“Often, big tech platforms prioritize profit over safety”: Jim Fruchterman of Tech Matters on leveraging technology, collaborations, and holding tech companies accountable.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard
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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Could you introduce yourself and share what your organization does and what inspired its inception?

Jim Fruchterman: I'm Jim Fruchterman, founder of Tech Matters, a charity that’s also a tech company. My background is in for-profit AI tech companies in Silicon Valley, but when my investors vetoed a project to help disabled kids, I decided to pursue it anyway. That led me to spend 35 years starting nonprofit tech companies to create products for the 90% of humanity and the planet that for-profit companies usually overlook. I previously led Benetech for 30 years, focusing on disability and human rights. Six years ago, I stepped down to start Tech Matters, where I tackle issues like the environment and child welfare. As a tech person, I see gaps where technology should be helping but isn’t—often because the people in need are in places like Zambia, are disabled, or are human rights activists. My job is to identify these problems and build small companies that can solve them over the long term.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you give me an example of your approach?

Jim Fruchterman: Sure. At Benetech, the best-known example is Bookshare, a national digital library for kids with disabilities in the U.S. that’s now the world’s largest library for the blind and dyslexic. At Tech Matters, our biggest initiative is Aselo, essentially the "Salesforce for child helplines." Instead of relying on expensive, complex commercial products, Aselo is an open-source solution designed with and by child helplines. It’s now live in 15 countries, and that’s why I’m here—to support that project.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you come up with Aselo? With tech being everywhere, how did you identify the need for a child helpline solution?

Jim Fruchterman: I often act as the "Silicon Valley tech person" that nonprofit leaders know. Through my Karmic consulting practice, I offer free advice to nonprofit leaders, often three to five calls a week. Occasionally, one of these conversations reveals a problem where tech could help millions of people if tied to an existing reform movement. That's how Aselo started.

Jeroo Billimoria, founder of Child Helpline International and Childline India, approached me with a strategy plan from a consulting firm. Half of it proposed a tech solution—a mobile app for child helplines—which I thought was a bad idea. I suggested speaking with leaders of national helplines instead. Jeroo's credibility opened doors, and after talking to 20 helpline leaders, the need became clear: every helpline had separate, custom-built systems, with only U.S.-based ones having in-house tech teams. Others hired expensive consultants, leading to unsustainable costs and inefficiency.

Jeroo introduced me at an international child helpline meeting, where she rallied unanimous support for developing an open-source solution. Ten helplines co-developed Aselo with us over 18 months. We built a prototype with a small team, starting with a developer and product manager, and scaled from there. Today, Aselo operates in 15 countries. It's customizable for each helpline's language and data needs, while maintaining a 95% shared foundation.

Aselo is our largest initiative, but we also have Terraso, which develops software for local leaders and smallholders addressing climate and agriculture challenges. Each project has its own product manager and head of engineering, and while the teams are small—$1 to $2 million a year each—they exchange ideas and support each other. We build tailored solutions for nonprofits and communities, focusing on scaling impact while staying lean.

The same kind of thing happened with Sarah Scherr, who was involved in the EcoAgriculture movement. We had mutual donors, and one of them told her, "You need a nerd. Call Jim Fruchterman." She reached out with a reform movement called the 1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People Movement. The idea is to focus on landscapes or regions, implementing 30 interconnected initiatives rather than isolated projects, which avoids optimizing for one issue at the expense of others.

That initial meeting was six years ago. We secured funding about four or five years ago, with major donors like Safe Online (through End Violence), Facebook (which contributed $1 million), Schmidt Futures, and the Peery Foundation, which helped launch Tech Matters. A significant portion of that funding supported these efforts. Over time, we've transitioned to having customers. Last year, 30% of our budget came from revenue, and that number is expected to grow. Our model is simple: the developed world pays more to subsidize the same high-quality technology for the developing world, ensuring equitable access.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What have been the biggest challenges with Aselo, particularly from the user perspective?

Jim Fruchterman: Let's break it down. The stakeholders include kids, parents, and community members—like someone reporting a case of child abuse. Behind them are social service agencies (where they exist), the medical field, policymakers, and the press. Then there's our primary user: the helpline counselor talking to the child. Secondary users include helpline managers, CHI (Child Helpline International), and funders who need impact data. Policymakers and the press also look to us for insights, like trends in child issues or emerging forms of abuse.

Our biggest challenge is that we're toolmakers, not service providers. We rely on strong local organizations to deliver the service. In many countries, those organizations simply don't exist. We can't operate without partners who understand the local culture, laws, and needs. In Africa, for example, we've had significant impact because organizations in places like Zambia and Zimbabwe, though small in budget, are highly capable and staffed by professionals who keep the funding flowing despite challenges. We're expanding into Tanzania next.

But in some regions, it's much harder. When I visited Thailand, our partner, Childline Thailand, was great. But when I asked to meet their counterparts in Indonesia or Malaysia, they told me, "In Indonesia, we think the government took over the helpline, but we're not sure it's still operational." That's a massive country, yet there's no clear helpline presence. If someone wants to start a helpline, we offer an open-source package tailor-made for that purpose. But without strong local leadership, the challenge remains immense.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Partnerships with governments seem to be a recurring theme in social innovation. How do you work with governments, both now and in the past, and what role does tech play in these collaborations?

