Transcript for S13, E2 - Exploring the last human job and the role of connective labour with Allison Pugh

Intro: Welcome to the future of internal communication podcast. I'm Jen Sproul, CEO of the Institute of Internal Communication.

Since we launched this series in 2021, the world of work has been disrupted by event after event. A pandemic, geopolitics, AI, extreme weather events, remote and hybrid working, generational shifts, inclusion, diversity - the entire nature of how we work needs transformation.

This podcast explores opportunities for internal communication in the future of work. Internal comms is a crucial function that helps organisations achieve lasting change, building trust and relationship between people, in pursuit of shared goals.

Please join me, Dominic Walters and Cat Barnard as we dissect what this means for internal communication.

With relentless change the new normal, it's time to reimagine our profession.

Cathryn Barnard (01:06)

Hello and welcome to the latest episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Cat Barnard, as ever joined by Dominic Walters and Jen Sproul. Today we have got a really interesting conversation lined up. Coming back to the ongoing topic of artificial intelligence and what it means for us all. Today I'm feeling somewhat discombobulated because I've literally just watched two videos back to back. One is an interview with the philosopher Yuval Noah Harari giving his take on where we're at with artificial intelligence. And the other was with Tristan Harris, who was the former chief ethicist at Google and has since become somewhat of a whistleblower on the topic of technology and now artificial intelligence. So today I'm really pleased to welcome a professor of sociology, Allison Pugh, who teaches in America at John Hopkins University. We finally managed to connect. She's had a very, very busy schedule following the publication of her most recent book, which is aptly entitled, The Last Human Job, The Work of Connecting in a Disconnected World that was published late last year in 2024. And she has in the time since publication, I've watched you going round and around and around talking to various audiences about the themes that you address in the book. And it feels like such an apposite, timely topic to be discussing, every single day, I think I can speak for all of us that we are barraged with a litany of media headlines telling us that if we don't instantaneously adopt generative AI in particular, but AI in general, we will render ourselves obsolete and have to face, I don't know, a life in the gutter or some such and I don't think that the discourse is fair. I think the pendulum kind of needs to swing back and we need some reason and measure. So for that reason, I'm really, really delighted to welcome you, Allison, to the podcast to speak to our listeners today, the internal communication community. Welcome and thank you.

Allison (03:35)

Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate this opportunity.

Cathryn Barnard (03:39)

Brilliant. Thank you. And I really appreciate the opportunity to talk about the book because it was recommended to me actually by a former guest to our podcast, Jennifer Sertl. And when I received my copy in the post, I won't lie, I did look at it and go, that's a big one. And when I got stuck in, it felt like a really meaty body of work because it was so rich. Every single page was so rich with observation and call out really. So I guess I would love to start the conversation by asking you what had you been noticing that led you to write the book? What was going through your mind when you felt called to put pen to paper, so to speak.

Allison (04:37)

I wrote the book principally because I was in the middle of an argument with other sociologists about the value of in-depth interviewing. And there was a kind of argument or a fight going on in the journals about how, people who are giving you interviews, they're just kind of giving you ex post facto rationalisations of their behaviour. It doesn't actually reflect anything true. They're just saying, yeah, I do this because of this. it's not something real. In-depth interviewing is actually how I do my work. It's how I've written four books so far. And to me, that argument felt like such a reductive approach to our idea of what interviewing is. In depth interviewing if you can imagine like journalism, but ind of maybe longer. You really like kind of are listening deeply to the other person and then you're reflecting back to them what they say and then they're saying, no, no, that's not quite it. It's more like this and you're saying, well, how about this and you're also paying a lot of attention to what they're not saying and their body language. And so it's a very kind of, it's a deeply reflective moment where you're attuned to another person. And it is also very interactive. It's not at all like I'm a stenographer. Instead, it's the two of us together making something. So after I was in this argument with my fellow sociologist, I started to look around and see what other jobs also use this method of reflecting and witnessing the other in communion with the other person. I kept seeing it everywhere. And then at that time, I also noticed that it was really being compressed and constrained by time and efficiency campaigns, basically. And so I was looking around going, huh, and the only other people really focusing on the impact of systems on feeling work were AI engineers. This was 2015 when I started my research and they were really focused on how do we get AI agents that can do this kind of reflective work with the other and how can we help out people who are time compressed and all the things that you hear today. And so that's why I started writing this book.

