**Public Sector Future podcast – Future of Infrastructure**

**Episode 2 –** Public Interest Technology: This is Our Work

**Jeremy Goldberg [host]**

**Darren Walker / Ford Foundation [guest]**

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Welcome to the *Future of Infrastructure*, a part of Microsoft’s Public Sector Future series. I’m Jeremy Goldberg, Worldwide Director of Critical Infrastructure at Microsoft. And I’m on a journey to learn more about how infrastructure is being built around the world by talking with public servants, philanthropists, artists and place-makers who have spent their lives working in the public interest. This is a series to help us build things and plan for the future while

Today, it’s an honor to welcome Darren Walker, President of the Ford Foundation, who joins me to talk about a crucial topic to the future of infrastructure and government, public interest technology.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** To start off, Darren, would just really love for you to introduce yourself, talk a bit about the mission of Ford Foundation, and then we’ll dive into a couple of the topics that I know that are very important to you around public interest technology.

**DARREN WALKER:** Well, thank you, Jeremy. It’s a great honor to be with you and to talk about something I’m passionate about, the Ford Foundation and technology.

The Ford Foundation was founded by Henry Ford and his son Edsel Ford in 1936 in Detroit. We were a small family foundation until the untimely death of Edsel Ford in 1943, at which time the Ford Foundation was the beneficiary of a substantial part of his estate, which today has evolved into about an $18 billion asset foundation. We are independent of the Ford family and the Ford Motor Company, although Henry Ford III is on our board.

We today are focused as a social justice philanthropy on the global threat of inequality, because our mission in part is to promote and protect democratic institutions in the United States and around the world, and we believe inequality is a threat to our democracy.

And therefore we are working to address the drivers of that inequality, the ways in which our economic system produces too little prosperity for too few of us, how to have an economy that produces more shared prosperity, how do we have a political system that is responsive to the needs of the broad-based citizenry, how do we ensure that art and culture plays a role in American life and in life around the world, and of course technology, which is at the center of the Ford Foundation’s work today.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So how did you get into philanthropy and what was there – was there a defining moment for you that led to this career path and I guess we call it profession?

**DARREN WALKER:** Well, I actually never wanted a career in philanthropy. I in 2000 was leading a nonprofit organization in Harlem. I worked in a small basement office on 138th Street at the Abyssinian Baptist Church and we were developing housing, job creation, managing a Head Start program and the like.

And my phone rang and it was someone who said, “I gave your name to the president of the Ford Foundation,” who said, “I gave your name to the president of the Rockefeller Foundation.” (Laughter.) And thus began my journey. I found myself a few weeks later in this office and a few months later, I was hired.

And my experience in philanthropy was really I think informed by what I saw as a grantee, a fundraiser running a nonprofit, which often didn’t reflect favorability on philanthropy. It was bureaucratic, very opaque. People weren’t always transparent and forthcoming, and it was hard to understand what foundations were really funding. So I’ve internalized a lot of those experiences now that I’m on the other side.

But I was very lucky, because going to the Rockefeller Foundation in 2000 was a really exciting moment and I got to do all sort of things. But I wanted to come into philanthropy not because I wanted a career in philanthropy, but because I wanted to do the kind of work I was doing in Harlem on a much larger scale. And what philanthropy provided was a platform for broader impact and a deeper network of colleagues doing this kind of work in the United States and around the world.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s a perfect segue into something I read recently that you wrote with Chuck Robbins in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. And I’m going to read this quote because it really stuck out to me. So I’m going to read it word for word.

And you wrote, “As leaders in philanthropy and technology, we see immense promise of a tech-enabled future when technology is designed with the needs of the public in mind. Yet where there should be bridges, we recognize a persistent gap. Even now, the people who could most benefit from learning from one another are rarely in the same rooms or virtual spaces, from scientists to community organizers, developers, to social theorists.”

Extremely powerful and I’d love to talk more about how we can build those bridges, how the work that you’re doing is building those bridges globally, and how we can ensure that when technology is designed with the public in mind, with people, you know, in mind, that it’s truly engaging with that public.

