Transcript for S10 bonus episode Ethics, Internal Communication and 21st Century Business with Roger Steare

Cat Barnard (00:42)

Hello and welcome to a special bonus episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I am your co-host Cat Barnard, as ever joined by my esteemed colleagues, Dom Walters and Jen Sproul. And today we have, I think, a really important guest who is going to talk about a really important issue that I think at this juncture in 2024, it's not too soon to have an important conversation about. So without further ado, I would like to introduce you to Roger Steare, who is also known as the corporate philosopher, and he is recognised worldwide as a leading expert on moral reasoning, values-based leadership and culture, and the responsible use of AI.

So to give you a tiny bit of background, I first became aware of Roger's work, I think back in 2017, when I attended a lecture given by Peter Cheese, the chief executive of the CIPD at the University of Westminster. And Peter had referenced Roger's first book, which is called Ethicability. And while delivering, his keynote on the future of work, Peter had pointed to a rising need for all boardrooms to feature ethical considerations in their day-to-day activities. And so enthused by what I had heard, I went out and bought Roger's book. I will concede it did take me a little bit of time to get round to reading it. I actually read it this year, I can't remember what it was that piqued my interest, but I pulled it off my bookshelf and literally read it in one sitting and was immediately of the view that we needed to get Roger on to the podcast to come and chat with us. So just to give you a tiny bit more background about Roger, he's been working in this field for a number of years.

Cat Barnard (03:02)

Some highlights include following the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster, BP asked Roger to develop a global ethical leadership programme for 4,000 leaders. The project was so impactful that it earned recognition from the US Department of Justice in 2016 as part of the US $20.8 billion consent agreement with BP. In 2012, after RBS's massive restructuring following the financial crash of 2008, Roger was sought for a leadership and culture transformation programme in collaboration with PWC, earning high praise from chief executive Stephen Hester for the shared learning and growth experience. And then in 2021, Roger was invited to help a national government to define those moral values that are essential for a fairer society, drawing on insights from anthropology, psychology, and moral philosophy, he's recommended humanity, justice, wisdom, courage, temperance, and resilience as the values that define a fair and prosperous society. So I think we can probably

all agree from what I have just outlined, that Roger, has been called in to provide advice and guidance after some pretty fractious global catastrophes have occurred.

And I think that is the basis for the start of the conversation today. So Roger, wow, what, what an entrance. Welcome. And thank you so much for giving up your time to come and chat with us today.

Roger Steare (04:55)

Thank you, Cat, and it's a joy to be with you. And I hope that the conversation we all have today will be illuminating and inspiring for your members.

Cat Barnard (05:06)

Thank you. And as we're recording, we are also recognising that this podcast now goes out to listeners on all of the continents, and we're fast approaching 25,000 downloads. So we recognise and are grateful to everybody that listens to the podcast. We recognise that it's really striking a chord. And I think as we approach the middle of 2024. It's not really an understatement to say that most businesses are in crisis mode now, trying to navigate multiple forces that are causing market complexity, the climate crisis, the onslaught of artificial intelligence, rising geopolitical tensions.

There's an awful lot for business leaders to be contemplating on a day in day out basis. And I suspect also a rising opportunity to respond in a knee-jerk fashion rather than in a reasoned, measured, pragmatic way. So that is the backdrop by which I wanted to trigger this conversation. But Roger, let's start at the beginning for those that are uninitiated. Perhaps myself included, in its broadest terms, what is ethics?

Roger Steare (06:35)

Thanks Cat. So some jesters say it's the county slightly to the east of London and north of the Thames, but I'm not an ethics boy. Ethics is the way we think about and debate how to lead a good life and that applies in every aspect of our lives. So by good I don't mean good in terms of earning loads of money.

What I mean is good in terms of creating a sustainable civilisation in harmony with the ecosystem we currently find ourselves on, which is called planet Earth. So ethics is something which applies to every aspect of our lives. And in terms of, I think, a hack for everyone to consider, for example, most professional institutes, most organisations, and I know the Institute of Internal Communication have one, has a code of conduct. And there

are good legal reasons why we have a code of conduct. However, I do not have a code of conduct at home with my wife and my children and grandchildren. I do not have a code of conduct with my friends. Codes of conduct are not, if you like, a guarantee that you're gonna do the right thing.

And I've challenged regulators on this around the world, including the FCA here in the UK, who recognise that having literally tens of thousands of rules about what to do and what not to do is not the same as ethics. Ethics is about the way we think about how to lead a good life in the service of others. Aristotle talked about friendship as the ideal.

