



The Internal Comms Podcast – Season 10

Episode 87 – Tracing the legacy of internal comms

Katie 00:04

Hello and welcome to The Internal Comms Podcast with me, Katie Macaulay. This is a show to inform, inspire, and generally energise those of us with responsibility for communicating inside our organisations.

Katie 00:23

Every fortnight I ask a leading light from the world of communication, business consultancy, or academia, to sit in my podcast hot seat, and together, we explore ways to improve the way we can communicate at work. It is often said you must know the past to understand the present. The stories we tell ourselves and each other about our past hugely influences the way we see ourselves today. So what's our profession's backstory? When, where, and why did internal communication become a recognised and established profession within organisations? My guests today have been awarded a considerable grant from the UK Government to research the answer to this very question. Professor Michael Heller And Professor Joe Chick, of Brunel University, are writing an institutional history of internal communications in the United Kingdom, Michael and Joe hope to give us IC practitioners a clearer sense of our occupational history, and in turn enhance our professional identity. As you'll hear, internal comms has a rich and vibrant history, dating all the way back to the 1800s.

Katie 01:59

The three of us cover a lot of ground in this show. What makes something a true profession? How have major societal shifts – war, the right to vote, shaped communication inside organisations? And does history always move forward? Or has IC, in some ways, come full circle? To answer these questions, and many, many more. Let's meet Michael, and Joe.

Katie 02:33

So Michael, and Joe, welcome to the Internal Comms Podcast. It's a pleasure to have you here. And in person, too.

Michael Heller 02:41

Yes. Thank you.

Joe Chick 02:42

Yeah, thank you for having us on.

Katie 02:43

Let's get straight into this, because you have won a considerable grant, I believe it is quite a substantial grant, to conduct an institutional history of internal communication, we are going to come back to that word institution in a minute. Can you tell us how much that grant was for? And in comparative terms, the sort of size of it? And does that also indicate the importance of the subject?

Michael Heller 03:11

I think so, yeah. I mean, it's a huge grant. It's not just the amount of the grant it's who you get it from. This is from the government, which is always fantastic. So we got it from the Economic Social Research Council, which is a government body that gives out money to different groups engineer. The sum is huge. I was out actually a wedding, a friend of mine, who's a doctor, and I spoke to his boss, who's the head of research. I said to him, "what's a big grant for medicine?" And he said something with seven or eight figures, in the millions. Now, for a business history grant, this is massive, we think, the biggest grant that's ever been given in the UK. We've heard of grants in the millions, but they've been what we call interdisciplinary grants. But for us, yeah, it's a lot of money.

Katie 03:21

£650,000?

Michael Heller 03:36

£630,000. But I'm sure we can get some extra money from somewhere.

Katie 04:07

Am I right in thinking that does in some way you think underscore the importance of the subject?

Michael Heller 04:13

I think it's a huge vote of confidence in internal communication. I really do. This is government money. This is not from a private institute, but people who were awarding this public money clearly felt this was in the public interest.

Katie 04:25

Yes, fantastic.

Joe Chick 04:26

Getting the award. It was partly about the subject matter, but also about who we're aiming to engage with as well, which was different from other academic projects. Because normally, academic projects might be primarily engaged with academics and they'll put as a bit of a token extra some kind of public engagement thing

they're going to do, but it was reversed with this project, so trying to engage with the internal comms community was really at the centre of this. So that's why we've been having our really active website and podcast series and we're going to be running workshops with internal comms people about what our research can actually do to add to their approach to their profession. We're working closely with all these partners to actually support this whole process of professionalising internal comms and so I think, the fact that we're working closely primarily with groups outside of academia was one of the things that helped to winning that money.

Michael Heller 05:09

Yeah, I think I think Joe's spot on. It's really interesting because when you do this application, and it is literally six pages, you can only write six pages. The team is myself, Joe, Professor Mick Ronson from Exeter University. We wrote and rewrote those six pages 30 times. We just kept writing it and rewriting it and rewriting until it sparkled. And then we said, now it's ready. Now we submit it. If you do look, it's very nice to read it. And going back to what Joe said there's a section where it says, 'Who are the main constituents of your research?' Who was it focused at? So when we said, the first group is the internal communication profession but we didn't say academics.

Katie 05:50

Fantastic.

Michael Heller 05:51

This is not researched by academics for other academics.

Katie 05:54

Yep.

Michael Heller 05:55

So at the centre of our research, and Joe's quite rightly said that, is the concept of social impact and knowledge exchange.

Joe Chick 06:01

We'll eventually be writing the handbook as well, won't we, for how you can use history in internal comms as well.

Michael Heller 06:07

We're going to be having practical output so please don't be turned off by "Oh, God, it's just a bunch of academics." We are going to write some accept piece, obviously, for our academic friends, but we do realise there are much bigger constituencies out



there, which are basically internal comms professionals, and actually also organisations themselves.

Katie 06:23

Can I take you right back to the beginning? Because I'm curious what sparked your interest in this subject in the first place?