Cathryn Barnard (07:12)

Wow. And there's such a lot to unpack there. It resonated for me when you were talking about the, it's a fragile, vulnerable dance that goes on between two individuals when a deep conversation takes place. When somebody shares some of their innermost truths

with you, it is an honor to witness them and to be in conversation, particularly with the onslaught of digital communication. And I'll put my hand up, I was involved in the mobile telecoms industry from the nineties. So I spent quite a lot of time feeling like I've got some kind of contributors' guilt to the whole way in which we're set up today. But one of the things that you bring out in your book really early on, you called this act of connection, you refer to it as connective labor. And I hadn't come across that term previously. I'd come across the term emotional labour. And in my mind, I'd kind of thought about the way that women, in particular caregivers, do an awful lot of nurturing to raise other humans and hopefully socialise them in a way that means that they're, reasonably decently functioning within society and how the task of bringing up children and of keeping families tethered and tied together and bound together. That is hard work and I had never any appreciation of that until I became a parent. So when I read Connective Labor it immediately chimed with me because I also thought about people at work who organise the social events, people at work who make sure that everybody's okay and kind of on the same page, people at work who do those things that they get no recognition for, but if they got taken out of the equation tomorrow, they would be missed, they would be sorely missed. And so that was something that I reflected on almost immediately, but it actually gives me kind of spine chills and not in a good way when you talk about your observation that software developers were looking at this stuff a decade ago to work out how to replicate it. I mean, just in the news in the past week, we've heard Mark Zuckerberg wade in and talk about how his technology can resolve issues of loneliness. And a year or so ago, I think they trialed a, I can never remember, my daughter will shout at me, can never remember whether it was Kylie Jenner or the other one. But they created a chat bot, this is meta, created a chat bot because the argument was, it's better to have somebody to speak to than nobody at all.

Cathryn Barnard (10:46)

And that just makes me feel really, really uncomfortable. And so as I recollect the book, which I read, I think six months or so ago now, I think about how you describe the role of connective labor, particularly in education and in healthcare. And how, for me, my takeaway is, what damage do we do when we don't take the time to deeply connect and see another, certainly in a kind of hospital or healthcare setting. If you're not listening to somebody's story, you're missing all the things that they could tell you about how they've ended up in the situation that you're currently diagnosing or attending to as a medical practitioner. But I also feel really deeply worried for our kids actually, because the one thing that every child needs is somebody to listen to them that shows up and believes in them. And that's not always your parents. I think actually most of us can all point back to one teacher or one person that was outside of the family that fueled our inner belief that we were actually capable of something more than we'd thought ourselves to be until that point. And so there's an awful lot in here as you were writing that I was nodding, ardently in agreement. So I don't really know where I'm going with this. I think I'm having a bit of a ramble rant, but there you go. I obviously want to talk about this and it's really important, right? The act of talking.

Allison (12:36)

Well, I can offer one thing, which is I was so privileged to do this work. I ended up talking to more than 100 people who many of whom were practitioners. So they were teachers

and doctors and therapists and also home health care aides and hairdressers and all kinds of folks. And the stories they told are what sticks with me. So I do think, you know, it's important to have a name, it's important, a name to the thing we care about. So that's why I called it Connective Labor. And I think it's important to diagnose like when it, you know, what kind of organizations help that to impede it and what kinds enable it, et cetera. But really when I think about my research, I think about the stories. So when you talk about how important it is for kids to be listened to, the first thing I thought of was this teacher I interviewed in Oakland, California, African-American teacher, Pamela Murray. And she had selective mutism when she was little. So she kind of wasn't talking and people didn't know why. And really it was because her family moved even every couple of months. And she just kind of was responding in some way to that.

Can we call it trauma? I'm not sure, but anyway, to that situation. they were thinking about testing her for special ed in the United States, for kids who need additional attention that way. And then she met a teacher who she says just sat and listened. She was like, kids get us talking to them all the time. And this teacher just sat and listened. And she flowered in that moment. And she says, I could have been tested for special ed and instead I was tested and they put me in gifted and talented. And today she's a middle school teacher in Oakland and she's like, I wanna be that teacher, that teacher that I needed and that I wanted and that I finally got. I wanna be that teacher for my kids. It's like such a powerful experience and also inspiration for her. So it has a profound effect.

