



GameChangers
Season 2: Episode 6
John Tass-Parker

Seth Robinson: Welcome to GameChangers. The show that's about playing by your own rules when it comes to your career. Join us as we speak with people who've taken the road less traveled and found their niche. I'm your host, Seth Robinson. This season, we're taking some time out to reconnect. Exploring the ways our game-changers are forming connections in the world by creating new communities, spaces and technologies.

John Tass-Parker: *And in order to operate in the unknown, you've got to have a bunch of context. You've got to travel and you've got to meet people. You got to read a bunch or watch TVs and movies from languages that you didn't grow up speaking.*

Seth Robinson: Today, we're joined by a tech industry veteran who has taken his passions for politics, storytelling, and the media, and turn them into a career with one of the world's leading social media platforms. We recorded this episode from abroad. So apologies if at times the audio is a little patchy.

John Tass-Parker: I'm John Tass-Parker and I started at Melbourne University in 2007 and then graduated a couple of years later after that. But now for the last seven years, I've been the head of politics and government at Instagram. And I also am a proud member of the U.S. Advisory board for The Fred Hollows Foundation, which I actually like to lead with, frankly, at the moment, because they are doing such amazing work in a really tough time. And I've also just finished up as a fellow at American University in their Sine Institute of Policy & Politics. So a little bit of a tamper slide at the moment, but a lot of fun.

Seth Robinson: It's a portfolio career with a range of roles and responsibilities, but what are the stepping stones that lead you to a career like this? In John's case it's included time spent working as a photographer, a film producer, and in former prime minister, Julia Gillards' media team.

John Tass-Parker: So I think with all interesting careers, they all make a lot of sense in hindsight, but kind of at the different points of my journey, they certainly didn't. So I think the first thing that I'd say is that for those that are listening, that are still kind of getting started in their career and just starting to work out what they want to do with this big life, don't panic if it's really a very stressful series of decisions, but when you force them, it always seems to be unhelpful. So I would say that just to start with, but I mean for my career, I was always really interested in storytelling and stories and entertainment, and just the idea that kind of culture is really shaped by the things that we consume both on the individual level, but then also as a society and different groups within that society.

And so I was always really fascinated with that. And the vast majority of that has been very visually driven. I was really into art and photography in my year 11 and 12, and that carried through my undergrad years, but it wasn't the only thing I was interested in. And I think I was really conscious to just be super curious and learn a bunch of different things and be exposed to a bunch of different things. And that kind of set me up for just a lot of curiosity that has led me on this career journey that I've had so far.

Seth Robinson: You made a really interesting point there in the it's not that kind of standard progression career. It's not like you went and became a consultant and then a senior consultant and a manager. How is it when it comes to navigating that kind of thing that you pick what's next?

John Tass-Parker: Yeah, really good question. So the way that I've thought about my career has always been trying to make sure that what I'm focusing my energy on both within my day job, and then also things that I have things that I do outside of it on things that firstly I can provide some kind of really tangible contribution myself and doing it in a way that I'm really leveraging the background that I have or the interests that I have. And there's a lot of, I guess, naysayers about Gen Z and millennials kind of wanting to do things that they're passionate about. And I'm actually a really big believer in it because I've seen that in people that I work with, people that I've hired, that when you give people the opportunity to work on things that they are really, truly passionate about, and it may be an exercise in learning that passion as well.

You can't just discount things straight off the bat because you never know what you might like. But I'm a big fan of doing things and focusing on things where I can have that really substantive contribution, but then also be thinking about doing the things that open up more opportunities after them. So when I think about my next job, I really hope that I'm going to be doing something that maybe doesn't narrow my focus further down into technology and social media and politics, but maybe diversifies it a little bit more.

And I learned more parts of one of those worlds in whatever the role is next. And so when you're thinking about coming out of university and thinking about that kind of like first, second, third job, I really encourage people who are in that moment to go, "Okay, how can I widen my experiences, not just

focus on one or two?" And that's probably advice that it may be really contentious because we are in a world where there are a lot of specialists, but I think if you are coming from this background of multi-disciplinary undergrad and really just generally curious, that is really a point where you want to kind of continue to have some kind of opportunity to learn and be exposed to new things.

