

Working with the Paradoxes of Technology, Interview with Marek Tuszynski

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- MT 00:18 It's not enough nowadays. And it has never been to only think about how to carve out your own space within the technical spectrum and defend yourself, et cetera. We do a lot of that as well because it's necessarily in some of the work we do. But we also do other things that are promoting a more proactive, if not creative ways of using technology and data. So that's why a lot of the focus that we play with is around different forms of investigation. So how different kinds of actors using different means of technology can build their own narratives. So not only defend themselves, protect themselves or the networks they work with, et cetera, but also use technology to propose very different narrative, takes the risks.
- MT 01:40 Tactical tech is a international organization that consists of almost 35 people and that operates from Berlin, Germany, and it works with a larger network of different actors, institutions, organizations or individuals, informal groups and so on. And the aim of this organization of tactical tech is to showcase and use and describe and demystify the role of technology, information and evidence in the political context. So how different actors can empower themselves or use technology to become more effective where also it adds more efficacy to their work, whatever their work is. Tactical tech mostly works in the context of human rights, social justice. So wherever there is a technology or information or evidence we are coming in and we either know, or tools or framing or explanation how and when certain kinds of technology uses of information can be more powerful than others.
- MT 02:49 So tactical tech has been funded by two people Stephanie Hankey and myself and we happen to work together on different development and technology projects around the world. And we were dissatisfied by the way technology is being promoted, implemented or understood in different places. And the idea was how one organization or a group of individuals can showcase that there is a very strong political aspect of technology that has to be put out. And a focus of tactical tech at the

beginning was because of focus on Free and Open Source Software because for us that was the political toolbox that enable the users, give them agency and autonomy and the right to use this technology freely. And starting from that, we start looking at other aspects of information technology, which are the ones that are empowering, which are the ones that are actually dis-empowering different actors.

- MT 03:53 So over time, 15 years in the spectrum of development in technology, politics and in the current world in the 21st century is a long time. So a lot of things happened from the initial idea of what we wanted tactical tech to be what it is right now in a way. Nevertheless, I think the the most important change was already incepted at the beginning. We wanted to work on the power of information, understood very, very broadly. And you cannot talk about information without technology nowadays at all. Practically speaking. We just couldn't do it at the beginning. At the beginning there was much more important to focus on technological aspect and get people onto using certain tools, tactics, forms of combining technology with other forms of activism and so forth. What's changed over time is two things change, first of all the role of information has become much more significant information, understood as data. And, second that the actors playing with that become much stronger and much more significant politically. So, the spectrum of actors shifted heavily but also the role of evidence, information and data become a foreplay rather than technology that is now is there. Everybody knows that, but it's not the things that you're doing things for is the stuff that you're doing with.
- MT 05:16 So tactical tech is formally a classic non-for-profit. So it's a kind of a business and that purpose of which is not making money, share the money among shareholders and so forth or produce goods that you can sell, et cetera. And the idea is that you convince people who would give you money, and these are private foundations, mostly, and spend the money on projects that are promoting different values. So the idea of tactical tech was to find a format that would not fall into one category of businesses that are driven by consumerism and production of goods and things, services people have to buy. On the other hand, we didn't want to be an NGO, nongovernmental organization who's role is to fulfill a kind of a role of a government or other state actors, whatever.
- MT 06:11 They either unable to do them or they would rather give them away to people who are in better understanding of an environment in which they are operating. And we think that they are very important all of them. But we also thought at the beginning that there is a necessity for having more

and more and non for profit organization that will be able to act internationally because a lot of problems that we tackle, especially in the spectrum of technology and Information are nongeographically bounded. And for us, this ability to be flexible and move around and operate on that level was very important. So different idea about what the institution should produce and a different idea how it should operate, kind of mimicking different actors out there. So for us, it's very important to stay that a tactical tech is a non-for-profit that relies heavily on trust and funding of other entities. And we also have to share that trust with people with whom we work directly. So that's the a core value of the organization.

MT 07:16 The structure of the organization is an interesting beast in itself. So we operate according to a set of very formal rules. I mean, if you're running an registered organization, you have to be able to pay people and normal salaries, you have to be able to pay taxes. You have to be able to have a accountable structure. So it's very clear how decisions are being made and so forth, et cetera. So we comply with all of this as much as it's possible and necessary in different respects. And the structure is fairly flat. So you have a small team that is managing the organization. 35 people requires a certain levels of management, decision making some accumulation of knowledge and information and the driving force. So there's a smaller group of people that are, you know, way in a position to define the strategy and and propose different directions. But then the decision is about actual projects and what's going to be produced is decided by the teams that are working on them.