Michael Heller 06:31

My PhD was on clerical work. So I looked at the history of the Office of clerks in London between 1870 1914 and a lot of UK has sounds a bit boring, but it's not now because London at this time was the biggest city in the world. And it had the largest number of clerks in the world. And if you think about that, what where do most people work, including us today in offices. So this is the history work and the future of work. And how that work professionalised.

Michael Heller 06:58

I went through a lot of companies, because companies are amazing. They have so much archival material. I never knew this because I was a traditional historian, I used to think you would go to public archives to research, and then I started going to places like Royal Bank of Scotland, which I think employed 10 archivists. This is an organisation whose history went back to the 1680s. And it was a product of the merger over 100 banks. And again, the railway companies, the Prudential insurance company, all of these, Shell, they have these huge archives, and they're just amazing to research. So every time I went in and said, I want to look at clerks, first thing they gave me was the company magazine. To begin with, I saw the magazine as simply a source as a means to an end to research something else.

Katie 07:43

Yeah.

Michael Heller 07:43

But over time, I realised these magazines were actually– it was during researching the magazine that I kept seeing a word popping up all the time. And it was internal communications. And I realised that this is the emergence of a new discipline. Just to put that into context. If you think of the idea of human relations, or personnel management, human relations, in 1880 that didn't exist. You don't see labour departments, and then personnel departments popping up until the Second World War. So what we're saying is that there are disciplines within business, marketing, public relations... these don't just pop up, these are historical phenomena that emerge over time and actually, often go through several iterations. Again, that's when really my eyes lit up. And I thought hang on, this is when internal comms is developing. And, so there is a form of internal comms before the 1870s. But it's not

internal comms, it's just magazines, and internal comms as a managerial discipline, which looks at strategic communication, and looks at things like engagement, that's actually a much newer idea.

Joe Chick 08:51

And I think one of the things that's of interest is to make it not a history of magazines, but a history of internal comms. And because, as Michael says, if you go to a company when the first thing to get handed this this big pile of magazines, because there's so many of them surviving, and I think there's maybe been a bit of an assumption that that is the sum total of internal comms, because that's what the vast bulk of the written evidence is. But actually, of course, communication, there must be a whole range of different ways that people did communicate and trying to find out some of those other ones is more difficult because we don't have a huge pile of things about verbal communication to look through. But we're trying to look for all those kind of like slightly hidden kind of references to other types of communication.

09:25

I think this is very important. This idea of a paradigm shift, where the way you see something completely changes.

09:32

If you think of, I don't know, of physics, I imagined Newton developed the paradigm shift "Oh look there are laws of nature." And then Einstein later, "there are, but they're very relative" The way we see things changes. We're developing an idea that roundabout the 1880s to the 1960s, 1970s, there is what I would call an editorial logic in internal communications. It's fundamentally a written phenomena. And its primary platform is the magazine. There are other platforms. Townhall meetings. We know that organisations in the past held assemblies. We were actually in Unilever in Port Sunlight. And we were at their archive, and we looked at this room, we thought "wow, look at this room, I wonder what it's used for?" And it was an assembly hall, right? So you can imagine, you know, town hall was a town hall, and it's amazing. Memos, suggestion boxes, notice boards, and particularly the development of a new form of communication, which is the briefing group becomes known as teams meet later. You see a shift and it goes from an editorial logic to, for want of a better word, an internal communicate. There's a shift. There's a shift in the way organisations communicate.

Katie 09:32

Yes.

Katie 10:44

Can I ask you about one word in the title of the subject that you're studying? And that's the word institutional? So it's an institutional history of internal communication? What's the meaning behind that word institutional?

10:58

So to answer your question, institutionalism goes way back to the 19th century. It's actually a sociological theory, but it's used in business. It's an ingrained social practice. That's all an institution is. It's just something everybody does. We often do it without thinking. So when something becomes institutionalised, it's a form of social practice, which everybody follows and everybody accepts. It's an ingrained form of social behaviour, which frames the behaviour of entire groups or society, and organisations, organisations have institutional practice. Eating is a form of human behaviour. Yes? All humans eat. But dining is institutionalised. Yes. Does that make sense?

Katie 11:47

Yotal sense, yes.

Michael Heller 11:48

That's a really nice way of explaining it. So very quick example. When we go to a restaurant, we have courses of meals, yes? Starter, that's institutionalised practice. So in Britain up to the late 19th century, and actually if you go to China, you'll see all the food was just dumped on the table and it came with and you just ate. There might be different dishes, but you ate. What happens is it's developed by the French, then it comes over to Britain, spreads around the world, is you eat with different courses. That's institutional. Or even using knives and forks is an institutionalised form of practice, which only starts emerging in the 16th, 17th century. And another good example of institutionalised practice is sleeping. This is amazing, even sleep! Before the modern period, and we still see this in Spain where people have siestas, the idea you would sleep throughout the night just didn't exist, you would normally have a couple of sleeps. You wake up, right? You do something then go back to sleep. Only with the industrial revolution, we have factories, where you need workers, the idea that you go to bed and you sleep for eight hours. That's institutionalism. And why we call this an institutional history is what we're saying is internal communication becomes institutionalised, it becomes expected and ingrained within organisations.