So how do we go about and how does Ford go about building more bridges with public interest tech to enable those organizations to get those projects done and set them up for the long term?

**DARREN WALKER:** Well, let’s first talk about the public interest and technology because the public interest in technology has yet to be fully defined by the public. The public interest has for the most part been defined by the private sector, and the private sector has determined what space belongs to the public and what space belongs to the private sector.

My belief is that – and I think our belief here at the Ford Foundation is rooted in our history of support for the then new emerging field of public interest law. If we go back to the 1960s, there was no such thing as public interest law. Today, we take that for granted. I was trained as a lawyer. There is a public interest clinic that you must take in order to graduate. It is a part of legal training. When you go to a law firm, you do pro bono work on behalf of clients who often cannot afford, and the – the skills and talent that you bring as an attorney adds value to helping advance their lives and livelihoods.

We need a public interest technology movement, a movement that is based on the idea that people who are trained in computer science, computation on that – computational analysis, engineering, that these are the skills for the future. Just as we thought about legal training and lawyering in the 1960s, today it – it will be technology and those trained technologists who will significantly shape our future.

And to the degree that those technologists understand how they can work towards the public’s benefit, how they can work in the public interest, our society, our democracy will be better off, but they won’t learn that if what they are trained to be is a traditional CS major or a traditional engineer who goes to Google or Apple.

Now, we love the idea of engineers going to Google and Apple, just as we love the idea of young lawyers going to Cravath, Swaine, and Moore or Davis Polk, but there needs to be some mechanism for those who would choose not to go to those law firms or those technology firms, to ask themselves, how can I take this skill, this training, and advance some public interest objective.

So, the way we see that happening is by first addressing the curricula, the actual training of these technologists, and I think that’s a critical area for exploration and it’s rich, as we have learned, and very complicated to – I think to pierce the veil of an educational system, a training and curricula that is designed to in some ways narrow one’s – one’s expertise in order to go deep.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** That’s right.

**DARREN WALKER:** And I think for engineers and CS majors especially, the exposure to other disciplines, the humanities, the liberal arts, et cetera is very, very constrained by the need to take all of the engineering and all of the computer science courses.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** You’re right and, you know, you – you mentioned already, and I’ve heard this a few times as well around pro bono legal services, and it’s often referenced as some of the most creative, but most impactful types of partnerships.

In some cases, technology firms or professional services firms, you know, the talent that exists in those organizations want to give back, want to improve their skills, want to feel that they can apply their skills in new ways by doing well.

And the points you hit around curriculum development have as much to do, I think, as about the lexicon and the culture and shifting the mindset, right, which is part of what we’d like to see more of from our technologists and engineers is to say, take a step outside of your comfort zone, broaden that view, as you pointed out, from sometimes what is a pretty narrow way of looking at solving a problem, and ask those questions, but the first step is taking a step outside and actually talking with the people about what the real problems and challenges are.

**DARREN WALKER:** And understanding, and I think this is one challenge for the field of technology and the training. I had a very well-known technology CEO, we were on a panel, and he said as the moderator was talking about a major social challenge the Ford Foundation was working on, his response to the moderator was, “Well, this problem could be solved if you put a few engineers in a conference room.”

My response was, yes, and if they were joined by a political scientist, a poet, a dancer, et cetera, because four engineers in a room can’t solve that problem.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Agreed.

**DARREN WALKER:** The problem, though, is that often engineers are trained to believe they can, and – and – or they attempt to, because the idea is – because we’ve so valorized and deified the idea of being an engineer, the way we used to with lawyers in the 1960s.

To be an engineer today is akin to being a lawyer in the ‘60s. You – you know that your training has giving you an advantage in this new world, and – and – and yet that training, the traditional training that a lawyer would have received did not prepare that lawyer to work in the public interest, didn’t prepare that lawyer to be an environmental lawyer or to be a civil rights lawyer. It prepared them to be a more traditional corporate, maybe a government lawyer.