MT 08:24 The different economic models of funding, of kind the work that tactical tech is doing. And the reason we stay away from direct state funding is because of a trust, a state funding usually implies certain political interests and that are very localized. Commercial finding on the other hand is again about commercial interest two different kinds of politics in. And if you want to do work that we're doing that you want to stay away from this two kind of ways of defining the world, then you have to rely on private funding that is a different kind of thing. You can also try to produce things and then make money and then decide that part of the income that you're generating goes to the work that you're doing. And we tried that a few times. You can do to through the consultancy, advisory work that you do to different organizations where the work you do has nothing to do with the production.

MT 09:22 Then how you spend the money for or you can run a services. And we've been running tactical studios for five years. Sometime ago. That was the

aim was to on one hand, to exercise the way of producing visual content for four different clients, but then to divide the income in between covering the cost of, of that production and then giving it back to the organization that would create a pot of money that enables us to be more strategic,, about how we want to spend them. There's a necessity for fairly independent funding when it comes to promotion of technology as a political asset. Because again, the principle asset we have as an organisation is trust and who gives you money? What money and how we distribute them. It builds or can destroy that trust as well.

MT 10:16 When you look at the, what is the human capital of the organization, you're going to look at it differently than the first of all is the core team people that are on contracts working as a members of tactical tech and that it's changing over time. For the last five years we are around 35 people or 30, 35 people. If you like, but that's the core team. Then every single thing that we produce make, create an elicited training or a manual or a book, et cetera, always happens in collaboration with others. And these groups are of different sizes. A lot of products that we conceive also come out of meetings that we organize smaller, bigger. Some of them are 10 people, some of them are 150 people, and they also create a more informal network. We are not a membership organization, so it's very hard to say what is their current status in terms of members.

MT 11:09 And we don't have that. All of these links are soft, and informal. If you look at also the number of people that we trained directly, indirectly, or who access our materials, et cetera, then you have very different layers of numbers that you are talking about. And we can say that sometimes, annually we are able to train thousands of people, other years we train hundreds of people, but it's always a significant number. And some of them become partners, followers, friends, collaborators later on. But for us it's very important to sustain into this network. It is amorphous and non formal. If you look at who are these people that make the networks that we operate with, you look at that also very differently. So first of all, there are categories of people and the number of them will be organizations that share values or a similar goals as tactical tech.

MT 12:05 So we work definitely always with programmers, coders, techies, however they want to be defined. Some of them like to be defined as geeks and we work with a creative groups of people. So everything from artists, designers to people who make things, makers and so forth. And a historically also very strong group that we've been working with are people who identify themselves as activists. Sometimes they wouldn't not use the word activities, but those are people who are trying to have

impact on how society is being governed, ruled or how the powers or resources are being distributed who have access to them and so forth. So three groups of a creative techies and activists are significant parts of all the networks.

MT 12:55 When we speak about the context in which tactical tech operates in terms of what is the actual content, what narratives are working with or we decide not to work with, et cetera, how are we do make this decisions where we feel like we want to influence certain things who and where we don't want to influence things. I think it's important to remember that our context is very narrow. So we work within the fairly understood concept of human rights and social justice. This is what is important for us. And then we will work with any actors who are operating within that spectrum. Who are defending or trying to promote or understand or document things happening around this very specific subject. I would say that there's a set of different things that connect how you build narratives across different contexts, cultures and situations that are time bound it and so forth.

MT 13:58 And it's about I would say core elements. What makes narrative effective. So, it is that about the quality of the information and evidence and data, it is about a ability to verify and that information and data is about kind of accountability and responsibility and also proposed it's narratives and so forth, et cetera. That is universal. So in our work also when you then communicate that how you communicate that that is not justified. That is not true, that is not fair and so forth. So how you make sure that every single element that constitutes a good narrative that is the quality of the information that it is based on, that is the quality of analysis and how you process that information and is the quality of the output. So do you actually speak to the people to whom it matters do speak their language that they can identify with what you're trying to achieve through that communication, so forth, who you want to benefit from that will they be able to benefit from it.

MT 15:08 But also, you know, what do you do with people, who are the sources of this information? Do you care about them? How do you care about them? Do you need to protect them? Do you need to do something else for them? Maybe if you go to the process of research, do you think about giving that research back to the people that you use for that research and so forth? So there's this kind of a entire set of different values in which we are very strongly think that they constitutes something that is a different kind of storytelling.

