World Changers podcast

# Season 3, Episode 4

# Make me care: storytelling with empathy

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 00:08

Welcome to World Changers, a podcast exploring the trends making an enduring mark on our world of work, and how business leaders, HR teams and internal communicators can stay one step ahead.

Making audiences care is one of the fundamentals of employee engagement. But why is that so difficult? A key component of care is trust, and we’re tackling a lack of trust in companies government and authority generally. So how do we build it back? It starts with empathy. If we don’t trust what we hear, we shut off. And once we’ve disengaged, it’s pretty hard to get back on track. Reuters 2022 digital news report backs that up – selective news avoidance is at an all-time high. In the UK, our avoidance has shot up from 24% to 46%, with many of us citing that all the doom, gloom and disinformation has completely turned us off. How does that translate into the world of work? Well, in lots of ways, we start to distrust authoritative sources. We hear negative tales about our employers, and frankly, we get tired of the noise. Who wouldn’t want to turn the volume down? So we asked our team, when avoiding information overload is a daily challenge, what do you look for in a trusted news source? And what was the last story that struck a chord with you?

#### Declan Newcombe – 01:28

I’m Declan, an editorial assistant here at scarlettabbott. What I look for in a trusted news source is one that dives deeper into the subjects and stories they’re reporting. Those longer reads that paint a full picture and go beyond the surface-level story. Although, even if I trust the source, it always helps to be critical. I think those deep dives also help to fend off information overload. When you lose yourself in a story and invest in it, it can drown out the 1000s of other stories vying for your attention. The last story that struck a chord with me was the first in a series in the *New York Times* on the decline of religion in the US.

#### Jo Stark – 02:07

Hi, my name is Jo Stark, and I'm a senior consultant here at scarlettabbott. A trusted news source needs to be for me on a trusted platform so I know where it’s come from. The last thing I read that really struck a chord with me was around the subtle use of language and how the slight change in language can have a dramatic impact on the reader. Really fascinating stuff.

#### Lucy Clapham – 02:31

Hello, I’m Lucy Clapham and I’m a senior writer at scarlettabbott. What do I look for in a trusted news source? Well, I look for one that backs up its facts; that is independent; that doesn’t seem to be skewed to lean too much to the left or the right. I’ve always trusted and relied on the BBC. And I think I still do. But beyond that, I’ve started to look at other news sources as well. And most recently, I’ve, it’s always been around, it’s been around for a long time since the 1800s. But, The Economist is a title that I’ve started to read a bit more and subscribe to, I really liked the way they present things, the way they break things down, make it simple, make it easy, you know, really turn over the numbers and the data and crunch the facts and that sort of thing. And their cartoons are fantastic as well. And it’s just easy to understand, easy to get into. And just really interesting, just good writing as well. And I think the latest piece that really appealed to me from them and a story that really struck a chord with me, was a piece they did about female travel writers. I actually stumbled across it around March 8, on International Women’s Day. And it wasn’t a piece that was even out for International Women’s Day was actually from the archives. But it was a really lovely piece. And it just looked at some writers that I’ve not come across before, but it was really lovely to, sort of, see how women had been doing something that, you know, adventuring, exploring the same as men had it’s, you know, it’s a career, as it were, that has always been associated with men. But this piece actually sort of showed that actually, you know, women have been doing this for just as long, and have been writing about it just as well. And it recommended about, sort of, four or five titles. And I’m certainly going to go away and read one or two of them in future. So yeah.