And hopefully if we're in a special relationship with an other, with a spouse, a partner, and we live our life together, we may or may not have children, we may or may not have grandchildren, we will probably have friends. That is the context within which we debate and decide what is right in any aspect of our lives.

Roger Steare (08:54)

And it works pretty well because we've been running a five billion year software programme called Evolution. And we are a high order mammal and we are really good at making decisions that's good for our family and for our tribe. Unfortunately, there's a flip side to who we are. So there's a bit of a yin and yang here. So whilst we're very, we have very strong social bonds within our groups.

We are also programmed to be aggressive and violent when it comes to getting the resources we need and perhaps in competition with other groups. That doesn't mean to say that's right or wrong. It's just the nature of what it means to be homo sapiens. And we are incredibly effective. Individually we're weak. And even if you're a gym bunny and you do a lot of weights and you're an athlete, any other primate kilo for kilo will be able to rip you apart.

That is not, you know, we are weak as individuals, but together and collectively, we have that power. And I'm struck by the mantra of your institute, the power within, because the power within is not only the power within us. So I would call that our moral character. So which is a bit of nature and nurture, the way we sense what is right and wrong, but also the power within our families, our tribes and our workplace communities where doing the right thing, leading a good life, leading a good working life, is about our ability to have those powerful conversations. The communication is critical to this, and communication, as you know, because you're the professionals, is a two-way conversation, and it's sometimes quite uncomfortable. And one of the challenges I see is that, you know, sometimes the power within an organisation comes from the top and internal communication becomes propaganda rather than a vibrant two-way conversation between grownups. So that's quite a long way around saying what is ethics. I'm just gonna finish it with a definition. So how do we decide what's right? And I'm not gonna use long words like moral philosophers love to do, like.

Roger Steare (11:13)

and I'm going to say them now, but I'm never going to say them again on this podcast. So the first two are consequentialism and utilitarianism, which basically means what's right is what's good for us as a community of people. So I use the word people. So think about how your decision and actions impact other people. The second one is virtue ethics.

And what we mean there, virtues are moral values, things like courage, fairness, compassion, and so on. And the third one is rules. So rules are the shorthand that we've got, which enable us not to, you know, mean that we don't have to sit down and have conversations because we've been doing this for tens of thousands of years. We know that certain things inevitably lead to good outcomes and certain things inevitably lead to good outcomes.

So we have a few good simple rules. The problem is in business, because the way that business works is not the same as a Western democratic society, things get weird. So if I can, let me just give you an example or a reason why that happens. We on this podcast, British citizens living in a sort of democratic society, we can have another argument about that, but it's a sort of democracy and we can kick out our political leaders. And that's likely to happen at the next general election. However, we do not get to vote for our CEO, any leader in our organisation, unless we're in an organisation like Mondragon in Spain, which is an employee-owned cooperative, and they get to elect all of their leaders. So the Biologist E.O. Wilson, who died two or three years ago, described homo sapiens as having paleolithic emotions, so pretty basic emotions, good and bad, medieval institutions and godlike technology. Godlike technology, you guys are gonna talk about a bit later on, we call that AI at the moment. But the medieval institution is the corporation. The corporation was designed in the 17th century, and it has a king or queen, called CEO.

Roger Steare (13:30)

And it has a royal court called the board. And it is a bit weird. So what tends to happen is when it comes to thinking and making good ethical decisions together, we are looking around the room thinking, what's the person with the longest job title gonna say here? Am I gonna argue with that person and risk my employment? So the research we've done is overwhelming that unless you have effective, democratic dialogue, and I'm not talking about votes, but recognising that we're all grown-ups and we all have a moral conscience, well 97% of us, and can decide what's right but have good arguments together. Unless you can do that, unless internal communication professionals can facilitate those discussions, then organisations acting together, those communities will often do the wrong thing. because the power within has been corrupted. And I'm gonna pause there.

Cat Barnard (14:32)

Blimey, there's so much that you're saying there that is triggering all kinds of lightbulb moments for me. I'm thinking about things, you know, I'm thinking about the reality of the labour market in the UK in 2024. And I'm thinking about things like the CEO wage gap, you know, the pay gap between the CEO, typical CEO salaries and people, you know, on the shop floor, so to speak.