Michael Heller 13:04

So if you go to an organisation and 1880, or 1900, and you saw a magazine, so you went to the Great Western Railway Company, or the Prudential and you saw their magazine, you would say, "Oh, what's this?" Because it's just not expected or normal.

Whereas by the 1920s, 1930s, if you went to a large organisation, and they didn't have a magazine, you would say, why don't you have four, that's institutional.

Joe Chick 13:30

Of course Michael was talking before about these different paradigm shifts that he gets in communication. And that's where this process of institutionalisation becomes important because for there to be a shift, you have to have this process of deinstitutionalization of I guess of the old kind of forms and then reinstitutionalisation of new ones. So obviously, Michael mentioned about first the magazines that how that gradually becomes institutionalised, so that's an expected behaviour. But obviously, nowadays, magazines, that's not the main way that you communicate with employees. So there's been different processes of reinstitutionalisation along the way with that, and the first one that emerges to the forefront and replaces magazines, or at least, magazines don't disappear, but it becomes the main form, is what they call briefing groups that Michael was talking about earlier. And that's the practice that's now gradually formed into team meetings. And in fact, if people want to read about that we have got blog posts on our website.

Joe Chick 14:20

I guess, nowadays, we just take that for granted that if you have any kind of managerial position in any kind of organisation, there's an assumption that you're going to run team meetings, and people just assume you'll know how to do this. But what's quite interesting is we found that people were actually having to be actively trained in how to do these briefing groups when they first came about, because it was considered such a revolutionary way of communicating with your employees. But it was something that needed to be taught actively. So that's a sign that it hadn't become institutionalised yet at that point. And obviously meetings would have still occurred before but the idea of having a meeting with all your employees, rather than just a meeting with a few of the top managers was a new idea. And another question that raises, if there has to be a process of institutionalisation are people conscious of the fact they're doing that or not? And what we found is that people actively talking about how they're going to have to institutionalise this new practices, the briefing group.

Katie 15:11

Picking up on a couple of things there. I mean, we use the word "embed", it's exactly the same, it becomes habit, it becomes normal, it becomes expected. The other thing to say is actually, I think lots of research is done every year, there's something called the State of the Sector that comes out at the beginning of the year, which is a big survey of internal comms pros. And they still say, actually, that line manager communication and line manager skills are still a big priority and sometimes a gap

to effective communication. So your idea that these team briefings, people need to be instructed and trained is actually is an ongoing thought and debate, I think. I remember healthy debate that flourished on LinkedIn, not that long ago, somebody's taking the position that internal communication wasn't a profession. It wasn't a distinct profession. And that made me think, what is it that constitutes something coming professionalised, turning into a profession? I can think of a few things. But I wondered from your perspective. When does a discipline and activity a job, I guess, become a profession, do you think?

Joe Chick 16:20

That's an interesting question. And I think it's probably because that word profession is one that we have always used without necessarily stopping to think, like you say, what it actually means. And it's almost one of those things that then gets reverse engineered, you have to stop and think, so what exactly do we actually mean? Because we've assumed certain things are professional and some things aren't. And there's other things actually in the grey area. Yeah.

Joe Chick 16:38

And so I suppose that doesn't mean that there's no official criteria for being a profession. But there are a number of things that people have said. One thing is having some sort of code of practice that people within that have to stick to, and, having that done inherently means you need some kind of organisational structure, like an institute that people have to belong to in order to actually be able to enforce those. So that's one thing you might look for with a profession. And of course, that's one of the challenges that internal comms has is that actually, there's more than one different bodies that they might belong to. And there's no official single code that everyone has to stick to because of that. And another thing that might make a profession is having qualifications. And again, that's something that has started to emerge with internal columns. But again, it's not something that's required in order to practice, but it's maybe increasingly seen as officials who have done a qualification. But again, that's maybe not quite got there yet. And another thing is having awards and some kind of recognition of people. And that's something that has been going on for a bit of a while. Yeah.

Michael Heller 17:37

Just to add to what Joe is saying, so really important writer on this called Abbott, the University of Chicago, he wrote a book in 1988, called the System of Professionals. And he asked your question, he says, What does it mean to be a professional? Though, he actually laid down two fundamental bases that complement what Joe said by the way, and the first one is really important. And in this respect, I think internal comms is a profession. It's 'professions have jurisdictions.' They have an area, which they say "this is our area.



Katie 18:09

Interesting.

Michael Heller 18:10

So professions are inherently jurisdictional. So for example, the body is the jurisdiction of doctors and medicine.

Michael Heller 18:17

Okay. Yeah.

Michael Heller 18:19

And but what you find and this is what makes Abbott's book so really cool. He says there are boundary clashes, so you get other groups that try and invade other professionals.

Katie 18:29

Yeah, yeah, we still have that now. Yeah.

Michael Heller 18:31

So people try to get into your territory. So if you think about accountancy, yeah, accountancy is developed into it's not just about numbers anymore. It's about consultancy in business, like, they're trying to get into branding, into HR, strategy, or how, in the late 19th century, banking and accountants tried to get into law in conveyancing, and profiting. So so first of all, the idea of a jurisdiction is important.

