
InTransition 139: Brian Lee-Archer

Speaker 1: Welcome to In Transition, a program dedicated to the practice of content communication in the public sector. Here is your host, David Pembroke.

David: Hello ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to In Transition, the podcast that examines the practice of content communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke, and thank you very much for joining me once again. Today, we delve into the world of digital government. For those who are in the content space, digital government is fundamental, really, to the way we create value for citizens and stakeholders, and to understand the changes that are come. Today, we speak to Brian Lee-Archer, who is the managing director of government and health industry practice for the global giant, Accenture. They really are a huge company in this space, not only just in government and health industry, but across everywhere, involved in all sorts of projects.

Before Brian was involved in Accenture, he held senior positions at SAP. Interestingly, between 2014-2017, when he was working with SAP, he set up this really interesting institute for digital government. I really do look forward to having that conversation with him about that as well. A distinguished public servant, who spent many, many years working in the government, understanding just exactly how does government relate better and use technology to create value in the community, and also has worked with IBM as well over the years. He joins me in the studio now. Brian, thanks very much for being In Transition.

Brian: Thank you David. Thanks for the opportunity to speak to you and your listeners.

David: You've been involved in this game for a long time, the digital government space. How would you characterise where we are at the moment on this topsy-turvy ride? The reason I say that is I had a presentation yesterday from a colleague who is getting into the artificial intelligence space and showing me the applications of artificial intelligence. We had a great conversation here this morning in the office with Accenture, and my head is still spinning around the capabilities that a giant company like Accenture has. How do we distil all of that and make sense of where digital technology is, and how it's changing the relationships between governments and citizens?

Brian: Look, it's a really good question. I think one of the things to keep in mind with digital is that digital has been around for a long time. As the tech industry, of course, we love to make things sound like everything is always new, and, yeah, we're very good at hyping things up at times. Of course, one of the examples that I highlight to

people is 1969, we put a man on the moon. How did he get there? It was digital technology sitting behind the Apollo program. Digital itself is not new. It's what we can do with it, and how we can leverage it, and how we make use of it that's really starting the change.

I often think back to, again, in the late 1990s, early 2000, around year 2000, we had the phenomenon of E-Government and that was certainly all the rage. Everyone was talking about E-Government, and in the context of what was happening then with the dot-com boom, government as we knew it was going to radically change because of this thing called E-Government. Of course, if we look in 2017, what we expect our governments to do, pretty much the same as what we expect them to do 50 years ago, 100 years ago, protect us, to educate us, to give us good health.

Again, one of my mantras is the fundamentals of government haven't changed. When we say digital government, it's not that there are some magic new form of government out there. Digital just opens up a way of changing the way we can do government regarding getting better policy, and getting better solutions to the problems that have been there for many years.

David: I think, and this podcast really is directed to people who work in communication.

Brian: Yeah.

David: I think, and I'm speaking on behalf of that audience now, that it's unsettling. When you do see this technology, and you do see this in action, and you just think, "How am I going to get on top of this analytics thing?" Artificial intelligence, new technology, smart machines, it's all moving so fast, it's trying to understand which part of it you grab on, and where is it that you can create value, because I know it's a disturbing feature of the world that we're in now that things seem to be moving in such a clip. We want all that value, but sometimes it's hard to grab on the piece that we can decide that that's where we're going to be able to create the value.

Brian: Look, that's the issue is. You used that word value, because the question you need to be asking yourself, where is value being created? Now, because there's lots of digital technology out there. It is, it's coming at us like a fire hose of all these different technologies. As I said before, going back to the fundamentals of what does government need to do, and back to what's the real business problem, and then how can I take it ... Which technologies are appropriate, which ones are mature, which ones are at the right level of maturity that I can actually address a real business problem.

Again, from the tech industry point of view, there's a tendency to say, "Here is artificial intelligence. Here is machine learning, here is Internet of Things. What's wrong with you, you should be using this," whereas you just got to back and say, "Well, no, I have a business problem. I've got to try and get better health outcomes, or I've got to try and secure the nation's borders." Going back to those basic principles of looking at the business problem, and then seeing what technologies could add value, or help me add value in solving that problem.