#### Sophie Heaps – 04:12

I am Sophie Heaps, the client relationship manager here at scarlettabbott. What I’ve been personally trying to do is make a little bit more of a conscious effort, definitely easier said than done, at not being instantly sucked in by the clickbait and the tagline, and just taking that extra 10-20 seconds at looking at who’s written the article and the news outlet those come from. Are they reliable? Are they trustworthy? Are they respected? Have I consumed content on there before that I found a value and, you know, going from that and if that is not necessarily obvious, you can have a look at who’s engaging, who’s commenting, who’s liking, who’s sharing, adding their own thoughts and opinions, people that have been tagged, because I’m sure that you've got friends, colleagues, connections on your professional and personal networks for that reason. And then always recommend following specific hashtags of topics, conversation, everything that you want to keep up to date with. Definitely recommend following specific hashtags for that reason. It will generate a news feed that is relevant to you. I think the most thought-provoking article I’ve recently read is around a CEO that had made it mandatory for all of their employees to come back to the office full time. And in doing so, an employee had to rehome their family dog. I think it brought up such a valid conversation about the outdated mindset of productivity levels being higher if you’re in the office than you’ve been at home.

#### William Carnegie – 05:35

Hi, I’m William Carnegie, senior IC consultant here at scarlettabbott. While it might have become more of the Wild West under its new tenure, Twitter is still my go-to place for news and information. There, I get to tap into the thoughts and opinions of the people I either know personally and respect for their sage advice, all those comedians, technologists, ex-colleagues, mavericks and oddballs, whose opinions prod and push me to think a little bit more openly. Last article that caught my ear, rather than eye, was a conversation on Navarro Media’s Planet B podcast with Māori activist, Tina Ngata, on decolonizing the oceans, which I highly recommend.

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 06:16

We also put that question to the wider comms community.

#### Anne White – 05:41

Anne White, internal comms lead, Nominet. So what makes a trusted news source for me? It’s one that shows consistency and balance. They don’t change their position just to be on trend and they’re not afraid to tell both sides of the story. Bias is a real killer of trust for me. The last story that really hooked me, it’s quite hard to decide, actually, because I’m a bit of a magpie, when it comes to news. Lots of different things catch my attention. But one that did was from a fellow professional woman talking about how many times she gets asked when she’s going to have babies. I cannot believe that that still happens in this day and age. But it led into a really interesting broader conversation about unconscious gender bias in the workplace. And there was a really interesting visual that went along with it that showed not only examples of female gender bias in the workplace, but also male gender bias, which I thought was really interesting. In my work, my big experiment around storytelling is getting colleagues, who are just doing their day-to-day jobs with great humility, to understand just how powerfully their stories can connect with our purpose, and by sharing them, how they can help our whole community to feel really proud of the work that happens in our business to deliver benefits to wider society.

#### Brenda Wong – 07:27

Hi, I’m Brenda Wong, and I work for Stotles as the people and operations manager. The last story that really hooked me was an article on vulture.com. It had the most intriguing title. It was called ‘The Spine Collector’. The headline was, ‘for years, a mysterious figure has been stealing books before the release. Is it espionage? Revenge? Or a complete waste of time?’ And essentially, it was looking for somebody who was leaking books, basically. And I just love the idea of this modern day book thief, stealing from publishers – to what end? We don't know, because I don’t think he was leaking it to anybody but himself. I just like that there is somebody out there with such chaotic energy and love a good modern mystery. It makes sense that something, like this article, went viral, captured people’s imaginations, what with ‘Knives Out’ and ‘Only Murders in the Building’ being very popular pieces of media released recently. There’s an innate quality in human beings where they are curious, they love gossip, they love the drama, and what better way to introduce some drama into your life by living vicariously through somebody else’s.

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 08:47

Now as communicators, tackling distrust and disconnect is a challenge. How do we approach it? We need to find the relatable human stories that make us care. I sat down with my colleague, Charlie Feasby, to explore how. Charlie, welcome to the podcast!

#### Charlie Feasby – 09:01

Thank you for having me, or, thank you for having me to interview you.

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 09:04

Yeah, it’s really strange format this time round because basically, I wrote this World Changer ‘make me care: storytelling with empathy’. And so I thought I would ask Charlie to interview me instead, for a change. It feels a bit weird that the mic’s turning on me, but that’s okay. Very much over to you.

#### Charlie Feasby – 09:21

Awesome. So you are the queen of content here at scarlettabbott. And the first question in this ‘make me care’ stuff is, there’s so much content out there in the world to hold people’s attention. How do you make yours stand out?