I'm thinking about things like these well-documented, full return to office mandates that are coming out and leaking into the press every so often. I'm thinking about all the disparity between those, in the elites, echelons of hierarchy and everybody else, and the lack of employee voice as we've called it in the past, the lack of equity in most organisations at the moment. And, and I'm also thinking with my future of work hat on how actually to survive the coming decades of uncertainty, volatility and ambiguity, we need all hands on deck, like never before we need everybody in the organisation, regardless of the employment contract that they hold, where they're working from, how many hours they contribute, regardless of all the variables, we need all hands on deck, all eyes and ears open and alert to what's going on out in the marketplace and feeling empowered and safe to speak about what they see and observe. It feels like what we need and what we've got are two wholly separate things at the moment and if I was to call it Roger I would also say and it seems like we're not sure of examples of a lack of ethics in business right now. So I want to ask you another question which is probably quite deep but...

Cat Barnard (16:45)

Here we are discussing philosophy on a podcast. What is the role of ethics in business? I know you've started to touch on that in your, you know, when I asked you the first question, but more poignantly for our listeners, what part does ethics play in a well-functioning organisation?

Roger Steare (17:05)

Well, as I've said, the role it does play is a bit weird. And it's because the world of work is about three or four hundred years behind the evolution of our civilisation and our society in terms of the way that power is used or abused. However, and there's always a however, there are thousands of leaders in business in the UK and around the world who are good people, people of good character, and they display the sort of qualities that we would expect to see in a trusted friend. They don't treat us like slaves, they treat us with respect, they listen to our own insights and skills and knowledge.

It's weird, I would say it's probably worse than that. I think business is corrupted because of that structural deficit or defect. But it has the potential. And here's why I do help leaders and teams in organisations transform very rapidly. So there's a meme in business that cultural transformation takes years. That's rubbish.

We know that the culture we experience at work can change overnight if our bad leader leaves and a good person joins. And therefore, the hack we've got is to, and this is something that a lot of you will have heard before, we bring the best of ourselves to work. And what I mean by ourselves is our humanity to work.

And humanity is the most powerful expression. I mean it in the sense of humanity linked to humanitarianism, which is our ability to work well together in groups. And let's face it, the corporation is a relatively recent design and it applies to public sector and third sector organisations as well, which have badly, you know, unfortunately mistake mimicked the corporation. Most people in the world and for most of our history,

Roger Steare (19:19)

We've worked in family enterprises, farming, creating artisan crafts, fishing, building houses in groups. So ethics in business is wholly good. There's nothing weird about the label we do together in groups. If that's founded on the same bonds and friendship, by the way, the research that's coming through shows that having a professional friendship, sort of a theme of professional friendship within the workplace is the most powerful sign of high levels of engagement in the organisation. I trust you. I trust you to cut me a bit of slack when my kids are real and I need to take time off. And I, and trust me when the same thing happens to you because your mum or dad are ill and maybe terminally ill with cancer that I will take up the slack that you need. That level of, if you like, that social good, that humanity is hardwired into us. And for most of our history and in most of the world now, that still operates. What we've got to do in the modern corporate workplace is to challenge these constructs, these legal constructs that have perverted the power within, but recognise that people of good character, and I'm gonna name one person, one CEO I've worked with three times. His name is Joe Garner. He was the CEO of HSBC UK, retail bank when we first met in 2007. He then went across to run BT Open Reach, and his final job was 2012, sorry, 2016 through to 20-22 when he was the CEO of Nationwide Building Society. And all of the stuff I'm talking about, we put into practice, particularly in Nationwide. And he didn't talk about democracy. He talked about, wait for it, democracy of voice. So in any discussion, any meeting, everybody had a moral obligation to share what they thought was the right thing to do and why, and follow if you like, a reasoning, a moral reasoning framework. And everybody was encouraged, nobody was punished for doing that. And the quality that decisions made were astonishing. And the culture transformation happened in months. So their Glassdoor score went from 3.2 to 3.9 in six months. And for an organisation of 20,000 people, that's a hell of an increase. And Joe's CEO score was in the mid-90s. Obviously. So my answer is ethics in business is a force for good. But if it's not, it's because you've got

misleaders, not leaders. And the remedy for that is very simple. We need to make sure we hire people of character into leadership roles within our businesses, and of course, within society, but we're not going to get into politics.