This is where the analytics side though becomes very important, because it helps with forming the evidence base. If you think about the concept evidence-based management, which again is, I think, is a very important principles. Getting better data, better insight into information that can actually help inform the policy process, so that the interventions could be digital, or they could in fact be quite manual. Sometimes, perhaps the best solution is that we've worked out that there's a cohort of people, that the best way we can service their needs, send somebody at the ground, talk to them.

David: Yeah.

Brian: We've used digital, and we've used analytics to work out or predict, this is the cohort of people that that's the most effective intervention for. That's a good use of digital.

David: Right.

Brian: In fact, good old fashioned face-to-face talking-

David: Was the outcome.

Brian: Was the outcome.

David: Yeah. What about analytics capabilities and those applications? How do you view those at the moment? How comprehensive are they, and how widespread are those skills?

Brian: Look, this is growing very fast. I think one of the challenges is the ... I think it's an issue for government, is about transparency, because there is a lot of concerns, in terms of how we're using all this data and information. In using information, there is great opportunity, but with that comes risk. You know what I mean? As we go down this digital path, and as we start make better use of data and information, it's not risk-free. I think we need-

David: What do you mean by that?

Brian: In terms of, it's like anything, if we put all this data together ... If I go back, a simple example, you think about in the health sector, where we've, in terms of the human genome and DNA, science is basically giving us incredible insight into individuals. You can do a DNA test and you can map all your genes, and you can get an indication of likelihood of or risk factors in terms of particular diseases. Now, as an individual, you'll sort of thing, "Well, that's fantastic," and you can take some preventative strategies, but you wouldn't want that in the hands of your life insurance company or even maybe your health insurance company or even your employer.

Here we have, we're getting great insight from all this information that you personally could get great value from, and as a society, we could get collective value, but there are risks. We have to then look at the moral and ethical challenges that arise from how we use this data. I think that's the challenge now, is because as we go deeper and deeper, and we like to think our governments, and certainly, we're very fortunate here in Australia, we have good government, that this data and information will be used for good purposes, but, of course, there's always a potential dark side. It could be used against us, or used in a way that may not be in what we think is our best interest.

David: How does government get the social licence then to access and analyse data at a time when trust in institutions such as government globally is challenged?

Brian: You mentioned that word trust. Yeah, this is a real dilemma, because, as we say, public trust is falling in many different dimensions. An example I look at is if you think about what happened in the US with the National Security Agency and the Eric Snowden, and, of course, what you saw happen there was he lifted the lid on what was happening behind the scenes with a lot of data collection. Now, of course, most of us would look at it and say, "Yeah, but the fact that the NSA is doing a very important job, protecting the nation. We want to have an agency like that. It's good to know that our governments are doing that sort of thing to protect us," but what I think Snowden revealed was that as a public, we didn't understand or appreciate how or what was being done, and there's a lack of transparency.

I think that's the question ... The point then is we have to have a lot more transparency. Now, that will again present another challenge, because, of course, certainly at national security level, there's going to be a limit to how much transparency, because if the bad guys know what you're looking for, then they can work around the system. I think that's the point here, and this is where it comes, obviously, to your listeners, is around this communication, to get that trust back. As we start to take advantage of these technologies, use this data, we have to be very upfront about what's the value that we are delivering by doing this. Then identify,

these are some of the risks that come with that, but here's how we are mitigating those risks.

There's three parts to it, the value, the risk, and then showing you're mitigating it. If you just try and say, "This is all good," and focus on the good side, and don't address the other side, then people will be very sceptical because of that trust issue. I think, yeah, transparency, I think that's ... If there's one word in terms of how we try and build that trust back is saying, "Yeah, do good things with this data, but tell us what you're doing and how you're doing it."

David: Isn't it counterintuitive, really, around much of public sector culture is that transparency is a difficult thing, because they, and I supposed this is a broad generalisation, I suppose, but the government of the day, the minister, protection of the minister's interests, and decision-making made, and reasons that have been there to make decisions, it's often a very, very complex cocktail that goes into, ultimately, a policy or program or regulatory decision? The reflexive nature is maybe we don't really want to show them how we're making these sausages, but what you're saying is to rebuild the trust, you're going to have to show how the sausages are being made.

Brian: You do, and I think going back to the point I made earlier about evidence-based management, is I think it's incumbent upon us to develop that evidence-based. The evidence-based covers several criteria, some of which is personal experience and professional expertise. That's the component of evidence-based management component, as well as scientific literature, and your own data, and doing stakeholder consultation.

