



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

EPISODE #135

- WITH EVAN EKIN-SMYTH

TRANSCRIPT

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Evan Ekin-Smyth:

You've got to look at the electoral environment around the world. It is contested and more contested than it's ever been before and I think a lot of that is due to the communications environment, the world of digital and social media and people having platforms sometimes very private, talking in their own groups and expanding their own little bubbles to contest the things that they think should be contested, which on the surface of it, great, freedom of communication, everybody's allowed to have their views, but some of those views are dangerous. Some of those are inadvertently wrong, so misinformation, but some of them are deliberately wrong and people using it for people's own purposes, so disinformation and those things are having a negative effect and it's making it much more of a challenge to uphold reputation of elections worldwide and we are not immune to that so that's something that we knew going into 2022.

Outro:

Welcome to the GovComms podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now, here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone and welcome once again to GovComms, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. Today in the studio, I'm joined by Evan Ekin-Smyth, who is the director of media and digital engagement at the Australian Electoral Commission. During the recently completed 2022 federal election here in Australia, Evan became a familiar face to some. He and his team were responsible for implementing a media and social media approach that was unique in Australian Government Communication. During the federal election, some of you may have followed the AEC's Twitter account, which displayed a witty, personable and friendly, yet at times, firm tone of voice.

During a time of increasingly contested misinformation and disinformation, the AEC played a key role in just keeping everything on track and we're going to be talking to Evan about that today because yes, personality has been used before, but the AEC perhaps took it a little bit further and really played an important role in keeping, as I say, everything on track as we headed towards the election. Evan was originally a Canberra local and studied at the University of Canberra, but it's a pleasure that he's now joined me in the studio today. Evan, welcome to GovComms.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

G'day, David, and thank you for having me on and thank you for following what we were doing during the election.

David Pembroke:

Like many, many other people, but listen, we'll come to that. Tell us your story. Where are you from? You're from Canberra originally, but how did you get into the comms business?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Yeah. From Canberra. I was probably like many people coming out of school year 12, thinking, what am I going to do with my life and not really having much of an idea, but you want to do something that you're passionate about. Something that's going to be fun. I think you spend, I don't know how much it is, but half of your waking

time at work. If you're not doing something that you enjoy, you're probably doing it wrong. I had a look at the field of media and journalism. I thought it looked interesting, that we could do interesting things like having chats to your good self David, and that's a good place to be. I went into the University of Canberra doing... I had a stint in TAFE first, but went into the University of Canberra doing journalism. Had fun doing that so I've followed that journalism PR path into the public service.

I've been with the Australian Electoral Commission almost my entire career. There was a little gap in between university and coming to the AEC, but I joined as a graduate back in 2011. I've been there since, a few different roles, but mainly floating in my area. Elections, as boring as they sound to some people, they're fun and getting to know them intimately, not many people know how they actually operate. I'm one of those people now who does. They're so complex, they're so important and really, we've got a good bunch of people at the AEC through my time as well. I've enjoyed it so I haven't seen any reason to leave.

David Pembroke:

In terms of that journalism study that you did, what were some of the skills that you picked up that have been useful in your government communications career?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Probably one of the critical ones is getting over what was an absolutely crippling fear of public speaking, which sounds funny given that I've just spent a concentrated six week period doing almost nothing but, so what I did during my journalism degree, which most journalism studies will do, is some theory, but also some of the practise. Wandering around and doing interviews for radio and TV and contributing to the school website as it was at the time, getting in the studio, playing with the equipment a little bit. Really just getting that practise to learn how to articulate yourself, to learn how to uncover an issue and communicate in a way that is actually going to resonate with an audience, so I think that's been helpful for me as I've progressed in my career.

David Pembroke:

Do you feel that those journalism skills have been very, very useful when you've come into a big story like elections and then tried to assemble, pick it apart, simplify it and then put it all back together in a way that people can engage with?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

I think so, yeah. One of the key things is understanding what the people you're talking to are after and most of the people that we are engaging with in my role, yes, we engaged through social media and there's that audience, which I'm sure we'll talk about, but are journalists, so knowing potentially, and I've never been a working journalist, so I don't know it intimately, but having some level of groundwork into knowing what they're looking for, what their very busy day is potentially throwing up at them, what their priorities are, what their potential level of background knowledge, who else they might want to talk to, all those sort of things help when you are picking up the phone or answering an email.