Seth Robinson: You make a really interesting point there around almost that generalist versus specialist debate, which I think is something we're hearing more and more of. Do you think that's something you kind put back to your educational background as well? I know you did a bachelor of commerce and a bachelor of arts as well. Do you think that that kind of interdisciplinarity set that trajectory for you?

John Tass-Parker: Yeah, absolutely. I'm really impressed with the way that Melbourne mobile has kind of changed things in Australia because it does map a little bit more to the kind of college experience that people have in the United States. And it is one where you just get to do a bunch of different stuff and it's great. And you don't feel the pressure immediately to go into a professional degree because I think if you'd asked me when I was 18 or 19, I'd be like, "Oh, I want to be a lawyer or a doctor or something like that." But I did need those four, five years of my undergrad to be able to get enough life experience and enough kind of input just collecting that data almost and thinking, "Okay, what do I do next?" And if I'd been forced to make that decision earlier, I think I probably would've been able to make the right one for me at the time.

Seth Robinson: You're a really interesting example. I think of one of these people who has a job that maybe you haven't heard of when you're 18 or 19. You made the point that you might be, "Oh, I want to be a doctor or a lawyer." But there's that kind of old adage that seems to be circulating more and more that the jobs students are training for now don't exist yet. And I'm curious, do you think that really is the case, do you think we're training for roles that just aren't out there?

John Tass-Parker: Absolutely. I wholeheartedly agree. I mean, and also I think some of the most interesting jobs are the ones that have questions that nobody has ever had to face before. And that's really special. And it puts a fire in your belly when you get to work and no days the same. And that can be really exciting. When I think about hiring people and when I look at my colleagues who are also in similar kind of environments, they really need people to be able to operate in the unknown. And in order to operate in the unknown, you've got to have a bunch of context. You got to travel and meet people. You got to read a bunch or watch TVs and movies from languages that you didn't grow up speaking.

And that kind of really wide world of view and empathy allows you, I think, in this day and age to be a great generalist and to be able to bring something really special to these kinds of big unknown challenges that a lot of certainly technology companies are facing right now. Now that being said, there are a bunch of people with real expertise in very specific areas. When I

think about some of my colleagues, they are national security experts or they are amazing product designers and once you're in that kind of world, absolutely, you've got to double down. You've got to make sure that you're going to be the best possible person or the best possible version of yourself at doing that kind of role, I think. But that comes, I think right now for most people or somebody like me at the very least, after a period of kind of exposure to a bunch of different things so that you can have an informed decision.

Seth Robinson: I thought you made a really interesting point previously, when you said, when you're thinking about that second or third or fourth job, do you think that's kind of the period where you start having to make those decisions and think about what that trajectory is?

John Tass-Parker: Absolutely. Yeah. So I've always thought about the first job as almost like a signal to the world that you can operate as a professional. Now my corporate and my NGO and my government life will continue and I'll learn more at a different parts of my career, but the most amount of learning happens in that first job, because you just work out of how to work as a team or working in an organization and navigate how to communicate with your boss or your colleagues or whatnot. And you really need that to be able to then progress onto the next stage.

Sometimes it's super easy for some people but for somebody like me that has hired people but straight out of university and then also hired people that have had a couple of different jobs, you really do see a very big difference between those who have already started their career. And those that have done a bunch of internships, which are very important, but you do need that kind of corporate or government or institutional kind of exposure before you can get kind of get onto that the next level.

Seth Robinson: So what kind of work does John do now?

John Tass-Parker: I would imagine that anyone listen to this, probably is familiar with The Fred Hollows Foundation, which is pretty much the preeminent global organization on tackling curable blindness. And there's a massive opportunity there to fundamentally change the lives of not only people who are living with curable blindness, but then also people who in that environment. It is the daughters, the sons, the mothers, the fathers, the cousins, whatever. And by allowing somebody to access their sight, it's a huge benefit to a family, to economies, to people being able to participate in society and had their full capacity. And I love that work. I love the fact that the foundation has been so successful in achieving really substantial goals and curing people's sight. And I'm just pumped to be a small part of it as they continue to expand globally.