- MT 15:47 In our work based on collaboration between different groups that are coming from different walks of life, experience and expertise. We are able to produce different kinds of content and this content can be divided into online digital content. So there'll be websites that are either guides, tool kits or more informative resources, but it's mostly resources. I would say. We produce a lot of publications and the publication can be also not necessarily a book or booklet or leaflet or something like this but also film, documentary, film, feature films, animation and so forth. And also we organize events and events are either a small training or larger workshops that have also different goals of producing something but the content of this workshop is also defined with these groups together. As I said, our work is always kind of based and driven by a larger participation and collaboration with different actors.
- MT 16:46 From the beginning of, of, of tactical tech, it was very important for us that every single output, whatever that would be that we ever produced in the history of the organization has to be accessible, publicly accessible, freely accessible. And we work with free and open source software principles. And later on we also started using creative commons and so forth. But every single outfit that we ever produced is available sometimes in a raw format, in a source code, sometimes in the final product, like a book. Sometimes in both formats where you can get it as it was finally produced, but you can also look at the material that kind of constitutes the final production. And for us that's very important when you operate in this noncommercial way. We would find it amoral, if we were making money of something that is being built from contributions that are also non-commercial.
- MT 17:42 And the other aspect of kind of freely available content is political for us. We don't want to create any possible restrictions from anybody to be able to use this material ever. So even if we disappear, if you know, political or social or cultural changes may impact our ability to do things also within the networks, everything we produce up until that moment, we always be available. And that was extremely important for us. So I think the, the fact that our content is public in that sense gives it its independent life and I'm very happy sometimes when I travel to some places in a world where people are thinking that tactical tech is a, is a software or as a tool because that's how they come across it. And they never thought that there's an institution behind it of any sort.
- MT 18:36 And we like that fact that making this output free, it gives you the independent life when you work with topics like technology or digital security or anything that is related to technology, the first barrier that

you see as a user is that it's not necessarily easy accessible and not in terms of the form but also content, the presentation, the way of describing things and so forth. So when you are talking initially at tactical tech about demystification of technology was not only to a kind of top down narrative: here is how you should understand it, et cetera, but rather try to produce an output that is easy to digest that is not intimidating. And that is not overly complicated or complex. So for us, this combination between design and narrative and how much information you put upfront, how much you actually get people excited about learning and understanding why it is important to learn some new things for them. It should be creative and engaging and easy. It doesn't mean it has to be super simplified but you always have to make this balance between why is it necessary and useful ways to the political but also enable people to learn.

MT 20:02 For me personally access to information, knowledge, other experiences, even other ideas, it's probably one of the most important in terms of how you develop your own understanding of the world that you are living within and the more that we have publicly available trusted sources or ways of actually creating them is probably the most significant. Then you think of how you would like to conceive more conscious and political actors that would not fall into mainstream in often manipulated narratives but able to produce their own narratives. I don't see that happening without a solid, publicly available trusted knowledge or information.

MT 21:05 The other thing that we observed lately it's this impossible city to disentangle technology from data. At the beginning of tactical tech, data was just kind of interesting factor, but it was not determining yet the use of technology but also the importance of technology in a political context. What have happened in last years, with the proliferation of smart devices, phones and other things, et cetera, is that none of them exist without the layer of technology, very deep layer of data and that creates it and as we call it, a very often paradox of the cellphone in which you can't really say that technology is not empowering individual because it does, it does every single second that you actually using it. It does exactly what you want it to do in terms of finding places, you know, communicating across borders, understanding certain thing, accessing you know, things and so forth, et cetera. And it's immediate. It's right there. So it also creates this addiction that you can't really imagine being able to operate in the world without this and negotiation that the technology place in this relationship.