Jim Fruchterman: I'll start with what we're doing today and then touch on my earlier experiences. For helplines, most are run by national NGOs outside the U.S., where the environment is different. In the U.S., it's more fragmented, but we've started engaging by attending helpline conferences. After two years, we're hopeful about securing a partnership or two, helped by peer referrals—showcasing what another state, like Nebraska, has achieved, for example.

The goal of Aselo is multifaceted. First, we aim to transition helplines from being phone-centric to fully embracing the texting era. Young people prefer texting, so Aselo supports SMS, web chat, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, Line (in South Asia), Telegram, and soon, potentially Discord. The idea is to meet young people where they are, using the communication methods they're comfortable with. Over time, the helpline movement has shifted from 5% text-based to 25%, and we're aiming for 80%. Thailand leads the way, with a majority of interactions via text, reflecting their texting-oriented culture.

Second, we focus on empowering counselors—the most valuable people in the system—so they can assist more kids, more effectively. By streamlining processes and removing non-essential tasks, the technology enables counselors to focus on what matters most: helping kids. We're not replacing counselors; we're augmenting their work. Lastly, we're working to make helplines more data-savvy. Better data usage leads to improved services and outcomes. However, we've been surprised by the generally low technological capacity among helpline staff, which highlights the need for ongoing training and support.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is your work increasing technological capacity within helplines?

Jim Fruchterman: Absolutely. We conduct both quantitative and qualitative assessments to measure impact. For example, one helpline noted that their counselors went from completing 40% of data entry to 90%. With better data, they started asking critical questions, like, "What does this 25% of cases labeled as 'other' actually represent?"

In one case, a helpline classified all online abuse as "grooming," which wasn't useful. Another helpline broke it down into five specific types of online abuse and trained their staff to distinguish between them. This kind of data-driven approach enables helplines to improve their services and ask better questions. As someone with 40+ years of AI experience, I know that good data is essential for AI. Many helplines didn't even have usable data despite doing tremendous work. We're helping them collect, encrypt, and anonymize data to keep it secure while still enabling its use for AI, without betraying the trust of those seeking help.

Our vision is threefold: adding text capabilities, making counselors more effective and satisfied with their tech, and using technology to improve overall operations. What helpline leadership appreciates most is how this data makes them powerful advocates with policymakers and the press. For example, they can now answer questions like, "How many 14- to 16-year-old girls reported being forced into child marriage?" That level of insight is transformative.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Does the ability to talk directly to policymakers tie back to your work with government partnerships?

Jim Fruchterman: Absolutely. Governments play multiple roles in this space. Helplines are often run by national NGOs or governments themselves. Some governments do a great job; others, not so much. Sometimes, the government is our customer. However, we tend not to work with governments doing a poor job—they're usually not interested in engaging with us.

For example, in Jamaica, our partner is the national child advocate, a government official. She set up a helpline and now has better data, making her a more authoritative voice on children's issues. That data is crucial—it's often the only source about Jamaican kids, collected directly from helpline calls. For most national NGOs, a relationship with the government is essential, especially when dealing with issues like child sexual abuse material, which requires legal compliance. Governments also regulate helplines, force telecom companies to provide free lines (like 1098 in India or 116 in Africa), and serve as health, education, or children's ministry

partners. While governments may not fund helplines in developing countries, they play a critical role in enabling operations.

In my previous work with Bookshare, we partnered heavily with governments. Initially, it was a small nonprofit with a sliding-scale subscription model, where U.S. users paid 10 times more than users in developing countries. When we won the national contract with the U.S. Department of Education, our budget grew from under $1 million to $7 million annually, now up to $9 million. That funding enables us to also serve the rest of the world. We also worked with governments to pass the Marrakesh Treaty, enabling nonprofits to make books accessible to the blind without copyright hurdles. It required working with progressive governments in the developing world and eventually convincing North American and European governments to support the treaty.

Scaling often requires government involvement. For helplines, scale typically comes when they make a deal to become the national helpline. However, in developing countries, this is rarely accompanied by government funding. Governments are critical partners, but their support is often uneven.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I'd like to hear your vision on how tech can be a game-changer in pushing institutions like schools, families, and nonprofits to keep children safe.

Jim Fruchterman: This is a huge debate in the field. As someone with an AI background, I spend most of my time talking people *out* of overhyping AI. It's not a magic wand. The current wave of AI is just another step in the steady improvement of certain technologies. It's a significant step, but it's not a miracle—it's not human, and it doesn't truly understand anything. Inside the tech industry, we joke about AI being a "stochastic parrot"—repeating patterns it has seen, often trained on internet data that doesn't represent 90% of humanity.

