
In Transition Podcast Ep 06 – Steve Lewis

David Pembroke: Hello Ladies and Gentlemen and welcome to episode 6 of In Transition - the podcast that explores the practice of content marketing in Government. My name is David Pembroke, thanks for joining me.

Content marketing is a strategic business process that involves the creation, curation and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content designed to meet the needs of a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen or stakeholder action.

So, to today's guest. I will declare an interest upfront. He is an old friend of mine and indeed he's kind enough to let me stay in his holiday house on the NSW South Coast in Australia coast every year. He's also one of the country's longest serving political journalists, having worked as senior correspondent in the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery for News Limited and The Australian newspaper.

He's also an author of a bestselling political thriller, The Marmalade Files, which is soon to be turned into a film and he is the serving senior vice president of the National Press Club in Canberra. His name is Steve Lewis, he's also now a consultant to Newgate Communication and he joins me now.

Steve Lewis, thanks very much for being in Transition.

Steve Lewis: David, great to be here.

David Pembroke: Fantastic. Listen, I've invited you along today because our audience of government communicators and content marketers, really, are always intrigued with the media as a primary channel to reach the public. What's your view of the current influence of the media on government communication?

Steve Lewis: Media have always been very influential in terms of government communications. The media is changing. We've seen enormous change in the media, in the Canberra Press Gallery. What that means is that we've seen a number of specialist online reporters, people who are working in the digital media, less people working in the so-called old media. It means that the days of getting in the newsroom at 10am or 11am, or even later, are long gone. We've seen the rise of 24/7 social media and all that's had an enormous impact on the media landscape.

But I think the fundamentals still count for an enormous amount that governments and indeed oppositions and cross-bench senators rely upon the media as a whole to get that message out, to disseminate the message. Just today, we've seen our prime minister, Tony Abbott, on Channel Nine this morning on the high-rating Today Show and I heard Joe Hockey being interviewed by Fran Kelly on the ABC so, traditional media, old media if you want to call it that, but they're still very much the very important forums that politicians will use to get their message out.

It's no different whether you're the prime minister of Australia or whether you're working in a communications space in an outlying smaller agency in the Commonwealth bureaucracy, you are relying, of course, on media in all its forms to get that message out. The trick, of course, is to be able to communicate sensibly, wisely, properly that particular message so I think that's ... gee, that's a debate, mate, that would hours to have.

David Pembroke: We've got plenty of time so let's see how we go, but is that influence diminishing?

Steve Lewis: Look, it's the \$64 question. Has social media, for instance, taken over as a more influential platform, Twitter, Facebook, etc, than say, appearing on Channel Nine or going on Fran Kelly's show? I would argue that while social media is very influential and I'm certainly not for one moment downplaying Twitter or Facebook or the use of those particular vehicles, I still think that the traditional media is, not probably, but is the vehicle that politicians, particularly senior politicians, use to try and influence public opinion and particularly to set the agenda for the day or for the period with particular messages.

Twitter and Facebook are very, very important and influential and help disseminate that particular message, particularly, I guess, to younger audiences and audiences that might not be listening to Fran Kelly at 7:10am in the morning. But I still think that traditional media, radio, television and the newspapers, particularly with this government, the News Limited newspapers, be it The Australian or the Daily Telegraph, are still the vehicles by which governments rely upon to influence public opinion.

I'll give you one example, if I may. [Inaudible 05:55] the Daily Telegraph. I worked for the Tele for a number of years. Paul Whittaker, the editor, decided a year, two years ago that he was going to back a second airport for Sydney, and we saw the government under Tony Abbott announce a second airport for Sydney early this year. Now I declare an interest. We

are working with Sydney Airport which, of course, has a first right of refusal.

But putting all that to one side, I don't think we'd have a second airport being proposed for Western Sydney unless the Daily Telegraph got in behind and anyone can go and have a look at the campaign they ran and are running for a second airport, they're running competitions now on what the name should be, that second airport would not have occurred if the Telegraph had decided not to support that. So there is an example where an old-fashioned newspaper has set the agenda and government has responded by announcing a second airport which, you and I know, has been floating around in the political ether for what, three, four, five bloody [inaudible 06:59] ...

