelve month's time. What's happened? What's different for you today in twelve months time? What are the changes you've been able to make within your organisation that is helping you to do a better job, or you are doing a demonstrably better job?

Ruth Dewsbury: I think we'd be able to show that our audience would be much, much, much, much larger, and we'd be able to have done some demographic analysis of how those people are and a deep dive into research of not only how their attitudes

are changing but what actions are they taking? We'd need to integrate our strategies much more.

David Pembroke: Integrate with who?

Ruth Dewsbury: We need to integrate across line areas, but also across functions. People do tend to silo not just the issues. There's the age old ... The holy grail is having integrated policies, but we also need to integrate our functions more effectively so that digital service delivery people are joined up with the policy people, and that we can cross promote on each other's channels. We don't see traditional media as being completely different from social media because there's so much interaction between the two, and again similarly with web content. Because people often see these things as discrete activities, and they may have even an audio/visual function that isn't part of their strategic plan.

David Pembroke: So it's really about getting everyone together early, isn't it? It's about really getting the right people in the room, developing a strategy that everyone agrees to, and then implementing, measuring, having your benchmarks, going back and measuring again to see what sort of impacts are taking place, and taking it from there.

Ruth Dewsbury: And working across departments, too. I think there's lots more we could do in terms of talking to each other about shared experiences and best practise and all the rest of it, and also piggybacking on each other's channels, because nobody has sole ownership of any channels these days. They're all shared one way or another. It always amazes me when I go to social media conferences how quickly things change. You think, "Oh, I only went to one six months ago. It's going to be the same old, same old." But no. It's usually completely different. They've moved into completely different areas and there's new research, new channels. Some are on the ebb. Some are on the flow.

David Pembroke: Don't you feel lucky though? I just feel so grateful that I happened to stumble into this career and I happened to stumble into this period where there is so much change, and you do have to stay ... It keeps you alive because you're so engaged in it. There's so much happening and it's so much of a challenge, and ultimately government communication is about you're trying to make communities stronger. You're trying to improve things for people, so there's real mission led stuff that sits behind what we're doing.

Ruth Dewsbury: Yeah that's right, and a lot of it for us is making things available to people.

David Pembroke: Well that's it. There's vast stores of resources and information and expertise, as you say. Even just your department. It's a treasure trove.

Ruth Dewsbury: It is, and a lot of it's hitherto been locked up.

David Pembroke: And making that accessible. Yeah, that's a good point. I haven't thought of it that-

Ruth Dewsbury: It's been locked up and it's been curated internally, but-

David Pembroke: We're having a great time, thank you very much.

Ruth Dewsbury: But a lot of the people out there don't even know what they've got at their fingertips. For example, the citizen science groups around the country.

David Pembroke: You mentioned those ...

Ruth Dewsbury: There's so many people who are passionately and actively engaged in local projects, and they've got access to ... On their phones they can collect data. They can transmit data. They can give photos. There's just so much content that they can generate, but our responsibility at the other side is to make what we've got available for them. So if they're frog watching, they can go and see how their frog watching matches with national databases and whether that particular frog is on the threatened species database. There's so much potential for them to work with us on that.

David Pembroke: That's a really interesting way of thinking about it, isn't it? How do we open up so people can come in, and this whole transparency of government, open government. Anyway, lots to talk about into the future, which we will no doubt talk again. There's a few things there that we could go on, but I'm already a bit out of time looking at the timer over there, so sorry if you ... It's funny how people consume the content sometimes. We've got one of our most dedicated listeners who walks to work, and she likes it to be 30 minutes long, thank you, because when I get to work I want it to be finished.

Ruth Dewsbury: Fair enough.

David Pembroke: So Kylie, sorry! But I'm sure it was worth sticking around. Some interesting things. Really interesting, and thank you very much. Ruth has agreed to join the advisory group who are going to be pushing and pulling and testing and prodding and challenging the content communication project that we have underway with Australian National University in terms of building out that plan, so thank you very much for that. We're putting a good team together of people at a municipal level, state level, federal level, multilateral level, and international governments as well getting involved, so that's going to be great because even as we talk I think you're going to see again how it's going to be of assistance, so that should be a great project for us.

So thanks Ruth for getting involved in that. If you are interested in that research programme, jump online, www.contentgroup.com.au/research. We're going to have a lot more information over the next few months about where we're at

with that, so if you want to stay up to date, please give us your email address. Thank you very much, and thanks for coming in. It's going to be a good year.

Ruth Dewsbury: It will. It'll be very exciting.

David Pembroke: Yeah, lots to do. Lots to do. Thanks again. Good luck with everything over at the Department of Environment. And to you, the audience, thanks very much for turning up once again. I love doing these podcasts as you know. Always so many interesting people to talk to. Have a great week. I'll be back at the same time next week, so for the moment, bye for now.