The decision-maker, okay, may then, for a variety of reasons, decide to do one thing or another. That's the political process. It's hard to, sometimes, understand how that political process works, but as a minimum, you want to be able to say that there was the evidence that was presented. The decision, if they want to ... Sometimes, there may be good reasons why they say, "Well, this won't be as transparent as, perhaps, everyone would like," but there's an evidence-based to say, "That's why we did it."

When it come to the public scrutiny or accountability, they can at least demonstrate that there was good process in making those decisions, as opposed to just a "Well, we don't think the public have a right to know this, and so we're just not going to keep them informed." What was the evidence for making those decisions?

David: Yeah.

Brian: Yeah, because with digital, these things are moving much faster, so those decision-making cycles, of course, are much shorter in terms of getting the evidence, and being able to present it. Some people tend to think that when you talk about evidence-based management, it implies time, a lengthy time. We haven't got time to do all that consultation and evidence gathering. Again, with digital technologies and whatever, it is possible to be able to at least form some sort of evidence-based beyond just "This is what I think or feel" in very short periods of time, because that's the advantage of having all this data online available in data stores and whatever.

David: How well do you believe government is managing that challenge around taking the good of digital, that ability to gather evidence, but to manage those quicker cycles? Again, government is not known for its agility. How is it going? I suppose, it's very hard to say, but let's just talk about, say, the Australian government, how do you believe they're performing at the moment in terms of being able to extract value from the digital transformation?

Brian: I think there is certainly good examples of some very good performance. I think it's like anything. If you look across the board, there will be some parts are doing extremely well, other parts maybe not moving quite as quickly. Generally, across the board, and certainly my experience, I've worked all around the world in my times at SAP and IBM, having opportunity to see lots of different governments in operation. I always get reminded when I do work outside Australia to say, "Actually, what's happening here is pretty good. We are doing a good job," but where we're challenged, the challenges are, and it comes down the old bogey, I suppose for all Australian governments has been, say, federal-state ... Getting the federal-state cooperation.

David: Yeah.

Brian: Once we've mastered that ability to be able to exchange information between our federal and state agencies, I think that's when we're really starting to make some real advances on some of these more wicked, say, social problems that we're dealing with and whatever, because often it's a separation between, say, some data at a federal data, some to the state. It's not easy sometimes to bring those together, and for good reasons. There's important privacy and data protection legislation that has to be worked through, and it takes time.

David: Surely they can make some advances faster than they are at the moment, because if I'm, for example, in South Australia, or New South Wales, really, shouldn't my data protection rights be the same? I just live in a different part of Australia.

Brian: I suppose it's a bit like rail gauges, isn't it? Yeah.

David: Well, I suppose the point is that the rail gauge question was a long time ago. Why are we still have those discussion, cross-jurisdictional discussions 100 years after the fact?

Brian: Yeah. Oh, look, yeah, I wish there was an easy answer to that. I think what's happening is, in a way, just exposes those same sorts of issues, and it just comes down to how do we get people sitting in a room and working these things through. I think there is a much greater recognition, and there are some great initiatives going on, let's say, through the Digital Transformation Agency, through the PM&C apart from the Prime Minister and Cabinet, which are looking very clearly. Productivity Commission, of course, is due to release a report very soon on this whole question of data and data sharing and whatever. It's recognised.

David: Yeah.

Brian: I mean, we know it's an issue, and where-

David: Plenty of talking.

Brian: It's just a matter of having to work through the, obviously, the political processes and whatever. This is the thing. It's not a technology issue. The technologies-

David: Waiting at the gate.

Brian: The technology is waiting at the gate, but at the same time, I think it's important that the political processes and public are involved in this, and these are important check and balance. As an IT industry, for the first 40, 50 years of the IT industry, and we all had it pretty good, because everything that IT did, we looked at and said, "That's marvellous. This is all great. This is all fantastic." In a way, it was taking us onwards and upwards, but we're now reaching a point, and it is because of things like with data and whatever, we're reaching a point where, oh, hang on, we need to just stop a minute and reflect, and say, "Is this taking us exactly where we want to go, or are we ready to where it's potentially taking us?"

