

Transcript | How to Communicate Apolitically in a Political World

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00:00:10.460 --> 00:00:12.910

Jessica van Onselen: Hi, everyone! Welcome!

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00:00:13.020 --> 00:00:14.969

Jessica van Onselen: Hello? You're in the right place?

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00:00:15.390 --> 00:00:17.699

Jessica van Onselen: We'll give everyone a second to join.

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00:00:18.750 --> 00:00:20.409

Jessica van Onselen: Hello, hello?

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00:00:22.470 --> 00:00:32.759

Jessica van Onselen: Hi there, everyone. We're just giving folks a few seconds to make it in, take a deep breath, arrive. You are 100% exactly where you should be.

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00:00:32.970 --> 00:00:38.820

Jessica van Onselen: Just letting folks enter the room, get ready, settle down, grab a good cup of tea.

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00:00:40.460 --> 00:00:42.660

Jessica van Onselen: And settle in for today's conversation.

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00:00:43.200 --> 00:00:44.989

Jessica van Onselen: We've got some amazing guests.

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00:00:45.800 --> 00:00:47.140

Jessica van Onselen: Hi there!

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00:00:47.240 --> 00:01:00.909

Jessica van Onselen: Welcome to this panel on communicating apolitically in a political world. My name is Jessica, I'm the Director of Marketing and Communications here at Apolitical, at the appropriately named Apolitical, so this is a topic I think about a lot.

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00:01:01.010 --> 00:01:11.650

Jessica van Onselen: Welcome to all of you. It would be great to hear from all of you, so, please do post in the chat where you're joining us from. We love to get a little bit of, geography up front.

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00:01:11.650 --> 00:01:31.139

Jessica van Onselen: Let us know what organization you work for, maybe you want to share your role, but open up that chat, say hi. I'm going to introduce all our amazing guests in a moment, but in the meantime, it's really nice to get a sense of who's in the room. So, don't be shy, get in there, say hello. Hoping we'll see some UK, some Canada, maybe some global faces, global names, say hello.

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00:01:31.960 --> 00:01:51.590

Jessica van Onselen: Today, we're going to be covering how to communicate with clarity and impartiality in a world where political debate and polarization is everywhere. We'll explore ways to strengthen neutrality in everyday interactions, navigate sensitive topics without bias, and craft messages that uphold the integrity of public service.

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00:01:51.750 --> 00:02:02.660

Jessica van Onselen: Drawing on real examples and best practices from across different sectors, our speakers will share how to maintain credibility and avoid the risk of your work being misinterpreted.

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00:02:02.930 --> 00:02:16.300

Jessica van Onselen: Now, for those of you who may be joining us for the first time, welcome. AP Political is the world's largest network for global government, used by over a quarter of a million public servants and policymakers from more than 170 different countries.

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00:02:16.490 --> 00:02:26.150

Jessica van Onselen: Our mission is to make governments smarter, and we do this by equipping public servants worldwide with the knowledge and the skills and the networks they need to lead the change.

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00:02:26.780 --> 00:02:51.759

Jessica van Onselen: I'm gonna jump into the chat and see who's there, because I see a couple of folks have been introducing themselves, and I love this. So, let's see who we have. We have Graham saying hi from Ontario, Canada. Hi, Graham. We have Joseph from San Francisco. Joseph, it is super early for you, so we are very appreciative that we've got some West Coasters getting up here at this time. We've got Emmy from Hackney in London, we've got hi, Kelly from Peterborough in the UK. Yes, for the

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00:02:51.760 --> 00:02:53.850

Jessica van Onselen: home office. Wonderful welcome.

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00:02:53.850 --> 00:03:18.559

Jessica van Onselen: Someone from Stockholm, fantastic. Joaquin joining us from there. We have the Greater London Authority, great. We've got Barry joining from... also from Ontario. Welcome, welcome, but quite specifically between Huntsville and North Bay. I love that specificity, Barry. We've got Diane, from Boston, Massachusetts, but Diane, your name indicated you might have been in Ireland, but I caught it in time, and I noticed you're actually from Massachusetts.

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00:03:18.710 --> 00:03:37.690

Jessica van Onselen: We've got Duluth, Minnesota, how fantastic. We've got someone joining from Nigeria, fantastic, from the Nigeria Governor's Forum. Okay, that's a high-powered body, fantastic. Vancouver, Ontario, I could keep going for days. Slovakia, this is incredible. Welcome, you are totally in the right place. We are so thrilled to have you here.

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00:03:37.690 --> 00:03:50.099

Jessica van Onselen: We are also thrilled to extend an invitation to our apolitical government comms community. This is an online space to connect with peers working in communications and governments and departments around the world.

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00:03:50.100 --> 00:03:58.290

Jessica van Onselen: You can join to exchange ideas on crisis messaging, engaging the public, communicating policy in politically sensitive contexts.

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00:03:58.350 --> 00:04:13.649

Jessica van Onselen: The link is in the resources tab at the bottom of your screen. You'll see a little resources tab, and my colleague is also going to post the link to that community in the chat,

and I'd love to see your voices in there. We can carry on the conversation by all means, so keep an eye out for the government comms community there.

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00:04:13.650 --> 00:04:19.099

Jessica van Onselen: I'll get a few technical notes out of the way, and then we can jump into the meat of today's conversation.

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00:04:19.230 --> 00:04:25.270

Jessica van Onselen: This event is recorded for on-demand viewing on the apolitical website, so please don't record it yourself.

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00:04:25.380 --> 00:04:36.869

Jessica van Onselen: Contact details for privacy concerns are in the apolitical homepage footer. Closed captions are available. They can be toggled on or off in your screen settings, so go for that.

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00:04:37.200 --> 00:05:01.789

Jessica van Onselen: Before we introduce our powerhouse speakers, I was just saying before we started that I've been, like, fangirling a little bit about having all of them on here today. We're gonna run a few quick polls to get a sense of where you, dear audience, are joining today's conversation from. So, let's take a look at the first poll. The question is, when do you encounter your biggest communication challenges? I'll read the answers while you vote. Could be, is it public statements?

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00:05:01.990 --> 00:05:13.939

Jessica van Onselen: Is it internal communications with staff? What about policy advice or briefing materials? Maybe engaging or consulting stakeholders? Creating social media content? That can be a minefield.

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00:05:13.940 --> 00:05:24.749

Jessica van Onselen: interacting with senior political stuff. Where are you encountering your biggest communication challenges? You're working in this all day, what experiences have you had? What's happening?

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00:05:24.840 --> 00:05:43.770

Jessica van Onselen: let us know. I'm watching the voting live, but I'm gonna give it another few seconds so more of you can vote. This is something I definitely think about in my work. I can

see our speakers are probably sort of running it over in their minds as well. Where is... where are the pain points? Where is it hard? Where is it tricky? Where are you running into a couple of banana peels?

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00:05:44.420 --> 00:06:06.890

Jessica van Onselen: Alright, looks like voting is slowing down. We're gonna share the results here. Okay, so, the results are... we actually have... it looks like a fairly clear winner, in that it's interacting with senior political staff. That's really interesting. Okay, so making sure that the communication up the chain is managed in an apolitical and neutral way is pretty tricky for this audience.

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00:06:06.890 --> 00:06:14.429

Jessica van Onselen: Second, we've got internal communications, that's interesting, so talking to staff within your organizations, but also engaging stakeholders.

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00:06:14.430 --> 00:06:28.449

Jessica van Onselen: Now, if you'd asked me before this poll, I would have guessed that that would have been number one, so really interesting, that's third. Interestingly, very few of you saying it's actually creating social media content. That's not what's giving you gray hairs. It's actually talking to staff in many ways.

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00:06:28.460 --> 00:06:32.290

Jessica van Onselen: Fantastic. Really, really great to get some of the answers there.

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00:06:32.360 --> 00:06:45.330

Jessica van Onselen: Okay. Moving on to the second poll, what support or guidance would help you feel more confident communicating impartially? What support or guidance would help you feel more confident

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00:06:45.330 --> 00:07:02.560

Jessica van Onselen: communicating impartially. If you think of something we haven't listed as an option there, I mean, feel free to submit your answer in the chat as well. I think we think of a lot of these things, but I'm sure we haven't covered all of them. So, would you want clear guidelines? What about practical tools, like templates or language?

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00:07:02.560 --> 00:07:13.609

Jessica van Onselen: real-world examples or case studies. Maybe it's peer discussions. They would really help you think, okay, I'm norming this, this is what other peers working in the space are feeling. Is it training?

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00:07:13.730 --> 00:07:26.100

Jessica van Onselen: Some of you might already be feeling super confident about communicating apolitical, in which case, call me, because I need some advice. It's really a minefield, so phone me directly after this, and we can... I can learn all your secrets.