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 09:35

Well, I think it’s originality. I think it has to be. And I’ve been so frustrated with all of this Chat GPT crap that I keep hearing about, because it’s just recycling information. So like, there is, I’m sure there's an infinite amount of information already in the world, but the creation of fresh, interesting, innovative content, recycled over and over again will mean that we lose that originality and I was reading an article recently by Alex Morel called *‘The Age of Average’*, and it was absolutely brilliant. So he was talking about how our visual culture is flatlining and the only cure for that is creativity. And it really, really spoke to me because I was just like, this is our job. This is what we have to do. There were some really delicious phrases in there like ‘cast aside conformity’, ‘exercise the expected’ and ‘decline, the indistinguishable’, because like arts and car design, and writing, if you look at this article, like everything looks the same and has looked the same for a really long time, aesthetically, down to like Cafe design, or the way that our shops look, or the way that our art starting to look. And like you have to get away from that mainstream medium and look outside the box, really. So I think for me, the way is originality and there’s lots of different ways that you can do that, of course, yeah, it just has to be. I mean, what do you think?

#### Charlie Feasby – 10:58

Well, you know me. I am a fierce opponent of Chat GPT. I’ve written about how much I hate it in a what I thought was a very democratic way but my true feelings that I will reveal now is that I hate it and I think it’s terrible. And the idea of recycling, like you say, the work is just so boring. Like, whenever you read something that’s written by Chat GPT, it’s so dull, and there’s no spark that gets me interested. And that only comes from a human putting their say into it. And that’s, you know, what gets me excited about work, you know. It’s those, like you say, gleaming details that Chat GPT just can’t write because it doesn’t know what they are.

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 11:38

I completely agree. And you’re right, it’s that originality. It’s that fresh spark. It’s that person. And actually, I’ve been doing some master classes recently with people about writing, and we’ve been talking about how bloody uncomfortable is to write. Like, if you are putting a bit of yourself into the written word. And so that that’s vulnerability. That’s, you know, that’s connection. And the people that do it and are brave enough and, you know, can put it out there, can connect with their audience in a way that, like, I just think if you run something through Chat GPT, and have a lazy day, lazy interaction is all you’re gonna get – or none.

#### Charlie Feasby – 12:14

I mean, people always say that if you run something through Chat, GPT, you know, it’s, oh, it’s an easy solution. And it’s one of those things of, why does it need to be easy? You know, writing is hard and that’s what makes it good, which isn’t the most encouraging thing to basically say, you need to bash your head against a wall in order to make this good. But that’s how you get good results. It’s not by taking the easy route. It’s by putting in the effort and writing something that’s bloody great.

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 12:38

Yes, preach.

#### Charlie Feasby – 12:40

So we often think of stories as articles and as the written word, but how else do you engage with people outside of that format?

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 12:49

Well, you’ve got me on to one of my favourite topics here, because, like, I really, really challenge us all the time to think about, how can you not write 500 words and a standfirst today? How can you do something different? And audiences engage with different things all the time, right? But like, how can you go beyond, kind of, even what’s coming into modern internal communications, like podcasts and video and all that sort of stuff, and how can you really push the envelope on your internal channels and think, oh, what can I do that's different? Like a quiz, for example. Might sound really frivolous but my gosh, if you want people to remember what you’re saying, get them to do a quiz about it because that’s instant retention. Even better if you can make them laugh in the quiz, like I often think we get really nervous about ‘we don't want colleagues laughing at our communications, because they’re very sort of interesting’. Actually, if you can make people laugh, and have a great time, while they’re reading stuff, they’ll remember it and they will believe that. You know, work doesn’t always have to be fully serious and very busy and important. And actually, you can come to work and enjoy your job and have fun and there’s a great culture in that company that they work for. I’ve also been delving back into horoscopes recently. Not actual horoscopes, people. Don’t worry, but more like about self-relevance, like we remember self-relevant things to like, look at a group photograph and who do you look at first?

#### Charlie Feasby – 14:08

Yourself.