Cathryn Barnard (14:51)

I just want to say one thing because actually I think this will feed into what I know Jen is wanting to ask. Last week Gallup produced its 2025 State of the Global Workplace report which in the internal communication profession is one of those annual reports that gives the pulse of the latest global engagement at work data and so just quickly it showed several things they reformatted it this year but one thing engagement is down second thing engagement amongst line managers and supervisors who arguably probably are setting the temperature in the room for everybody else working in an organisation, that is down. But they'd also dived into some of the backdrop data and looked at questions like, when did you last feel stressed at work? When did you last feel lonely at work? And so the question around loneliness, Gallup has dug into and the results aren't great. So this whole piece around the extent to which our workplaces aren't healthy, they're not places in which we feel connected. There's brand new data to kind of bear that out and Jen, I will hand it over to you.

Jen Sproul (16:25)

It’s really insightful, but also I'd say not shocking set of results from that report. None of that surprises me in the work that I do and the observations that I have. And, Allison, it's just fascinating, isn't it? And I think that, as someone that also used to work in the sort of research world, I think that the power of in-depth interviews is something that's to be... it's been such a lost art, I think, over time. I think market and social research could became highly commoditised, highly moved very fastly into data management, which I think then dehumanised the power of that. But I think the other thing that struck me, and also on that note, what worries me is the level of synthetic data that's being used to model what

we all want as a society rather than actually just ask us the question, perhaps have an interview with us to truly understand.

But I think also that the art of you described is so important because it's not just what we say, it's where we sit, how we convey the human, the body language. There's so many more stories to be found than just the words that come out when you have that really powerful one-to-one. There is so much insight and richness that you can find. And I think that as we reflect where we are right now, everything feels highly complex, highly emotional, but trying to be given a transactional box commoditised approach. So it's kind of like a square peg in a round hole. I sometimes worry. And work is a place that is a place that defines you, that connects you, that helps you feel valued and heard and listened to. But I feel like in the pace, the demand of pace to innovate and the demand of pace to keep up we're losing the power of that. And I guess from your research and the things that you've done, and it sounds fascinating, the conversations that you've had, what is that sort of big misunderstanding, I guess, about what work is in the 21st century? Because it's a place we feel. What do you think we're misunderstanding about work right now and what it's there for?

Allison (18:30)

Great question. And also, I love that observation because that actually leads right into my answer. In my view, there's kind of two major trends of say, we can say of the last 50 years in work. One is, it's kind of greater emotional content. And that's happening across occupations. Labour economists in the United States anyway say the US is moving from a thinking economy to a feeling economy, but it's not just the US that's doing that. I've seen research in Sweden and a bunch of different countries that are finding similar things. And it's not just the addition of new jobs like social media marketing or whatever, it's actually the expanse of feeling in old jobs also. So that's one trend, the greater emotionality at work.

But the other trend is probably even a hundred years old is the kind of massive what sociologists call rationalisation of work. So the kind of increasing importance of data and counting and making things very systematic and trying to measure everything. And those two trends have collided. And so what we have is a kind of like doctors are a perfect example. They are being asked to be more emotionally present and aware and collaborative and patient centered. And there's a lot of emphasis on emotional sensitivity and then they're being asked to be really efficient and finish, cram more and more patients into shorter and shorter amounts of time and those are colliding deeply contradictory trends and the contradictions are being written onto people and people are kind of experiencing the contradictions in their body. So in my view the biggest misunderstanding is really when you live in one of those trends and you don't see the other and and they we need to understand both trends and be able to address them both. And I live over here on the emotional side. And in my view, the rationalisation or the efficiency side is not seeing the basic value and importance of emotions. And I think part of, I'm gonna add a second misunderstanding if I can, which is about the emotional side. Because kind of to date, much of what we talk about with regard to emotions acts like emotions live within one person. So we talk about emotional intelligence or the EQ, you know, emotional, I guess that's emotional quotient, I'm not sure. In any case, it's as if, someone can be more or less intelligent about emotions. Sure, I'm fine with that, but really what matters at work and

outside of work is emotions as an interaction between people, an emotional connection between people. And we have trouble kind of seeing that and thinking about that. It's much easier, I mean, if it's easy at all, it's much easier to measure or think about emotions as living and adhering to one person. But actually, what matters is what happens between people. And we need to be able to think about that and conceptualise that and enable that and train for it and all sorts of things, but **it's about what happens between people**. And that feels to me like a big misunderstanding, partly brought about by our predilection for just kind of an individualised approach.