David Pembroke:

Listen, you started, as you say, you went into the AEC as a graduate about 10 years ago, and we've just had the most recent federal election. What are the biggest changes that you've seen in that time in the work and the role that you play?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

There's been enormous changes both with the AEC, but with the environment, the communications environment, and specifically the electoral communications environment. When I first started at the AEC, we

did not have any social media, for instance. Social media, of course, was around at that time, used very differently to what it is now, but us as an organisation, we didn't have any accounts. I started the AEC's Twitter account. I remember writing the document to our executive who probably picked it up with a bemused look on their face and thought, "Do we really want do this?" Luckily they said, yes, because I think it's been a good thing for us. I'm sure they would've been forced into saying yes sooner or later anyway, but the environment has changed enormously and particularly in the last few years. You've got to look at the electoral environment around the world. It is, I wouldn't use the word toxic, because it's not toxic, but...

David Pembroke:

Contested.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

It's contested. Thank you. That's a better word. It is contested and more contested than it's ever been before and I think a lot of that is due to the communications environment, the world of digital and social media and people having platforms sometimes very private talking in their own groups and expanding their own little bubbles to contest the things that they think should be contested, which on the surface of it, great. Freedom of communication, everybody's allowed to have their views, but some of those views are dangerous. Some of those are inadvertently wrong, so misinformation, but some of them are deliberately wrong and for the people using it for people's own purposes, so disinformation and those things are having a negative effect and it's making it much more of a challenge to uphold the reputation of elections worldwide and we are not immune to that, so that's something that we knew going into 2022.

David Pembroke:

Take me then, through the planning. When did you start to get ready for this most recent election and what were some of the conversations that were taking place in those very early conversations around not only this challenging context that you had to address, but how you were going to put together a team and how you were going to deal with the challenges of misinformation and disinformation, but also the challenges of more broadly keeping people well informed about what was coming and what they were expected to do?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

If the Electoral Commissioner was listening, he would love for me to say that we start preparing before the previous election is even finished...

David Pembroke:

Right.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

...and it's true, but really in terms of misinformation, disinformation, it hasn't just cropped up in the last year before an election, it's been around for a little while. It's just been continually changing and will continue to change.

David Pembroke:

Sorry to interrupt, but to go back, having been around for 10 years, when did you start to see it or is it really just follow the adoption of social media?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

In terms of it really heightening itself in our consciousness, it was probably between the 2016 and 2019 federal elections and at the 2019 federal election, we ran for the first time something that was called a stop and consider campaign. It was a disinformation campaign, alerting voters that, hey, it's not something that they didn't know, but hey, not everything that you'll see during the federal election will be true. How about you actually use these basic tools to think about the messages that are coming at you rather than letting potentially wrong information influence how you go about voting. Seems a very simple thing. It seems an obvious thing to do, but for the Australian Electoral Commission, who has a history and a level of pride associated with this history of almost being the invisible player and never saying anything with any level of controversy whatsoever, it was a very new and somewhat risky thing for us to do.

We have political players, including the parties and the candidates and the people that surround them who don't want the AEC to be seen, necessarily. That was something that had a level of risk associated with it, but we obviously saw in that electoral cycle, the need for that and we started adopting our approach in the lead up to that federal election in 2019 and the necessity to, I suppose, turn that dial quite a bit more in between 2019, 2022 was very evident.

David Pembroke:

Back in 2019 though, how did you decide where you were going to play, because there's a spectrum or a scale and there's a tone that you needed to find as well. Again, what were those conversations like and how are you trying to settle into that space as to okay, 2019, this is where we need to be because of the level of engagement in that context or level of perhaps threat and then trying to find that tone and the types of information and the level of activity? It absolutely fascinates me as to how you would be making those choices.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

We were a little bit more sophisticated about it this election, but I'll reflect back on 2019 in a second. In between 2019 and 2022, what we did reasonably early on in the electoral cycle is identify the need to really protect our reputation based on our experiences of 2019, so we came up with a reputation management framework. We've had various iterations of it, probably less sophisticated in the past, but we concentrated on it really hard in between these two cycles and effectively there was a reputation management strategy, which had a set of principles that we wanted all of our communication to adhere to.