Jen Sproul (22:35)

Roger, like Cat said, as you've been talking, there's so many light bulb moments or things that you're saying that just hit at the core and you've talked about our tagline the power within and we also talk about, we just want to feel like we matter, like we're valued, like we mean something, that we're not just a number on a board. But I sometimes worry that we're going in that opposite direction and actually more people are feeling like a commodity than a human. And then what that does to us. And there's many things that you've talked about and words about, conversations and dialogue. And I think that's something that seems even from my perspective and the conversations I have, there is more fear around entering difficult dialogue. It's a fearful place. You know, the rise of activism, which is just another way of employee voice.

And we also know from our own research, when we've looked into employees and what they want is that they want to be heard, but more so than ever, they want their words to mean change. And when their words don't create change, that trust just goes out of the window because it feels like that kickbox. And I think one of the things as well that we've reflected on it, and as organisations, I'm sure you've come across this, you've named quite a few there, as they get bigger and bigger and bigger, and they become more about process than humanity, that then makes that enablement of that transformation and that dialogue and that disparate thinking and that siloed behaviour even more. And I absolutely agree that as internal communicators, how can we step up to facilitate that conversation? But with all that being said, there is, as we say, so much also going on in the wider world that we live in from what we've talked about earlier, climate action, mental health, you know, cost of living, finances. There's so much and I think there is a growing pressure and expectation of organisations to do good for society. We can argue whether we feel that actually happening and it's still more about power and profit than it is about people and planet. But and I wonder how long a leader if there isn't in that mindset can ignore that pressure before it builds and creates a negative impact for their organisation.

Jen Sproul (24:41)

So there's that long ramble in mind, thinking about this healthier society piece and all the ethical things that you've talked about. How do we, I guess, impress that why, how ethics and the role of business has to play in a healthier society? And I guess with that, then how do we impress to those senior leaders or those people, why that's important if it's not the number on a balance sheet?

Roger Steare (25:04)

Well, Jen, that's a big question. Let me just start and I may not get very far. So what you're talking about here, I think, is the battle between economics as a dismal science, as it's been described, and our desires, our deep desires to lead a good life. The problem with economics as a dismal science, it's based on addiction. What I mean by that, our desire for more. I mean back in the day, the Greek roots of the word economy is oikos. And it actually means how do you run a home? So remember, in my day, home economics was about cookery and stuff like that.

And it also means thrift. So making do with what you've got. The problem in the West, and it's increasingly true in other parts of the world, is the addiction of consumer capitalism, which means that we believe that when we have even more, we're going to feel happy. And that's built into our monkey brain that when, for example, food was scarce, if we found a very rich source of food, like a beehive full of honey, we would endure the stings in order to get this concentrated form of energy. And because we're hardwired, as soon as we get something sweet, we eat loads of it. Well, we're now in a civilisation which is not only delivering cheap industrial carbohydrates to eat, the whole system is running on, if you like, our desire to have something new. And what we thought was cool two years ago in terms of a TV, an LCD or OLED TV, by the time the next one comes out, it ends up in landfill. So what I'm saying there is that I don't think we can square this circle until we ask ourselves pretty fundamental existential questions, which is what does it take for us to lead a good life? And we've got some pretty horrible statistics. So since the 1950s in the UK, so we came out of post-Second World War rationing in 1953, happiness levels increased until the 60s, and then they flatlined ever since. And in fact, in many cohorts in our society, groups of people are becoming, suffering more and more levels of mental health illness because of this addiction that we've got to more. And if you take it in a microcosm, if you like, the rule that says next quarter's got to be better than this quarter in terms of sales and profits is just part of that same conundrum. This isn't communism, this is ecology. This is our ability to say if we keep eating ourselves and we keep eating what we've got or making it toxic, then we're not gonna survive for very long or lots of us aren't gonna survive. So I don't think we can fix this at a tactical level. We've got to have a moment where we really understand there are some pretty fundamental things we've gotta fix. But I don't see the political will. And this sounds like a ditch of despair.vI don't think things are going to get better until they get worse.

Jen Sproul (28:41)

I think that's, yeah, and I also think as well that whilst there's sort of two sides of that coin as you say as well is there's that what we're doing at the other end, but I think that there is a growing want or better for better good life from society and from us as citizens. And I think

that sometimes we're in, as you said earlier, that distance between business and what we feel in our friendship and our values and our lives haven't. And that gap is widening and I was reading somewhere as well as that inequality feels like it's rising again after the years of being in that direction. So I think for us all to reflect on. And I think that conversation that we, that I hope that as internal communicators, we can try and have to see where we go. I know that Dom is burning to ask the next question. So I will let Dom take the mic.