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00:07:26.260 --> 00:07:34.449

Jessica van Onselen: Very good, we've got some votes rolling in. We've got two that are neck and neck, I'm gonna give it a few more seconds.

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00:07:34.610 --> 00:07:45.720

Jessica van Onselen: So that you can squeeze your vote in. Okay, the question was, what support or guidance would help you feel more confident communicating impartially here? And pretty much neck and neck, we've got practical tools.

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00:07:45.720 --> 00:08:02.619

Jessica van Onselen: like templates or language guidance, etc. And then real-world examples or case studies. So just understanding how other folks are doing this in another context can be extremely helpful. Very few of you feeling already confident communicating apolitical, but there were some of you, so we do want to hear from you.

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00:08:02.620 --> 00:08:15.899

Jessica van Onselen: And a sizable chunk, looking for clear guidelines on how to communicate impartially, so really, really useful. I'm gonna just actually quickly check in the chat and see if anyone said anything else here.

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00:08:15.900 --> 00:08:35.239

Jessica van Onselen: Paul's saying, one of the biggest for me is the middle ground in organizations. The people at the top get the net zero memo, but that doesn't always translate to managers in different departments. Okay, so Paul, you're also talking about that internal piece, so important. And Kelly's saying, feedback. I don't think it's always obvious your own communication isn't clear to others.

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00:08:35.240 --> 00:08:45.570

Jessica van Onselen: Unless they feel confident to tell you, yep, that's so true, 100%, couldn't agree more. Alright, thanks for taking part in those polls. I'm now going to introduce our speakers.

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00:08:45.580 --> 00:08:56.300

Jessica van Onselen: We're fortunate to have 3 really brilliant guests with us today. We have Celestine Cheong, we have Sophie Vipond, and Benjamin Peters joining us today. I'm going to do a short introduction for all of them.

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00:08:56.300 --> 00:09:13.979

Jessica van Onselen: Celestine Cheong is the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority's Head of External Communications, a former scientist. She contributed to Don Rie's decommissioning, returning in 2020 to advance Cullum's fusion project, and fusion is just picking up so much momentum, it's really interesting.

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00:09:13.980 --> 00:09:24.839

Jessica van Onselen: Celestine has had stints as a journalist, has featured in Netflix's Grenfell film for her fire safety work, and led two joint European tours, JET,

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00:09:25.030 --> 00:09:31.749

Jessica van Onselen: World Record Fusion Announcements. That is a tongue twister, Celestine, but worth every single word of it.

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00:09:32.390 --> 00:09:50.990

Jessica van Onselen: Sophie Vipond is Director of External Affairs at the Climate Change Committee, leading strategy for the UK's seventh carbon budget and upcoming well-adapted UK report. I know a lot of folks at Apolitical are looking forward to that report, Sophie. Formerly at the Climate Group, she drove campaigns advancing electric vehicles.

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00:09:51.000 --> 00:10:08.999

Jessica van Onselen: Sophie co-chairs the ICCN Communications Working Group and mentors through I Have a Voice. Welcome, Sophie. And last, but definitely not least, is Benjamin Peters. Benjamin is Head of External Communications at the National Audit Office, also an organization we look at a lot here at Apolitical.

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00:10:09.000 --> 00:10:14.240

Jessica van Onselen: He began his career in UK intelligence, later leading public comms for GCHQ.

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00:10:14.240 --> 00:10:33.749

Jessica van Onselen: Awarded an MBE in 2019, he now promotes the NAO's findings to strengthen transparency, improve public services, and build trust in government spending. You can read the full bios by visiting the Resources tab at the bottom of your Zoom screen and heading to the Speakers section, so you didn't just have to listen intently to everything I said.

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00:10:34.010 --> 00:10:48.879

Jessica van Onselen: Before we launch into today's panel, I thought we could start with a quick icebreaker question, just to get us warmed up. Always love a cheeky little icebreaker. Our guests have had a heads up, but you online are welcome to contribute in the chat as well.

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00:10:48.880 --> 00:10:55.629

Jessica van Onselen: So, Celestine, Sophie, and Ben, if you had to write a report title that guarantees it will not be read.

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00:10:55.730 --> 00:11:10.029

Jessica van Onselen: what would it be? What is the most boring report title you can possibly think of? If you want to give some thought to it online, please do drop your answers in the chat as well. Okay, let's go to you first, Sophie. What would your unreadable report be titled?

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00:11:10.570 --> 00:11:17.420

Sophie Vipond: Hi everyone. I have to confess that I actually asked some of my team to come up with this with me, because I thought it was such a good task.

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00:11:18.030 --> 00:11:24.710

Sophie Vipond: And we've come up with a real tongue twister. So, a comprehensive analysis of the deconstruction

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00:11:26.870 --> 00:11:33.829

Sophie Vipond: And the incoherence of narrative, an excessively verbose and meandering discourse delineating and disclosing in effectuous phraseology.

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00:11:34.700 --> 00:11:39.950

Jessica van Onselen: Sophie, for me, you sort of froze in a Zoom moment, just as you were two words into it, which I kind of took with it.

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00:11:39.950 --> 00:11:41.060

Sophie Vipond: Incident. Oh no!

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00:11:41.060 --> 00:12:02.550

Jessica van Onselen: No, no, no, we got all of it, it unfroze, but I sort of felt like it was just Zoom freaking out at the jargon-packed amazingness of that. Don't worry, it all came through, and anyone who can work in phraseology into a report title, you'll see the floods of love coming from the reaction there. All right, Sophie, strong contender out of the gates, most boring, unreadable report title. Celestine, you're gonna have to top that one.

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00:12:03.130 --> 00:12:15.460

Celestine Cheong: Tough going. Yeah, and Sophie does freeze. Mine would be, consultation responses to amendments to the building regulations, Part L.

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00:12:17.090 --> 00:12:18.670

Celestine Cheong: And there are many parts.

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00:12:18.840 --> 00:12:36.719

Jessica van Onselen: Oh, no, and I think it's that part one that's actually the killer, right? Because it definitely implies another 25 other parts of that alphabet. So, yeah, it was subtle Celestine, but there's a kicker in there, for sure. I don't want to read parts A to L, yeah, well done. Benjamin, what is the most boring report title you can think of?

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00:12:36.900 --> 00:12:48.029

Benjamin Peters: I mean, I must also confess I cheated, and I just looked at our back catalogue from the 80s, and my favorite, I found was monitoring and control of investment by the nationalized industries in Fixed Assets.

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00:12:49.110 --> 00:12:56.610

Jessica van Onselen: Oh, I actually, I actually, like, you know, seized up a bit with, with fixed assets there, Benjamin. That is a masterstroke.

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00:12:56.790 --> 00:13:02.210

Jessica van Onselen: I have to just say there's a very high compliment being paid to you by Paul, Celestine in the chat. Paul said.

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00:13:02.210 --> 00:13:17.170

Jessica van Onselen: Sorry, are we voting on this because I just fell asleep during Celestine's title. Boom, I think that's a gold medal. Yeah, absolutely. A zinger Paul, we have to acknowledge. These were outstanding. Please put your most boring titles into the chats. Just fantastic.

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00:13:17.370 --> 00:13:33.980

Jessica van Onselen: All right, let's get started. I'm going to open with a question that I'm going to put to each of you, so I'll come to each of you and get your responses. So, you all work in very different policy spaces, where impartiality is a common challenge. In one sentence, and I know this is tricky, but in one sentence.

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00:13:33.980 --> 00:13:42.250

Jessica van Onselen: What's one communication principle or mindset that you rely on when pressure is high and neutrality feels like it's at risk?

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00:13:42.250 --> 00:13:45.419

Jessica van Onselen: Let me go the reverse way around. Benjamin, I'll come to you first.

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00:13:46.840 --> 00:13:55.649

Benjamin Peters: So one thing would just be always to start with mission. What is your statutory, constitutional role? What is your purpose? And align it to that.

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00:13:56.210 --> 00:14:01.750

Jessica van Onselen: Okay, so really starting with that North Star, fantastic. Celestine, what about you? What's your one principle?

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00:14:02.640 --> 00:14:17.820

Celestine Cheong: Well, I have a few, but first, I would definitely think about who's your audience. You've got to know your audience, and think about what might they want to know, and then go on to your *raison d'être*, which is your principle, your mission.

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00:14:19.530 --> 00:14:25.959

Jessica van Onselen: Alright, so I'm hearing mission there as well, absolutely, great. Okay, Sophie, what is your one principle?