Jen Sproul (20:20)

Yeah, I would agree. I I love the way you said that. And as you talk about that contradiction, there's so much I see of that in the practice of internal communication and why being an internal communicator can feel super exhausting and feel super sort of, I don't know where I'm supposed to go or not or whatever. I don't know if you feel this as well as that because we're trying to transactionalise or pace everything or we're certainly bringing in as a style of communication textually a less emotional one. It's a very short hard way we connect with each other. It's very staccato. And then when you're sitting there alone, that can feel very brash and harsh because as we said, the beauty of in-depth is you don't hear tone, context, body language and all those things. But I also wonder as you talk about emotion and I think many internal communicators, we were aware of this sort of we feel this like we need to get on top of AI and data and all this kind of transactional important measurement stuff because nobody's buying the emotion stuff. But I also wonder if, this is just as you were talking, a thought that was coming out, if we've made emotion in the way we connect with each other in that connected labour theory feel too scary. Well, if I say it wrong or if I connect wrong or if I get the wrong words wrong or if I try to care and take it back, are we... I wonder if we put a shade on something that should be allowed to happen. I don't know if I'm making any sense.

Allison (23:49)

Yeah, I totally agree. I have found that as I kind of talk about this work over the past year that people, they know it's important they believe it's important, they believe that it's vital, but they are worried about doing it right. So often I find that the conversation goes in the direction where I'm like, actually it doesn't have to be perfect. Like people feel seen part one way in which ironically, one way in which people feel seen is if you make a mistake, and then you say, I think I didn't do that quite right. Is it better, is this more right? Or can you correct me or whatever that give and take and acknowledgement that you might not have it perfect actually helps people feel more seen and this is something that therapists know, they talk about and different kind of experts in seeing have kind of reported this finding, is that actually the trying, the getting it wrong and then trying both feels more human and feels more attentive, feels more intentional, and just in the intent is felt the connection. So it's actually very effective and you do not have to do it perfectly.

Jen Sproul (25:03)

I couldn't agree more, that's what makes the whole experience bonding, for some people when we're in it together and we're all with it and we're experiencing it and I think trial and error is an important thing we should all embrace. But I wonder if, I don't know, I'll pass to Dom now that maybe as we, whether AI is inhibiting that. But Dom, I'm gonna throw to you now.

Dom (25:23)

Thank you. Allison, I'm fascinated by this. We had a public holiday here in the UK yesterday. And so as part of that, I was out in our village doing an event and I got chatting about the sort of stuff we'd been talking about actually. And I got a of pushback from someone in a different world, because I was saying, sorry, a different working world. I was saying things have changed fundamentally now. We're much more transactional. We're losing sight of our emotionality. It's very dangerous in work. We're not making connections.

And his pushback was, that's always been the case. And he quoted me going back to when people thought that when you went about 15 miles an hour on a train, a swissky, I can't even say it, you wouldn't be able to breathe, how about that? And all the way through to the 70s when they said that if the kids watching television were gonna rock their brains and lots of stuff. I thought it was quite an interesting bit of pushback. I don't agree with it, but I thought it was quite interesting. So as you're talking about this tension between rationality and emotionality, I guess it's good to get your take, not least for when I meet this guy at the next event so can push back better. But what do you think is causing that tension to get worse? Again, think Jen has just mentioned possibly one of them, which is people in a world where we're highly aware of differences and being fair and open with people, that has meant that many people don't say stuff for fear of getting it wrong. I get that. But what else do you think may have caused this conflict between emotion and rationality to become more intense? Well, if indeed it has.