Dom (29:28)

Well, you say burning and it follows on very nicely, I think. I love the conversation we're having. In fact, even though it's actually quite early in the morning, I want to pour myself a large glass of whiskey and sit back and reflect upon what the good life is and how it's going to affect me. But I also know that there are many people listening, many practitioners of communication, who'll be saying, how do I get permission to have this conversation? Because there are lots of words we've used, which I think in organisational terms are quite polluted, quite toxic. One of which I think is philosophy itself. And I've seen in many cases, philosophy has become a bit of a boo word like the word academic, where people say, well, that's a philosophical question, which is perhaps code for not something we're gonna get into because we're running a business. I'm paraphrasing, obviously. And I think the second thing is about, we talked about values, Roger, you've mentioned values. And I've been through many campaigns where organisations have developed values and they've done all the right things, they've got people involved, they've done the listening, they've helped people form them and then they've become nothing more than a rather curling poster on a wall that people almost look to as a cynicism. So what I'd love to know, Roger, because you've worked with some leading organisations successfully, how do we bridge that gap? How do we take what we know is sensible and all the things you've talked about?

And how do we then get people in organisations interested in doing something about it? Because I suspect, as you say, 97% of us are morally good, want to do the right thing, want to have a good life, but sometimes the reality of business, those quarter upon quarter improvements, et cetera, get in the way. So how can we start to have those conversations? And I guess to do that, first of all, what are moral values when it comes to business? But also how can we demonstrate that they're important in helping organisations be successful and function well? Massive question, I apologise Roger. I'll pour the whiskey if you start the conversation on this bit.

Roger Steare (31:27)

I love whiskey, whiskey doesn't love me unfortunately.

So yeah, I mean, I think your word picture of a set of values as a curling poster is wonderful and I think I might have to borrow that from you. It's absolutely right and these exercises ignore the fact that we as people, as grown people or even children, we do have a set of values that are baked into us and that are baked into our family life. As long as you live in a just society.

So moral values, I'm not gonna run through an extensive list. By the way, your listeners can find out how they rate on moral values by taking our currently free to use moraldna.org psychometric, and it will tell you how you make decisions using the three philosophies of people, values, and rules, which I talked about earlier, but also give you a score on ranking for each of 10 moral values. So moral values, one of the ones that, so by the way, word integrity is not a moral value, it's a basket which says, these are all the moral values I believe in. So integrity is what we call a meta value. So you often hear people talking about ethics and integrity and all sorts of those are category errors. So moral values are first of all, compassion, love, kindness, the things that without which,

Roger Steare (32:57)

we would not be able to grow the infant human, which comes out helpless and requires years of love and care and support both physical and emotional. And I often ask in seminars, I ask people, when does that stop? When do we no longer need that love, care, and support of others? And some people think, oh, 18 or whatever. And a lot of people say never.

Absolutely never, that never stops. So love, compassion is number one. The second one is fairness, justice as fairness. So if you want to understand that, there's a great 20th century philosopher called John Rawls, R-A-W-L-S, who talked about justice as fairness. I think Cat used the phrase in the introduction, equity. Equity is not the same as equality.

Equality is everybody is the same and gets the same. No equity is about fairness So if we have a child in our community who is born physically or mentally disabled a just community will divert more resources to supporting that child then it does an able-bodied sound, mentally healthy child

And that, you know, most people say that's right. It's not true for all societies, but that's fairness. The next one is prudence or wisdom. In other words, let's realise that we've got a mind, I don't use the word brain, because brain is not what we use, is not the only thing we use to think. We use our mind, which has a physical connection to reality. And by the way, this is a challenge for AI, is it does not have a connection with the physical world at this stage. So our mind, which is our whole body-mind thing, is our ability to think rationally, but also to think emotionally, and also to intuit. Intuition is a very powerful sense that we have. Philosophers and quantum physicists think it's our ability...

Roger Steare (35:10)

to tap into the quantum universe, but that's a whole series of podcasts, we're not going to go there. So there are other ones such as humility, which is in deficit in most misleaders. So most misleaders suffer from a combination of narcissism, which is the opposite of humility, machiavellianism, which means they don't tell the truth, they, they are devious.

And the final one is psychopathy or pathology, which means that they don't care when they hurt other people. Anyway, that's again another series of podcasts. So those are a few that I would share with you. And when I see a set of corporate values, Dom, I look at them and say, which of these could you use to run a gulag or an extermination camp?

