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CTRL+CLICK CAST #117

Democratizing Tech with Fabian Elliott

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Preview: A lot of this research, to be honest, a lot of researchers that are doing this work, they're not necessarily from an under-represented community or from the Black community. So that's why like we take a lot of pride in us being able to do our own research and us being able to tell our own story and us being able to scrutinize and be like, "Hold on, this doesn't seem right." And we dig deeper. And so that's really important because who controls the narrative can not only influence thinking, but influence action and behavior on where resources show up.

[Music]

Lea Alcantara: From [Bright Umbrella](#), this is CTRL+CLICK CAST! We inspect the web for you! Today, Fabian Elliot joins the show to discuss how we can democratize tech. I'm your host, Lea Alcantara, and I'm joined by my fab co-host:

Emily Lewis: Emily Lewis!

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Emily Lewis: A few episodes back, we talked with Tim Bardlavens about the diversity challenges in the design industry, and all the problems and potential solutions seem to point to access; lack of access to resources, lack of access to opportunity. Tim even mentioned lack of access to awareness, like access to knowing that design is even a profession in the first place.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: You know, our listeners know how important accessibility is to us because we've always talked about it, but I think our conversation with Tim was the first time I realized how broad an issue accessibility really is. It's so much larger a discussion than we've had on the show, which is really focused on access for people of different *abilities*. So joining us to keep this broader discussion of access going is CEO of [Black Tech Mecca](#), Fabian Elliot. Black Tech Mecca is directly addressing this idea of access in technology by helping cities increase Black participation in the tech sector through research, education and advocacy.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: BTM has developed a proprietary "Black Tech Ecosystem" City Assessment Framework and recently completed a report on the City of Chicago, which was sponsored by Google and NBC-Comcast and CompTIA. Welcome to the show, Fabian!

Fabian Elliot: Hello, hello. It's so great to be here!



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Lea Alcantara: Thank you. So can you tell our listeners a bit more about yourself?

Fabian Elliot: Yeah, absolutely. So I'm Fabian Elliot, CEO of Black Tech Mecca. I'm originally from North Carolina, although we're based in Chicago, and what actually kind of led to the work we're doing at Black Tech Mecca and what led to me coming to Chicago is my own entry into the tech field. I had interned with Google in the Atlanta office and received a full time opportunity upon graduation that brought me to Chicago about six years ago, and I ended up getting heavily involved internally with different diversity, inclusion and equity initiatives, and I saw an opportunity to do more externally in the community, and that's really what led to Black Tech Mecca and the work that we're doing now.

Emily Lewis: How did you even get interested and involved in tech in the first place? Was it something in high school or college?

Fabian Elliot: Yeah, I guess it was actually pretty funny because growing up, I had no interest in technology.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: I won't refer this thing from a tech wiz kid, like my parents were going to bring home a family computer that broke and I magically fixed it, but like that's not my story at all. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]



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Fabian Elliot: Actually, as a kid, I wanted to be... a lot of kids, I wanted to be... a lot of boys especially, I wanted to be a professional football player.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: So that was like my dream job, and I was pretty big in the sports just through high school, but then I actually had a career-ending shoulder injury that ended up being a blessing in disguise because I was then introduced to the field of marketing.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: And through a high school organization called [DECA](#) and that's what I ended up studying in college, and how technology came into play is the intersection between marketing and technology, so advertising technology.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: And so I love marketing, I love advertising, and when I saw the intersection or learned about the intersection, that's what introduced me to technology. As I like to say, it was almost my gateway drug.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.



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Fabian Elliot: And after I realized how technology could be leveraged for anything you were passionate about or anything you wanted to change in the world, I was like, “Okay, I got to get in on this.”

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: Yeah. You know, that sounds familiar to me in some ways because some of my first jobs were in marketing and the first job that led me into the web industry was a marketing position and they just happened to have a website and you can teach yourself that stuff online, and so I tried it, but it was that sort of instant feeling of, “Wow, I’m reaching so many more people than I can with this newsletter that we send out every Friday that’s on paper.” And it’s just kind of amazing that that marketing job is if I hadn’t had that, I’m not sure I would be where I am today. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: You know what, though, this like both your stories, and this even reminds me of what Tim mentioned in our last talk about diversity in design was that no one considered tech or even design as a career option early in their life.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Which kind of tells me that tech does a bad job in explaining to people its positive impact in society.

Emily Lewis: And the opportunity.