But the idea of public interest we need in the technology world, we need for those technologists to be trained that way and to understand that they are only part of the solution, and that without these other disciplines, and also without some training themselves in other disciplines, they won’t be prepared to actually realize the potential for technology to help society.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** It sounds like, so you helped us to define, you know, pub – the public interest and by inviting more people to the table that represent and reflect a broad part of society, right, you talked about artists, we talk about neighborhoods, people, community, engineers, you know, inviting people to be a part of the solution, right, the ideas, the ideation, that’s part of how we prepare, I believe, for the long-term operational sustainability of – of the challenges. Would you agree?

**DARREN WALKER:** Indeed. Indeed. And we should really talk, Jeremy, about the private sector’s role here because when you reference so many talented people in these companies who want to give back, the companies have to provide pathways, and that doesn’t exist at scale.

So if you are a bright, young CS student, your options for internships, summer jobs, opportunities for employment post-graduation are pretty limited to technology companies. Why couldn’t we have internships and pathways to organizations like the Environmental Defense Fund or Planned Parenthood or the ACLU or the Federalist Society or any other host of nonprofit, civil society organizations working in the

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** You have no examples that you could think of?

**DARREN WALKER:** There are – there are examples, and I don’t want to sound self-serving, there are examples that we are working on with some technology companies that I think will be forthcoming in the next summer and in the next sort of hiring season. And there are policies that companies have taken to allow for what we would call pro bono, right, to allow for volunteer work at nonprofit or civil society or, of course, government.

And this is what’s so critical here and I appreciate that a significant part of your audience are people who are working in the public sector, because they understand what the public interest is. They understand that to be in the public arena, to be in public service is a noble calling, that it is among the highest forms of patriotism and love of country and service to democracy.

And yet they don’t have all the skills and talents they need as we think about how we make our democracy successful in the future. And part of that is because technology has not been central to functioning government.

Now, that’s not to say that we haven’t had technology programs, that we haven’t had software and we haven’t --

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** There are some examples, right.

**DARREN WALKER:** Of course. And there are examples in recent years, certainly from the Obama administration going forward, of real innovation and beginnings of a transformation that could really, if significant investment were forthcoming, could really transform the effectiveness and impact of government.

But we’ve got to support the public sector in making the investment and making the case that investment needs to be made in technology and in bringing in talent from industry, talent from CS graduating programs, et cetera, because until we’re able to bring that talent into government, until we’re able to have many, many PhDs in computer science working on the Hill, let’s talk about that.

The number of PhDs in computer science working on Capitol Hill you can literally count on two hands. In any other sphere of American life, some of the most talented people in large numbers are working on Capitol Hill, working to support members of Congress, the Senate in their daily work, whether it be on the environment or human rights or financial services or consumer issues, et cetera. We’ve got great experts with PhDs, but we don’t have in large numbers a corollary, which is what we desperately need.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So, Darren, one of the programs that I’m interested to learn more about and our audience would love to hear more about is the Public Interest Technology University program. Can you share a bit about that?

**DARREN WALKER:** Sure. The Public Interest Technology University Network emerged from some early investments we made at universities working on this emerging field of public interest technology at MIT, Stanford, Howard University, University of Texas, University of Virginia, where their engineering and computer science programs were experimenting with – with interdisciplinary education, curricula, with internships for students to go to public interest organizations.

And from the beginning of – the beginnings really were about a dozen universities. We’re now over 50 universities nationally, who have committed to, on their campuses, addressing the issues of curricula, of training for future technologists, of problem-solving large and small issues in their own communities, and it’s really been the basis for our conviction that universities and training of technologists remains the most important transformation we can invest in, because if we can unlock the – the ways in which young people learn, are introduced to the fields of engineering, computing, technology generally, we can unlock solutions for all sorts of challenges in the world.

And so, we’re very excited that we’ve crossed the 50th university and each of them is part of this network that meets twice a year and they address everything from fundraising to difficult and recalcitrant deans who don’t want to cooperate -- (laughter) – and – and – and what are the best practices and what are the incentives you can put in place – and – and how do you have the breakthroughs that really allow for big problem-solving.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Do we see this – you mentioned 50 universities. Is this a model that may be taken globally?