David Pembroke: A long time.

Steve Lewis: ... a long time.

David Pembroke: But let me challenge you with the words and the sentiment expressed by the Victorian Labor Party's marginal seats campaigner at the recent state election in Victoria where he said that their strategy was to work face-to-face on the ground with campaigners, meeting with people, going directly to those whose vote counted and they are the swinging voters in the marginal electorates.

He said, "We didn't want to win the day as far as the media was concerned and we didn't care that the major newspapers editorialized against us because we communicated face-to-face with those that mattered." So they, in fact, decided that they were going to go in the opposite direction and we're able to run what was effectively a content marketing campaign to get the result and win the election.

Steve Lewis: Absolutely and I thought it was very interesting. In the Victorian election, the result that went Labor's way on the weekend will it be seen as a watershed in Australian politics in terms of elections that were the tactics by the winning side, were different to that that's been used in the past? I'm not sure. I'm not an expert on that election.

But you're right. I do note that The Age and the Herald Sun both editorialized in favour of Denis Napthine being re-elected, it didn't work. What did that tell you? It tells you that people don't read editorials or don't take much notice of editorials at the very least.

David Pembroke: But the editorials really are a summation of an editorial line that you've seen published over throughout the election. They're not just pulled out of nowhere.

Steve Lewis: No. That's right. That's right, and I'm not trying to diminish or play down the campaign strategy that Labor adopted. I don't know enough about it, I don't know how much they relied upon digital media, social media to where [crosstalk 08:49] ...

David Pembroke: I think a lot of it was face-to-face, so I think they used people on the ground, talking to people, clearly identifying using ...

Steve Lewis: That's the best media, isn't it?

David Pembroke: Oh, it is.

Steve Lewis: That's the best way. If you can go out and speak face-to-face to people and win the political debate, win their vote, that's what it's all about at the end of the day. It's about winning their vote. Fantastic.

And they put a lot of resources. I know the unions put a lot of resources into getting people out in the field to say, "Vote one Labor, get rid of this Napthine government, they're a state facsimile of the Abbott Government, etc, etc." Now, I'm sure in the wash-up, there'll be some serious analysis and I'm sure in the wash-up there will be a considered view that that played an important role. It wouldn't be the first election where newspapers have editorialized for one party and they haven't won so I'm not sure how much that tells us about the influence of traditional media.

That said, I'm not trying to suggest that traditional media has the same level of influence that it had 30, 20, 10 years ago. I accept the landscape is changing and I accept that more and more, particularly younger people, are less and less reading newspapers or watching television, traditional television. They're watching and getting their news and their information through their PDAs and their iPhones and the rest of it. They're streaming stuff through NetFlix. They're getting Game of Thrones before it even arrives in Australia. They're relying less on the traditional media. The free-to-air stations that were so dominant for so long are losing their clout. There's no doubt about that.

David Pembroke: What about outside of the political context of an election where a government is seeking to explain to people the benefits of their programs and why they have taken certain decisions? If that is, in fact, the changing

landscape in terms of technology and the way content is created, distributed and consumed, what then, in your view, is the opportunity for government communication, organizations, departments, divisions to take advantage of that so as that they can, in fact, go direct to citizens to explain the policies of the government of the day?

Steve Lewis:

That's a very good question and a very important issue. We are seeing, I think, more and more government agencies right across the sphere, particularly at a federal level, and that's where my expertise is, it's not so much at the state level, but we're seeing some, I think, innovative use of podcast, of web-based broadcast where people are getting messages out. Organizations like NDIS, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, it's using some very innovative uses of the web to get the messages out to stakeholders, to people who may be recipients or beneficiaries, if you like, of NDIS services. I've seen some really good use of the web there.

We're seeing some of the biggest government agencies across the board, particularly those that have got a strong interaction with the public, reach out to stakeholders, whether it's the tax office or Centrelink or other big government agencies, using digital media online services to reach out and put the CEO or key players there to deliver these particular messages.