Fabian Elliot: I 100% agree, because I was exposed to technology. I was exposed to STEM.

Lea Alcantara: Sure.



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Fabian Elliot: I participated in – it’s called a Math and Science Enrichment Network Program from 6th grade to 12th grade where basically we did like Mathlete competitions where you’d go so geeky.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Fabian Elliot: But you’d go like you would have a team and you all would take a math test and then compete against other people, and then like whoever had the highest average score, you could win and get a medallion or something like that.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Fabian Elliot: But like you said though, I like math and I enjoyed those things, but I saw no practical application like in it.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: There’s no connection to what I was passionate about or what else I was interested in, and so that’s one of the things I always advocate for and I think what’s really important is that instead of just introducing technology as this foreign object and trying to force feed it down people’s throats, I think you have to find out what’s interesting or what their passionate about and help them be able to connect the dots.



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Emily Lewis: So I feel like that's a good segue to start talking about your mission at Black Tech Mecca with democratizing tech. Can you kind of explain what that means? I feel like it kind of comes from what you just started talking about.

Fabian Elliot: Absolutely, yes. So democratizing tech, what I like about just the phrase in general is it's holistic, because a lot of times when we talk about technology and the tech sector and equity and diversity and inclusion, it seems to get stuck at that access conversation, you know?

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: It seems to get stuck at, "Hey, you know, let's just get a computer in front of underprivileged child or hey, let's just get Wi-Fi into this neighborhood." And it doesn't go any further beyond that from access to actually participating in curating in the tech sector. It's actually innovating and leading disruptive companies in the tech sector, and so when we talk about democratizing tech for the Black community, it's really looking at how can we create spaces and environments and communities in cities where the Black community can fully participate in the tech sector and contribute to innovations and be able to help drive the overall tech sector forward and to be able to realize your full potential in tech and innovation.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: And that ties in I guess on some levels to the access, but it goes further and is that where that kind of finding out what people care about and making technology relevant to what they care about. Is that part of this?

Fabian Elliot: You know, absolutely. So the thing is, like it's a very like intricate type of situation with layers because when we're talking about the interest piece and connecting with the passion, that's



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where, okay, once you've even successfully done that, someone is interested in it and they have an idea they're pursuing, do they have access to the resources they need to bring that idea to life?

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: Do they have the mentorship? Do they have the funding? Do they have all of the different things that it takes to bring an idea to life? So it's definitely a part of it, but it's just looking at the full spectrum of engagement and activity.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: And that's incredibly important part, but it's just one portion of the spectrum.

Emily Lewis: So let's talk a little bit about that spectrum and all the different I guess points on that spectrum, BTM is trying to hit what your goals are and how you're trying to do that.

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Fabian Elliot: You know, for sure. So how we've kind of look at things when we're talking about a Black Tech Ecosystem is mainly we look at three different tracks, so academic, corporate and entrepreneurship, and each one of those track is within the tech sector and the different ways that someone can participate in each. So for example, for academic, looking at, okay, what does it look like to be K-to-12 student all the way up to, say, a dean of a computer science program, like that full spectrum of engagement?

Emily Lewis: Right.



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Fabian Elliot: On the corporate side, what does it look like to be an intern that's wet behind the ears all the way up to sitting in the C-Suite?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: And then the same thing for entrepreneurship, so it would be launching your very first startup to being a serial entrepreneur and investor, and so what we're really looking at is evaluating are there resources in place and how are environments and cities and communities are set up to facilitate the Black community's movement through these tracks.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: So whether it's excelling or rising within one particular track or transferring between tracks, so going from getting training to then working on a company or going for working at a company to starting your own company.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: So that is essentially the movements that we're looking to facilitate, and our assessment framework assesses the state or the health of an ecosystem to facilitate that movement.

Lea Alcantara: So all of us here talking on the show understand the value of improving diversity and tech, but one of the things that BTM highlights is the economic potential for this type of advocacy for these multiple streams. Why don't you spell it out in frank phrases to our listeners exactly what positive impact your movement is accomplishing?