David Pembroke:

What were they?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Pretty basic things. Six principles. It's up on our website. It says that we want to be very open and regular, was one of them. It seems obvious, but we fulfilled that through a range of activities, but just being so accessible, probably more accessible than most government agencies have ever been almost because if you look at the amount of social media traffic, if you asked us a question, we answered it and we answered it quickly. We were very accessible to media representatives. Being open and regular was one of them. Pitching ourselves as the electoral experts was one of them and even though we are electoral experts, we run the process, I think for a long time, the AEC, being that silent player and not wanting to be seen, you immediately think of, and people still will, of course, and probably still did during the 2022 federal election.

People think of your Anthony Greens, the ABC electoral analyst and other players like that as the foremost electoral experts, but we needed to heighten ourselves in that conversation through our work so that people can refer back to us, can refer back to our communication advice really so that we can shut down

some of that disinformation, but also so we can have people around us who do it for us, do some of that work for us.

David Pembroke:

Were they subject matter experts from inside the AEC or were there academics that you engaged or who carried that story, that expertise line of your framework?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Our staff and primarily our communication staff, but also the experts who were within the organisation actually running the process. One example of that is probably our work on YouTube, short form video. We started something called AECTV and we didn't get people from outside in to say, "These are the experts." We got our people to stand up, sometimes reluctantly...

David Pembroke:

With that crippling fear of public speaking.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Yeah. That fear that I was talking about and that's probably why you saw me in a few more than I would have liked to have been in because some people were very reluctant, but we got our experts, our people running the process to stand up.

David Pembroke:

How important was that?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Critical. Absolutely critical because these are the people that know it best and for us to be able to explain it in that medium, in very short because people's attention spans aren't great these days, in very short form, it worked really well for us. Proactively, but even more so reactively and we knew the issues that were going to come at us, the questions that were going to happen because they kind of templated from overseas so we knew all the areas where people would try and question electoral integrity. We had products, be it short form video, graphics, timelines on our website about our integrity journey, things of that nature to be able to use reactively, to explain it. It's hard to argue with the person who runs the process, who's saying, "Actually have a look in pictures while I speak at what exactly happens."

We thought that was critical and that was an idea. Everybody's been making video for a while and content for a long time, but we do it completely in house. We don't have professional videographers roaming the halls of the AEC. I remember in my convincing of the commissioner that we should do this, I just hijacked a meeting room, slapped an AECTV sign on the side and said, "Commissioner, this is what we're going to be doing. What do you reckon?" That's how it started and that was around the time of the 2019 election. Since then, we've bought a very small amount of kit, done some very basic training and we think our video products are good enough and particularly the content is good to be able to explain some of those complex issues.

David Pembroke:

It's cheap, isn't it? The gear.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Yeah. Absolutely. It depends how you want to do it. You could go almost as expensive or as cheap as you like, but we haven't spent much money on a AECTV at all. It's really people on my team, me and my colleague, Jess, is sitting behind us and others who have been doing this thing and starring in the videos. It's completely in-house, cheap, free and quick, which is really important because we can produce, if there's an issue running and we did this during the election, you turn around, you whip up to the studio, you say some lines in front of a camera, you edit it up, you can have it out within the hour.