**DARREN WALKER:** Well, there’s no doubt that there are systems, for example the India system of higher education, the IITs, for example, would be a great system to partner with. And – and so there’s no hesitation on our part – part except the need for more investment. We’ve got to have donors see that if you are working on these issues, whether it be public health, food security, justice, education, that training technologists in the public interest will help advance your mission, will get you faster and quicker to solutions.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** You mentioned the Obama years and how a lot of the – that administration propelled a lot of the kind of dynamic way of technologists coming into federal government, also state and local governments, and led to a proliferation of groups like Codee for America, a variety of these organizations.

Now, I’ve also been around public service during those years, and one of the things that I’d heard is, you know, these partnerships or this external approach to the partnerships that brings in outsiders, they’re often criticized, right? The culture with inside of the government is a little resistant. There are those that are part of the camp that are into it, want it, see the value, and over the years there’s been demonstrated outcomes and impacts, but there are those that still aren’t believers, that don’t believe, Darren, like what you and I agree on here is that these are important models for the public interest. So how do we best overcome that resistance to design and build that capacity, we think, inside of the government to be open and to embrace that?

**DARREN WALKER:** This is our work. This is the mission that we must rise to because as long as this idea of public interest technology means bringing in a group of outside private sector technologists to sort of save the day because the public sector can’t do it, we’re doomed. So we have to find a way to disrupt the – the entrenched systems and structures that prevent innovation.

And I think, as you rightly say, Jeremy, during the Obama years because there was such strong leadership, a strong chief technology officer in the White House, we saw really monumental change. And there was no doubt, as in any institution that has a legacy, there was resistance, but you can overcome that resistance by demonstrating impact and by creating incentives that make the case for and – and ultimately make it much easier to change the internal.

For example, in the 1960s, the Justice Department did not have a large number of civil rights attorneys. But the Justice Department understood ultimately those inside the Justice Department, that they needed these new skills and talents. There was not a cadre of environmental lawyers in government.

And it took some wrangling to make the adjustments, but today, the best and the brightest go into the Justice Department. There is no more talented sort of repository of – of – of great lawyering than the United States Justice Department, because it has attracted lawyers who want to work in the public interest and they might work for a large law firm for a period of time, but they go to the Justice Department to prosecute, to work on civil rights or just civil cases on behalf of the people.

And I think it’s quite possible to imagine how technologists can be embedded in and can organically be a part of government and that it is not seen as an appendage of people who want to volunteer a period of time and then get back to being rich.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So I have one final question. Then, you know, maybe it’s a bit selfish of me, but I rely on you for my summer reading usually. And so, you know, I’m looking at, and I know our audience is very interested to hear from you on, you know, what are some of the things that you’ve read recently, something you’re watching that has inspired you to think differently about a topic or a theme or an issue that’s current, and an infrastructure or a technology today.

**DARREN WALKER:** Well, on infrastructure and technology I’m not sure, because I read so much on current events, especially around issues of inequality and – and so, I will say that a book that I’ve read that expanded my view of – of a problem was Isabel Wilkerson’s Caste because she took what I perceive to be a U.S. challenge of a racial history that we must come to grips with and she put it in a global context and connected the threads of data and knowledge and research and culture that helped me as a reader to see that this is a much larger systemic challenge than simply one of racism in the United States.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Great. Well, Darren, thank you for having me here today and for this discussion. Always insightful. Always to the point. Always transparent. And I know our audience will enjoy not only listening, learning, but of course following the continued work that you all are doing through programs like PIT and all the other global work that the Ford Foundation does around social justice. So thank you for joining us today.

**DARREN WALKER:** Thank you for having me, Jeremy.

[Music]

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Thanks for listening to this episode and being a part of the Future of Infrastructure, and for joining me on this journey to meet and learn from the people improving life in their communities. If you liked today’s episode and want to help other people find it, please take a moment to share, rate and review the show. To learn more, visit us at **wwps.microsoft.com**, or find me on LinkedIn and Twitter at **JeremyMGoldberg**.

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