Allison (26:46)

I do think it's gotten worse. There's no question, actually, if you talk to any physician, any teacher. The thing you can say to your person, your neighbour, or whoever that is, is that, at least what I'm arguing is that it's not that these things, I don't think this is like an innate biological need for to be seen. I'm actually not arguing that. I do not think that like the 17th century, had the same level of this need for this personalised, reflective attention. I do think that that is a cultural artifact and a historical one. So it's like both unique or, to maybe Western culture a little more, and also historically new. So we have an increasing need to be seen or to be to be witnessed in this way and you can probably think about different contributors to that, like why that would be more true now than before. But for sure that side of the equation is going up, but then the other side is also going up, by which I mean the trends in work towards greater and greater systematisation or standardisation or whatever you want to call that trend that sociologists call rationalisation and that we know for sure, because those are trends that started in manufacturing.

So you had the tailorisation or the invention of the assembly line, et cetera, and the imposition of assembly line tactics to a number of different professions. But that did not include emotional professions, or I would say interactive service, humane professions, until I want to say the 70s or 80s. And it's increasingly moving into those professions. So it's for sure happening more on that end. And both of those are colliding. And so it's definitely new. So teachers, at least in the United States, for example, there was a passage of something called the No Child Left Behind Act in, I want to say, was that 2005? Not sure exactly what year, something like that. And that was, before then. We did not really keep extreme track of kids. And after then, data became the way we evaluated and rewarded schools and punished schools and sometimes teachers. So data became paramount and we started tracking kids and measuring them. And that affected the teachers who are supposed to be connecting with kids. They became the data, the source of data.

Allison (29:31)

So that's just one example, that same exact thing happened in medicine. So for sure, these two trends are increasing and colliding and doing so more and more. I think what your person is talking about, and it's always good to be able to understand and reflect before you disagree, I think what they're trying to say is that this tension you can call it this anti-technolog, or this fight with technology, or maybe modernity, it feels old. And maybe it dates all the way back to the Luddites and before. There's always been people fighting about how much to bring technology into our world and the kind of lament that we have of like, people are more alienated and they're not more lonely and they're not connected. And those are longstanding laments. So that's for sure true. That's a kind of time-honored critique of modernity. That's essentially the, actually the story of the founding of sociology and anthropology in a bunch of disciplines. That doesn't mean that those kind of time-honoured lamentations aren't true A. B, true in new and diverse ways. Like, I'm sure even your interlocutor would say that, the chatbot therapist is a new kind of entity. That person is not wrong that the chatbot therapist kind of represents these longstanding arguments about, modern humanity and the oppression of technology versus its liberatory qualities or something like that, like he's not wrong in that we've been talking about this for a long time. He is wrong in that it's not new.

Dom (31:17)

I think what's interesting, I think one of things we're saying is that this has always been an issue, but it's just got more more intense in the last few decades, affecting more people, and affecting people where we've relied upon them to be emotional. Like you say, teachers, I'm married to a teacher, I get that. Doctors, medical professionals, suddenly they're having to perhaps dampen down their natural instincts to be emotional because they're being measured on different things or being hit over the head about certain things. And then there's also the technological issue as well. And I hate to be the first to bring up AI, possibly today, looking at AI, no, I'm not the first, am I? Sorry, I couldn't have been. But looking at AI, what worries you most about AI in terms of what that's doing and where it's leading us. Then I was going to say, what worries you about the race? But I sometimes wonder that AI isn't actually a race, it suggests that there are two or more people trying to beat each other. I think there's one mass of people just pushing this forward at the moment together without any competition. But nonetheless, what do you think about AI? What worries you about how this thing, which is already intensified, how it

might be as we go into the future? And I ask that because that helps us set the context for how communicators could behave and what they're to have to deal with perhaps over the coming years.

Allison (32:33)

First of all, it is a race. Unfortunately, it's a race in which I feel like I'm standing on the sidelines. I disagree about the race. So I kind of want us all to be looking in another direction. But the race is so loud and occupying so many resources that it's kind of dominating the airspace. And I'm having trouble with that. So that's the first thing. **It is a race. It's just not my race.** The race that it is, is between these behemoth organisations and billionaires to try and be first across some line that they are inventing about our future. And I don't like it.