Again, as some of these new technologies like artificial intelligence march forward, I think it's incumbent upon from a political level through to society that we do stop and think and reflect, and have that opportunity to really, say, guide where do we want this to go, and have some sort of impact, influence on it, and not just to be waiting for the IT industry to say, "You take us wherever you want us to."

David: Yeah. This podcast is really for people working in communications, what role can they play in, say, facilitating this discussion in terms of the content piece that can be

that atomic particle that's going to spark the insight, the debate the discussion that's going to lead to the clarity, hopefully, that enables society to move forward?

Brian: Well, I think what people in government communications need to do is be rational about some of these debates and arguments. I mean, again, thinking from a tech industry point of view, remembering where it's coming from, it's about push. This technology, you should all be doing it. You should all be using it. It's going to take over the world in terms of the future of work question. Look, there's a self-interest in promoting that these things are perhaps moving a lot faster, more rapidly than perhaps they really are.

David: This is an anxiety-inducing-

Brian: It does, yeah.

David: ... That I find in my role is that you just think, "God, I'm just a hack journo who likes to write stories," trying to deal with it, but at the same time, wanting to create the value. How do you resist that? If you can't do this, then you struggle sometimes trying to understand where that value piece is and what you can do.

Brian: I said, I think that's where we look to our governments, and we look to them to give that reassurance. I mean, these times of changing times and troubled times and whatever, I mean, it is that stability of leadership that can come from government to say, "Hey, yes, things are changing, and the workforce and industry and whatever is going to experience lots of change, but at the same time, we're here to protect you." I mean, as the governments, and we look to our governments to make sure there will be programs in place, or there will be policies in place that say, "Well, as these technologies come in, there will be change, and yet, we have policies and programs that will support us."

David: Yeah, well-articulated, well-thought through.

Brian: Yeah, as opposed to just, in a way, we know about the deer in the headlights and letting the message come through, we're all going to be replaced by robots, and they're not having a response to that.

David: Yeah.

Brian: Again, that's a message coming from the tech industry. I think we have to stand up and say, "Well, that's not what we, perhaps, want," and we need to be able to have a clear message saying, "Well, we accept that this technology is coming and it can do great things for us, but we're not just going to stand here, roll over and say, 'Take over for me.'"

David: Sure. Now, you're an experienced digital expert in government. As you say, worked around the world, worked in all the big companies, what do you expect from the communications professionals working with and for government to assist you with when you're going about your projects?

Brian: I think what we're looking for, again, is to get people to think about, understanding those, as I said, some of those moral and ethical questions that come up.

David: So context?

Brian: Context.

David: You're looking for someone to come in and say, perhaps, the view of the citizen, to be able to bring it to a conversation to say, "Look, we know or we understand from the data that this is really where people's attitudes are at."

Brian: Yeah, and it's helping people along the journey. I mean, I see our attitudes to the data and how in privacy and all these things. It is like a social change movement. If you think about how we thought about privacy and the use of our data 20 years ago as a society versus how we see it now, I mean, it's definitely moved in terms of just the way we gladly will share data about ourselves on social media networks and whatever.

Everybody is not moving at the same pace. Again, we need to respect that some people are right out there, and really want to embrace these sorts of technologies, but there are other people who still want to go slow or for a variety of reasons either, just through the digital exclusion argument are not able to engage. It's important then that, again, as we design services that we are respecting that there are people at different stages of this journey.

David: Yeah.

Brian: I think then again, from a communications point of view, it's ... Yeah, look this might be the trend. This is the direction. This is where things are moving, but we're-

David: We're not yet.

Brian: There's something here for everyone, and we understand that some of you may not want to go down this path.

David: Yeah.

Brian: The point of view of, say, from services point of view, say, go back to health again, there's lots of advantages in terms of being able to share your health information amongst the health network, my health record, which next year will be moving to an opt-out, and some people will wallop, but some people will want to opt out, because I say, "Well, for good reasons, I don't believe in this."

Of course, that means that the service that they might get may be slightly different, because if you're in a situation where your record is being shared amongst the health professionals, that's great. I don't have the different people in the health system my story over and over again, but someone else might decide, "I'm happy to do that, because I don't want that shared." That will be their choice. I think that's, again, from the communications point of view is letting people know, you do have a choice, and you should have a choice. It's not something that you have to do it.