Michael Heller 18:55

Now, the second area that Abbott talks about, and this is really important, is it's not just about jurisdiction, it's about what he called theorization. So taxi drivers are not a profession, right? But if you get in a black cab, "I've got the knowledge. I've got the knowledge I can get you from A to B, where are you now you're in Brixton?"

Michael Heller 18:55

Now, I would argue in that case, of course, internal communication, because it has created the jurisdiction process of systematically communicating within organisations is something that was developed by internal communication specialists. In 1949 in Britain, you have the British Association of Industrial Editors. We've also found another group, what were they called? That appeared in the 1930s, the Institute of House Org Editors. So we can clearly see that from the 1930s there were efforts by people trying to say "this is our area, this is our field."

Katie 19:45



And they're proud of that.

Michael Heller 19:46

But drivers haven't theorised that knowledge. They haven't come up with ideas. And I think what's happened and again, we have found this from our research is that internal communication professionals have theorised what they do.

Katie 20:02

Very much so.

Michael Heller 20:03

So concepts of engagement, of voice, well, I know Katie your organisation does an awful lot of model building in theorisations. And we've seen that from professional groups have done this. Yeah. And we've seen it from consultancy groups and from organisations. So that idea that a group of people have developed a theoretical body of knowledge, which is then passed on and is graded through awards is graded through qualifications as Joe quite rightly said, Yes, I think without doubt internal communications professional.

Katie 20:35

A quick word from our sponsor, AB is the world's most experienced internal comms agency. For 60 years, our brilliant consultants and fearless creatives have been helping organisations around the world inform, inspire and enthuse their employees building great organisations from the inside out. There is a lot of pressure on internal comms folks just now, to help you plan, prioritise and deliver astonishingly effective communications. Arrange a friendly, informal chat with us today. Simply email hello@abcomm.co.uk. And if you do I look forward to meeting you.

Katie 21:34

I think one of the very obvious questions to ask, and apologies because I think you might find this quite a pedestrian question, but let's ask it because I think it might be going through listeners' minds okay? The history of what we do must be so influenced by external forces. For example, I'm thinking technology is an obvious one. I'm old enough to remember the first email coming into organisations; intranet being introduced into organisations. How much of the story of internal communication is going to be shaped by not just technological but social impacts as well. So I'm thinking for example, the fact that we live in a less deferential society than we used to. So that whole idea of employee voice feels very congruent to today's times, because employees don't just passively receive a message, they want to take part in something.

Michael Heller 22:33

That's absolutely fundamental. Another key concept of institutional theory, and this is really important... businesses don't do things purely for rational and economic reasons. Now, that's really important that idea.

Katie 22:48

Businesses are run by people!

Michael Heller 22:49

They're run by people and they're based in society, so it diverges from economics, laissez faire, supply and demand, Homo Economicus, rational man. Institutional theory puts at the centre of this concept of social man and socialised organising. What it's actually saying is that organisations and institutions are fundamentally sociological phenomena, that they're just made up for people and they're based in society. And what it also says, this is really important – or me, I think it's fundamental – is that organisations whether it's a company or a government office, or a hospital or a school or the military even operate in the material world and the institutional world. In yoga, you operate in a physical and the spiritual, body and soul. So what that's saying is on the material level, organisations are like machines, they need things, they need people, they need money, they need markets, they need technology, they input output, that's what organisations do. They compete for labour, they compete for markets. But organisations also need symbolic resources. So for example, organisations need legitimacy. Now, this is absolutely fundamental. You can think of organisations who had perfectly good product, but because they lost their legitimacy... If you think of BP, for example, in the Gulf of Mexico, what happened? It was a horizon oil crisis. That broke them in America. Yes. Because they lost the legitimacy. If you think of Nestle in the 70s, with the baby milk scandal, which took them decades to – it nearly broke the company. And of course, that's why organisations create things like mission statements and corporate brands

Katie 24:33

I was going to say branding is right up there, it's a symbol.

Michael Heller 24:37

So organisations don't just compete for physical resources. They also compete for symbolic resources. They compete for things like reputation, legitimacy. And those symbolic goods or sociological, if that makes sense?

Katie 24:52

Totally.

Michael Heller 24:53

If you look at organisations like Unilever in the UK, or John Lewis, The Body Shop and Lush, or even Tata, the engine company that owns Jaguar Land Rover? Or companies in the past like Cadbury and Roundtree, that were run by Quakers, were very religious, they would actually say the social is as important as the economic, and if not more.

Katie 25:16

Yeah, yeah.

Michael Heller 25:17

And so what we are saying is that, yes, company magazines and internal comms did appear to solve functional goals, for example, when an organisation becomes so big, how do you communicate? But if you look all the discourse, language around the magazines that we found, it's all about legitimacy. It's all about giving a sense of purpose, giving a sense of family, giving a sense of aims. That's institutional.

Joe Chick 25:43

There was a very important article written in 1917, by Mayor and Rowan, very famous paper, and it's called Institutionalised Organisations: Formal structure is myth and ceremony, that a lot of what we do is error, it's mythical

Katie 26:00

Totally.