Seth Robinson: That's a thread that we never really zero in on when we think about things like The Fred Hollows Foundation. You think it's this miraculous thing at a personal level of restoring someone's sight, but I had never previously considered the broader social or economic impacts of that. That's a huge spill on effect, isn't it?

John Tass-Parker: Yeah. Absolutely. So make sure that you go to the website, go to the Instagram account, the Facebook page, the Twitter account, and follow along and see if it's something that you might be interested in helping out with.

Seth Robinson: So speaking of social tags there, let's talk a little bit about your work at Instagram.

John Tass-Parker: Yeah. So my role at Instagram has changed pretty dramatically over the course of the last seven and a half years also, the seven years that I've been there. And it has really followed the path of Instagram being a very small social network. I think there was only about a hundred or 150 million users at the time that I joined to now, well and truly over a billion. And it has evolved from being working with politicians and government entities and media organizations that wanted to use the platform into thinking about the way that the platform kind of interacts with the major social moments. And so what I've been doing for the last couple of years is really been about laying the groundwork for the 2020 election in the U.S. last year.

And thinking about the kind of working with our product team and working with our other professionals to be able to create a really deep experience, not only in the U.S. as well, we launched products globally, but ways for people to be able to express themselves and encourage people to participate in democracy and access really important, fundamental information. And so that has been a really big shift because it's gone from being almost like external facing role into a very internal facing role. And those kind of changes are really interesting because you're using different parts of your brain and different skillsets.

Seth Robinson: And in terms of those threads you mentioned before around storytelling and visual storytelling and working with the government and the media, it's kind of the epitome of working in that space in a lot of ways. But I imagine it's also incredibly challenging last year and I know in the lead up to the 2020 election, as you mentioned, and in the years previously, there was a lot of discussion in media focus on the relationship between the media and social media and the way we covered elections and the effects that had on democracy. Can you tell us a little bit about some of the challenges of working around that in your role?

John Tass-Parker: Yeah, so what's fascinating about the kind of intersection of politics and Instagram. And I try to expand it out even further into thinking about the way that people interact with almost societal level conversations or social issues. And what's happened over the course of these seven years is that people discovered that they had this amazing power in their pockets to be able to produce content, right? And those pieces of content have evolved from images to videos, to different types of videos within that kind of umbrella, right? So now we have Instagram stories, Instagram reels, and they kind of all fit a different part of the media sphere like the media contents sphere. And what has happened is that as those different formats of visual communication have evolved, people then kind of interact

increasingly with the social issues and with the political conversation in that style.

And so as you have more people communicating in that style, you have people viewing it. And so now, because we have seen a bunch of celebrities, public figures, influencers communicating real substantive issues using these formats, I think especially those people who are native to the growing up with the internet, they start to use those formats and be able to communicate in those formats in really substantive ways. And so it changes it from being just a bunch of fun stuff to being inclusive of the serious substantive conversations that are going on, because it's a natural way of communicating for a lot of people. And so that's the big trend that has happened, but then for my role, right, I have had to go okay with my team and with my colleagues like, "What does that mean for us? What do we need to be focusing on here?"

And so a lot of the work that I've been doing is about how do we make sure that when people start to do this kind of creation, how do we make sure that there's really good information within the app related to elections or related to COVID or related to other things, and making sure that that's from a really substantive authoritative source and then people can use it. And so we had a big kind of hub in the U.S. election and people were able to share that. One of the products, I think we launched two years ago in Australia which I loved, was some democracy sausage stickers, which will link directly to the AAC where people could find a polling location. And so that's the fun stuff, but it's also the challenges and the opportunities, and then the questions that have never been asked before.

And so you kind of have to attack them all as they come along while at the same time trying to go, "Okay, where is this trend going and what do we need to prepare for?" And so the one thing with these big technology companies and it's not just Facebook, Instagram, Google of the world, but it's all the emerging startups. And it's the way that they may be big legacy corporations then have to interact with the world of technology. They're going to be starting to face big questions around the way that they present information to people, the way that people store private information, all of this stuff is super, super challenging because rightfully so when you're starting to talk about this kind of world, it's pretty important.