Right now, I'm advising against replacing counselors with chatbots. While chatbots can handle simple, repetitive tasks—like answering 900 out of 1,000 frequently asked questions with pre-approved responses—they're not ready for more complex, sensitive interactions. In mental health, for example, some young people are self-medicating with chatbots, leading to tragic outcomes, including cases where chatbots have inadvertently encouraged suicide. Even two cases are too many.

Current commercial products lack the necessary guardrails, and there's little to no regulation ensuring ethical safeguards. If we zoom out from children to mental health in general, we can draw parallels with the evolution of physical healthcare. Years ago, there weren't enough doctors and nurses to meet global health needs, so community health workers—often women working for free—helped fill the gap. Today, there's a push to professionalize and compensate those roles. Mental health is in a similar position now.

The question is whether automated chatbots could ethically fill part of the gap while providing clear off ramps to human counselors when needed. Some people are already experimenting

with this, but I believe they'll fail with the current state of technology, especially in mental health. Chatbots might work for structured tasks, like answering canned questions in maternal health, but mental health requires a level of empathy and nuance that tech isn't ready to deliver.

The helpline movement's strength is delivering human empathy at scale, not chatbots at scale. That's a key strategic question for us and for others in the space. These are conversations we're having with our peers—those leading tech teams in similar fields. It's a collective challenge we're all trying to navigate.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: In the field of child sexual violence, working with the private tech sector is critical but also incredibly challenging. Is it all about regulation? And is the idea of designing safe spaces ever truly possible?

Jim Fruchterman: Working with the private tech sector in child protection is essential but incredibly challenging. Often, big tech platforms prioritize profit over safety. While their child safety teams are dedicated, they are usually powerless within these massive companies, and senior executives rarely prioritize decisions that help kids.

Regulation is critical to control excesses and force companies to take necessary actions. However, it's not straightforward. For example, in the human rights space, privacy and encryption are top priorities. But in child protection, intercepting CSAM requires some compromise on those goals. Balancing these trade-offs is complex. The bigger issue is regulatory capture—tech companies often block meaningful regulations. That's where external pressure is vital. Advocacy groups, initiatives like the Heat Initiative, and public pressure push companies to act responsibly. Small shifts in tech giants' policies can have outsized impacts, far beyond what smaller organizations can achieve.

Many people ask, "Why not build a better Facebook?" The reality is that the network effect makes it nearly impossible to compete with platforms that have billions of users. Starting a new platform requires immense capital, flawless user experience, and a strategy to attract and retain users—challenges that have defeated countless attempts. On innovation, my role often involves helping advocates understand what's feasible and guiding them toward practical solutions. For example, finding a compromise that's 70% as effective but far cheaper can be a win. Advocacy, combined with innovative approaches, can lead to significant breakthroughs. Always focus on human-centered design. Build solutions that address real user needs, not what you think they should want. Successful products require deep understanding and an amazing user experience. If you get that right, the rest will follow. But without it, nothing else matters.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are some leverage points in the tech industry that we could target in the next five years to create meaningful change?

Jim Fruchterman: The biggest challenge is that the entire field is too weak relative to the immense power and wealth of tech platforms. These companies generate enormous profits, and while they do some good, they also create negative consequences—akin to the oil industry's

impact on climate change and pollution. Just as we regulate industries and require them to mitigate harm, tech companies should fund helpline services for mental health and child safety, much like telecom companies are taxed to support 911 services. Governments could enforce this by tying it to platforms' licenses to operate, requiring child-safe design and proactive harm mitigation. Some progress has been made, like the UK's efforts around child-safe design, but much more needs to happen. Regulation is essential, but so is pressure—social, media, and advocacy-driven—to push tech companies toward ethical practices.

Data is an increasingly valuable asset, but nonprofits lag far behind for-profits in utilizing it effectively. While companies optimize data for profit—tracking customer acquisition costs, lifetime revenue, and other insights—nonprofits often lack the tools and strategies to leverage data responsibly for social good. We've been working on a project called the Better Deal for Data, inspired by the open-source movement but focused on data privacy and ethics. It's built on eight simple principles, such as ensuring users retain ownership of their data, anonymizing it for research, and banning its sale to third parties.

This approach creates a trust-based system, similar to how patients trust doctors with their medical data. For example, farmers often hesitate to share data because they've been exploited by agribusinesses in the past. Implementing transparent governance modeled on medical privacy laws ensures data is used for research and social good, not profit at their expense.

We've launched a co-design process with nonprofits, unions, cooperatives, and even some for-profits interested in adopting these principles. By next year, we aim to have clear guidelines, examples, and a certification process. Specific fields, like child helplines, can add tailored requirements to reflect their unique needs, ensuring ethical data use becomes a standard across the nonprofit sector. Creating trust around data and ensuring platforms contribute to mitigating harms they exacerbate are two key leverage points for driving change.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is there anything that you'd like to talk about?

Jim Fruchterman: While CSAM [Child Sexual Abuse Material] is a critical focus, we also need to address the broader real-world challenges kids face, like hunger, lack of education, and mental health gaps. Technology can't solve these alone, but it's a vital part of the solution.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you so much, this has been great.

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** This interview has been edited and condensed.*