Cathryn Barnard (33:10)

I love the fact that you've just called that out because for me and I guess playing into your field of study, absolutely we need to call out the fact that we have got one of the worst crises of inequality globally the gap between rich and poor now. So you're absolutely right, it's not my race. I think that's such a cool way of framing it because that's the point, isn't it? Like, actually, there is, in order for all of this to succeed, if you play the thought experiment, it needs people like us to believe that we're in the race, that we will engage with it. The entire success story hinges on people like us adopting the tools and then feeding the tools with our content right?

Allison (34:00)

Better that we have our own race.

Cathryn Barnard (34:03)

Allison, what an amazing reflection though, it's not our race or it's not my race, it's like it's up to us to choose.

Allison (34:12)

So you were saying, what's my worry? I do have, as you can imagine, I do have a primary worry about this. And that is, it is true that humans are vulnerable, so vulnerable to what they're selling. They project, they believe that computers are trustworthy and don't judge them and are kind of a safe haven for their emotional needs and that they can be vulnerable with them. And they also are almost inclined to think of machines as having feelings, as being kind of human-like, and they project a lot of emotions onto machines. So machines have to do very little, chat, GPT, computers have to do very little to kind of trigger those kinds of responses by humans. And it's actually kind of heartbreaking because really what's happening on the other end is they are just trying to make some

money and they are just trying to sell this to whatever market that they can find. And just in the past year, since I've been talking about this, they've shifted markets and they're really aiming right now. They're really aiming for this market of kind of therapy or friends or I would say, connective labour, kind of soft human emotion market. And that must be because they're seeing some good pickup there. And it's not a surprise because humans are both afraid. There's a lot of anxiety around kind of interacting with other humans. People are judgmental. People can shame you. People's moral gaze feels really intense.

It's just easier and we know this from many research studies, it's just easier to tell a computer that you have these, things you're not proud of, or this disease that you don't want to admit to someone else, or you're not that good at this particular algebraic problem, or whatever this thing you're ashamed of. We can do shame much more easily in front of a computer, partly because we think we're not risking anything interpersonally. That's what I'm afraid of. Our human vulnerability, our penchant for trusting these, I'll just call them spigots of consumer capitalism that are not in your best interest. That's what I'm afraid of.

Dom (36:57

So it's basically like we're starting to trust a friend that we don't know, but secretly that friend is going down to the local bar and spilling our secrets and abusing our friendship. I'm selling our secrets, Absolutely, yes, that's very clear. Thank you very much.

Jen Sproul (37:15)

I think what worries me as well is that I don't think as a society, a population, and I'm sure there's varying degrees and I have discourse discussions with my friends sometimes about this, we realise how much of ourselves we've given away to be monetised. And that worries me, it's been going on for decades. to the point where we don't realise that. A certain generation and it worries me as I see some of my friends, kids growing up, they think that's the normal, it worries me. Because I think vulnerability and that sense of self and that esteem and that place needs to, that place of safety should be so protected and it should be truly safe, not marketed as safe. And I think that also that should happen in the work place as well. But I would certainly say from an internal communication perspective and reflecting that back. if you think of the origins of internal communication as a professional community dates back hundreds of years, 100 odd years, something like that. But probably became systemised, I would say, as you talked about from sort of 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s and so on and so forth onwards.

And at IoIC, we have been as the profession has developed from one where it was a broadcast. How do we just tell people information at work that they need to know that's happening at the corporate level to how does it become something? And that's why we advocate for internal communication, because it's something you feel, something you do, something that's safe that in our world, we shouldn't be here if everyone could communicate or do well, if that makes sense as a human behavior and we talk about the

role of internal communication now being one where **our purpose is to create a workforce that feels informed, connected and purposeful**. And I think that when I look at our profession, our community where we're going, we certainly feel like AI is all the things we should be focusing on. And I'm not denying it's around and that's something that we need to get with it because noise is big and we need to hyper personalise everything can, so on and so forth, because it's become this sort of generation of getting so much stuff out and getting it opened and read that that becomes more important than the outcome or the emotion or the feeling that we're trying to create and that point of being connected is a part of our purpose. And I guess with my long ramble is that what do you think communication plays in building that human connection at work and that how do we see the role of communication, I'm telling you something to how we create it as something that creates that emotional value as well as that safety.