Joe Chick 26:01

That doesn't mean it's not true. We create narratives and stories and ceremonies, which gives a sense of ritualization and meaning to what we do. And a lot of internal communication, I think does that.

Katie 26:12

And it does it explicitly. So you talked about 1920, walking into an organisation and you'd expect to see an in house magazine, and it would be odd by the 60s and 70s, probably not to have one, yes. But these days, it would be very odd if you walked into an organisation and you said, "where are your values?" and they said, "We don't have any values. We don't have any stated values," you would look blank at that. You use the word narrative and organisations needing a narrative. I feel like sometimes that's what we're doing at the moment is helping organisations create their narrative.

Michael Heller 26:46

Absolutely. So Mayor and Rowan don't say that the organisation becomes institutionalised, they say society becomes institutionalised, and then the

organization's absorbed social institutions to create legitimacy. So just to give you an example of that, is magazines and newspapers. We know that newspapers have existed since the 17th century. So yeah, late 17th century, but newspapers were only read by extremely wealthy people. It's been estimated that if you bought The Times, a copy The Times in the 1800's, it would be the equivalent of spending £50 on something now, that's how it was. And of course, that's why coffee houses opened in London, where you could read newspapers, which were already there. But what happens at the end of the 19th century, and the Daily Mail is one of the first of this is you see the rise of what becomes known as tabloid journalism, mass journalism, the penny newspaper.

Katie 27:44

Yes.

Michael Heller 27:45

And you see also the emergence of mass magazines. So magazines really pop.

Katie 27:49

Yeah.

Michael Heller 27:50

And then within 10 years, those magazines were absorbed into organisations.

Katie 27:53

Yes.

Michael Heller 27:54

So you see a practice. But it's not just the technology. It's the social practice of reading and communicating and creating

Katie 28:02

yes.

Michael Heller 28:02

That it's not just about this technology exists. And then it suddenly goes into that, it that technology has been socialised. And there is expectations around that.

Katie 28:11

Yes, I love that. And you've just made me think of the gentrified guy with his landed estate and his butler is ironing The Times for him in the morning. And that explains why because it was the equivalent of 50 pounds.



Michael Heller 28:22

By the late 60s, 70s, and particularly with Murdoch, you see, tabloid diarization, the glamour girl on page three, lots about sports. If you looked at the company magazines of the post office, for example, or the railway companies, by the 70s, we found this Unilever, you see the emergence of The Lever Mirror, they look like tabloids.

Katie 28:42

I hate the word Zeitgeist. But they're taking what's happening at the time, they're reflecting that. I don't know if you know this story about AB, but it just so neatly fits into what you've just described. So we get our name from Anthony Buckley, who is printing the Financial Times on Fleet Street, that's his job is to get the Financial Times out every day. This is early 1960s so only 20 years after the end of the Second World War.

Katie 29:07

It's weird times in some ways to think about what was going on. He's watching people come backwards and forwards to work. And he's wondering to himself, how they're being communicated to inside their organisations. There were no internal comms teams then. He wonders whether chief executives and managing directors would welcome the kind of professionalism that he's got at his fingertips at The Times, so that print production, print management and journalism. He wonders whether they would welcome that inside their organisations to help them communicate with their employees, which is why we believe we are the world's first internal comms agency in 1964.

Katie 29:49

He was massively visionary to do that, considering there wasn't internal comms as a recognised department then, and interestingly, our clients were the chief executive's secretaries, and I used that word deliberately because they were called secretaries, they weren't called personal assistant, but they were the one closest to the power that knew what was going on. So they were often the client. Fascinating. And those early clients are organisations, some of them long gone, and others still around.

Michael Heller 30:19

And that is another big change that shift in the 60s and 70s away from the organisation doing its internal comms towards consultancy. Last year is the BBC's 100th anniversary, although I think becomes a corporation in '26. But the BBC was created because of the emergence of mass democracy in 1918. So 1918, everybody gets to vote, although women under 30 have to wait until 1928. The idea was, once we have a democracy, people need to be communicated to. It's almost, people have

a right to communication or— and organisation start reflecting that idea that employee voice communicating to people becomes it's a part of welfare, welfare Isn't that so you have the emergence of things like industrial democracies, that unions have to be human voice that employees communicate. So that becomes a social phenomena that we see happening. So again, when the BBC is being established, we're seeing it's dripping down into organisations. And when we start seeing briefing groups, and when we start seeing the switch from the editorial to internal comms, that's in the 60s and 70s with the breakdown of the deferential society. And that's really important, because one of the big shifts is the old form of communication is one way it's taught people communicating, whereas the new internal communication is premised on two way communication.

Michael Heller 30:21

Yes, yes.

Michael Heller 31:33

And that I would say, owes itself to the collapse of a highly stratified deferential society and the emergence of a permissive society

Katie 31:56

As an agency that sprung up purely doing internal magazines, initially newspapers, then tabloids, then magazines, so it just follows all those trends of the newsstand, we then have to make a very conscious decision to almost let go of our roots because the danger is internal communications is viewed as just the people that produce the house organ as it were. And we want to be seen as so much more than that. Possibly other professions go through this as well, where they want to lose some of their roots in a way because they don't want to be too associated just with one narrow definition of what they do.