Because if you have one such as teamwork, that's morally neutral. You can't kill people at an industrial scale without teamwork. Teamwork is an outcome, and it can be good teamwork or bad teamwork. So when you and your colleagues start to gaze at your organisational values, compare them with what philosophers and psychologists and anthropologists call universal moral values, UMVs, and apply the goo-legged test to whatever values you think you have. I don't know if that answered your question. We're only just scratching the surface here, so forgive me if I haven't gone any deeper.

Dom (36:46)

No, I think you have answered that certainly in terms of giving a way in which you can test values. I think that's fantastic. Obviously, it's a hard subject to bring up with people, but saying can you apply these to bad things as well as good things. I think that that's a really interesting way of testing values. And I'm going to steal from you. Obviously suitably ascribed, I think lots of organisations feel as though they should have values and they go around and produce them the right way, then they forget all about them. So I guess the other side of the coin is how are they demonstrated? And that goes some way to answering, I think, your challenge, which is these could be good or bad.

I think the other thing which I take it from what you said is relaying it to the organisation because we talk a lot about abstract concepts I think and what you've just done is helped so I've made lots of notes, helped differentiate between equity and morality and philosophy and equality and I think once you start to differentiate those terms then you can start to apply them into a specific organisation which I think is incredibly helpful.

Jen Sproul (37:42)

So we're moving on. So there's some really big words there. And I'm going to move the topic towards then generative AI and how that fits in this landscape, I guess, that you've talked about. And there's many things as well. I believe in communication, have to have humanity at its heart. It's about words. It's how we cultivate emotion. It's about how we create understanding, how we build meaning, how we ensure fairness and how we feel about compassion and love and safety and I think love seems a strange word business but I think it has its place in the right context as well and I've always said we're in the business of emotion and that's what we're trying to create and AI is coming down the tracks. Well it has been sort of exploded I guess onto the scene even though it's been building for many decades as we know but last year it became quite, quite the explosion and a sort of scramble really about, well, now AI is here, we should all be adopting it. And it's sort of that sort of rapid race to it. And I know from talking with our members and those in the practice of communication, we're all sort of, it's a big topic. Well, how can we use AI? And a lot of the things have been said, well, let's use it for the grunt work. And I still ask, what is grunt work? And what does that mean when we're thinking about how we communicate with each other and we communicate with an organisation. We're still looking at how can it operationalise, create efficiency, how can it do all of these things. Obviously, we're looking at how AI can be used for the purpose of communication in organisations, but then the impact of AI as a widespread implementation that changes the organisation and how work is done depending on people's roles. I guess it's a big topic and I think something from IoIC's perspective, we've been keen to take a step back from thinking about the technology to thinking about what is the ethics or the proposition or the way or considerations before any adoption and learning and education is needed. So with that ramble said, so when considering this impact, what do you think are the ethical considerations we need to sort of have when thinking about using AI, generative AI, particularly for communication purposes.

Roger Steare (39:51)

Thanks, Jen. Yeah, I've been thinking about this a lot and researching it and talking about it with others because I think I certainly don't have the answers. I, like you, have lots of questions, but this is where I'm sensing, if you like, a glimmer of truth. The first thing we have to, you're absolutely right, Jen, AI has been in development since the 1950s.

Roger Steare (40:15)

And if we look now at neural networks and large language models, and philosophers will argue about whether or not they are intelligent, but let's not go there now. But in terms of what they are, they're basically a massive database. They're predictive tools. They use mathematics to work out the likelihood of a particular word following another word, which follows another word.

So it's basically a guessing game. It's not. it's a predicting machine, but it's based on what we've created within the internet of words. So I remember a long time ago, the concept called garbage in, garbage out in computing terms, in coding and so on, G-I-G-O, GIGO. And the problem we have with neural networks and large language models, the first question is, so the first problem is there's a lot of rubbish in it. It produces lots of rubbish because it's a mathematical predictive machine. It's not a human mind creating words that have meaning. So that's the biggest thing, you know, be careful about what any chatbot throws at you.