Seth Robinson:

One of the things we're focusing on for this season of game changes is the way people are reconnecting. We've had a weird year where we've gone into lockdowns and we've lived more and more of our lives online. And of course, this is kind of one of the key ideas of social media. And it's something that Mark Zuckerberg talks about a lot as one of the guiding kind of ethos in his founding of Facebook. Can you talk us through a little bit the relationship you see between social media platforms and how they do kind of affect that sense of community?

John Tass-Parker:

Yeah, I'll just take it on a personal note. There was something amazing about being in the state during this pandemic and then feeling close to my family and my closest university buddies and friends that are in Australia and being

able to share respective experiences through those private DM conversations or group threads or just posting on Instagram or on Facebook. There was a great sense of relief in while you're on your own. And I was very lucky that I was with my partner the entire time, but while you're on your own, being able to access your friends. I found I was jumping onto a video game with one of my closest mates who's in Australia while I was over here and we'd just be on audio chat for hours while we were just talking and he'd invite some other friends. And then suddenly just felt like everything was a little bit more normal. And it was the tech platform ecosystems that allowed for that kind of connection to happen. And on a personal level, I mean, it made a world of difference to being able to just feel close to my friends and family.

Seth Robinson: In a lot of ways, you're kind of living what a lot of students and graduates would perceive as the dream career. You've moved to America, you're working in the tech space, which is quite glamorous. I guess I'm curious is the reality, does that align and gel with the dream?

John Tass-Parker: I think the grass is always going to be greener. I'm really excited about the work that I do, and I'm really excited more than anything to rock up to work every day with some amazing colleagues that are from all walks of life, from all over the world and who are fiercely intelligent and empathetic and great workers. And I think when you have those kinds of people together and you're faced with really tough challenges, questions, opportunities, whatever it might be, it's a real privilege. And frankly humbling because I feel that everyone else is totally out of my league.

But it's a real privilege to get to work on those issues with other people that have just had these amazing lives already and bringing so much to the table. So I really do think though that it's not so much just the kind of big tech companies in the states that have that but there are so many opportunities to do great work with great people. And if you can just focus on that, then I think you're going to be really satisfied with what you're up to, whatever it might be. And that's why I love the work that I do outside of my day job, because I certainly feel like I get a lot out of that from a professional standpoint and just learning new things, but then also being able to bring something to the table and contribute substantively.

Seth Robinson: Well John, I have one last question for you, and then we'll let you go. This is one that we ask all of our guests, but what's one thing that's helped you get to where you are today that's not on your resume?

John Tass-Parker: That's a good one. Honestly, it was learning Photoshop. I know that sounds insane, but just being somebody who was a generalist and having a couple of really concrete skills allowed me just those gradual slow experiences that built me up to the point where I was qualified to be able to work in Prime Minister Gillard's office and be able to not only get the interview, but then also be able to... I hope to a good job and be able to contribute. And those are the kinds of things that just... It doesn't make any sense for me to talk about it right now in my current job, but being able to just bring something to the table has been awesome.

And then also go and have a beer with your colleagues. I mean, seriously, it goes one is because you can just start to suddenly work out who these people are that you're interacting with, day-to-day in a professional environment and just go, "Okay, I understand your perspective, and I understand where you're coming from." And then you just build up more and more trust and more and more empathy with each other on days, maybe not... Some of the hardest days, professionally, are the ones that when you're trying to navigate conflict or you're trying to navigate different points of view. And so when you have trust with your colleagues, it just takes on a different kind of tone.

Seth Robinson: John Tass-Parker, thank you so much for joining us on GameChangers.

John Tass-Parker: Thanks Seth.

Seth Robinson: It's easy to second guess ourselves when it comes to our careers. Thinking we should have committed sooner questioning whether we want to be specialists or generalists, but in a world where work is changing rapidly and the jobs we'll want in the future don't exist yet, being flexible and combining a few different interests might not be such a bad way to go. In the end, it's all about the package you bring to the table. Subscribe to GameChangers for new episodes or catch up at fpe.unimelb.edu.au/gamechangers. Game-changers is recorded on Wurundjeri land. The podcast is produced by me, Seth Robinson, and edited by Michelle Macklem with support from the University of Melbourne.