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Fabian Elliot: Yeah, so it's absolutely incredible, and that's what given me the confidence and the sustained just motivation and passion around pushing specifically on technology.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: Because I believe that technology can be a critical catalyst for a lot of the other issues and challenges that face the Black community, and whether it's economic or social, the power of technology, as we mentioned it earlier, is that all the most incredible tech innovators or tech companies, they just found a way to leverage technology as a tool to solve a problem that they care about.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: And so that's what I think is really interesting when we get to the as you are able to democratize tech and build this stronger tech ecosystems, that will leverage, that will empower the Black community in this case to be able to leverage technology to solve social challenges.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: So for example, in Chicago, it's not a secret, some of the crime issues or the shooting issues we have in the south and west side, so imagine if with greater democratization of tech, people in those communities can then wield technology to solve their own problems and not need the outside help.



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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: On the economic empowerment side, what we found in our research specifically for Chicago is that when you look at medium income of Black tech professionals against the overall just general medium income of the Black community, it's literally double.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: It's so like 2X. So we're talking about mid-60K compared to mid-30K, you know?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: That's eye popping on its own to just think about, "Okay, yeah, that's double." But when you think about what that really means and think about if your household income just happen to double tomorrow, how would that change things for you?

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: How would that change things for your family? And how could it even transform the trajectory of your entire lineage with being able to make that happen?



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Emily Lewis: Yeah. And even changing a community, your neighbors or other extended family members seeing what you've been able to achieve for yourself and your family and that they could do the same because there are supporting programs or internships or whatever to allow you to have access to build that skill set.

Fabian Elliot: Absolutely. And the thing I think is kind of funny or ironic is that we have these systems in place and these structures in place for a lot of other things, like I recall, I mentioned I wanted to be a football player when I was growing up and I didn't have to think twice growing up in North Carolina about like the system.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: Like I started playing junior pee wee at 9 years old, and then there was a system and a team for me to go to the pee wee league and then the midget league and then to go play in high school.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Fabian Elliot: Like they have a path and trajectory set up for you to do these things. There are camps. There are all these things like if you're good enough and you follow the path, you'll go to college and play or maybe you can go to NFL. A lot of my friends or some of my friends ended up going to the NFL, but that's not the case, you don't see that same type of rigor for things that are even more important than athletics.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]



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Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, I even think about my own childhood, and I feel like I was fortunate to grow up in the DC area which just has a lot more access to kind of everything, but even then I took like a one-week computer camp class and then that was it. There was nothing else for me to go take. There just happened to be a camp that taught something about computer, but that was it. [Laughs]

Fabian Elliot: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: There was nowhere else to go.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, there was no next step and there was no connecting the dots as to, well, what can this knowledge do for you.

Fabian Elliot: Yes,

Emily Lewis: Exactly.

Lea Alcantara: Or your community, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: Yeah, exactly.

Lea Alcantara: So you mentioned research that Black Tech Mecca does, and from what I read, data is a major part of your work. So why don't you talk a bit about that? What do you measure?

Fabian Elliot: Yeah.



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Lea Alcantara: What's your process/analysis?

Fabian Elliot: Yeah. So data is so absolutely critical to our work because if you notice, a lot of the diversity and inclusion in tech conversations now, it's hyper focused on the tech giants.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: So what are Google's diversity numbers? What are Facebook's diversity numbers? Congressmen and congresswomen are flying out to Silicon Valley to pound the table, but when you really look at the reality of the situation or like the biggest myth is that the people that go to these companies, they come from cities and communities, you know?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: Every human being grows up in a household that's part of a neighborhood, that's part of the community, that's part of a greater city, but the thing is no one can tell you diversity numbers or measurements for cities and communities.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Fabian Elliot: No one is talking about that. No one is looking at it, and so it's kind of like you are beating a dead horse that like though you're not going to see a big company or a tech giant diversity numbers change unless there's a fundamental change at the community and city level.



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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: And how I kind of stumbled upon this was prior to launching Black Tech Mecca, like I mentioned, I was pretty involved internally at Google and whatever it would look like was I led Google's Black employee group as a global culture.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: So pretty much, I was responsible for all the Black employees in the company and making sure they were getting the support they needed, and we had a lot of success leveraging data-driven strategies.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: So when we kind of got the data we needed from the company, we started collecting our own data from Black employees.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: And we took those insights and we're able to create better targeted programming, and so seeing the success that we had in the company and then starting to see some of the challenges in the community, I was like, "I guess someone has to be doing this in the community."