David: Yeah.

Brian: I think one of the great advantages of digital is being able to offer choice. We don't have to be one size fits all anymore. We can actually understand, and this is where analytics and data comes in, being able to understand people's needs, and with that, understand the context of a situation, and then hopefully then target the service intervention that fits those needs. Again, sometimes that might be they want to fill in a form, or want to do it quite manually, that's okay.

David: Really, I think what you're suggesting though from a communications professional point of view in this time of massive digital transformation that it's certainly not an opt out for a comms professional to not understand and have to know data.

Brian: Oh, absolutely.

David: They have to be able to look for data. Really, your advice I'm taking would be to communications professionals, improve your data skills or your analytical skills perhaps.

Brian: Yeah. Look, in terms of people aspect, the jobs of the future and whatever, the jobs of the future will be the ones and the people, I suppose, who will do well and succeed will be those who understands a bit about data, understand the principles of data science, understand some of the legal issues around ... There's ethical and moral questions that will come up. It'll be a blend of skills from a whole range of current disciplines. Those people who are able to cross those sorts of boundaries, I think they would be very valuable in tomorrow's market, as opposed to being a "Okay, I'm good on the data, but I actually don't understand any of the context of the business I'm looking at."

David: Right.

Brian: You're going to have to blend a range of skills across what we traditionally see now as quite siloed disciplines.

David: Yeah, because, traditionally, in communications you've got your creative types who like to create, tell stories, maybe create graphics and imagery. Often, they've gone into that side of the world, because they don't like mathematics. They don't want to be involved in it. Really, the digital future really says, unfortunately, or fortunately, you're going to have to do something about this if you want to stay relevant, which is really the piece, isn't it?

Brian: It is, but that doesn't mean you have to be an expert or a-

David: PhD, yeah, sure.

Brian: ... PhD on these things. Think about it, it's a bit like, you don't have to add up anymore. You just get a calculator to do it. I mean, some of the things around these technologies is you don't necessarily will need to know how I do it.

David: Yeah, how the algorithm was programmed, you just need to know how to be able to analyse.

Brian: Hell yeah, and understand where these things are coming from. I mean, there's a term that one of our mutual colleagues at the ANU was talking about the other day was explainable artificial intelligence.

David: Yeah.

Brian: This is something, again, that I think is quite important as we start to use more machines in, say, decision-making or getting involved in guiding decisions using algorithms and whatever. How then does the human expert explain to the citizens, and then as we go up the line, up to the minister and the government, they need to be able to explain what's going on.

David: Yeah.

Brian: We need to be able to give a rational explanation of why the service offer for one person or one cohort was this direction, and then another person or cohort with another direction, we just can't get there and say, "Oh, the machine did it."

David: Yeah.

Brian: We have to be able to have a ... Again, we need to be able to give a good reasoning behind how and why this is being done. We don't actually have to explain the algorithm. We'll leave that to the mathematicians.

David: Look, I think that's a particular strength of communications people is that sense of empathetic understanding of action, perhaps, of data, to be able to explain or understand, and then respond with explanation, because, to me, that is the role of the public sector communicator. It may be the role of the elected official to persuade, but it is the role of the government and public sector communicator to explain.

Brian: Yes.

David: Their job is to explain why around the policy and the elements of the program and the benefits that may be realised as the result of that. I don't know. I always come back to this sense of overwhelming anxiety, how do I keep up? What's your advice to me? I'm lying on the couch now. Dr. Brian, tell me how do I become a little bit more confident that this isn't just going to take me off in a place where I'm so unsettled that I really can't create that value, because I do have some value to give, but I'm so spooked by Accenture coming in and showing whatever it is that I perhaps don't feel comfortable or confident enough to be able to create value?

Brian: Yeah. Lying on the couch, yeah. Sometimes that's a good place to be. Actually, I'm just using that analogy. I mean, we do have to think. We do have to sit back and reflect a little bit on what it does mean for us. Look, in some respects-

David: It's interesting you say that, because I think that there would be a lot of people who's listening to this podcast now who would say, "Think, time to think, I don't have time to think because I've got too many things to do."