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 14:11

It’s just the way it is, isn’t it? And so like, if I presented you with a page of 12 things, and I was confident that you only needed to read one of them, how would I do it? I would do it in the horoscope and just have a bit of fun with it. Because actually, sometimes, it might just be about sharing some fresh product inspiration for one brand, or it might be about 12 tips to switch off or wellbeing tips or whatever it might be. If I did that in a kind of horoscope way, I’m sure you’d read it. Have you ever heard of the bliss point?

#### Charlie Feasby – 14:44

No, I haven’t.

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 14:45

Okay, so the bliss point is the point in which you are most, kind of, satiated. And in the food industry the bliss point is about how much fat, salt and sugar can I put in something so that it’s absolute perfection and you will just keep coming back and consuming. So like, I don’t know, a whopper, or something like that from Burger King. But actually, like, think about it in terms of content and think about, think about if you’re going on holiday, and like you’re going on holiday because you desperately need your break. But you get to the end of the holiday and sometimes you’re like, ‘quite glad to get back to work now’. And like you’ve stuffed yourself with ice cream every day, or whatever it is that you’ve done. You’ve been on the beach relaxing, or you’ve walked everyday, whatever it might be. But you’ve done the same thing every day for a week or two weeks, and you’ve reached your bliss point. And I think it’s the same with content. So like, novelty captures attention so just keep doing different things because if you just create one-dimensional content that looks the same, and you’ve got the same content treatments, and same formats that you keep going back to, your readers are going to be bored real quick. So like keep it... mix it up, make it varied. Do something different.

#### Charlie Feasby – 15:53

When I think about content, I think about, you know, social media is how people get so much of their content. When you think of things like TikTok, the algorithm is constantly changing and constantly making new things and that’s because people just find the new things so much more interesting, that we haven’t had the same TikTok trend for three years. It constantly evolves and changes. Yeah, I love the idea that we do here of like, you know, mosaic content and that stuff, because you do workshops and stuff and you ask people, how do you consume your content? And just the range of answers that you get, just shows that, you know, some people like podcasts, some people like videos, some people watch the news, some people read like little bullet point articles. It’s so important to have that range of stuff to get people interested and get them engaged. There’s no one size fits all, when it comes to content. Really.

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 16:40

I might turn that question on you then like What content do you really like? What do you really like to consume?

#### Charlie Feasby – 16:46

So, I am a big fan. I like podcasts. I am also a very visual person. So if something’s in video form, like, I have a good memory for films and documentaries. But also, there’s a lot of stuff on YouTube, like video essays and things like that. Those really engage me. I love people engaging with content in like a visual way. And that’s why I love, like, the design work we do here of, yes, the words are good, but it’s also about having that eye-catching thing to get you sucked into the content first as well. Yeah

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 17:16

Totally agree. And actually, you know, different platforms are coming up with different ways of experimenting, but it doesn’t necessarily mean you have to have that platform, like LinkedIn slides, I think are really good when they’re done well in a kind of very storytelling way. So like, you keep hooking the slide to slide to slide. That’s a great PowerPoint deck. That’s a great image gallery on your intranet. It’s the same thing. It just looks better, because you’ve seen it on LinkedIn and someone else has done it better. Actually, use the channels that you’ve got and you can be, if you don’t think about a PowerPoint slide as a PowerPoint slide but you think of it as a way to tell a story, suddenly, you can be open to a completely different format. So like experimentation is key, for me.

#### Charlie Feasby – 17:21

When we think of social media and a lot of stuff there is, a lot of it is very bite-sized, quick interactions, just the worry that people’s attention spans diminishing. Do you think, is there still a place for longer-form content in the kind of stuff we do?