- MT 22:24 On the other hand it is deceiving because it's much more data actually taken, than given in this process of exchange. And we as users are very little insight into what's happening with that data. So our questions we usually aren't like Are you actually sure that the data that you generated to produce the kind of autonomy that you believe you're getting, would it recognize you? Would you be able to reconstruct yourself and the data to give away or image of yourself? Kind of a data in which would be very different to what you think, who you are, who you can be, who you want to be in the future, and so forth.
- MT 23:05 And it's very hard to tackle this paradox when you try to work in terms of promoting certain ideas about politics of data and information because it's very hard to go to kind of a crack to the first layer to get to the second one. What did we try to do is to kind of work with this paradox as a, as a fact, there's this, how we all operate and we have to take it for granted and then find a ways and kind of narratives of engaging people into looking behind the screen and looking inside the system, unpacking the boxes they're using and so forth, but not in a technical way and not in a kind of understanding how networks works or how the data is flowing, et cetera, but more about the politics of that what kind of environment and world we are creating through letting ourselves, being seduced by this you know, superficial first layer of technology. So the paradox is about this contrast between immediate empowerment and disempowerment that is embedded in the technology nowadays.
- MT 24:11 So because a tactical tech is working on politics of technology and information, we decided to try not to stick to one type of technology or one type of understanding of information and so forth. And that gives us a very different dynamic of how we conceive, define what is the spectrum of what tactical tech should be producing in the long term. I think the infrastructure we're talking about is existing on the top of how we understand technology and we want to focus on that layer of the politicization of Information and data. And I think what changed with us well understanding of how we should operate is the fact that tactical tech also started focusing more on a group of users of technology that we were not paying attention to before to. And those are just ordinary consumers of technology viewer who are just using one by funds or a social network, et cetera.
- MT 25:11 Ecause for us it become very clearly important that without addressing this larger group of people and users, we won't to be able to solve problems using the groups that we were historically working with. Because technology is not only anymore defined by certain set of

companies. It is this strange relationship between companies and users. And we can talk to companies. What we also decided we need to talk to the users nowadays and we try to find more creative, more engaging formats for getting this conversation happening. The political work you do while you're using technologies is about understanding your risks and playing with these risks. But also we encourage people to take certain risks. It's according to them what is, you know, necessary. Ut also to think differently about how one can nowadays build narratives. It's such a vast access to information, knowledge and data, but also we've such a vast accessibility of technology in terms of being able to produce that data and that evidence.

MT 26:15 You don't have to rely anymore on actors that monopolize the ability to produce information and data nowadays, we can still do that. How impactful and how effective that can be. That depends on the risks that you are willing to take and for how long we've whom, where, when you want to carry on. So tactical tech work is in a way heavily on the possibility of still defining safe spaces and secure ways of communication. So defense, if you like, is focusing a lot on a better understanding of privacy, where you may not necessarily want to defend yourself fully, but you would like to at least have moments and spaces in which you feel more private, while immersing yourself in technology. And the third aspect is also this very proactive way of maybe even acting in the total open without any protection.

MT 27:15 But with a full understanding of how we can utilize technology, data and, and evidence that would counter existing, I would say narratives or counter existing, you know, world views. Or even create information that has not been there before. So in the last few years, tactical tech also started to use different forms of trying to engage more general public users, consumers of technology through mostly exhibitions or interventions like exhibitions in the public spaces. And for us, the important factor was to present technology quantification and data. With, it's ambiguity in such a way that it would not be intimidating for people, but also that would be very tangible. So instead of talking about theory and technological aspects let the visitor, the user experience something in relation to how do you use technology on an everyday basis and try to expand it slightly, give it a different context or put it in a constellation of different things where it adds up to something else than you would experience normally in your everyday life.

MT 28:31 Often, we tried to play with this inherent ambiguity of technology that the same thing maybe both at the same time in this context may be

extremely ethical, in the other context is extremely unethical and, and kind builds space and raises questions that normally you don't ask yourself because you operate only on one side of the spectrum.

- MT 29:05 In these interventions that we do in public space the principle and motif of how we designed the first layer of them is based on the concept of a culture jamming, which is you appropriate existing language and you would just adjust a little bit of some of the elements and it changed the meaning. The spaces we create they go farther and turn into kind of more educational experience and insights.
- MT 29:31 So they last longer. They propose more narratives if you like, inside the concept. So yes, at the phase of what we propose it is utilizing the beautiful idea of cultural jamming. But then the proposition is much deeper and much more expanded than the classical culture jamming is because we do not pretend to be something else. We don't try to speak the other language we have different content. It's actually the opposite. We are using the formal appearance that unfortunately or fortunately, a lot of the spaces in which we buy and interactive technology look much better than contemporary art galleries and they have much more audience. So that's why we use this kind of environment for getting people inside because for the user it's very clear what you can do there. What is it for, how does it work, what behavior is allowed, et cetera. And it's easier for us to take it step farther. We could not do that in, for example, art spaces. Because there's an embedded distance between the visitor and the content that is in this space.
- MT 30:51 What are the restricting factors in running organization of the type of tactical tech? That's a question that we are very often actually discussing within the board and the team of the organization. And because there's a number of them. First one is the scale. Do you want to endlessly grow and would the grow actually guarantee being more effective and actually have more efficacy and so forth? And we don't believe that's the case. I think it will be for us more important what we do is not only to share with our partners content that we produce and know-how knowledge and kind of cross pollinated different ideas about how you work with technology and information, but also promote, have certain culture and style of working as an organization. I think so the restriction in way is that we don't want to grow.
- MT 31:41 We don't see growth actually to be beneficial for what is important for the organization. We do remain flexible and adaptable bigger you grow it and slowly become the other benefits of being bigger. So it's, so it's