Brian: Yeah, and I think it comes back to that question of where is value created, and of course, value is then part of all, then how do I, taking, say, a citizen or a customer type perspective is ... What we're seeing in the IT industry is very much a strong focus on, actually, how do I really design for delighting or pleasing or giving great experiences to the people I'm there to serve. That becomes my design paradigm. That's what I'm trying to do. Then using that then can guide then how I can behave in the future. If I'm just looking at it as a traditional process that's just, I'm just here processing and just going through the motions, then of course, this is very confronting.

David: Very unsettling, yeah.

Brian: If I put myself-

David: Okay.

Brian: When I'm lying on the couch and I'm thinking about what can I do in my role as a communications expert that's going to really delight or please or whatever the consumers or the people I'm here to serve?

David: Yeah. I think that's a great perspective, because then once you've started from that sense of purpose and mission and clarity about what it is that you're trying to do, then the tools become the tools, other than the other way around, where they're driving you.

Brian: You've hit the nail in the head there with the word tools. All these digital, they are just, are new sets of tools. They're pretty funky and cool in some times, but they are tools.

David: Yeah.

Brian: Like anything, it's the people who are running them and people who are using the brain power. As I said, I think there's still a role for us. Certainly for-

David: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Brian: I don't think we're redundant yet, far from it.

David: No. Again, and from a communications professional's point of view, I think it's a long way away from the machines being able to produce that empathetic beautiful content story-led that's going to connect with the heart. I think there's the emotional intelligence yet sitting in machines is going to allow them to do that. I know they keep telling us that it's coming, but who knows? Who knows when?

Brian: Who knows when? Again, I think there is a very important narrative to be developed, which is how do we bring the population along with all this change.

David: Yeah.

Brian: As I said, communications people are saying they're being worried. Well, of course, people, the Australian public can do this. How government gets its message out there and all the good work that it does across the whole range of programs that it offers, yeah, it needs to get that message out there that it's doing a good job.

David: Well, indeed it is. I think that's the other point, isn't it, and this is where the content communication method and approach kicks in, is the fact that digital has now given us the capability for government to be a publisher. They can create their own content, distribute, curate, and then measure the impacts of what they're doing. I think that's an exciting new area for content communication professionals in government who can take advantage of these new digital tools to be able to have more effect and more impact, and to create those delightful experiences that you mentioned before. It's not all bad.

Brian: No, it's not.

David: It's not all freakish.

Brian: No. Look, and as I said, having the privilege over the years to visit all around the world, as I said, whenever you arrive back at Sydney or Melbourne Airport, you always just tap yourself and-

David: Kiss the ground.

Brian: Kiss the ground, and say, "We are so lucky here." I think we're well-positioned, and government is, it's aware of the issues. It's investing. It is conscious of the fact that it needs to move with the times in the digital world. I think the future is hard to predict, but I think as a country, and certainly from our government, we'll be up there with it.

David: Yup, indeed. Okay, Brian, thank you very much for coming in and having a conversation with me today. That's really interesting stuff. I hope that people listening take some encouragement, particularly from the end. Maybe midway through, they're a bit anxious like me, but it is an interesting time, and I don't think we can get too far ahead of ourselves. There's that catastrophic thinking that sometimes can take over, where you just think, "God if this happens, and this happens, and this happens, and this happens, I won't get out of bed," whereas today is today, today, so get out there.

Put the citizen at the centre of everything that you're doing, imagine that delightful experience, and then do whatever you possibly can with your colleagues, with your technology colleagues, with your program colleagues, with your policy colleagues, with whoever it is to come together collaboratively to try to design best practice and take advantage of the fact that we can now publish great content to strengthen communities and improve the well-being of citizens.

Brian: There's great stories out there. The more great stories we get out there, the better.

David: Yeah, well, this is the point. I think there are so many stories. 99% of what government does is you can disagree with them, and that's what the ballot box is for. You can go and cast your vote one way or the other, but most of the intention of, I think, all policy is really to try to improve society. It's not they're trying to do anything other than improve things. Yeah, I think we should be encouraged by that, and get out and tell more stories, because I think that will have a great impact. Brian Lee-Archer from Accenture, thank you very much, and to you the audience, thank you for coming back once again, and I will be back at the same time next week. For the moment, it's bye for now.

Speaker 1: You've been listening to In Transition, the program dedicated to the practice of content communication in the public sector. For more, visit us at contentgroup.com.au.