Michael Heller 32:31

Roy Sotherby is very senior academic has written a lot on institutionalism and professionalism as well. Headings Sotherby, Greenwood and they've written a lot about the accountancy profession, which goes through exactly that process,

Katie 32:44

Right.

Michael Heller 32:45

Where to begin with accountancy originated in counting houses, there was just numbers and counting. And they started developing some quite cool stuff like cost accounting depreciation, but it's still fundamentally about numbers. It's still counting stuff, it is just doing it in more spheres. But obviously, they have to now know things

about the law and so forth. So this professionalised as they develop a theoretical system knowledge and jurisdiction. But in the 1980s 1990s, they completely changed and said, we're not just about numbers, we're about business. We're about strategy. We're about telling people what to do. We move now from simply being solely concerned with numbers to be all about managing your business. And then they suddenly start branching out into things like branding. So how can you do cost accounting for brand or brand equity of your brand? So then they start working with base about branding and marketing, then going into strategy?

Katie 33:38

Yes.

Michael Heller 33:39

So that's a really good example of a profession which has deinstitutionalized and reinstitutionalized itself, and internal comms – and of course, this goes back to not just the emergence of these meetings, which you know, there's a move away from solely being dependent on print media, but also the emergence which is a defining element of internal comms as the digitalization of internal communications. And actually, now that shift I think, with social media, away from creating content to curating content, and that actually is so cool, because the emphasis now is that the employees create the content

Katie 34:18

Totally.

Michael Heller 34:19

And the internal confessionals, just like nudge them and get them to do all that. But they curate it and they craft the narrative. And you know, what's fascinating is that if you look at the origins of the magazine, it was the employees that wrote the magazine. So we're actually going full circle.

Katie 34:33

I was going to ask you about that because the magazine that I always come back to is the Lowell offering from the millworkers in Massachusetts, and Cortiva I think so. Yeah. And it is written for the female mill workers by the female mill workers.

Michael Heller 34:48

By themselves.

Katie 34:51

And all that sort of thing. So this idea that we've come full circle I love actually, and it isn't just my theory, then it's actually, you're finding it.

Michael Heller 34:59

No 100% Joe...

Joe Chick 34:59

And I think the reason that's happened because of course, Jim Levy noticed like a change, you tend to assume that sort of been in one direction. But actually, I'd like to say this is somewhere gone in a circle.

Michael Heller 35:08

I think the earliest magazine we found is the EPIS Magazine. Yeah, that's the Prudential insurance company. And that was written by its employees. And it's a bit like the Lowell, it's a bit weird. It's just full of poetry and literature. But it does talk about work as well.

Michael Heller 35:25

One of the major reasons why a lot of these company magazines actually emerged was because of sport.

Katie 35:31

Yes.

Michael Heller 35:31

So organisations started investing massively in sports grounds and sports for the city.

Katie 35:37

Yes.

Michael Heller 35:38

Then you have sports clubs. And if you think about this, if you do sport, I do judo, for example, than any sports person will know this, if you look at Italy, they have sports, newspaper, sports magazine, if you need to say, this is when the next game is this is the league table. This is the result. Here's report.

Katie 35:55

So one of our early publications was called BP leisure news. And it was just about the clubs and the sporting goings on at BP.

Michael Heller 36:04

The other thing that we know from our research, for example, Major, British, but I'm sure overseas as well. Railway stations, there's always a memorial.

Katie 36:13

Yes.

Michael Heller 36:13

For soldiers that died in the First World War.

Katie 36:15

Yes

Michael Heller 36:16

If you go to the Prudential, there's a huge war memorial because companies actually had their own battalions. They had soldiers that went and then they, it's bizarre when you think about this, this is before the First World War. Now what would happen would be when the war broke out, a huge proportion of your workforce just disappeared.

Katie 36:36

Yes.

Michael Heller 36:37

And they started writing letters back to the company to tell their colleagues what was going on. And they were getting so many letters, they set up a journal to put the letters into

Katie 36:47

Wow.

Michael Heller 36:48

For me, the most important thing I think with history is, even though I've used a lot of theory, we are very agnostic. We never say there is a set text, a set script. And so these things can be happening for a multitude...

Katie 37:02

Yeah, I don't know where this fits with what you're learning and your research. But certainly Anthony Buckley, as I say, where AB gets his name, sadly, he passed away not that long ago, but I got him on the podcast. So I did interview him. But he talks about the importance of going to the chief executive and saying, if we write your magazine, there is going to be a degree of objectivity, which is going to make the content more believable. We can call you out. Because we can say, look, that doesn't really make sense. That's not the language the reader would use. Whereas if it comes straight from you, it could be much more easily viewed as propaganda. So

we're gonna sit in the middle between the reader and the corporate centre and the messages you want to get out. And I think that's an interesting place. Because I think internal comms people often find themselves exactly still in the middle, in the sense that they're spending their time on the front line, learning, listening, soaking up the culture and the values. And then the corporate centre might give them a strategy and say, communicate that. Okay, somehow, I've got to be the bridge, I've got to make the connection. He was doing that in the 70s. But potentially, that's the challenge we still face today, I think.