David Pembroke:

Did you use mobile lots on your phones because the capability of the latest Apple phone... A mate of mine who works with the Queensland Premier was showing me the other day with the 4k and the stabilisers built in. It's frightening, the professional quality that you can now get out of a phone.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Yeah. Yeah, it is. We had a mixture. We bought some still reasonably lower end cameras so we weren't spending big dollars, but a fair bit on the phone and we bought a basic gimble as well to do some shots like that, but we're still relatively immature in our approach though. We are looking at how do we make AECTV better from a technical point of view in terms of how do we format it for the right channels and things of that nature and do we need any more kit to make that happen? It's always, at least in the short term future, going to be only ever a semi-professional outfit because we think that's where we get the best results from.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. As you say, that's the speed piece, it's the multi-skilled team members who are able to do as well as plan. It's inexpensive, because I think this is a massive transformation that is taking place and I'm really pleased to see that the AEC is taking the lead and demonstrating this change doesn't have to come with some ridiculous amount of money that government really doesn't want to spend.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

No, that's right. You just have to have a go really. Some of the first videos that we did and I think a couple of them are up on YouTube. You look back at them now and you go, "Gee, where's the lighting on that?"

David Pembroke:

That's it. That's it.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Yeah. The message was right. The content was always right and we've just tweaked our approach a little bit and we've learned a little bit along the way and it's not just for creating that short form video as well. The material that we have for our AECTV studio is the same material that I did countless zoom interviews with media representatives on as well, so it helps in that regard.

David Pembroke:

Listen, we only got through two of the principles, which is, and I would say ladies and gentlemen, this is a two part interview because there is a lot to talk about, but I still want to go back to number one because you said this notion of openness, but also regularity. Take me through that. Was this planning that editorial calendar, so was it, you were turning up at the same time and the same place so you were building a habit in the audience?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

We were so available. We had something like, I think it was about 150,000 tags on social media through that six week period. If you average that out, that's 3000 to 4000 a day and there's some level of content comment that doesn't require a response, but for the vast majority, you're talking about questions and comment that does require a response and we responded and we responded quickly. There's a structure that sits behind that to enable us to do it and media inquiries, we were very, very busy. My phone rang hot and I always answered it and I always got back to people and it was swift. I shouldn't say I, because my colleagues were involved in that as well, but we were very swift and I think something that really benefited us on the media side was relationships with media and they got to know that we were swift and that we were open and our media briefings, which was a series of, and we've done this in the past, but to a lesser degree.

We reached out to media organisations in every state and territory, individual organisations and offered them a media briefing with the electoral commissioner, myself and the relevant state manager. Originally it was going to be in person, COVID scuppered that a little bit and most of them were via Zoom or Teams. We were talking to channel seven in Darwin, individually and taking a 45 minute slot to talk to them. We did, I don't know the number, but it was more than 50 individual media briefings myself, the commissioner and the relevant state manager to sit down and only talk a little bit. It was more about what did they want to know on the eve of the election? I think that built really good relationships for us and we got a lot of follow up off that. We were able to outreach to journalists when we knew there were things happening in their jurisdictions because we talked to them before so I think that sort of stuff really worked very, very well for us.

David Pembroke:

Trust really sits at the heart of the effort and this responsiveness. I think a lot of people listening would be thinking, if only I had an authorising environment that allowed me to move as quickly, as swiftly and not to say, "Hang on, there's a process between me moving to the studio quickly to engage." How have you been able to get that? Obviously you've been there for 10 years, you can build trust, but how do you advise people to build trust with the higher ups so as the dreaded approval processes can be faster to meet the needs of the new world, which is immediate, it's fast, it's got to get there. How do you do that?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

There are a few things where we have a natural advantage. One is that we're an independent statutory authority and that goes on steroids during an election event, obviously. We have a minister that we report to during an election event. It's a very different environment. We're also a smaller organisation than a lot of public service departments, so that is helpful, of course, but it's still hard to cultivate. Yes, I've been there 10 years, so has the current electoral commissioner and we have a very close working relationship, deliberately so. Not just because we think each other is a good bloke, we get on well, that's a good thing, but because we knew that there needed to be a good connection between myself and the commissioner in order to have him trust what me and my section are doing, but also for me and my section to be connected to the issues, to be connected to operationally what's going on and to be able to regularly discuss things without going through unnecessary layers of approval or consultation.

Consultation is incredibly important and you don't want to skip it out. There are times where you need your tentacles in all areas of the organisation to get the information that you need, but to be able to have that regular liaison with the electoral commissioner...

David Pembroke:

Not only the commissioner, but I'm sure the other...