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 18:14

Absolutely. I think people’s attention spans are waning on the things that people don’t want to pay attention to. So you’ve got to find a way to hook people and make them interested in the right type of content. Now, ask me to like, read 10 pages on policy and unless it’s my contract, I’m probably going to cry. But I think if you can tap into people’s niches or the things that they’re interested in, and in the workplace, that can be purpose, it can be sustainability, it can be diversity and inclusion, it can be wellbeing, all of these different topics. If you get a really engaged team, it can be like a high-performance team. I was having this conversation the other day. I did the story a little while back. And I was trying to find an unusual perspective for this business about really high-performing team. And I was like, can we talk to people on nights? And can we do an article about that? And the whole article was called Night Owls. And we went out and interviewed them at night, spoke to the right people, did an amazing photo shoot. It was really, really bloody interesting, because it’s an unusual perspective. And I just would really challenge listeners to think about who you can talk to. And you don’t... like, that team doesn’t have to have achieved record breaking sales or outstanding performance or whatever it might be. They can be just doing a great job as they ordinarily do. But it’s just a different perspective, a different person that you wouldn’t normally speak to. And all of a sudden, you know, I’m well past the bliss point. And I’m like, oh, fresh, interesting. Novelty catches attention.

#### Charlie Feasby – 19:42

That’s what I kind of think about with DE&I stuff. It’s something I care about a lot. But also, it’s just interesting, you know, if we’re hearing the same voices over and over again, it gets stale very quickly. So if you have a diverse bunch of people telling you their tales, it’s going to be interesting, and I find I know it's my job to interview people but, people just are interesting anyway. They talk about so many different things, and everyone has different lived experiences that you can pick out anyone, and they will have an interesting story to tell.

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 20:10

Absolutely. And that just tells me that you are a journalist of the future, Charlie, because like curiosity is the main trait that you’d... like, if you're interested in people, if you give a damn about people, you can get the best story out of them. And you know what, like, anybody listening, everybody has got the best story to tell about themselves. They just don’t know it until you start talking to them. People are like, ‘oh, I've not got a story’, and then you just dig into their lives and all of a sudden, you find out really interesting things that they would have never even thought was a story. You’ve just got to have the right ears to listen to them.

#### Charlie Feasby – 20:40

What’s the best example of empathy or experimentation in storytelling that you’ve seen recently? Like, what strikes a chord with people in your experience?

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 20:50

It’s really good question. I think this one hits empathy and experimentation. But it’s a feature by The Guardian called *‘Dining Across the Divide’* and it gets two people from two completely different backgrounds, maybe even political stances, to sit down and have dinner together, and it runs you through their conversation over starter, main course and dessert. And what I really love about it is usually by the end of each one, someone else has taken on board, the other’s opinion and points and people have found more connection than they did division, which I think is really important in like today’s very angry world. I also really like just the fact of getting to know someone a little bit. I love an in-conversation story. I think it really works. And I think it’s okay to apply this format, maybe not the sitting down together over dinner, but it might be a coffee. It's okay to apply this format internally, because we can’t paint like ridiculous pictures of the world that everybody has the same opinion about everything. It’s okay to show nuance. It’s okay to show different points of view. Everybody’s got a different background. How fascinating to get a Jew to sit down with a Sikh and talk about their lives and how they’ve been shaped. And where those people have grown up in the world will completely influence the way that they speak about themselves, their interest in other people. I think it’s, you know, a really fascinating format. The other thing I’ve read recently is where like, the journalist kind of turns the pen on to themselves. Now, be wary of doing this too much. But I read something with Simon Hattonstone recently in The Guardian, who had, he does amazing profiles for The Guardian, and he had had encephalitis as a child and he wanted to see the effect that that had had on his brain. So he went and got brain scans as an adult and and kind of talked about his experience. And you think of a health story, and you kind of like very often think, ‘oh, this is gonna be oppressively miserable, because it’s about health’, like I was talking about Stand Up to Cancer on Bake Off of the other day. And much as I really, really like that, it makes me weep so hard. The power of storytelling. But like this particular story, found why having encephalitis as a child was actually, in some ways, a blessing, because he can’t remember lots of the past. And it helps him not worry about the future. And that’s a really good thing, because he doesn’t want to ruminate and think on the future. He just wants to like live in the present day. And it was just a really brilliant article where somebody turns the pen on themselves, shares their experience and in doing so, A, he does a really interesting and novel take on a health story, which can can normally be quite depressing as I say, but, B, manages to be uplifting and interesting, and explore something in a completely different way that, I don’t know, if he’d asked a reader to do that if they would have had the same outcome. Whereas it was very kind of interestingly introspective. That was a really good one. The last thing I want to talk about is Substack. And if people don’t look at Substack, already, please go and check it out. It’s like a new platform, where that... Well, I say new, it’s been around for about four or five years now. But it’s just becoming really big. And it is where kind of the best journalists go and they set up their own Substack. And the idea is that it goes out as an email to people. So people read it as a newsletter. So there’s a finite stop to the Substack. And I think the big problem with social media is the ever scroll like you can’t stop. And so if you trust a journalist to come into your inbox, in whatever kind of publishing format they do, some people do daily, some people do monthly, some people do quarterly, whatever it might be, to come into your private space, which is your inbox and you control it, like you’re the subscriber and you can choose to unsubscribe. That’s a really important relationship that a writers got with their reader, I guess. And there is some really interesting people on there doing interesting and different formats. There’s one guy on there who does choose your own adventure stories. People are talking about food, film, philosophy, whatever it might be. So you know how I was talking earlier about people are interested in what they’re interested in, you can find the theme or topic and go pick a fantastic journalist. I’m talking like even writers are on there. Margaret Atwood’s on there now. It’s becoming a massive platform. And I just think they’re really experimenting with what an email newsletter can do. And I think, my God, in IC, all we do is send out email newsletters, and like, how do you get people to read them and make them interesting? You could definitely pick up some tips on that. Sorry, I went into a really excitable rant.