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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: But when I started asking questions, simple questions like, “Hey, how is the Black tech community doing in Chicago?” No one could answer.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: “Hey, is the Black tech community better off now than it was ten years ago or twenty years ago?” No one could answer it, and so that’s when like the lightning bulb moment happened on, “Okay, it’s not going to be easy, but maybe it’s crazy enough to try and it could have a good impact to see what we could do,” and so last year, we hired a team from the University of Illinois, Chicago, and some of the sponsors you mentioned, and we partnered with the city to tackle this, and what it really looked like was, first, defining what a Black tech ecosystem is, identifying what are the important indicators to measure the health of one, and then using that to then assess and grow and have a benchmark that you could then track progress against.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: And so for us, how the framework works is originally in our original framework, there were thirteen indicators such as connectivity, mobility, fluidity, mentorship; these different things. However, we’re going to be introducing a new framework. Man, I guess this is the first time I’m talking about this publicly, but since we hired a new research director, we’re going to be introducing a new framework that essentially is for our three tracks — academic, corporate and entrepreneurship



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— it has indicators and metrics that are tied to each one of those and it allows us to be able to then collect data for those indicators and then score and assess how a city is doing holistically.

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Emily Lewis: And I'm curious, really I'm not familiar with the process of gathering data on a citywide level. Is that surveys? Is that people knocking on doors? Like what does that look like when you're talking about something that big? Chicago is huge.

Fabian Elliot: Yeah. So for our first round of research we did last year, we decided to make our first phase just focus on secondary data.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: So we looked at the existing data sources out there that we just stitch together to just get some sort of view, and so that's looking at like census, workforce data, looking at Chicago public schools' data, computer science classes, and things of that nature. So just tapping into existing data set, but unfortunately, there are a lot of indicators that we need. We found like data deserts. So for example, for entrepreneurship, no one on the planet or no one in the United States could tell you how many Black tech entrepreneurs there are in a given city.

Emily Lewis: Huh.

Fabian Elliot: It is not a data set out there that does that.

Lea Alcantara: Hmm.



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Fabian Elliot: And so that's one of the items that we're going to have to tackle now moving forward to collect their own data. So it will be a mixture of maybe surveys, maybe focus groups, and community partnerships to see what data they have.

Emily Lewis: Fascinating. You know, I said in your intro that you had just completed a report for Chicago. Are you able to share any of the findings that you have, like I guess that report will serve as the basis that future reports are measured against.

Fabian Elliot: Yeah. So some of the interesting findings just based on the secondary data that was available were, one, the size of the Black tech workforce in Chicago and comparing it to twelve other cities. So in Chicago, it was about 40,000 Black community members working in the tech sector, and at first, I didn't know how many it would be, but that seemed like a large number, and it was more than I thought it would be.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: But while it was good news that that was a sizable number, that 40,000 was about 9% of the overall tech workforce, and that was higher than I would thought it would be, too, but the catch is that, and I'm guilty of this, too, when we think about the tech sector, a lot of times now, it's really easy to only view a sliver of it or only consider a sliver of it to be tech.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: So like the sexy stuff, so you know, engineers and software developers and people working at the hottest consumer tech companies and things of that nature.

Emily Lewis: Right.



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Fabian Elliot: But when you look at, and we used World Business Chicago's, they're the economic development arm for the city, we used their industry and occupation codes that they consider to be in the tech sector.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Fabian Elliot: And that's a lot broader than most people think, like the person that comes in installs your AT&T cable, they're a tech person,

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: You know, they're in a tech occupation.

Emily Lewis: Oh.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: And so it's broader than most people think, and so as we dug more into that 40,000, unfortunately, the Black community, we were heavily skewed into some of the lower paying tech jobs.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: So like we were over represented as a cable installer, but really under represented, let's say, as a software developer.



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Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: And so as we dug into those numbers, that was a bit alarming as well as when you started looking at leadership, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: Not many of us were leading a company or in the C-Suite or even manager level, so those were some of the interesting insights on that front.

Lea Alcantara: You know what this reminds me of is the manipulation of data whenever it comes to diversity, especially with large tech companies, you know?

Fabian Elliot: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: For example, like Amazon as a tech company, they can mention, “Oh, we have a really diverse workforce.” But how many of that is, as you mentioned, are the high paid software developers and how much of that are the warehouse workers working for minimum wage?

Fabian Elliot: Right.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So they could technically say, “Well, we have a sizable minority workforce here,” but are you counting every single person in this multinational organization? Right?