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00:14:26.300 --> 00:14:30.949

Sophie Vipond: Mine was, look at the data, because if you're just communicating facts, then it is apolitical.

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00:14:31.280 --> 00:14:42.329

Jessica van Onselen: Yeah, and in climate, gee, can't think of a topic where that's more... it just roots you, it gives you something that's, like, indisputable, a great principle. It's something we think about a lot here at Apolitical as well.

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00:14:42.450 --> 00:14:58.130

Jessica van Onselen: Celestine, I'm gonna come to you. You've led comms in really high-stakes environments, and not everything always goes to plan. Can you share a moment with the audience where something was, say, handled poorly, and what you learned about maintaining control and impartiality under pressure?

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00:14:59.420 --> 00:15:12.949

Celestine Cheong: Sure, thanks, Jessica. I noticed that the poll says real-life world examples are case studies, and I'm happy to share a case study with you. It's not something my team did.

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00:15:12.980 --> 00:15:32.640

Celestine Cheong: But it's actually something that happened within the organization. So, if you don't know what, or who we are, UK Atomic Energy Authority, we essentially, focus on the delivery of sustainable fusion and, maximize the economic and, scientific benefits.

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00:15:32.640 --> 00:15:44.560

Celestine Cheong: So what happened, I'm happy to share a slide, but either that, you can Google it yourself because it's public knowledge. If you actually type in nuclear fusion, it's time for a reality check

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00:15:44.720 --> 00:15:51.899

Celestine Cheong: And it's a letter that's appeared in the Guardian newspaper. Now, this is something that,

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00:15:52.130 --> 00:15:57.400

Celestine Cheong: our communications department did not approve. So someone within the workforce

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00:15:57.840 --> 00:16:01.470

Celestine Cheong: That had written a letter, and actually it was published.

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00:16:01.600 --> 00:16:15.280

Celestine Cheong: And what it did was it criticized our Secretary of State for not being briefed enough. I know, emoji, shock sign. Yeah. So, and what it said was that,

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00:16:15.280 --> 00:16:19.479

Celestine Cheong: our Secretary of State wasn't briefed enough in the sense that he said.

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00:16:19.480 --> 00:16:35.299

Celestine Cheong: We're in grasping distance of fusion. The thing is, a lot of the scientists who we work with, I have to admit, you know, dare I say that they don't quite understand the political messaging. Of course you want, our politicians want inspired to provide hope.

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00:16:35.340 --> 00:16:50.239

Celestine Cheong: At the end of the day, we are publicly funded, so it's taxpayers' money. So with this letter that got published, don't assume that central government do not read such things, because they do.

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00:16:50.440 --> 00:17:05.829

Celestine Cheong: And, I would say that, of course, you never bite the hand that feeds you, or pays you. Just do not do that. So, of course, that came back to our department, and we went, okay, not great. But the points in the letter

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00:17:06.069 --> 00:17:15.750

Celestine Cheong: about the difficulties, in fusion and how to achieve it are true. Now, but one thing that wasn't, appreciated

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00:17:15.750 --> 00:17:28.400

Celestine Cheong: was the, criticism of our Secretary of State. So, what do we do, right? For those in policy who are, of course, who work in policy, make sure

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00:17:28.730 --> 00:17:47.919

Celestine Cheong: that, you have policies set in place whereby, for example, because this, it might be, if your policies aren't set in place, it could be a disciplinary matter. Now, this is an internal communications, again, another, hot poll topic, that this is an internal communications matter.

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00:17:47.920 --> 00:17:55.280

Celestine Cheong: So make sure that you have policies in place whereby, it doesn't matter the material that

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00:17:55.280 --> 00:18:04.229

Celestine Cheong: is to be published. Even if it's on a personal capacity, it still, represents the organization you work, work for.

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00:18:04.230 --> 00:18:20.449

Celestine Cheong: So, make sure that, there's a policy in your conditions of employment manual that stipulates anything that does become public, at least check with your line manager, or check with the communications department. And that also goes for social media.

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00:18:20.530 --> 00:18:30.990

Celestine Cheong: If you have a social media policy that states, if you're unsure about anything, come to, come to the communications department for, for a, for a sense check.

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00:18:31.340 --> 00:18:47.379

Celestine Cheong: So yeah, that wasn't great. An organization of 3,000 people letter appeared in The Guardian criticizing after record amount of money injected into the organization. So, that's a real-life case study example that I provided.

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00:18:47.380 --> 00:19:00.550

Jessica van Onselen: So, so useful, Celestine, and I think really hearing the call there for making sure you have the hygiene of good policies, really thinking through these things before you get to, like, a crisis moment, what, you know, how employees can be,

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00:19:00.550 --> 00:19:17.959

Jessica van Onselen: ambassadorial, their role in all of this. Yeah, that's a really strong start there. Thank you. Benjamin, the National Audit Office reports, review public spending. Have you ever had a case where a politician publicly criticized one of your reports? How did your team respond?

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00:19:19.270 --> 00:19:26.909

Benjamin Peters: Sure, it happens. I mean, the way we produce our reports on the government departments is that, you know, they do have to get cleared to make sure they're factually accurate, so...

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00:19:26.920 --> 00:19:43.330

Benjamin Peters: So in some ways, it shouldn't happen. Occasionally, it does. Occasionally, actually, what's often worse is people agreeing with them too heartily and saying, you know, the NEO has endorsed whatever I believe as a politician, which isn't the case. But there's one sort of particularly notable

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00:19:43.350 --> 00:19:58.559

Benjamin Peters: event that sort of goes down in our history. From about, 7 to 10 years ago, just to keep it vague, we did a report on Universal Credit, and essentially had quite a very critical finding saying that as it stood, it wasn't value for money, and there was nothing to suggest

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00:19:58.780 --> 00:20:03.839

Benjamin Peters: That it would ever be value for money based on the kind of current, the trajectory of the time.

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00:20:05.360 --> 00:20:16.969

Benjamin Peters: And, the Secretary of State at the time stood up in the House of Commons and essentially disagreed with the report and said it didn't take into account, kind of, other work that had been going on since, that it was outdated.

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00:20:17.210 --> 00:20:29.160

Benjamin Peters: So we kind of took that, and that sort of started us thinking, like, okay, how do we respond to this? Do we just let it go? We need to be able to let politicians speak. That is their role. We don't want to get into, kind of, fistfights with them.

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00:20:29.760 --> 00:20:31.190

Benjamin Peters: But then, unfortunately.

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00:20:31.370 --> 00:20:51.090

Benjamin Peters: you know, they stood up a second time in the House and said, that our report had said that actually the reforms to Universe Credit needed to go faster, and they needed to continue. Essentially, we were making a policy recommendation that they should continue, and how so. And this, for us, we just felt at this point, this is crossing a line.

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00:20:51.340 --> 00:20:57.849

Benjamin Peters: one, going back to what I said before, remembering our mission, our job is to hold government to account for Parliament. We're here to support Parliament.

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00:20:58.150 --> 00:21:17.709

Benjamin Peters: And it looked like, you know, a politician was misleading Parliament, whether intentionally or not. So at that point, we felt we had to speak. Now, we'd tried the kind of back-channels approach. We didn't want a public fight, you know, informing that office, can we engage on this? But for whatever reason, that hadn't really worked. And ultimately, it got to the point where we felt that

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00:21:18.250 --> 00:21:29.119

Benjamin Peters: it was going to undermine our organization, and also, you know, Parliament's ability to scrutinise this important piece of policy. So we wrote an open letter,

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00:21:29.720 --> 00:21:43.610

Benjamin Peters: Just explaining then, again, sort of, to Sophie's point, drawing back to the evidence, saying this is what the evidence states, we did not say that. So being very careful not to say, you are wrong, or we disagree with you.

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00:21:43.610 --> 00:21:44.090

Jessica van Onselen: We...

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00:21:44.090 --> 00:21:48.220

Benjamin Peters: We just want to reiterate our position very clearly and publicly on this matter.

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00:21:49.140 --> 00:22:01.420

Benjamin Peters: We had tried to not get to that point, but we ended up, I felt it's important, it resulted in the Secretary of State having to come to the House and apologize for misleading them. There were calls for resignation.

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00:22:01.460 --> 00:22:11.509

Benjamin Peters: as a result of it, but that was, you know, it's a difficult time, that's not a place we want to be in, but yeah, we kind of kept to that. What's our mission? What and who were we really here to serve?

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00:22:11.510 --> 00:22:22.590

Benjamin Peters: But two, let's keep it in the evidence, information, base, so that we can... are very confident we can support what we were saying, and we're going to step back from all the other political stuff that was swirling around.