important to place yourself in a network of different actors of different sizes, different speeds of operation and so forth. But you would like to see more, I would say, organizations like us that can survive the speed of development of the environment in which we are operating. There's also internally it is extremely hard to sustain motivation. It's actually really hard work. Often it's quite boring when you produce different kinds of content and make sure that people are healthy and you know, and you'll take care of the wellness. It's not easy.

MT 32:44 And the work we do is often extremely stressful. The work you do with our partners is extremely demanding emotionally and often also physically when you run trainings in different places, then you often deal with people who were slaves who were destroyed or at a time of being destroyed in different ways. That creates a lot of responsibility and in some cases even trauma, there's a high risk of operating in this environment. So I think it's very important to understand that the context of our work is sometimes a lot of fun, but very often is, is quite fragile. And very often very dramatic as well. So on the one hand you want people to think about the work we do is just a work. And on the other hand, you can't really do that because it takes more than only time in front of the computer and you know, eight hours a day.

MT 33:42 And it's important for us that it is there, this personal connection, understanding where we are coming from, how they operate, what is the driving force behind why they want to be political about certain things is very significant for us. So maintain the team internally in a healthy environment. It's very challenging. And also when you run an organization like this, there's possibility for a sustainable way of doing that. It's also sometimes draining.

MT 34:19 The question about how long we think tactical tech should run for is as long as it is relevant and it can run with me or other funders or without. We created a robust structure right now that tactical tech is an institution that can be filled with different kinds of people and still run for quite some time, but it's also in this DNA is that it should extinct whenever the environment in which it operates, it does not exist anymore.

MT 34:54 So the question if we should be around next 10 years or not, it depends on what's going on around tactical tech. Personally I don't think that organizations should last forever and it's important that they change more or they disappear. In the sector we operate is interesting to see that you don't see an emergence and you know situations in which multiple organizations treat one entity together and satirize. It's, it's not very

common. It's common in other sectors. And I would like to see that, for example, the question of success in, in this way of operating is very interesting always for us because the context of our work is either social, political or cultural change and this changes and they do take decades or generations. This is not like a, they were tactical to coming in here and you're going to change the world and we did it you know, in a fortnight you like.

MT 35:55 So we have to look at the success in a very different kind of a spectrum, in a time-space. So sometimes success for us would be to be able to get together certain group of people and have a discussion about certain topic that have not happened before and we may not be able to produce anything. But the fact that we are able to have the discussion is already extremely successful and that may not see the public eye. In other cases, it's very important for us to actually definitely produce something that summarize this set of different conversation discussions, production and so forth. And see that it is uptaken, so people are using it. Then you can look at numbers, you can look at places where it used and the communicative output that you produced based on that usage.

MT 36:37 The other level of success is to see the broader understanding of politics of data, information and technology among the sector of actors for whom initially that was not an issue. And that's extremely hard to measure as well. And that comes to conversations to evaluations we do to long term observation where we look at the, the first wave of using something, then we look at it six months later, then you look at it two years later. We've done a lot of kinds of studies and the third I think what is important in measuring your success is to be extremely self critical. I should be able to not only to get easy satisfaction from the fact, okay, we organized X number of trainings, but do we actually know if they work?

MT 37:29 So we often questioned ourselves in other way where we hire external experts we send them into the field and ask them to see if our assumptions and ideas about how things being used actually are effective. Is our training actually training anybody, does the training stick to people longer than a few days, et cetera and so forth. And we also are known for producing reports based on that research that our self critique, criticizing our own work if you like. So if you're able to do that, that also kind of, that's for me, a success for the organization. So this is like a much larger spectrum of how you define what a success is. I think there's a lot of pressure to justify a success in numerical ways, kind of quantify your success by a number of people, a number of books produced, number of trainings and et cetera. And we can do that. Luckily

we actually are pretty good at it, but for us that's not the kind of the reason and the way of measuring success of our work. The, the reason for essays, what would stay after after we disappear.