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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: Yeah. So I mean, that's absolutely true, and that's where like, yeah, companies like Amazon and Apple because they have retail presence, they can fudge a bit and that's why like one of the core things of what we're doing is, a lot of this research, to be honest, and a lot of researchers that are doing this work, they're not necessarily from an under-represented community or from the Black community.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: So that's why like we take a lot of pride in us being able to do our own research and us being able to tell our own story and us being able to scrutinize and be like, "Hold on, this doesn't seem right."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: And we dig deeper.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: And so that's really important because who controls the narrative can not only influence thinking, but influence action and behavior on where resources show up.



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Emily Lewis: Yeah. As disappointing as the statistics may end up being, I think it's crucial that you are starting to identify these things more specifically and narrowly because, like you said, if there's no data, how can anyone assess whether things are improving or worsening or how to improve or whatever. You need to start somewhere.

Fabian Elliot: You know, absolutely, and like I'll share something personally, like my work, the work that I do at Black Tech Mecca, it's actually inspired by the past, and so it was from me like I don't know if you all ever arrived at a certain point, but you can probably understand, but when you start to look around at what's going on in the world, you can't help but ask like how did we get here, like why are things the way they are.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: And history and like learning more about our country's history, global history, African history, Black history, inspired me to want to do something about the future, and the thing that was most frustrating is, as I look back in the history books, I saw a repetition of we're still talking about the same issues and the same challenges, at least for the Black community, that people have been talking about for a hundred years.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: Like for example, one of the books that was really eye opening for me and set me on this course was a book called [*The Mis-Education of the Negro*](#) by Carter G. Woodson. He's the father of Black History Month. He was the second African-American to get a PhD from Harvard. He's a famous historian, and the thing that was funny is that book is a series of like his essays that he wrote from like 1915 to 1930.



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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Wow!

Fabian Elliot: And he's talking about the same exact challenges that like I'm still seeing today.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: And so where data really fits into this whole piece point that I'm making is that, I wanted to see progress.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: And you can't grow what you can't measure. You can't progress what you can't track.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: And so that's where enter to the scene data, like we really want to be able to get that measurable progress, then you're not going to be able to do it without the data piece.

Emily Lewis: You know, to put you on a spot a bit, would you mind sharing like what your hopes for the future of this will be? You are looking to the past, you're trying to establish data to understand what you're dealing with, but it's in service of making a better future. What does that look like to you?

Fabian Elliot: Right. Right. So to reference history first, and then answer that, the way things are now, it wasn't an accident.



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Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: It was systemic. It was strategic. It was deliberate, and it's put a lot of people on the earth in a pretty deep hole, that we're on the wrong side of that equation.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: And so what I believe in at the end of the day is just human potential, and what keeps me up at night or what worries me is that these generations and hundreds of years of systems that oppress certain people are suppressing human potential.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: As far as these people that if they had the right fair shot, they could maybe cure cancer or they could do these incredible things in the world.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: But with the system and challenges that get in their way, like I just can't help but wonder of what's the world missing out on.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.



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Fabian Elliot: And so for me, it's how can we leverage technology as a catalyst to help these people that are on the wrong side of this equation to be able to reach their full potential.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: I think as many people as we can help reach their full potential, the better humanity will be for it, and so for me, it's just leveraging technology as a catalyst to do that in a bitter scheme of things.

Emily Lewis: When you were describing that, something occurred to me. You said, "We didn't end up by accident," and I almost feel like the work you're doing at Black Tech Mecca, it's like, "We didn't end up here by accident. We're not going to get out of here by accident. We have to be just as an intentional and just as strategic as it was to get us here in the first place."

Fabian Elliot: There you go. That's exactly right. And the thing I have to coach and if when like tech executives or other folks who aren't part of the Black community come or they consult me on like diversity and inclusion or equity things, the first thing I have to remind them is this isn't just a business problem. What we're seeing in the tech sector isn't just a tech sector problem. Tech is just a small sliver of the greater societal challenges that we're facing, and that it's not just a simple business problem where you could set some OKRs (Objectives and Key Results), create a strategy, and in a couple of quarters, you'll be done with it, you know?

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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.



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Fabian Elliot: I try to coach them that, “All right, if you’re really trying to do something here, you need to be ready for the long run and you need to be ready for probably not very swift progress. It’s going to take time.”

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: Because like you said, it took time for us to get here in this situation.

Lea Alcantara: So we’ve been focusing on how Black Tech Mecca has worked with Chicago and Chicago data. Is there a grander plan with reaching other cities and communities?