117

00:22:22.650 --> 00:22:27.450

Benjamin Peters: you know, Universal Credit, the people involved at the time, and just sticking our lane.

118

00:22:28.250 --> 00:22:53.109

Jessica van Onselen: Yes, really, really sort of returning to, like, your raison d'etre is the North Star there, but what I was also interested in there, Benjamin, is, the process of judgment. You know, it sounds like a very well thought through, although that doesn't necessarily mean slow, because sometimes one has to do these things quite quickly, but, you know, trying a number of other means to get to the same outcome, and being very judicious about when you move to something like an open letter.

119

00:22:53.110 --> 00:22:57.019

Jessica van Onselen: So really thinking about that escalation there thoughtfully as well. Brilliant.

120

00:22:57.370 --> 00:23:15.090

Jessica van Onselen: Sophie, with the Climate Change Committee's work often sitting in a politically charged space, that is really more true now than ever, how do you communicate evidence-based work without it being seen as advocacy? I mean, your one principle was data.

121

00:23:15.120 --> 00:23:21.119

Jessica van Onselen: So we'd love to hear a bit more about what is an evidence-based approach to stay in the middle lane there.

122

00:23:21.480 --> 00:23:33.069

Sophie Vipond: Thank you, and I think it's something that we do spend a lot of time working on and thinking about, both at the Secretariat level and at the committee level, so it's definitely, there's no kind of clear one

123

00:23:33.140 --> 00:23:44.959

Sophie Vipond: you know, one answer to every situation. The case study that I thought about in terms of this, was one where we got a lot of criticism, actually, from the broader climate community.

124

00:23:45.210 --> 00:23:57.309

Sophie Vipond: So, a couple of years ago, the Prime Minister of the time, Bishy Sunak, came out and made a speech, which is now known as the Rollback Speech, where he rolled back on a bunch of climate commitments under his government.

125

00:23:57.480 --> 00:24:04.259

Sophie Vipond: And we were under so much criticism for not coming out, and... Criticising his speech.

126

00:24:04.400 --> 00:24:09.890

Sophie Vipond: We did a very short response, which said, we will run the numbers, and then we will comment.

127

00:24:10.010 --> 00:24:12.100

Sophie Vipond: And we didn't get involved in...

128

00:24:12.720 --> 00:24:24.590

Sophie Vipond: what was wanted from the community, which was a kind of running commentary. And then we put our analysts to work, they went, and they ran the numbers, and we started our statement a few weeks later with.

129

00:24:24.690 --> 00:24:27.560

Sophie Vipond: We have run the numbers, and this is what we have found.

130

00:24:27.690 --> 00:24:30.919

Sophie Vipond: And I think taking the heat out of.

131

00:24:30.920 --> 00:24:35.409

Jessica van Onselen: An immediate response, unless it is really necessary, and kind of focusing on...

132

00:24:35.410 --> 00:24:46.910

Sophie Vipond: what does that do to the stats? And then the second half of that is that you then have the freedom to say, whilst we're not sure this has influenced the stats, you've certainly now influenced the public debate. We don't measure that, but someone does.

133

00:24:47.040 --> 00:24:53.430

Sophie Vipond: And so you can... you can still say something meaningful, but I think, for me, it is about...

134

00:24:53.570 --> 00:25:07.779

Sophie Vipond: you often have to get a position out there, but that position can be... will come right back to you. And that is a very safe space for an arm-sex body to be in, and I would recommend it as a immediate response. You certainly should never be pushed into saying something you want

135

00:25:08.070 --> 00:25:17.209

Sophie Vipond: your kind of wider community wants, just because it would work for them, because you serve, as Ben said, a very specific statutory role, and that's incredible.

136

00:25:18.920 --> 00:25:43.599

Jessica van Onselen: again, this is so much about, just that, judgment, and there it's talking about the temporal judgment, right? Do I need to respond right now, or do I need to come back when I have more evidence? And just asking for that, it's so crucial when things are heated and charged and feel like they might take on a life of its own. What a fantastic set of answers straight out of the gates. Celestine, I'm going to come back to you. So, nuclear fusion is a pretty complex

137

00:25:43.600 --> 00:26:00.839

Jessica van Onselen: scientific topic, often misunderstood. Can you share a case where you feel your team really got it right? So, a moment where the messaging struck the right balance

between clarity, neutrality, and public understanding? We've spent a bit of time in, like, the difficult space, but what's... tell us about a time you aced it.

138

00:26:01.360 --> 00:26:12.359

Celestine Cheong: Sure, I'm happy to share some slides, yeah, please. So I'll just introduce Fusion very quickly, and then actually share with you...

139

00:26:14.420 --> 00:26:21.530

Celestine Cheong: the Joint European Taurus, world record results, which happened recently. Can you see... can you see my screen?

140

00:26:21.530 --> 00:26:23.829

Jessica van Onselen: see it? Yep, it's up there. Go for it.

141

00:26:23.830 --> 00:26:43.409

Celestine Cheong: Great. Okay, so, fusion. Very quickly, you smash atoms together, you don't split them apart, and you create helium in the process, because we use two forms of hydrogen, deuterium and tritium. You can have other forms of hydrogen, but they produce a neutron. And that helps,

142

00:26:43.420 --> 00:27:07.230

Celestine Cheong: Let me click on that one. Here we go. Yeah, that helps, generate, energy to turn a turbine and then produce electricity. Right. Now, fusion, there are lots and lots of benefits. It is considered the holy grail of, of energy, because it's low carbon, it's safe, it's reliable, sustainable, and you cannot get a runaway chain reaction, because physics says

143

00:27:07.230 --> 00:27:08.319

Celestine Cheong: You just can't.

144

00:27:08.430 --> 00:27:14.770

Celestine Cheong: So if we can actually, get there and put it on... put our electrons on the grid.

145

00:27:14.770 --> 00:27:36.470

Celestine Cheong: That would be fantastic. It hasn't happened yet, but we have got a lot... a long way, and still a lot to do. Anyway, as I said, it's really hard... now, this is quite a scary, scary

picture, because yes, you need to create conditions of, heat and pressure to fuse atoms together, because it's like...

146

00:27:36.470 --> 00:27:41.940

Celestine Cheong: It's like opposite, magnets. They don't want to... they don't want to fuse, they don't want to connect.

147

00:27:41.940 --> 00:27:56.790

Celestine Cheong: So you've got to create these conditions where you have to push these markers together. So, temperatures of, about 150, 200 million degrees hotter than the center of sun, like what I'm wearing on my t-shirt here at Fusion Power.

148

00:27:57.150 --> 00:28:05.720

Celestine Cheong: 200 million degrees. Anyway, so the world record results. Because it's so hard, it means it also comes with a lot of techy scientific data.

149

00:28:05.770 --> 00:28:17.659

Celestine Cheong: data that, will go over, everyone's head. So just bear in mind that, of course, you want to make it exciting to the public, but then also explain the science.

150

00:28:18.040 --> 00:28:32.280

Celestine Cheong: Now, JET, which is Joint European Taurus, what we had to do was try and make complex, scientific, findings palatable to the everyday, reader.

151

00:28:32.420 --> 00:28:35.090

Celestine Cheong: So much so, what does it mean?

152

00:28:35.090 --> 00:29:00.080

Celestine Cheong: we decided, and we took a long time with various... with, in fact, Eurofusion, with various communicators and the senior leaders, of how do we do this? Because one wants to go, well, if we just put the numbers out, you'll get it. Actually, no. Because what does it mean to the everyday knowledge? And what do we find as something that we can use as an analogy?

153

00:29:00.080 --> 00:29:06.489

Celestine Cheong: This is really hard, because one example was it could power the size of Liverpool.

154

00:29:06.630 --> 00:29:14.640

Celestine Cheong: with this amount of residents, but aha, but Liverpool might not use the same amount of electricity as, say, Manchester, or wherever.

155

00:29:14.890 --> 00:29:23.010

Celestine Cheong: So, in terms of getting it right, not only did we, use simple English.

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00:29:23.470 --> 00:29:29.139

Celestine Cheong: Now, it might seem as simple as that, but using language that avoided jargon.

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00:29:29.250 --> 00:29:38.329

Celestine Cheong: It didn't go too far into the science where you just lose yourself, but also creating content that,

158

00:29:38.500 --> 00:29:53.209

Celestine Cheong: that people could understand, see, hear, feel. Now, I do, on the next slide, have a video, which I'm not going to play, because I'm told it doesn't play very well in Zoom, but if you go to our Instagram channel, UKEA Official.

159

00:29:53.320 --> 00:30:00.029

Celestine Cheong: you can hear the sound of a plasma being created by jet. It's a whirling sound, it's very cool.