I think that is certainly the case that we're seeing much more important or appropriate use of those services, particularly the web and digitization has allowed us to basically provide that particular service, and that's a great thing. It's probably far more interactive and it's probably delivering to people the sorts of services and interaction, importantly, that they want.

I guess the downside is that a lot of people like to still have that face-to-face contact, particularly if they've got a problem with their welfare payments or their tax or whatever the case might be.

I know the tax office, for instance, are now offering a service to small business where you can log on and go into the tax office portal and find out if you've got particular issues. You're a small business. You're running a corner shop. You're working all day, you close up the shop, and you're trying to do your accounting at 8:00 at night. You've got a question for the tax office. Several years ago, you wouldn't have any luck, but now there's I know a small business service available that allows you access to that. That's, I guess, a sensible use of that web-based service that the tax office has put in place.

David Pembroke: If I could draw then, perhaps, on your long experience as a journalist, as a content creator, what would your advice be to those government communicators who are now going to be expected to create useful, relevant, valuable content? What's the secret? What's the secret to making really good content?

Steve Lewis: It's a great question. From a journalist's point of view, you're always wanting to tell a story, a bold story, you're wanting cut-through, you're wanting cut-through. Whether you're trying to put out a message on behalf of the department, on behalf of a minister, on behalf of some particular agency, you want cut-through so how do you achieve that? That's the \$64 question.

I would imagine there's a lot of former journalists who are around the place now working in government agencies. I know there are. My message to them would be you got to really think about the message you're trying to send out. You have to recognize that journalists are pressed for time more than ever. They don't have the luxury of getting a story and being able to spend all day on it, basically, because of the demands of the job.

What does that mean? It means that basically I think it puts greater demand on those working in government agencies to ensure that the message has got as much cut-through as possible. It's the age-old balance, I guess, of wanting to be strategic and make sure that you just don't put out messages on everything that's going on, but you're far more strategic and you might hold back on certain messages because they're not really that important. In other words, go for quality, rather than quantity.

But make sure when you've got a message that you want to deliver, make it as cut-through as possible. I guess put yourself in the shoes of the journalist who is receiving it to say, is there anything in there that's going to seriously tweak their interest or is it a bit bland, a bit ... [inaudible 15:58] thing that you could hold back. Are you doing it just to get your KPIs up? Are you doing it because there's a significant message in there that needs to be widely disseminated?

David Pembroke: Perhaps what I'm asking, really, is not so much pitching that story to the media, which remains as important, but I'm talking about creating that story and going direct to your audience. Is there a rule of thumb that you used to follow as a journalist about what are the things that needed to be in this story to really pass your test before you are happy enough to send it on to the subeditors?

Steve Lewis:

Sure. A lot of the stories that I did when I was working over, what, 20-something years in the press corps, a lot of that was I guess more on investigative stuff, so I was basically trying to delve beneath the front-of-house PR machine and actually try and dip into it so I was probably fairly atypical, but I think there are many journalists, certainly nowadays, who are doing that investigative work and, yeah, the Commonwealth which spends billions of dollars each year, there aren't many journalists who are prepared to spend the time, who are determined enough, persistent enough and know where to look to pursue those sorts of stories. That makes it a bit of a challenge.

Journalists want good stories that they know they're going to be able to sell to their news desk so what are you looking for? You're wanting stories that have some bite, you're wanting stories that have ... always after an exclusive. You look at The Australian newspaper. Most days it's got five exclusives on the front page. How many of those are legitimate exclusives? Another question. But as a journo, you're always wanting to break stories. You always want to get stories that other people don't have.

That means from a government communications point of view, if you've got a big story or a strategic story, it may make better sense for you to say, "I'm going to give this story to The Financial Review, give it to Phil Coorey as an exclusive because I know that he's more likely to then push that to be on the front page." If I give that out to everybody, everyone's going to look at it and go, "Well, it's a general press release." It's going to end up on page six or page eight sort of thing. From a journalist's point of view, you're looking for exclusives, you're looking for stories that you know are going to resonate and sometimes, you're also looking for just a quirky sort of story.