Fabian Elliot: Right. Right. So what we’re really seeking to do and where the measurement piece fits in is to create what we call smart data-driven Black tech ecosystems, so ecosystems where you have a measurement framework in place to assess how things are going and to measure progress, an ecosystem where there’s coordination between resources and leaders to be able to improve the score of that ecosystem that’s being measured, and then new innovative solutions to fill gaps that aren’t being addressed. So you have this feedback, this continuous loop of measurement, coordination, solutions, measurement, coordination, solutions, and these smart data-drive Black tech ecosystems in our big vision is to help 100 cities to create those smart Black data-driven ecosystems.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: And do you think it’s a model that other communities could learn from or benefit from? It occurs to me Chicago is a very urban area.

Fabian Elliot: Yeah.



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Emily Lewis: Is this something that could apply in rural communities that have even less access to resources?

Fabian Elliot: Yeah. So right now, the short answer is yes, and I think that's what we're going to have to figure out after we nail the urban environments, you know?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: It's like how do we think about that, because I mentioned I grew up in North Carolina, but I didn't mention that specifically I grew up in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and I grew up on a dirt road, a dusty dirt road that wasn't paved until I went off to college.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: And we're not talking about so long ago, like this is like the late 90's, even early 2000's.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: Like the road got paved in 2008, so like that's my background. That's where I've come from, so I really understand the rural experience, and like it's just the dearth and the disconnectivity that can occur, and so that's something that like I really do want to look into is, "Okay, you've got to be realistic about what you'd be able to do in some of these rural cities, but how do you create things where people can plug into remote resources or plug into the nearest hub."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]



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Fabian Elliot: So I grew up in Fayetteville on a dirt road, but we're an hour away from Raleigh, the capital of North Carolina.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Fabian Elliot: So I think that's going to be an interesting way to look at it, "Okay, how can either plug in remotely, get support remotely, or how can they physically get to their nearest major hub?"

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: And do you feel like the model could even extend beyond the Black community, maybe other people of color, like a Native American community, which also struggles with that rural issue?

Fabian Elliot: Yes, and that's a beautiful thing about our framework, like take out Black and introduce anything else, whatever you can measure.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: Race would probably be the easiest. Race and ethnicity would probably be the easiest to exchange, but if you can get the data on veterans or LGBT or like whatever it may be, there's got to be the same indicators, the same metrics. It's just where you get the data from. So that's my bigger hope or potential aspiration is that like while we don't have the resources to branch out like that, we definitely hope that our model can be repurposed for anyone who's interested.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]



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Lea Alcantara: So I realized you haven't actually touched on the specific indicators or metrics. Can you share some of the things you are specifically measuring in terms of what progress means?

Fabian Elliot: Yeah. So until we release the new one, I'll just talk about what we currently have public. So for example, mobility, and so what that really looks at is how is the Black community rising through the ranks in leadership.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: And so that was kind of hard to look at. The only thing you can really look at was static leadership numbers, but you can't really see, "Okay, who's leaving the city or who is coming in to the city," and those types of things. But mobility is an example. For mentorship, measuring and looking at how many mentorship programs for the tech community are out there that are accessible, and also looking at incubators and accelerators, so looking at where are those located in the city of Chicago and how accessible are they...

Lea Alcantara: Right, geographically.

Fabian Elliot: Yeah. How accessible are they to the Black community, and just looking at those types of metrics and data points tied to those indicators.

Emily Lewis: I feel like it's got to be really nuanced and it's probably why it's so important for Black Tech Mecca to be having their eye on this data measurement because you could measure how many incubators are in the city and if it's a great number, then everyone is patting themselves on the back, but your point about where are they located and are they accessible.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.



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Emily Lewis: It's that little tweak on how the lens you're looking at the data through.

Fabian Elliot: Right, and let's go back to the earlier point why it's so important for us to be doing this research, you know?

Emily Lewis: Yes.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: So that we have that contextual knowledge, like that's also another reason why I wouldn't feel fit leading this type of initiative outside of the Black community.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: Because I grew up on the dirt road that was highly segregated, all Black mostly family. My parents went to an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). I mean, like I lived and breathed the Black community experience. I don't feel comfortable telling Native Americans what they need to do, like I'm understanding their experience.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right, right.

Fabian Elliot: Or the Latinx community and so that's one challenge I do see with diversity and inclusion is that there are some groups that try to just blanket all the entire under-represented community.