160

00:30:00.080 --> 00:30:05.519

Celestine Cheong: And you can actually see a plasma being created. In fact, you see that little red

161

00:30:05.550 --> 00:30:23.499

Celestine Cheong: what looks like a flare. That happens, turned, it actually, it covers the... what it seems, it covers the whole of the interior and then disappears. But the hottest part isn't actually where you see the color, it's actually the invisible part, so that's actually where the plasma takes place.

162

00:30:23.500 --> 00:30:33.459

Celestine Cheong: So, if you can actually... if you can actually hear, see, what it looks like, what it sounds like, then people will start to get engaged. So, in terms of,

163

00:30:33.810 --> 00:30:38.190

Celestine Cheong: where we got it right. That's... that's the video, but I'll... I'll skip that.

164

00:30:38.240 --> 00:30:49.089

Celestine Cheong: It did well. You know, we released the content, it did really well. It... in terms of our Gov.uk website, at one point it was number one.

165

00:30:49.090 --> 00:31:06.229

Celestine Cheong: And it was the number one, posted story out of what it says here, and it then fell down to 51 out of 23,000 news pages. What was interesting, in terms of the stats, was that helping the people understand what Fusion is.

166

00:31:06.230 --> 00:31:10.410

Celestine Cheong: And what it does, and what it could actually, bring.

167

00:31:10.720 --> 00:31:28.229

Celestine Cheong: help the public, to, to support it. So, we actually had the... His Royal Highness, Highness the Prince of Wales, who's now the King, visit, and actually, maintaining that kind of simplicity

168

00:31:28.230 --> 00:31:42.119

Celestine Cheong: led to, actually, the, the King's account, re... reposting. And what I put here is the public attitude tracker. Now, over the period of time of explaining the science is actually,

169

00:31:42.120 --> 00:31:54.150

Celestine Cheong: interesting, and yet easy to grasp. The public sector's knowledge of fusion and support did increase. Now, it increased from 34% in terms of support.

170

00:31:54.170 --> 00:32:12.509

Celestine Cheong: To 39%, and then it went up to 49%, so a massive increase of 10% within a short period of time. So I have to say that, you know, thanks to my team, we... we did... we worked on a very, very unique campaign that happens very, very rarely.

171

00:32:12.510 --> 00:32:18.949

Celestine Cheong: I'm very fortunate to work on it. Get all your ducks in a row, and then off we go.

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00:32:18.950 --> 00:32:20.059

Jessica van Onselen: Oh, that's such a...

173

00:32:20.060 --> 00:32:21.580

Celestine Cheong: sharing from there.

174

00:32:21.810 --> 00:32:28.979

Jessica van Onselen: Oh, Celestine, what a great case study, and Sophie was really pleased with the data at the end, which just showed that impact. So, yeah, it ended up.

175

00:32:28.980 --> 00:32:32.069

Celestine Cheong: There's a comment, science is cool, wish I paid attention to science.

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00:32:32.410 --> 00:32:34.919

Celestine Cheong: Cool! I agree! It is cool!

177

00:32:34.920 --> 00:32:47.760

Jessica van Onselen: Science is... and also, science is cool when you can hear it, I have to say. That is a really brilliant tip that I hadn't thought of. I wonder if I can, if I can find what apolitical sounds like. Yeah, that would be a really great, communications challenge.

178

00:32:47.760 --> 00:33:03.119

Jessica van Onselen: Fantastic. Well, I was just, tipped by your, challenge, Celestine, to be 10 times hotter than the sun. I'm just gonna walk into something that is politically 10 times hotter than the sun, and ask Benjamin a really, a really tough question here. So,

179

00:33:03.120 --> 00:33:10.589

Jessica van Onselen: communicating on immigration is always politically and emotionally charged, but probably never so... never more so than the moment.

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00:33:10.740 --> 00:33:23.230

Jessica van Onselen: Benjamin, when the National Audit Office publishes a topic, a report on this particular topic, how do you approach the messaging to remain both impartial, but also transparent, especially with such a polarizing topic?

181

00:33:24.610 --> 00:33:26.540

Benjamin Peters: Sure, thank you.

182

00:33:26.630 --> 00:33:35.189

Benjamin Peters: Yeah, we've certainly done quite a lot of this, you know, a lot of our topics are, sensitive, because we cover all of government, but immigration, we've

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00:33:35.190 --> 00:33:47.379

Benjamin Peters: recently reported on, the last couple of years, you know, the Rwanda deportation scheme, asylum accommodation, most recently on the contract of asylum accommodation. We've got something on the whole system coming out soon, which will look at the entire system costs.

184

00:33:47.650 --> 00:34:02.140

Benjamin Peters: It's gonna put a big number on the cost of asylum, to the UK, and so we know what, you know, how people will be using that in debate. And it's... it's difficult. And interestingly, one of my colleagues is just looking at this report.

185

00:34:02.350 --> 00:34:11.230

Benjamin Peters: apropos of nothing, not really knowing I was doing this, said, oh, is the fact we're even doing this report impartial?

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00:34:11.230 --> 00:34:14.110

Jessica van Onselen: Because it is so political, and we are putting this.

187

00:34:14.110 --> 00:34:15.780

Benjamin Peters: Number out there.

188

00:34:17.139 --> 00:34:33.890

Benjamin Peters: And it feels like it is totally, sort of, just feeding into something at the moment. Like, really good challenge. So I guess some... one, there's something that is perhaps not so much comms, but we need to be able to explain it, is actually how we choose the work we do, and making sure that we have a balanced work program

189

00:34:34.239 --> 00:34:49.350

Benjamin Peters: overall, so actually, one, we are responding to government priorities. We, you know, we are looking at the things that government is putting money and effort into, that Parliament wants to scrutinise that. So it is appropriate that we look at this and not, sort of, other stuff.

190

00:34:49.360 --> 00:35:07.580

Benjamin Peters: But also we look at the entire balance, and we are looking at plenty of things, that are maybe not on the radar, and we want to put them on the radar. No pun intended, we've got something coming up on space weather soon, which, Celestine, I think you might enjoy. But, you know, we want to make sure that we have got balance in everything we do overall, so that actually when

191

00:35:08.070 --> 00:35:20.930

Benjamin Peters: these pieces of work come out that we know are going to wade into difficult territory are, can be justified. You know, I've talked before about mission and evidence, so sort of skipping past that, and how do we actually deal with it a bit more practically?

192

00:35:21.080 --> 00:35:30.459

Benjamin Peters: at the time. You know, assuming our report is the quality that they always are, you know, we can evidence and justify everything within there.

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00:35:30.760 --> 00:35:40.480

Jessica van Onselen: We then have a bit of a difficult balancing act, because again, a bit like science, audit language can be quite technocratic, quite jargon-filled. It's often using the civil service terminology, we sort of.

194

00:35:40.480 --> 00:35:55.009

Benjamin Peters: there's a risk that we are speaking, sort of, in civil service language, which is fine for the people that need the report, but how do we communicate it wider, including to politicians that might not have that expertise? So there's something about getting the tone of the language right.

195

00:35:55.670 --> 00:36:14.630

Benjamin Peters: people talked a bit about having language guides and so on, so we do have, you know, we have, as part of all our brand work, we have our tone of voice, which for us at the NEO is objective, insightful, and human, and we try and make sure that everything we communicate fits with those, and they, obviously, the tone of those scales up and down, depending on the topic.

196

00:36:14.710 --> 00:36:18.879

Benjamin Peters: But as long as we stick to that, we're not normally going too far wrong.

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00:36:19.120 --> 00:36:20.850

Benjamin Peters: And then...

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00:36:21.310 --> 00:36:30.790

Benjamin Peters: we get to what's often the most difficult bit with, you know, the civil service departments that we're working in. I think we've got some home office people, on the call.

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00:36:30.920 --> 00:36:34.080

Benjamin Peters: In that we...

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00:36:34.400 --> 00:36:53.770

Benjamin Peters: they need to be able to translate this, and we put out a press notice about that. And I actually literally had a former permanent secretary at a talk, only last week, saying, I think your press notice should be duller, but they're too sensationalist. They're, you know, your, implication that we're wading into political territory.

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00:36:54.040 --> 00:37:10.080

Benjamin Peters: it is something I think about a lot. We've got... we've got a duty for this information to get out into the public domain, because it's about transparency, shining a light on how things are going. It's not about being critical for the sake of it, it's not about bashing government. It is about identifying what's...

202

00:37:10.260 --> 00:37:20.860

Benjamin Peters: not working, weather issues, but also what is working. So one of the things we are keen ever more to do, and it's something we're really focusing on, is actually making sure that, as well as,

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00:37:21.420 --> 00:37:26.450

Benjamin Peters: Which, our reports have always had, you know, our recommendations, as well as our findings.

