



SCHOOL for
THINKTANKERS

On Think Tanks



Communications in complex context

David Watson
Strategy, communications and policy consultant
Former Chatham House Communications
Director

Agenda

1. Introduction to Chatham House
2. How does CH communicate for impact?
3. Team, channels, tools and strategies
4. Measuring success
5. Politically sensitive issues
6. Questions and discussion

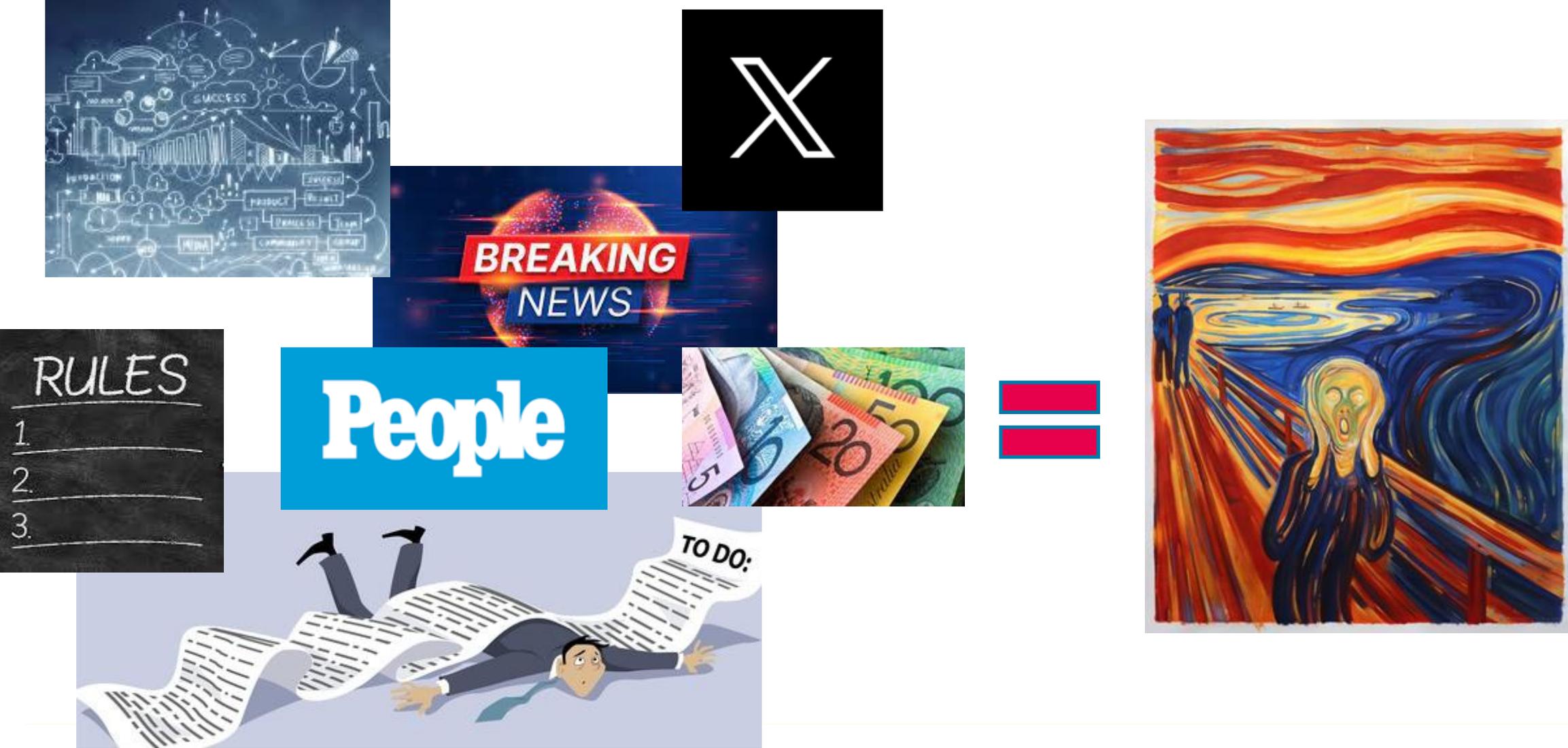
Chatham House

- Independent international affairs think tank – Independent Thinking
- Founded in 1920
- Chatham House rule
- Events and convening, dialogue, research and analysis, empowering next generation
- 15 thematic and geographic programmes and teams
- Membership model



'Our mission is to help governments and societies build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world'

The context for communications



Effective communication is essential

1. Evidence, analysis and ideas are not sufficient to influence policy
2. Decision-makers and influencers have plenty of alternative sources – we are all competing for attention (audiences won't just find you!)
3. Time is at a premium and attention must be grasped quickly
4. Research is rarely immediately translatable into practical recommendations
5. Presenting the facts is only half the job – and compelling research deserves properly communicating
6. Establish credibility, reputation and brand for future influencing
7. Bring research alive! To stand out. It's fun!
8. Attract funding and partnerships.