Sometimes there's nothing better than getting a nice, quirky, even a story that's nice human interest or a story that's got a positive angle to it. I know there's a bit of a cliché that journalists only look for scandal and they're always looking to demonize governments and those in authority. They should be holding those people to account, but good journalists are also looking for the quirky story, the bit of color and movement and something maybe even a bit of human interest as well because those stories often are the ones that have as much resonance as your big investigative breakthrough.

David Pembroke:

What about the increasing importance of visual content, be it on a social channel or even in a video context, at an event, there's many, many ways that we can receive visual content. What's your views about the

emerging importance of making sure that you're supporting your story with the appropriate imagery?

Steve Lewis: There's no doubt that video imagery has emerged over the last number of years, a small number of years, as a very important tool and a very important component of the media offering. You now have specialized video journalists working, say, in the Canberra Press Gallery, working in the big media houses in Sydney and Melbourne, whereas several years ago, you didn't have that. Several years ago, say, print journalists might have a bit of a side interest in video and might do a bit of video on the side, but you now have specialist video journalists so it is really important.

I'm not sure that it's emerged to the extent that I thought it might have, as dominant as I thought several years ago it might emerge. In other words, it seems to me that print is still very much in terms of the newspapers or the news outlets that I read and I read a lot of the news outlets. I read News Limited, Fairfax, the ABC, I read on a regular basis the Guardian and I read more recent portals like the New Daily which I do some writing for, Crikey, some of those other portals. I'm not sure that video has become as dominant or influential in the telling of a story as I thought it might be. I'm not sure whether or not I'm just ...

David Pembroke: What's the reason for that?

Steve Lewis: I'm not sure. That's a really interesting point.

David Pembroke: Is it because it's complicated?

Steve Lewis: It's complicated, it's expensive, it's difficult to do. I'm know News Limited had a small army of video journalists several years ago, I'm not sure that small army of video journalists are still in existence.

David Pembroke: It's a platoon.

Steve Lewis: Yeah, it might be, but they might have hit a hamburger. No. I'm not sure that there's that many left. My daughter, Rosie, was working as a video journalist. She worked at The Australian and at News Limited in Sydney and when she joined, there was a small team and ended up she was the last remaining video journalist. She's now working in Canberra in print, but she got all those video skills. I'm not downplaying the importance of video. I think video can tell a story like nothing else as can a good photograph. It can tell a story much better than words can often. I'm not sure what the reason is.

One of the things we have seen is the rise of social media and so many websites and we've seen the rise of citizen journalists where people can go out and ... oh, just before I came here, I don't know, but I was looking at a silly little video of a brown snake and an old bloke came by and kicked him in the head a few times. It was just this quirky video and it was on one of the mainstream websites. It just took my fancy and I was thinking, someone's taken that and they've sent it in and it's now up on a website.

Citizen journalist is becoming very important. Some might say very powerful. It means that those in authority are under more scrutiny than ever before. But I'm not sure that the professional journalist is putting down the pen and picking up the video camera to the extent that I thought that might occur several years ago. Maybe I'm wrong, and I haven't worked in a newsroom fulltime for a year or so, but my sense is when I walk around the Press Gallery at least, there's not the number of people with video cameras doing the work that I thought they might have been.

David Pembroke: As we look to the future, things are changing quickly, and the rise of the citizen journalist, the opportunity for everyone to actually be a publisher now, where do you see it changing, particularly for those people who are working in government communication? Where are the opportunities for them to be more effective in their work on a daily basis and where do you think the industry more broadly is going in the next two to three years?

Steve Lewis: That's a really, really good question. We've been talking a bit about this, but I think if I was working in government communications, I'd be obviously utilizing all the latest technologies. I'd be looking for those opportunities to tell a story about the work that the agency does in a more innovative way.

David Pembroke: A bold way. [Crosstalk 24:11] It's a word that you used earlier, to be a bit braver, to be a bit bolder.

Steve Lewis: It's cut through. It's cut through.