41.27

The other ones which of course we're seeing is they are reflections of the worst of humanity. If you like our, you know, bias and discrimination is the first one. They not only perpetuate biases, they amplify them. And if you, in the safety labs, they are trying to jailbreak these chatbots by asking the same question in different ways hundreds of times. And in the end, the chatbot system throws up stuff which breaks the safeguards. So it's racist, for example. The next one is misinformation and deepfakes. Well, you know, we've had propaganda. People in power have tried to manipulate the truth for their own ends for thousands of years. There's nothing new here. It's just easily accessible. Deepfakes are very scary and appalling. In other words,

Roger Steare (44:26)

One of my wife's Facebook accounts has been cloned. That's not an AI thing, although it's possible it was a bot that did that. But sometimes you can't believe what you see or hear or, or whatever read. Intellectual property rights is a big thing. So all the big chat bots have basically sucked up all the freely available data in the system. What they're now being caught doing is stealing copyright IP, you know, copyright information, private information. So privacy is another thing. You know, these things, although you have to pay a small subscription, it doesn't cover the costs. So basically, the price you pay for using generative AI is a lack of privacy and the exploitation of private data. For the workplace, you've got job displacement, so people will lose their jobs or their jobs will change. We don't know how this is gonna work out. I think the best thinking I've heard about this is, it's a bubble at the moment. We thought that having computers and having PDFs, for example, would mean we would have paperless office. Well, that's not worked well, is it? There are still reams of paper, et cetera, et cetera.

Security, they can be hacked. I mean cyber phishing, all of that stuff is going to be enabled. Accountability is the final big thing. So who is responsible for it? And the problem we've got is that AI within the West is driven by autocratic business leaders like Mark Zuckerberg at Facebook, like the leadership at Google, and so on.

In the other parts of the world, it's driven by autocratic political leaders who are using AI for allegedly for to destabilise democracies, etc, and destabilise family life and all the rest of it. So AI is here to stay. It's always been here. If we think about propaganda, it's

Roger Steare (44:36)

a reflection on who we are. It's a moral mirror to the best and the worst of us. AI at its best enables a radiologist or oncologist to detect cancer cells rapidly because the AI is scanning all these x-rays and mammograms, etc., and throwing out the ones that it needs a human to look at. So that's great, but it's also creating, if you like, a lot of the moral sins that we've got, and I don't mean that in a religious sense, they're now on steroids. It's, you know, everything that is bad about our society, AI is amplifying it. It's amplifying the good, but it's amplifying the bad. And so therefore, I can't give a coherent sort of formula for your profession. What I would say is, you're clearly aware of it. I've read your report on AI, AI and the Future of Internal Communication white paper, which I think is great in setting out the sense, but the answer is we have to keep talking about it and arguing about it and trial and error. Sometimes we're gonna make mistakes. Well, look, let's not fire people who make an honest mistake. Let's learn from it and so on and so forth. So that's my ramble. Completed on that.

Cat Barnard (45:56)

Sorry, that does make me think about something that Dom said earlier. You know, this piece around how sometimes in some organisations, words like philosophy and values have lost their importance, you know, that they're denigrated as being off-piste, irrelevant when it comes to the priorities of an organisation to maintain shareholder profits, et cetera, et cetera. I would invite listeners to think about courage today because actually, and I know we've not talked about this and probably it's another whole conversation in of itself, but I think Roger, you and I might have talked about it when we were prepping for the podcast today. It's required of all of us to think carefully about what kind of society we want to co-exist in and then take a stance and apply moral courage. And therefore, as we think about all of these themes and topics that we've talked about today, who do we choose to be? What matters now? Those are massive questions. We delivered a webinar yesterday for members at the Institute on the topic of scenario planning. And I started that webinar by using a quote from Margaret Heffernan that she wrote at the start of her book Uncharted. And the question is, in the future, what will we wish we had been doing now? So I think all of this for me, when I think about all of these really poignant themes, these critical themes that we've addressed today, I'd invite all listeners to think about courage and the courage to stand up and take a stance and do the right thing.

Dom (48:06)

Can I add to that, Cat, please? Because I think that makes a huge amount of sense. So I'd like to just ask Roger, I think, to finish off one thing he recommends that internal

communicators should do. And in fact, I was trying to think about what my answer would be based on the conversation we've had. And I found it too hard because I've taken three things at least. One is I love the Gulag analysis of values. I could find myself using that. That was great. Also Roger, I think you mentioned, and we didn't talk about it much, the phrase misleaders, which opened up a whole, it was a flash-bulb moment, I think, for me, because that was a fantastic way of describing some people. And it's, again, something I'm going to steal. And I think, also, the idea about democracy of voice, because, again, I know as communicators, we cope against brick walls of leaders who will shut down whole conversations by saying, I'm not running a democracy here.

I think being able to talk about democracy of voice is a very powerful way of reopening the conversation in a constructive way. So I failed to pull just one thing from my conversation, but I'm going to ask you to do that please Roger and say, look, what one thing would you like internal communicators do to demonstrate that courage that Cats just talked about.