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00:37:26.550 --> 00:37:34.139

Benjamin Peters: But unsurprisingly, getting those through into the press is very difficult, because they want the big, bad number, they want the juicy stories.

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00:37:34.720 --> 00:37:43.000

Benjamin Peters: And so, whilst we talk, Whilst sometimes the civil servants, that we're reporting on feel that

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00:37:43.210 --> 00:37:53.940

Benjamin Peters: we are overly skewing the press notes one way. Actually, what we're trying to do is find a bit of a middle ground, because if we just put our report in the public domain, it gets taken out of context, and we lose all control.

207

00:37:54.240 --> 00:38:08.479

Benjamin Peters: of any messaging, and actually, that's normally where we tend to see more sensationalist or misreporting happening. Whereas, actually, if we try and meet them halfway and put this into more accessible language that is more suitable for different sorts of press outlets, it tends to get reported more accurately.

208

00:38:08.570 --> 00:38:26.949

Benjamin Peters: And so my number one comms objective on all our comms plans for each individual report campaign is not reach or to try and get this many hits. That comes lower down. The first one is always, is the messaging, you know, accurate, impartial, and objective? And so for me, huge reach.

209

00:38:27.110 --> 00:38:35.179

Benjamin Peters: But landing in papers where they've slightly got it wrong is a... is a much bigger fail than someone getting it right and not many people reading it.

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00:38:35.660 --> 00:38:53.419

Benjamin Peters: And so, getting that balance right is very difficult. It's often a real argument with the people we're talking to on the department side, but also with our own auditors, who are like, well, I'm not very comfortable, you haven't used the exact word in the report. It's like, well, yeah, we're trying to avoid the report titles that I read out at the beginning, and trying to kind of...

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00:38:53.540 --> 00:39:02.490

Benjamin Peters: translate that a bit. So, that is where, I guess, one, being able to articulate, hopefully as I'm articulating it now, to your own stakeholders.

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00:39:02.600 --> 00:39:06.170

Benjamin Peters: What you're doing and what your role is, and also that your professional judgment.

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00:39:06.270 --> 00:39:23.700

Benjamin Peters: in this is valid, particularly working in organizations, perhaps like mine, perhaps in the science sector, where they are very evidence-led themselves, and it can be quite hard to turn around and say, you've kind of just got to trust me, because I know I can't give you empirical data that says this word will land better than that word.

214

00:39:24.500 --> 00:39:34.649

Benjamin Peters: But you've kind of got to trust me, on, you know, my skill set as opposed to yours. So those are, you know, some of the things to try and do with each individual report.

215

00:39:35.910 --> 00:39:47.909

Benjamin Peters: So, particularly that objective, that insightfulness, and then, and then, you know, the human, and we'll talk maybe a bit more about that later, but never losing sight of that, and what's... why you're doing this, you know, the ultimate impact.

216

00:39:48.580 --> 00:40:04.800

Jessica van Onselen: Just, yeah, that's so helpful, and the number of tools you kind of mentioned in there, pre-agreed language guide or tone of voice guide that is not inflexible, that can help shape these things in difficult moments, being really clear on your objectives from the get-go, absolutely.

217

00:40:04.800 --> 00:40:17.439

Jessica van Onselen: Sophie, I'm going to come to you, and then I just want to say to, our... everyone online, we'll take some Q&A after that. You can either pop them in the chat or in the Q&A tab function, so just start thinking what you want to ask our amazing panelists.

218

00:40:17.640 --> 00:40:38.899

Jessica van Onselen: So, Sophie, coming to you, communicating climate action inevitably draws attention from politicians, from activists, and the public, especially when the advice is critical. Can you share a time when the committee's report triggered maybe a political or media reaction, and how you shaped the comms to stay focused on the evidence? You gave the example earlier of the, so-called rollback speech.

219

00:40:38.900 --> 00:40:51.549

Jessica van Onselen: and a decision there to really sort of step back for a while. Has that always been possible? What, have there been examples where there's more heat, or where you've really had to sort of step in to try and keep things focused on the evidence?

220

00:40:52.430 --> 00:41:10.459

Sophie Vipond: It's a really good question, and it's something we face not just in the Westminster Whitehall world, but also in the DeVold administrations, which we're responsible for reporting to as well. So the other big example that I faced during my time at the CCC is in April 2024, where we

221

00:41:11.030 --> 00:41:19.020

Sophie Vipond: And the committee decided this, had to officially come forward and say we no longer thought it was credible that Scotland would hit the targets that they had.

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00:41:19.130 --> 00:41:26.079

Sophie Vipond: And the reason that is so important is that whilst it was a policy-based assessment,

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00:41:26.450 --> 00:41:32.589

Sophie Vipond: you know, some stats. They haven't published a climate change plan for quite a long time. They've missed their annual targets.

224

00:41:32.770 --> 00:41:36.900

Sophie Vipond: 8 times in 12 years, like, the evidence was stacking up.

225

00:41:37.410 --> 00:41:40.639

Sophie Vipond: And we say, follow the evidence, but we were aware

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00:41:40.900 --> 00:41:54.640

Sophie Vipond: that in doing so, there would be a lot of political fallout. That doesn't mean that you can't deliver the evidence, but you have to be really, really clear on what it is that you're saying. So we didn't criticize politicians, we didn't criticize political parties.

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00:41:54.760 --> 00:42:00.979

Sophie Vipond: We didn't say, this... particular person is responsible, we just said, if you look at all these

228

00:42:01.090 --> 00:42:04.810

Sophie Vipond: all these evidence bases. This is not possible.

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00:42:05.740 --> 00:42:14.420

Sophie Vipond: Even when you're under media pressure, you know, when you're in an interview and someone goes, yeah, but this is already the fault of blah blah, and the answer is, that's not our... that's not our job to judge.

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00:42:14.680 --> 00:42:16.850

Sophie Vipond: And I think that is...

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00:42:17.020 --> 00:42:30.300

Sophie Vipond: increasingly important in a political world where there are more political parties, and they move positions more. It feels so tempting to try and be a political commentator, and that is not our role.

232

00:42:30.370 --> 00:42:44.590

Sophie Vipond: But in comms, understanding that political commentary and understanding that movement is really important, and as Ben said, kind of knowing what's going to land will change over how the kind of political appetite is more broadly, small p political.

233

00:42:44.590 --> 00:42:58.310

Sophie Vipond: And so being able to navigate the kind of, I would say, the big P and the small P is a large part of what comms does, and the thing that I would say I've benefited from the most at the CCC is the complete trust and faith of both my committee and my.

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00:42:58.310 --> 00:43:00.590

Jessica van Onselen: analytical colleagues on the Secretariat.

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00:43:00.590 --> 00:43:02.109

Sophie Vipond: Who would say to me, well, we...

236

00:43:02.380 --> 00:43:21.270

Sophie Vipond: we can never pick up a phone and do what you do, in the same way that I'm like, well, I don't have a PhD in how to do that level of analysis. And I think when you work somewhere where your skill set is treated as such, then you have the space to say, I can advise on this. And for me, doing that advice to the Scottish Government.

237

00:43:21.270 --> 00:43:36.709

Sophie Vipond: I was really confident that we were right on the... within the right side of the line, because we'd had the space and the time to think it through. The committee had given us a direction, and we had delivered it in line, back to that kind of top point, with the evidence, and that was what the, kind of, what the role of the Climate Change Committee was to do.

238

00:43:36.710 --> 00:43:41.449

Sophie Vipond: And the political fallout is a consequence, but it wasn't the intended consequence, and I think that really matters.

239

00:43:42.100 --> 00:43:47.140

Jessica van Onselen: But also, maybe it sounds like a sort of predictable consequence that you could at least plan through.

240

00:43:47.140 --> 00:44:05.819

Sophie Vipond: But in a way, the risk is that you try... and there are people in these roles who try and avoid political outcomes of any kind, and in that stage, actually, you fail to hold people to account, be the regulator, inform the public, whatever bit of your mission that is driving you.

241

00:44:05.910 --> 00:44:16.370

Sophie Vipond: And for us, if we had seen all this evidence and said, nothing to see here, that would have been a failing of our duty. So we kind of had to prepare for the political fallout, rather than try and avoid it.

242

00:44:16.870 --> 00:44:24.189

Jessica van Onselen: It's so interesting, a common theme through all three of your remarks has really been about having that institutional certainty.