Michael Heller 38:17

No, I think that's absolutely fundamental. And in the 1960s, there's a magazine called Coal News.

Katie 38:23

There is, yeah

Michael Heller 38:24

In 1945, there are a million coal miners in Britain, if you include their family, pretty massive, right? Yeah. And even by the 60s, you're still talking 2, 300,000. Now, what happens in the 60s is the coal industry has to restructure and it has to close down coal mines. And we know that a key role of internal communication and that's why it is strategic is organisational change. And I'm sure you've had lots of clients where you've gone in and said, as part of a change programme and underneath communicate, and really one of the first companies in Britain, which explicitly spoke about this was the coal board. And what they did is they did exactly what you said. So they set up a tabloid called Coal News. Now, don't forget as well that these magazines, they're read in coal mining communities. Yes. So you've got wives, children, teenagers, not they're actually communal. But we know for a fact that magazines are often read not just by workers, their families and other people. We know that this is the case. Now what the coal board did very cleverly, it did exactly what you said. It set up an independent editorial board. So you would have an editor sub-editor, teams of journalists and Coal News, criticise, sometimes the management board, and as a result of this, it was trusted by the coal mines. And that really put internal communications to the forefront. You know that Ford, British Rail do the same, you start seeing this kind of independent editorial because this has always been a big problem with company internal comms is will workers listen? And one thing we've seen when we were at Unilever we saw this was that trade unions have highly sophisticated forms of internal communication

Katie 40:04

Very.



Michael Heller 40:05

So, I think the professionalisation of union communication forced companies–

Katie 40:10

I don't doubt it for a moment. I don't doubt it.

Michael Heller 40:13

So it's all about getting that legitimacy over. We're not just mouthpieces of management. Sometimes you have to be the mouthpiece of management. That's what makes it such a fascinating history.

Katie 40:22

Yes. And such a fascinating profession, I would argue as well. Your whole project is due to end. Am I right, the end of 2025?

Michael Heller 40:30

Yeah.

Katie 40:30

Do right in the thick of it all at the moment. If we fast forward to that point, when it is all over? From the perspective of listeners who are working in the internal comms profession, what is this body of work? What is your project going to give them?

Joe Chick 40:46

Well, I think there's two aspects of what we're working on that would contribute there. We're obviously looking at the history of internal comms as a profession. But we're also looking at how organisations use their own history. Yeah. And I think it probably to start the second one of those, I guess that's going to be quite a crucial things that's practical value is learning from strategic ways that you can use your organization's history, because we found when we went to the IOIC festival with them talking about storytelling a lot, it was a common theme there. And of course, a crucial part of telling the story of your organisation is its past and trying to maybe take a step back and think about the lessons you can learn about how to use the past to tell a story is one thing and the workshops we're going to be running that will probably be one of the crucial kind of themes of those workshops will be how to use your organization's past and of course sometimes, organisations have difficult pasts that they're having to work with as well.

Joe Chick 41:35

So there's, yeah, but I've also got another thing which we found when we did our focus group to some people, and it's a new organisation, which doesn't have that long past, how do you go about telling a story when there's a relatively short past

compared to one that's got long heritage? So suppose that's one aspect and then the first bit about the actual history of the profession, then I suppose that's hopefully going to contribute in some way to the professionalisation and perhaps what I'm talking about earlier, what the definition of a profession is, that's maybe something else that should have been in there, because actually having a sense of heritage is probably an important part of it. It's excellent. Hopefully this will contribute to that.

Michael Heller 42:08

One thing we know is that when groups professionalise, they write a history of that professional practice. So they pretend Oh, well, we've always been doing it. They create what's called what Hobsbawm the very famous British historian, he called it invented tradition. The royal family are really good at that. You know, we all yes, we go along in the carriage, a gold carriage. No, he started doing that in the 19th Century. But they pretend they did it for centuries. Or kilts. Yes, we know that kilts for tall didn't develop Braveheart didn't wear a kilt with tartan. And it's something that developed in actually it was invented tradition in the 80s. So professions are very good at this. So as soon as the doctors and the lawyers and the pharmacists, they wrote a history of their practice legitimated it gave them a sense of professional legitimacy. Now, one thing we've seen is that even though internal comms is old, we know it goes way back to the 1880s. It still hasn't written a history of itself.

Katie 43:05

Yeah.

Michael Heller 43:05

And the book we write will not be aimed at academics, it won't be aimed at professionals, but can be read by academics. And it will be saying, this is where you're from. And this is how old you are. And this is your history, and your heritage and your legacy as well. So

Katie 43:20

This episode of The Internal Comms Podcast is brought to you by my very own Friday update. Would you like a short email from me, never more than five bullet points long, giving you my take on the week's news from across the world of communications? This might be the latest reports, books, podcasts, conferences, campaigns that have caught my eye during the week. I always limit myself to just five nuggets of news. So you can read it in record time, but still feel a little bit more informed, hopefully a little uplifted as you end your week. Now, this is subscriber only content, which was initially intended just for AB colleagues and clients. I don't post this content anywhere else. So you do need to sign up. But that is super easy. Simply go to abcomm.co.uk/Friday, we just need your email address. And it's equally easy

to unsubscribe at any time. So give it a go that sign up page again abcomm.co.uk/Friday. And if you do choose to be a subscriber, I very much look forward to being in touch.