I guess there's two aspects to it. One is, government agencies have to provide advice. The big agencies in social welfare and health and those sorts of areas, they have to provide advice to people en masse. If you look at some of these government websites, they're massive and they've got all these subportals and they're providing huge amounts of information and most of it is fairly straightforward. You click on a

website, you go to a drop-down menu, you go there and you go to the particular area you're interested in.

But, as I said, NDIS or those agencies that are being more creative or more innovative and perhaps being a bit more cut-through are basically relying on video and new technologies to tell the story and I suspect, without having any direct knowledge, that they're probably getting better results. They're probably getting those messages out.

There's so much information available. There's more information than ever before and so many different forms and it makes it harder to get that message through, to get that cut-through message so increasingly, you have to basically be ... my advice would be for everyone, basically, you got to be very strategic, you got to aim for the cut-through, you got to aim to be bold, you got to aim to be innovative. If your KPI is just putting out five press releases a day in whatever form, that, to me, is bad communications because I can guarantee you 98% of the time, those press releases will end up ... the journos will get it in their email, their in tray and they'll just flick it straight to the trash bin.

You've got to be far more strategic because there is information overload, but I think it is a great opportunity for government communicators who want to get their messages out to use the technologies to be innovative in the way they use it. I would have thought there's great opportunities.

David Pembroke: How do they get the buy-in of their minister who perhaps may not be as well versed or understanding of the new technologies and likes the press release?

Steve Lewis: Sure, and I'm sure that would be the daily frustration that many government communicators would have, that they might come up with what they think is a great press release or great package and they'll find that their minister might not be of the same mind or that their media adviser might not be of the same mind and, unfortunately, that good hard work goes to nothing, goes to waste.

How do you get your minister engaged? That's a really tough one. It depends on the minister, but my message would be you've got to sell the argument. Let's face it. This government probably needs a bit of a hand when it comes to communicating their message, but my argument would be that good use of communications can work very much in the minister's favour, that it might be a program or a scheme or an announcement that may not even directly involve the minister, or the

minister may not have a direct hands-on role, but if it reflects well on the department, the agency and on the government more broadly, then it's got to be a good thing.

David Pembroke: But it could go wrong. It's risky. We can't control it.

Steve Lewis: Absolutely, and I guess that's one of the dynamics that we're seeing more and more, that people are risk-averse, ministers are risk-averse, advisers are risk-averse and they're looking for the downside. How do you overcome that? How do you basically try and avoid everything you create and packaged beautifully being dumped because the minister says, "No. Look, it's very pretty, but I'm not going to stand out there like a shag on a rock. I'm going to be crucified by the Tele or the project or whatever for looking like an idiot." I don't quite know the answer to it. It's a real tough one.

One of the things that's occurred with the rise of social media and with the rise of citizen journalism is that while there's more information than ever, it probably has led to people being more, in some cases, risk-averse. I'm not a politician. I've never been a politician or worked for a politician, but I know many of them very well. They are under scrutiny 24/7 and you look back at footage wistfully of people like Bob Hawke and Gough Whitlam, and even [inaudible 28:53] look at the way they interacted with the public and some of their commentary, [inaudible 28:59] it's harder and harder and harder, I think, to get to do that nowadays because if I was a politician, I'd be worried that everything, every single thing I said would end up on YouTube.

I'll just to give you one example. A couple of years ago at the Press Club, we wanted to have a really good fun night. We wanted to attract politicians and journos and staffers so we thought, "Let's put on some karaoke." Harmless fun, karaoke. A group of quite senior parliamentarians from Labor, and at the time Labor were in government, turned up. I thought this is fantastic. This is going to go down really well. [Inaudible 29:37] They got on the dancefloor to have a sing.

As soon as they got up, there's one particular person who is going to build it up, the iPhones got up. I bet that everyone was going to YouTube it. This person said, "No, no, no. I'm not going to be involved" and I thought, "We've created a rod for our own back." We were trying to have some fun and all of a sudden, social media, citizen journalism thought, "Uh-uh. We're going to put this up on YouTube." I remember one person who was from the other side of politics had their iPhone up and I just knew that they'd put that up on YouTube any second.