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00:44:24.190 --> 00:44:49.050

Jessica van Onselen: Because if there's rock-solid confidence, and this is our mandate, this is our remit, this is why we exist, and this is the impact that we will always be driving towards, that you have a North Star to sort of return to when there might be confusion, or, you know, we would like this institution not to be about statistics or evidence, but to play an advocacy role, and just not only having your certainty as communications professionals, but the backing of your executive and your boards to say.

244

00:44:49.050 --> 00:45:04.639

Jessica van Onselen: really clear on, like, what this organization and institution needs to do. It's really crucial to kind of weathering those storms, so I'm really taking here just renewing that and making sure that everyone is aligned, will help when things get a little bit tricky and a little bit heated.

245

00:45:04.670 --> 00:45:23.840

Jessica van Onselen: Fantastic. Put your Q&A... I see there were a couple of Q&A. You've been chatting in the chat. Celestine has already answered one question, Sophie's been asking... answering questions there about evidence, etc. So, pop something into the chat by all means. I'm going to read out one from Heather. I'll read it first, and then maybe I'll ping it to someone. So, Heather says.

246

00:45:23.840 --> 00:45:31.379

Jessica van Onselen: I work in climate emergency, and we take a data-driven approach, but there are often times when people question the data surrounding climate change.

247

00:45:31.380 --> 00:45:53.260

Jessica van Onselen: How do you handle climate skepticism from those still not believing evidence when it is presented to them? And I'm actually going to bounce this to all three of you, because I think Sophie has climate application, but, I do wonder, Benjamin, as well, about, like, in a world in which people are like, well, where does your data come from? But Celestine, even

around science, right? So, let's start with Sophie. Benjamin, I'll come to you, and Celestine, yeah.

248

00:45:53.260 --> 00:45:54.750

Jessica van Onselen: Thanks, Heather, great question.

249

00:45:55.500 --> 00:46:07.439

Sophie Vipond: So, on the climate point, I would just say that I'm in an incredibly lucky position, which is this country has legislation in the form of the Climate Change Act that means that the people that I advise, either government or parliament, have committed to

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00:46:07.460 --> 00:46:24.619

Sophie Vipond: understanding net zero and kind of believing that that is the target, because it is in law. And so, unlike many of my peers, there are lots of climate councils in other countries, unlike many of them, I am just incredibly privileged that I spend very little time convincing people that climate change is real.

251

00:46:25.130 --> 00:46:38.720

Sophie Vipond: having said that, I think there are some kind of hygiene best practices that we do that I'm really insistent on. So we publish all of our data, our charts, and the data behind them in a separate Excel file whenever we publish a report.

252

00:46:38.720 --> 00:46:54.659

Sophie Vipond: when we send our reports and our press releases to journalists under embargo, we also send that Excel file, so that if they were to go through the data themselves, and then come back with a question, which is like, I don't understand why you've done this, they can, before reporting on the story. So I think...

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00:46:54.910 --> 00:47:12.310

Sophie Vipond: in terms of the communications angle, we are never going to change every mind, but what you can do is be really transparent and open about your work, so that anyone that comes looking can see, A, the transparency, but also the fact that you have been transparent, which in this world, I think, is just as important.

254

00:47:12.480 --> 00:47:23.740

Jessica van Onselen: Yeah, yeah, super. Benjamin, I'm writing to you, I don't believe in facts. The NAO makes it all up, your fake facts. How do you deal with me?

255

00:47:25.460 --> 00:47:37.360

Benjamin Peters: Yeah, well, I have the joy of overseeing our correspondence function as well, so we do get a few of those. I mean, there's something about what Sophie says at the end, it's like, well, actually, is it... is it our role to convince you that climate change, or whatever the issue is, exists?

256

00:47:37.630 --> 00:47:55.729

Benjamin Peters: to a point, no. So again, back to your mission, like, actually, I don't have the time to waste, sort of, convincing this. You know, we don't report on vaccines, obviously a big, you know, anti-vaccine, community as well. It's not our job to change hearts and minds on that.

257

00:47:56.100 --> 00:48:00.800

Benjamin Peters: But, yes, where we can, we take a similar approach in trying to make our data public.

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00:48:01.240 --> 00:48:11.250

Benjamin Peters: One of our unique privileges, though, is we've got access to all of government, and obviously a lot of that's sensitive, so often... often we can't, so we do have to do it quite a bit on trust.

259

00:48:11.480 --> 00:48:18.989

Benjamin Peters: I think what helps us is the fact that, obviously, as demonstrated, we are quite often critical of

260

00:48:19.160 --> 00:48:23.309

Benjamin Peters: Government, or we are putting stuff in the public domain, and it's very rare that

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00:48:23.510 --> 00:48:35.150

Benjamin Peters: while someone might disagree with us on one area, they probably agree with us on another area. They see us commenting on whatever the issue might be that affects them. So I think that helps us a little bit.

262

00:48:35.240 --> 00:48:52.490

Benjamin Peters: But yeah, I think there's something about, again, you know, sticking to the facts and the data you have had, and just making the conclusion, you know, follow from it. If someone doesn't believe the start point, then they're never going to believe the end point, and you can't change that, so don't waste time on it.

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00:48:52.560 --> 00:48:56.899

Benjamin Peters: But I think there's something about not kind of patronizing, or not,

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00:48:57.380 --> 00:49:12.709

Benjamin Peters: going out to, like, belittle or undermine them, but just, demonstrating where you have got to your conclusion from, rather than necessarily engaging in an adversarial way to kind of convince them. So, that's, yeah, probably, kind of.

265

00:49:12.830 --> 00:49:14.309

Benjamin Peters: Our approach, my approach.

266

00:49:15.390 --> 00:49:23.249

Jessica van Onselen: Fantastic. Celestine, how do you make sure you're always putting evidence and data for trust building front and center?

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00:49:23.580 --> 00:49:39.510

Celestine Cheong: Well, just building on what Sophie and Ben, have said, if they don't agree with the climate data, you can agree with something. Energy security. Our global population is getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

268

00:49:39.690 --> 00:49:47.739

Celestine Cheong: The amount of energy used today is, I think it's roughly about 25 to 30 terawatts,

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00:49:47.800 --> 00:50:03.670

Celestine Cheong: And in 2050, it's going to rise to something like 70 terawatts, which is an incredible amount. And how do we do that when the world's population needs to have more energy to put our lights on?

270

00:50:03.820 --> 00:50:19.359

Celestine Cheong: We need... we need more... more things, sorry, we... we need... we need all sorts of forms of energy, and you can't... you can't disagree with that. So, agree on the one thing, that we are growing in terms of, the number of people.

271

00:50:19.690 --> 00:50:30.239

Celestine Cheong: And we need to keep the lights on, so we need to find ways, different ways, how to do that without, costing the environment too much.

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00:50:31.020 --> 00:50:39.569

Jessica van Onselen: So, sort of pushing the conversation towards areas where there is more consensus or a lower temperature can also be a strategy for sort of keeping things manageable there.

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00:50:39.600 --> 00:51:04.449

Jessica van Onselen: I am conscious that we are fast approaching the end of our session, and I want to make sure that I have time for a last sort of response from all of our panelists, and then we can start to wrap up. We have a question here from Laura Lee, which I'm not going to put live, but maybe our panelists want to weigh in an answer. She's actually challenging, is it not part of the role of communications team to change hearts and minds in some cases? I suppose mission-aligned, if it's

274

00:51:04.450 --> 00:51:18.250

Jessica van Onselen: is mandated within your sort of area, such as persuading people to get vaccinated. I mean, acknowledging that the folks on this call aren't working in that space, but there's a question there, so encouraging our panelists to jump in there if you want to give, Laura Lee a bit of an answer there.

275

00:51:18.250 --> 00:51:29.129

Jessica van Onselen: But the question I wanted to sort of wrap up on was, like, a practical tip for everyone who's online today. So, we've got people joining us from policy, from digital and data, many people here from communications as well.

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00:51:29.150 --> 00:51:51.259

Jessica van Onselen: You all have so much experience, there's so many decades of experience on this call in terms of our guests here. What is one piece of advice for someone trying to communicate more impartially for their current role? If you had to boil down some of the principles you've spoken about today, what would you tell the people on the call here? So, I'm gonna put it to each of you. I'll go Celestine first, then Sophie, then Benjamin.

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00:51:51.260 --> 00:51:54.490

Jessica van Onselen: What's one practical piece of advice for our listeners?

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00:51:56.510 --> 00:51:59.830

Celestine Cheong: Oh, gosh, there's quite a few.

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00:51:59.830 --> 00:52:01.870

Jessica van Onselen: Okay, top 3, yeah.