#### Charlie Feasby – 25:37

I, myself, through you, have just started getting into Substack, myself. And it’s the amazing thing of the internet is just such a leveller and there’s so many things you can find on there. You can find novelists, famous novelists like Margaret Atwood, but then you can find someone just chatting about like trains or something like that, and in a really passionate way. And it’s a good way to find good stories and good things that you’re interested in, but also just new ways of thinking about the world. And I mean, that kind of ties into my last question, you know, how can we encourage this experimentation and innovation in what we do?

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 26:11

I think it’s not being afraid to fail, right? Because it’s so scary as a content creator, specifically in a business where you might have an organisation where certain stakeholders might get in touch with you after you’ve published an article and be like, ‘hmm, not quite happy about that’. But if you don’t, like be brave, and try, how will you ever know? And for sure, there are different kinds of interpretations from different stakeholders across the business. But if you, if you manage people and say, ‘I’m going to create a culture of experimentation in my newsroom, because here's the data that shows my readers are turning off, so I have to try something different’, like give yourself permission to just go for it and go wild. And talk to me about inspirational formats for goodness sake. I’ve got million of them. And I’m fascinated to see what people’s different challenges are in their organisations. But usually, I’ve got an idea of whether some things worked or crashed and burned as well. It’s helpful, but like, be experimental, be brave, be playful, and just go for it, because you know, who’s telling you you can’t?

#### Charlie Feasby – 27:13

That reminds me that, you know, the band Aerosmith used to have a bad idea get-together, where everyone would come and bring what they thought was their worst idea. And most of them were terrible. But out of that, they also got ‘Love in an Elevator’ and ‘Dude Looks Like a Lady’. That thing of, your worst idea might not necessarily be a bad idea if you, you know, present it in the right way. Yeah.

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 27:36

Nice. Really nice. Oh, thank you for inviting me today, Charlie.

#### Charlie Feasby – 27:39

That’s okay. Thank you for inviting me. It’s very confusing, who invited who? When did it start? Thanks so much for having me. And thank you for sharing all your amazing knowledge.

#### Elle Bradley-Cox – 27:49

Cheers. If you want to explore this topic a little more, do join us later in the month for our webinar where you can put your questions to our expert panel. We’ll share the details in the show notes and on our social channels. Want to continue the conversation in the meantime, do come and chat to us over on Twitter @scarlettabbott or drop us an email at hello@scarlettabbott.co.uk. And we'll see you next time for another dive into World Changers 2023.

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