Allison (40:00)

Well, this is the good news, if I can just say. Like this is, we'll call this the emotional peak of this moment, of this conversation, because the good news is, if you want people to remember something, to take it in, to comply with particular, rules or regulations, to absorb it, you need a human being. And this is actually known. AI engineers know this. There's something that I have often put in my talks, which is it's a graph of app retention. App retention is terrible. It's abysmal. It's like apps lose something like 75 % of users within the first week. So maybe we've all done this, you download something thinking, that looks good. You use it like twice and then you're like, you know, I guess not. That is such a common experience that engineers spend a lot of time worrying about app retention. And the way they make humans stay motivated on a particular app often is they stick human interaction in them.

So not all of them have that capacity. But I spoke to a number of app entrepreneurs or designers who know this, who say, we would add a human at particular points where a person would have to interact with a human being just to give it a little more sticking power. this is also philosophically known like Levinas or some Paulo Freire, like there's, there's people who have written about the kind of importance of like the sticking power of the human gaze. And that applies to work, that applies to internal communication. If you want people to remember and care about and incorporate a particular fact or, guideline or whatever, you need a human being. I had a teacher, for example, talk to me, an independent school principal who had started a school in Oakland, California, telling me, yeah, I, don't think that kids really get bitten by the information until they feel seen by another person. And we can extrapolate across, it's not just kids and it's not just education. It's like, it's in multiple settings. **If you want people to care or incorporate something, you need a human being to do the seeing that underlies it.**

Jen Sproul (42:45)

Even our own professional community, we've just been looking at where they're at, the thing that they feel the most, I just don't seem seen and valued. And that's the human that they're looking for to get that from. I think that's wonderful. Thank you.

Cathryn Barnard (42:57)

It's a massive point. You've again given me almost goosebumps. I've been having a conversation offline with a guest who's coming online to speak to us in a couple of episodes time about the reality that she faced as head of internal communication when their big technology organisation had to undertake a massive pivot overnight because something substantial changed in the external operating environment and they went from having one strategy which was this to no strategy and then obviously you have to create a new strategy because in the absence of anything people are going to make up their own stories and I asked her how she went about it and she said bluntly it was long and laborious and painstaking but there was no alternative other than to go around office by office, team by team, so that everybody had the opportunity to engage in an immersive dialogue and kind of see the whites of our eyes and ask their questions and so on. She said, and it was getting to the point of just being full on, but it made such difference. And I think that as we wrap up this conversation, that is kind of, I feel like we're almost going to be in violent agreement with one another. One thing that an internal communicator who's listening today can take from this. Am I allowed to say it? If all you're focusing on is artificial intelligence, then I think you might be focusing on the wrong prize.

Allison (44:36)

Yeah, that's exactly right. That's what I would say. That's what I say to students when they say like, what should I study? I say, you should do the best you can to get as much experience as possible in interacting with other human beings because what humans will bring to value in this new, in this brave new world is gonna be their capacity to see and be seen and interacting with, to connect to other human beings. That's gonna be much more valuable than can you code? That's what ChatGPT does well already. **What we provide is the uniqueness of who we are with each other.**

Cathryn Barnard (45:16)

Which will endure long after the metaphorical lights have gone out. And, we're in mainland Europe. We had the whole of the Iberian Peninsula go dark for 12 hours last week or the week before.

Allison (45:32)

Yeah, but I saw all that dancing in the plaza.

Cathryn Barnard (49:34)

Insane right? But it could happen anywhere. If you buy yourself a 12 hours and you've not got any of your apps working for you or what have you, you're going to want to be in the company of people that you can at least have a giggle with, right?

Allison (45:48)

Mm-hmm, exactly right.

Cathryn Barnard (45:48)

Allison, thank you so, so much for agreeing to come on the podcast. I think it will have been invaluable for everybody listening today. And I think, it's an ongoing conversation really, isn't it? I would be very happy to just stay in touch and hear what you discover next in your work because I think it will be absolutely relevant for the work that we're doing here at the IoIC. So thank you very, very much for joining us.

Allison (46:18)

Thank you. Yeah. Thanks so much for the conversation. It was great to talk to you all.