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Other members of the executive team.

David Pembroke:

Executive... Yep.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Absolutely. It's critical.

David Pembroke:

You've got to do it earlier rather than at the point of need.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Yeah, you can't do it on the door stop.

David Pembroke:

Yep.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

You would never have the trust, the connection that's required. The other thing is to set up layers of, I suppose, structure that sit below it, not to slow it down, but structure deliberately designed to enable it. Underneath that reputation management strategy that I was talking about, there are a number of documents. One was stakeholder engagement plan, but in my area, media and digital engagement plan and that outlined how our social media operation was going to handle the volume and also work with approvals for sensitive content. It outlined how our media approach would work as well and I think having that document and having it outlined very, very well was critical in enabling the full executive leadership team to understand how we'd go about it and be comfortable with that.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. How important do you think it is that you were fast?

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Probably one of the most important things, because it allowed us to control the narrative more so than if we were slow. It's a very obvious, easy thing to say, but reactively and we did a lot proactively to cut off known issues, but reactively if we were to sit on an issue for an hour and that sounds like a very short period of time, it could get away from you and it could spread and by the time you put your words into it, there's other more prominent words who people are believing and they're not seeing what you are saying. The ability for us to be quick on particularly sensitive issues and for there to be that level of connection and trust between my section and me and the executive leadership team, it allowed me to know how we needed to respond and to do it with some authority, very swiftly.

David Pembroke:

Were there any times during the election campaign that you felt this is getting away from us, like it was an accelerated game of whack-a-mole that you weren't quite dealing with them as quickly or did you feel like you were in control? Certainly from an observer's point of view, I felt great confidence and trust that the AEC was managing the issues quite well, particularly after you've observed the chaos of elections in other places.

Evan Ekin-Smyth:

Yeah. There has been a level of reputational damage in other areas of the world with elections that we're very conscious of it. I felt like we were in pretty good control most of the time in terms of what we were talking about, probably all the time really. It's because we had people on our channels and we had those layers of connection to the executive. We had the good body of planning behind us. We had the good body of products sitting there, the ability to create products in real time that I felt like our knowledge held us in really good stead to be able to effectively prioritise. The last week of the election is the biggest week for us. If you look at any graph of our media inquiries, social media interactions, whatever it is, there are spikes everywhere.

Even in that last week, I felt like if we were a touch slower than we'd been during the rest of the election period in terms of a volume point of view, in terms of criticality, anything that was critical, we were still as swift, as open and as regular as we had been through the entire event, which allowed us to maintain that level of control.

David Pembroke:

So there you have it, the end of the first part of our conversation with Evan Ekin-Smyth who is the Director of Media and Digital Engagement at the Australian Electoral Commission. And what a fascinating conversation. The first two principles of six principles. So, in part two we are going to explore the other four principles that the Australian Electoral Commission use to manage communication and engagement during the recent Federal Election here in Australia. So, it's a great conversation, I am sure you enjoyed that first part one.

Now listen, there is a great conference on, in Brisbane, on October 20th and 21st of this year, 2022. Its called "Change 2022" and its brought to you by Griffith University and its a conference that bring together people who are focused on achieving measurable change that benefit people, communities and the planet. There's going to be a great line up of speakers - over 20 of them with a number of TEDx style talks. There are some interactive workshops and it is going to be held in person at Griffith University in Brisbane and it really is focused on behaviour change. There is no more topical issue in government communications then behaviour change. So, Change 2022 - go and visit griffith.edu.au/change. It's a programme put together by Sharyn Rundle-Thiele and it's a fantastic list of programme. Please go and have a look at that link so that you can find more information and tickets for that event. Very reasonably priced for two days, I wouldn't miss it, I'm going to be there, that's Change 2022.

So again, thanks to all of you for coming back once again. Thanks to also the great production team here at contentgroup who do such a wonderful job in not only finding the wonderful guests but also putting the programme together. So, a big thanks to Olivia Casamento and Ben Curry for making this programme what they've done over many many years. So, a big thanks to them. I'll be back at the same time in two weeks but for the moment, its bye for now.

Outro:

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