Roger Steare (49.16)

Okay, so my natural reaction is the same as yours, Dom. I would take a rule like what one action and break it, which is what you've done, and I think that's fine. So one of the things, so compliance is not the same as ethics. In a just community, compliance and ethics overlap, but compliance tends to lag moral reasoning and sense. So legislation tends to lag where our collective morality is, and that's an absolute fact. So if I had to say one action, it would be a process. So that's a bit of a cheat. So the process is, and I think it really is something that your institute can lead on. So I work a lot with professionals who are employed by their employer but are also a professional member of an institute. So obviously accountants, lawyers, two very big professional bodies around the world where you have a higher obligation to your profession than you do to any particular transitory employer. So thinking about power and thinking about your ability to facilitate this conversation at a deep level I would say what one thing your members could do would be to take some of the questions from this podcast and others that you're posing and go on a journey of moral education. I don't mean that in any pejorative sense because I'm on the journey of moral education. I've been a moral philosopher since I was at university academically. And that's because if you want to have a just society and if you like a moral economy, then no one individual can work out what that looks like. What we can do and what we must do

Roger Steare (51:23)

is do the stuff we want to see happening within our businesses and within our families and friendships within your institute. So you have to have that. You can curate and facilitate that discussion and take it beyond the code of conduct that most institutes have. So code of conduct is a set of instructions which have some part to play, but it won't give you all the answers. That code of conduct is lagging where the conversation is today.

And I think that you're certainly your most seasoned senior experience members, have a power which can help you do that. So that's what I would do. I wouldn't wreck. I'm not going to say, well, I think you need to read this, read that or whatever. I just think you need to bring that innate sense of moral character for which 97% of us have that inherently. But that power comes from our ability to connect with others and have those really powerful conversations, which is the essence of communication.

Jen Sproul (52:26)

I think that's brilliant and I think that's something and you know what and what you've just described for us as IoIC in particular to go away and do is absolutely what's at the forefront of my mind at the moment and actually Dom and I have a meeting tomorrow to talk about how we can work with our most senior members to facilitate and get them involved in the conversation. So you know what that's a validation that what we're trying to do and move towards is the right thing and I think conversation is key and working through that together and that human dialogue.

Roger Steare (52:53)

I just want to add one thing. I actually want to change slightly that recommendation because when you played it back, I realised I'd fallen into trap as assuming that the people with the most experience, the most senior had all the answers. I think you need to engage people at every level within your profession, particularly the younger people, particularly those who haven't yet been brainwashed by corporate life to come in and help stimulate that. So that was my mistake in falling into that trap. So apologies for that.

Jen Sproul (53:27)

No, absolutely, Roger. We'll amend that as well. And you're absolutely right. And like to say, we've looked at many groups. But I think there is many things that we can, as a institute, facilitate for our profession, as you say, across all levels to involve in the conversation about how we curate the future we want for our profession and the role we want to play and that moral role we want to play in our organisation. So thank you. Sorry Cat, I think I will leave it over to you to close off the podcast.

Cat Barnard (53:55)

Oh, bless you. I wasn't thinking of one thing in particular beyond, oh my goodness, this has been such a rich conversation. I'd like to think that at some point in the future, Roger, you would be happy to come back and partake of a part two because as you guys were all

speaking earlier, and I was thinking about what was being said, there was something in there for me that reminded me of the reality in journalism that if it bleeds, it leads. Of course we are impregnated with bad news stories all the time. So the stories that manifest in our mainstream media are the kind of disaster headlines. And I think it's really easy to overlook the good work that is going on and the good stewardship and the responsible leadership. And so perhaps, you know, these conversations that we have on the podcast, it's important, as I think we aspire to do, but it's important to keep focusing on the good things that are going on as an antidote to the kind of disaster capitalism that is pervasive at this point in.

in society and civilisation. So Roger, 100% thank you so much for sparing us your time today. And I'd love to think that perhaps we can reconvene at a later date for maybe a part two.

Roger Steare (55:29)

And thank you to the three of you as well. So, you know, this conversation is a gift for all of us and thank you for the opportunity to discuss these challenges and opportunities with you. And if you want me back, I'm very happy to do a part two.

Cat Barnard (55:47)

Lovely. Thank you so much. And for everybody listening to the podcast, plenty of food for thought there. Take a step back, get a cup of tea and just give yourself an hour, half an hour to just think.

Jen Sproul (56:03)

Thank you everybody.