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Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: Like, “Hey, we help veterans and we help LGBT. We help Black. We help Latinx, everyone.” But it’s like each one of those groups has such a nuanced experience and history. I think it’s really tough to effectively serve them all without having more targeted focus.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, it almost feels like being part of the community that you’re measuring needed to be part of the model you’re following.

Fabian Elliot: Right.

Lea Alcantara: And I think this also highlights how important specificity is in any diversity initiatives. I feel like there’s a problem of we’re like putting a giant umbrella under diversity, meaning like every single thing has value and focusing the effort.

Fabian Elliot: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: And if you have a specific conversation about a specific problem, then I think you have better solutions for that specific problem because again as a woman in tech, I have a certain experience, but since I’m Filipino and Emily is white, my experience is completely different, you know?



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Emily Lewis: It's totally different.

Fabian Elliot: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So...

Fabian Elliot: For sure.

Emily Lewis: We did get a listener question from AJ Kandy who was asking about, "When it comes to advocacy and activism, is it about targeting one thing or taking on multiple fronts? You're in the thick of this and in a lot of ways it sounds like you're taking on one thing, but from multiple fronts."
[Laughs]

Fabian Elliot: Yeah. So the beautiful thing about what we're doing in the assessment framework is that it really helps to facilitate more effective prioritization.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: So when you look at like there are a hundred different problems that need to be solved for the Black tech ecosystem.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Fabian Elliot: But through the framework, it allows us to be able to effectively prioritize, "Okay, what are the top three that would really move the needle? And how could we really act on that?"



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Lea Alcantara: Right.

Fabian Elliot: So I always tend to lean more towards wherever you can focus the better, because change isn't easy, you know?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: It takes a lot of effort and unless you have the resources to put the appropriate effort against multiple things, I think it's always a bit wiser to focus where you can.

Emily Lewis: Fabian, Black Tech Mecca is running an event called [State of the Black Tech Ecosystem](#), which when our listeners hear it, it will already have passed.

Fabian Elliot: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: But can you tell us more about this event, what your goals are?

Fabian Elliot: Yeah, absolutely. So we talked a lot about the Chicago report we did and the data there, but we didn't talk about the response that we received.

Emily Lewis: Ah.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: So once we released the report, we were aware that there other folks that we connected with in a few cities that were looking to do similar work, but once we released the report,



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the inbound and the response we got was just tremendous of what we call Black Tech Ecosystem builders in different cities across the country trying to build their local Black Tech Ecosystems and not having a way to think about it or measure it, and so we were just inundated with folks from Nashville to Memphis, to Toronto.

Emily Lewis: Wow!

Lea Alcantara: Wow.

Fabian Elliot: And like, “Can you all help us? Like how we use your framework to create change in our community?”

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Fabian Elliot: And so that’s where we have done our local Chicago State of the Black Tech Ecosystem events in the past, but we saw the need that, “Well, there’s really a burgeoning thriving community of people looking to create change in their individual cities, and like how can we create a platform to support these folks?” And so the summit is really focused on convening these different leaders, people that are creating coding boot camps and incubators across the country here in Chicago to really have a summit that’s focused on supporting them.

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Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]



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Fabian Elliot: Because most of the tech summits, especially Black tech summits, they're focused on "I." So how can I get ahead of my career?

Emily Lewis: Yes.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: How can I start a new business? Versus how can we do better, like how can Fabian leading Black Tech Mecca get the support he needs?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: Like no one was focused on this group of people, and we saw an opportunity to do that with our summit, and so we're going to have a delegate experience with in-depth workshops what the Black Tech Ecosystem is, how to get resources, how to form partnerships, training on how to navigate these cities, and then as well as how are we going to have several ACE talks on just key Black Tech Ecosystem topics that's open to the public, and then we're also doing a talent showcase that could help connect companies with diverse tech talent.

Lea Alcantara: Wow.

Emily Lewis: And is this going to be hopefully many years running? Is that the goal?

Fabian Elliot: Absolutely. It's the first, and it's annual, like this is going to be a flagship annual summit that we will be doing likely in the future.

Lea Alcantara: How exciting.



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Fabian Elliot: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Oh, I already know two people in my local community who I am going to send the link to, this podcast too, and that would be something that they would instantly want to participate in.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, absolutely.

Emily Lewis: Wow, that's great.

Lea Alcantara: Anyway, this was such a great talk and I feel like we can keep talking.

Fabian Elliot: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: But one final question, any final tips or actionable steps that our listeners can take to get involved either with Black Tech Mecca or in their own communities?