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00:52:01.870 --> 00:52:13.360

Celestine Cheong: It's, top three, well, okay, one thing, if you find yourself in, in a situation where you, you're, you, you find you might be drowning,

281

00:52:13.470 --> 00:52:28.749

Celestine Cheong: always bounce your ideas within your team. The good thing about being an arm's length body is that you have different departments, and a whole network of individuals you can reach out to, and they will help.

282

00:52:28.750 --> 00:52:41.759

Celestine Cheong: So I say use the network around you. Always bounce your ideas off. Another thing, depending on the subject, please be respectful and mindful. I've worked in the fire sector for 10 years.

283

00:52:41.790 --> 00:52:43.970

Celestine Cheong: Where lives are lost.

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00:52:43.970 --> 00:53:02.720

Celestine Cheong: You have to be in mind that, these lives, that have perished, it could be your friend, your family member, your neighbor, you know, your teacher, you know, someone, someone that you know. So, focus on the structure of the communications, as opposed to, being very, very reactive,

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00:53:02.720 --> 00:53:06.720

Celestine Cheong: And then, treat with facts. So,

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00:53:06.850 --> 00:53:19.009

Celestine Cheong: I would say that, yeah, and then go back to emphasize your mission statement, your principle, your raison d'etre. So, yeah, I could go on.

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00:53:19.340 --> 00:53:20.760

Jessica van Onselen: Oh, that's... that's awesome.

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00:53:20.760 --> 00:53:32.220

Celestine Cheong: Happy to reach out to me if you want to. I'm sure Jessica and the team, have my email address if you want to reach out, so happy to help.

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00:53:32.220 --> 00:53:41.420

Jessica van Onselen: Thank you, Celestine. Ben, what advice would you have for people on the call about, about communicating apolitically in a hyperpolarized world?

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00:53:42.400 --> 00:53:51.920

Benjamin Peters: I think one thing to not lose sight of is the... the keeping it human aspect, which I mentioned is one of our, one of our voices that we stick hold to.

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00:53:52.030 --> 00:54:10.409

Benjamin Peters: for a few reasons. One, everyone in a high-political world, hyper-political world, most people are still coming from a good place, they're coming from a passionate place and fervently believe something. They're still humans that believe it. A lot, you know, obviously, vaccines has come up in this. A lot of the people that,

292

00:54:10.450 --> 00:54:19.830

Benjamin Peters: you know, are... don't believe in vaccinations are doing it, because they are generally concerned, they think it's going to harm their child. They've got really good reason, understandable reasons at least,

293

00:54:20.280 --> 00:54:27.319

Benjamin Peters: Behind that. So, I think there's something about keeping human, and I think impartiality

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00:54:28.000 --> 00:54:34.879

Benjamin Peters: Impartial communications does not mean cold, it doesn't mean academic, it doesn't mean unemotional.

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00:54:35.150 --> 00:54:43.779

Benjamin Peters: you can still acknowledge, the impact of people on what you're talking about. So, you know, we do lots on societal issues, special educational needs.

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00:54:44.070 --> 00:54:47.280

Benjamin Peters: Housing, you know, refugees.

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00:54:47.960 --> 00:54:54.340

Benjamin Peters: And we try and place those center. What is this policy trying to achieve? And one, you talked about the North Star, there's your

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00:54:54.440 --> 00:55:02.579

Benjamin Peters: the mission of the organization. What is that trying to achieve? It's trying to get better and cheaper public services for the United Kingdom.

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00:55:02.580 --> 00:55:17.520

Benjamin Peters: so actually, it's the citizens that we should be considering in our communications, and translating stuff for them. So rather than just putting out big numbers, what does this mean for them? How do you make it relatable, but you can still keep that data and evidence,

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00:55:17.520 --> 00:55:36.769

Benjamin Peters: impartial. Just a tiny example on HMRC customer service report we put out recently. We were looking at how long people are, you know, waiting times on hold. We came up with a big figure, which was essentially the combined amount of time that the UK population has spent on hold trying to talk to HMRC is 798 years.

301

00:55:36.890 --> 00:55:53.410

Benjamin Peters: And, you know, one, obviously it lands the point, it's true, we're not trying to sensitize, actually, for the sake of it, but it becomes quite human quite quickly, because we have all been there on hold, and that is still data, that's still impartial, that's not political, in any way. We just all know what that

302

00:55:53.520 --> 00:56:04.770

Benjamin Peters: feels like, and I think it brings it home. So, so for me, it's that, don't hide behind, kind of, jargon, unemotional, purely academic language. Lean into the human side.

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00:56:05.690 --> 00:56:13.470

Jessica van Onselen: Fantastic call from Ben there. And Sophie, take us home. What advice do you have for people on the call, for apolitical communication?

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00:56:14.440 --> 00:56:24.559

Sophie Vipond: Thanks, yeah. Actually, mine is something similar to what I've written in response to a question, which is, remembering who you do comes for.

305

00:56:24.670 --> 00:56:43.220

Sophie Vipond: There are other organizations in any given space that may be able to do political communications, and they are the right people for that, and you are the right person to do what you want to do, and in fact, your career is hopefully long, and you may move between roles that allow you that flexibility and that don't.

306

00:56:43.220 --> 00:56:56.239

Sophie Vipond: But in a world where our institutions are being challenged, you have a responsibility to the institution that you serve to make sure that you protect its reputation, and I think that should carry you more than anything else that kind of drives you.

307

00:56:57.220 --> 00:57:19.519

Jessica van Onselen: Oh, Sophie, great note to end on. I'm gonna wrap up now, but I just also want to draw attention and say a big thank you to, like, the caliber of the comments, that we're getting here. Just some really deep points here from Russ, Farah had a great point, about communicating science, Philippe, etc. So, yeah, just thank you so much for these thoughtful contributions. It's been a real privilege.

308

00:57:20.380 --> 00:57:43.099

Jessica van Onselen: Thank you, all three of you, for such an insightful discussion. Remember to keep sharing any questions you have. You can continue this conversation in our government communications community. So, we posted the link earlier, we'll reshare it here, but if you can't get enough of the conversation there, just absolutely continue it there. Some of you may already be members, but for those of you who aren't, this is an online space.

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00:57:43.100 --> 00:58:06.079

Jessica van Onselen: designed for public servants working in communications to connect with peers around the world, and it's a place to ask these questions, to share experiences, like we heard today, swap ideas on everything from navigating political sensitivities to building public trust. And if you found today's conversation useful and want to keep the conversation going, it is exactly the place to do it. I mean, it's open, it's friendly, it's full of practical insights.

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00:58:06.080 --> 00:58:10.609

Jessica van Onselen: just give it a go. We'll pop the, we'll pop the, the link in the chat here.

311

00:58:10.610 --> 00:58:26.930

Jessica van Onselen: That just leaves me to say, really the... can we just have a virtual round of applause for our incredible speakers, Celestine, Sophie, and Benjamin, just phenomenal. Huge thanks to all of you for attending. You've been investing in your learning and being so engaged in this topic, what an absolute joy.

312

00:58:26.950 --> 00:58:40.640

Jessica van Onselen: We are going to put up a quick poll to find out how you felt about today's session. That helps us with continuing to improve our content, so we really appreciate it if you take a second to respond. On a scale of 1 to 10, rank your agreement with the statement.

313

00:58:40.640 --> 00:58:58.509

Jessica van Onselen: This event was a valuable use of my time, and your time is precious. One here meaning you completely disagree, and 10 meaning that you completely agree. We won't share the results, but it just really helps us to improve. I'm gonna quickly share a few more events you might want to register for to join us again soon.

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00:58:58.510 --> 00:59:23.199

Jessica van Onselen: And if you can't join us live, you can always watch them on replay. So we have the AI Skills Lab, that's AI for email writing, next Tuesday. That's a short 30-minute session on how to draft emails quicker and smarter. I am a complete fan of these 30-minute sessions, I love them. We've got how to think strategically on a full schedule in two weeks with two great speakers from Canada and South Africa, and next month, we'll be exploring

315

00:59:23.240 --> 00:59:34.559

Jessica van Onselen: how to get what you need from senior leaders. We know that senior leaders came up in today's conversation, so we'll post a link to all of those in the chat. You can click through, register, hopefully I'll see you at some of them.

316

00:59:34.580 --> 00:59:49.449

Jessica van Onselen: That is all we have time for today. We hope you found it helpful, and we want to say a huge thank you to our speakers again, to everyone who's made today happen, and to you for taking time out of your busy days. Keep an eye out for an email coming your way with today's recording and resources.

317

00:59:49.450 --> 00:59:55.919

Jessica van Onselen: And I hope to see you at another apolitical event soon. Have a wonderful and great day. Thanks, everyone! Bye!