Katie 44:54

I'm just gonna leave listeners with one quick fire question for you both and this is I hope is going to spark your imagination. If you had to pick one lesson from history that one lesson that history has taught us about the human race, what would it be?

Michael Heller 45:12

I'm gonna give this to Joe first. I'm a modern historian. I'm a baby, when it comes to history, Joe's actually a mediaeval historian. Joe's history is far more venerable.

Joe Chick 45:21

I think yeah, one of the things you notice from studying history is just how dramatically, society actually changes in quite a short space of time. And I suppose going back to the mediaeval times, that really strikes you how it almost feels like an alien world. But you realise it's not actually that long ago on the grand scheme of things. So I think realising just how much things are going to change, and then their everyday lives, we assume the world around us is going to stay much the same as it is, but actually, course really dramatic changes will happen in our lifetime and inevitable and sometimes people resist that, but you've got to recognise it, but at the same time, is that there are some things that don't really change. And when it comes to something like internal comms, I guess there's some the principles of good communication don't actually change. So probably a lot of the challenge then is, how do you keep those principles going for good communication in a completely different kind of society, which is inevitably going to happen?

Katie 46:11

Can I just ask a quick question then on what you've just said, yeah. Because people believe I think, oh, there's this general assumption that the world is speeding up that we are seeing change, changes exponential, this word that keeps being used. From your knowledge of mediaeval times. would even those people wandering around then have thought, things are changing quite fast?

Joe Chick 46:36

I think so I think probably looking at I guess, looking back with 21st century eyes, it can seem like it's all quite similar. But actually, there were significant changes, and people at the starting in the mediaeval times wouldn't have recognised it as really being the same society at all. So...

Katie 46:48

There's something quite reassuring in that, in a way.

Joe Chick 46:50

I guess, the changes there maybe don't seem quite as dramatic to us. But certainly there are certain areas like technology now where actually, the rate of change is incredibly quick at the moment, but it's always been the case that the world keeps changing around you. And you have to try and work out how to keep things functioning in a different society

Katie 47:05

That says something about the adaptability of the human race, isn't it?

Joe Chick 47:09

street for someone to worry about change about humans do always seem to work out how to adapt to the changes that are going on around us

Katie 47:15

Quite reassuring. Yeah. What's your lesson? Michael, do you reckon history has taught us about ourselves?

Michael Heller 47:20

One of my favourite lines in history is actually from Mark Twain, from slavery, live it, he says, History doesn't repeat itself. But it rhymes. Ah, I love that line. So it doesn't repeat itself. But it rhymes.

Katie 47:33

So there are echoes of things that come back.

Michael Heller 47:36

So that I don't believe in the repetition. I'll give you a good example of this is that at the moment, there is a great fear of war, and quite rightly so. Yes, we have war at the moment in the Ukraine. And there is a big fear of China invading Taiwan. This has all happened before. Yes. As a lovely line in TS Eliot, the Wasteland where he writes, I have seen the scenes before enacted on the same divan all bad. I've seen this all before that, and in the same way, that in the past both before the first one and before the Second World War, we saw periods of great crisis and strike, simply economic strain, unions, and war is often used as a diversion. Yes, one of the oldest tricks in the book, but it's not going to happen in exactly the same way. So I think that's an incredible idea. There is no repetition in history. But there's certainly a loss of rhyming going on. As long as you've got the potential macro elements you'll go into see human behaviour. Yeah, structure and agency. The structure is the big macro thing. Yeah, the economy business. But that's us where the little micro bits



making. If you put people into bigger groups, their behaviour becomes more predictable. Yeah, yeah. And so history is a great lesson.

Katie 48:55

Brilliant. We could have kept talking easily for another hour. There's so many questions I still have for you. But thank you so much for your time, Michael and Joe.

Michael Heller 49:04

thank you so much. It's a pleasure.

Joe Chick 49:06

Thank you for having us.

Katie 49:08

So that is a wrap for this episode of The Internal Comms Podcast. For the show notes and the full transcript, head over to AB's website. That's abcomm.co.uk/podcast. If you did enjoy this episode, I would be extremely grateful if you could give the algorithms a little notch by rating this show on Apple Podcasts, that would just help other IC pros out there find our show. We have some great guests lined up for this season. An interesting mix of in house practitioners, advisors and consultants, so you may want to hit that subscribe button today.

Katie 49:54

All that remains is to say a special thank you to Michael, to Joe, to our producer John Philips, sound engineer Stuart Rolls, and Freddie and the team at AB, all of you keep the show on the road. And I am very grateful to you for doing that. And finally, a very special thank you to you for tuning in to The Internal Comms Podcast. Do continue to reach out to me on LinkedIn and Twitter. I enjoy getting feedback and I do try to respond to every comment. So until we meet again, lovely listeners stay safe and well and remember, it's what's inside that counts.