I thought what a shame. Here we are trying to do something to have some fun and the politician who wanted to have a sing, but wasn't prepared to have something that could have been embarrassing, perhaps even damaging to them, appear on YouTube five minutes later. There's a great example where technology allows you to do things you've never done before, allows you to be a journalist at the Press Club at 10:00 at night or wherever you want to be.

But at the same time, it's made the politicians, the elected representatives, more risk-averse because they know that everything they say, everything they do is likely to end up on social media in one form or another. Someone is going to tweet it, someone is going to put it up on Facebook, someone is going to put it up on YouTube and I think it's a great shame. I don't know what the answer is, mate, because it's liberating, in one sense, but it's also constraining in another.

David Pembroke: Interesting. It's certainly very interesting observations there from you. Just a final question before we go. You've been around for a while.

Steve Lewis: Thanks, mate ...

David Pembroke: Do you look forward ...

Steve Lewis: ... [inaudible 31:17] generous of you.

David Pembroke: But as you look forward, do you look forward with apprehension and anxiety or do you look forward with enthusiasm and this is going to be great, the future of communication?

Steve Lewis: Look, I'm a glass half-full type so I've always been pretty bubbly and enthusiastic about the future, even when I've been ... not dismissed, I shouldn't say that, but, yeah, I've always been pretty enthusiastic about the future and I think there's great opportunities, I really do, no matter what field of communications you're in. Whether you're David Pembroke running the Content Group, whether you're working for companies like Newgate Communications and we're embracing all the technology. Whether you're a journo up on the hill, treading the boards and basically trying to get the yarns out of disaffected [inaudible 32:07] fringes, I think there's a great opportunities and I'm very enthusiastic. I think people have to understand what technology can do for you.

You have to also understand particularly government communicators, have to understand that their ministers, the elected representatives who they work for, are under greater pressure than ever because of the rise of

social media and I guess that needs to be reflected in their thinking. They need to be very strategic in terms of the way they developed content and, as you mentioned before, I used the word cut-through. There's no point to me putting out something that's bland and has got no cut-through, but there's so much information out there that it's just not going to get any sort of real coverage.

I'm very enthusiastic. I think there's a great future. I think journalism has a strong future notwithstanding we are seeing the demise or we're seeing the decline of traditional media and we're seeing many, many fine journalists at the ABC as we speak who are basically facing redundancy and I think it's a great shame. I think it's a great shame and I feel very, very sorry for those 400 or so ABC journos who are going to go.

That said, a lot of those people will get jobs. They'll go out, they'll get jobs in freelance, they'll get jobs working in new media, they'll get jobs elsewhere because there are some great little innovative platforms and companies that are emerging. Many of them will probably end up working in government communications doing PR or media for government agencies or for ministers or for other sections of government.

There's always going to be a demand. There's always going to be a need for people who are good communicators, who've got good cut-through, who can distil a message, who can basically work with a complicated message and make it easily digestible by Mr. and Mrs. Potter. If you've got that ability you're going to get a job no matter where.

David Pembroke: Steve Lewis, thanks very much for joining us on The Change. It's been a real pleasure and good luck in the future.

Steve Lewis: Thanks very much, David. I've really enjoyed it.

David Pembroke: So there you go, A discussion with Steve Lewis.

What I took out of that was that times are changing and there are huge opportunities to create useful, relevant and valuable content to go direct to audiences, and use the many channels that are in place in order for you to get to that audience that are aggregating the content that they're looking for. You have to be very thoughtful about what the right channel is. You don't have to be in every channel, you just have to be in the right channel, and you also have to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of your efforts and always, always tie these content marketing efforts to the corporate objective. Nothing should happen unless it's driving back

towards the accomplishment of a corporate objective. The media remains a key and influential channel to reach vast numbers of people but I think it's important to remember that often we are not trying to reach everybody. Often in government our targets are very narrow, they're very niche. So perhaps the media is not always the right channel to use. That's something to keep in mind.

Thanks again for joining me and I will speak with you next week.