How Chatham House communicates for impact

1. Integrated communications approach:
 - Brand, profile-raising, multiple channels – in parallel to...
 - Substantive output, e.g. research paper, event, campaign
 - ‘Link expertise consistently to current affairs and events’
 - ‘Focus on the remarkable and timely’
2. Team effort between research, events and comms
3. Objective and audience driven (on a good day!) what activities will get CH what it wants
4. Planned to maximise impact (horizon scanning, moments of influence)
5. Comms involved at the outset of bids and proposals, and framing papers
6. Public comms allied with private engagement – The Rule.

The Chatham House comms orchestra

Communications and publishing

News and
comment

Publications

Digital
marketing and
website

The World
Today

International
Affairs

Comms channels

- Website platform
 - ❖ Publications, expert comments, media press releases and news stories, multimedia and video, events (led by events team)
- Media engagement (proactive and reactive)
- Social media (Twitter/X, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube)
- Email newsletters
- Podcast - Independent Thinking
- Search engine marketing, paid digital marketing

- The World Today (editorially independent)
- International Affairs (editorially independent and published on OUP).

Tools

- Weekly [comms grid](#) and meetings to prepare and agree
- Comms outputs planner spreadsheets and coordination with programmes
- Expert comment management through Asana
- Comms plans for mega-moments with lead programmes
- [Content framework](#) for new comms proposals, including funding bids
- Guidelines for comms activities on the [intranet](#)
- Research Committee, particularly [horizon scanning](#) and discussion of [comms priorities](#)
- Content Liaison Committee for routine work planning
- Regular internal communication with programme colleagues
- Fortnightly publications meetings to run through the [publications planner](#).

Strategies for impact

- Having a clear vision: why are you doing this and what does success look like?
- Identifying when to communicate through intelligence gathering and horizon scanning
- Being clear about the organization's added value
- Knowing the audience – how do they want to be influenced?
- Action plan: long-term, key influencing moments, rapid reaction, staying nimble
- Deploying the best comms activities to achieve objectives
- Being propositional and offering solutions, not just more eloquent descriptions of the problems
- Repeat, repackage, repeat, recycle, repeat again!

Are we having an impact?

- What impact do you want? Linked to objectives
- KPI stats on media coverage, website visits and engagement, newsletter subscribers, podcast downloads and plays
- Board review of research impact
- Feedback, including through our audience survey
- Annual Review – impact examples
- ‘The company we keep’
- Ongoing work and access.

Communications outputs 2024–25



38 publications



258 expert
comments and
explainers



45 podcasts

The World Today

3 issues of
The World Today
+ digital content



65,100 media
mentions



857 marketing
emails



6.7 million website
visitors

InternationalAffairs
Academically rigorous and policy relevant research for 100 years

6 issues of
International Affairs
+ digital content, events

Politically sensitive comms

Context for comms can be politically sensitive as well as noisy

- Chatham House values and brand
- Independence
- Engage professionally, thoughtfully and constructively
- Pivotal role of comms editorial judgement and guidance.

Examples:

- UK general election
- Israel Palestine conflict.

UK general election

Independence and UK Charity Commission guidelines

Risk management:

- Discussions at staff and Board research committees, risk and ethics committee
- [Principles for independent research and convening](#)
- Charity Commission [guidelines on political activities](#)
- CH guidance to staff and associates on balance in content programmes, appropriate language for comms outputs and events, social media guidance
- Keep a record of party-political figures featuring in CH public activities
- Role of chairs and hosts at events and on the podcast to challenge any assertions favoring or criticizing one party over another.

Guidance and positioning

Elections

Independence, political non-allegiance and diversity are [CH core values](#). Making the right judgement about balance is key to living our values and maintaining our reputation and credibility as an independent think tank. The UK and US elections demand we think even more carefully about party-political balance when we plan public activities and offer commentary (especially on social media).

Events

Chatham House is an independent, non-partisan organisation. We welcome speakers and representatives from all political parties and countries around the world. Chatham House events enable respectful and rigorous debate and hold speakers to account. All invitations to speak at Chatham House are made on this understanding.

Israel Palestine conflict

Risk management:

- Be clear about objectives (provide constructive and timely expertise, offer a breadth of commentary and analysis, and create space for thoughtful conversations across a range of perspectives, move the debate forward on longer term issues to increase the chances of achieving a lasting peace)
- Board and staff research committee discussions
- Set up internal working group co-chaired by MENAP programme director and Comms director – pause and double check
- Plan ahead on activities for ‘balance’ over the content programme and keep a record of activities
- Consider feedback in the round.



Thank you!

Questions and discussion