

## Jane Ruffino: While engineers are invaluable, the people telling the story make a piece of technology profitable



**Y**esterday morning, I climbed up to Villa Jovis, a palace built by the Roman emperor Tiberius when he retired to the island of Capri. “See the way they use brick in the wall construction?” I asked my boyfriend. “That’s one way to tell a Roman building’s age. They didn’t do that until the first century AD.” He wasn’t that interested, and suddenly I felt pretentious. There are really only two things interesting about this place: the view from the top, and the stories about Tiberius.

Construction style isn’t what makes Roman architecture and engineering interesting, and it shouldn’t come as a shock that the people responsible for laying the foundations of western society could figure out how to make a building stand up.

It’s fun to linger for a while on the “what”, and if you’re into how stuff works, that could be a long while. But what makes technology stick, and what captures the imaginations of history buffs or addressable markets, are the “how”, the “why” and the “who”. It’s a tech marketer’s job to create a narrative of the technology from a company perspective, without demanding to be credited as the author.

Whether it’s a Roman emperor’s palace of debauchery or a 21st-century mobile application, what makes technology fascinating has less to do with the fact that something is possible, and more to do with the ideas that make it possible, and what that, in turn, makes possible. Archaeologists use technology from the past to explain social change; marketers use tech in the present to figure out what

kind of change people are ready for.

And yet the conversation about tech jobs, and about who matters in the tech industry, seems to focus on technical roles, as if the marketing can be done by unpaid interns, or, in rare exceptions, like messaging app WhatsApp, not done at all.

In a conversation recently with another tech company, we were bragging about our mathematician, Mike. He’s one of the smartest people you could ever meet. He’s personable, fun, and sees technical challenges as opportunities. The chief executive we spoke with stopped us and said: “No offence to Mike, but everyone has a Mike.”

We felt instantly slighted on Mike’s behalf, but he was right: once you have a working product, what sets you apart is not your engineers, but how good you are with custom-

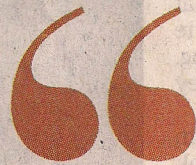
ers, and how convincing you are at showing what made you possible, and what you will make possible.

The image of the superbrain engineer isn’t a lie, but it feeds a myth of the programmer as a special snowflake, and often at the expense of the people telling the story that makes a piece of technology profitable. It’s no surprise that those people are more likely to be women, either. In the case of the dating app, Tinder, its stated origin story relies entirely on founders Sean Rad and Justin Mateen, when it was Whitney Wolfe, vice-president of marketing, who convinced young women on US college campuses to give the app a try. A good marketer can create a change in people’s behaviour, and with an invisible touch; a bad company takes that as an invitation to make the marketer invisible.

It’s not that engineers are less important, nor would anyone want to argue that marketers are the real special snowflakes, but we seem to talk about the marketing and business side and the technical side as if they exist in opposition to one another, rather than in the symbiotic relationship that they actually do (in successful companies, at least). The people who build a technology are not the only people who build a company – or an empire.

The Romans had the tools and knowledge to build in brick and concrete long before they actually did. What changed in the first century AD was the political and social structure, for better or for worse.

Without engineers, materials experts, and builders, the Romans could never have created places like Villa Jovis. But without someone to tell (and embellish) the story, the empire would have been little more than a pile of bricks.



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