Fabian Elliot: Yeah, yeah. So on the Black Tech Mecca side of the house, you can go to our website, blacktechmecca.org and you sign up to get newsletter updates if you're interested to being on the loop on what we have going on. Also, if you're exploring other additional charitable giving options, we're 501(c)(3), so if you want to add us to your book of charitable giving, definitely you can do donations through the site. As far as getting involved in your local community, I would say if that's something you're already passionate about or a particular issue or topic, just do some light research on our what organizations or who is kind of like tackling that and just show up at one of their events or see how you can get involved.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]



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Fabian Elliot: If you don't really have a specific passion and you're just like, "Hey, I want to help. I want to do something," then another option is maybe finding who are some of the local nonprofit organizations and seeing if anything, if anyone of them catches your eye or if you don't even do that, even just plugging in and maybe doing some research on what's going on like some of society's challenges and see if anything catches your eye.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, I really do feel like it comes down to that, just in my own experience, finding something that I care about in my local community and then just putting some time in towards it.

Fabian Elliot: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, absolutely.

Emily Lewis: Oh.

Lea Alcantara: So, that's all the time we have for today, but before we finish up, we've got our rapid fire ten questions so our listeners can get to know you a bit better.

Fabian Elliot: Okay, awesome.

Lea Alcantara: Are you ready?

Fabian Elliot: Let's do it.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Right. First question, what's your go-to karaoke song?



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Fabian Elliot: Oh, gosh, *Careless Whisper*.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Quick answer.

Emily Lewis: I love it.

Lea Alcantara: I love it.

Emily Lewis: What advice would you give your younger self?

Fabian Elliot: Gosh, be patient.

Lea Alcantara: What's your favorite PG-rated curse word?

Fabian Elliot: [Laughs] PG-rated, I wonder what PG-rated...

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Fabian Elliot: Obviously, it's something like darn, I guess.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]



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Fabian Elliot: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Who is your favorite superhero?

Fabian Elliot: Favorite superhero? Definitely, Black Panther is latest popularity. I'm on the bandwagon now.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: What is your favorite time of the year?

Fabian Elliot: I'd say spring.

Emily Lewis: If you could change one thing about the web, what would it be?

Fabian Elliot: Well, the one thing I would change would be – gosh, I'm pretty bothered by some of the net neutrality stuff.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Fabian Elliot: Maybe I would throw my hat in the ring there and see what could change.

Lea Alcantara: What are three words that describe you?

Fabian Elliot: Three words, I'd say energetic, focused and optimistic.



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Emily Lewis: What are three words that describe your work?

Fabian Elliot: Data, impact and progress.

Lea Alcantara: What's your favorite meal of the day?

Fabian Elliot: Breakfast, easy.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: All right, last question, coffee or tea?

Fabian Elliot: Tea. I'm a tea guy.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Very cool. So that's all the time we have. Thanks for joining the show.

Fabian Elliot: All right, no problem. It was a pleasure.

Emily Lewis: In case our listeners want to follow up with you, where can they find you online?

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Fabian Elliot: Yes, so you can check me out on my website, fabianelliott.com and also to my social media channels, so [LinkedIn, Fabian Elliot](#), Twitter [@fabian_elliott](#), and then Instagram, it's [@focused_fabe](#).

Emily Lewis: Awesome. Thank you again for joining us today. This was I think a really nice way to kind of continue the conversation with some real action and positive things that are in the works, and I'm really excited about the work that you're doing. This has been a great, great learning experience for me.

Fabian Elliot: Well, awesome. Thanks for having me. I had a blast.

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Emily Lewis: And many thanks to our hosting partner: [Arcustech](#).

Lea Alcantara: And thanks to our listeners for tuning in! If you want to know more about CTRL+CLICK, make sure you follow us on Twitter [@ctrlclickcast](#) or visit our website ctrlclickcast.com. And if you liked this episode, consider donating to the show — then give us a review on [Stitcher](#) or [Apple Podcasts](#) or both! Links are in our show notes and on our site!

Emily Lewis: Don't forget to tune in to our next episode when we have Sarah Federman on the show to discuss designing modular systems. Be sure to check out ctrlclickcast.com/schedule for more upcoming topics.

Lea Alcantara: This is Lea Alcantara ...



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Emily Lewis: And Emily Lewis ...

Lea Alcantara: Signing off for CTRL+CLICK CAST. See you next time!

Emily Lewis: Cheers!

[Music stops]

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