

How the next billion users are challenging global tech assessment (Interview)

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Payal Arora is a digital anthropologist and author of several books including the award-winning “The Next Billion Users” with Harvard Press. She is the co-founder of FemLab.Co, an initiative on the global future of work. Here, Julia Hahn interviews Payal Arora about her research on the digital lives of people in the Global South. The discussion touches on issues of privacy, data governance as well as their passionate and resilient use of online technologies and networks. Payal reflects on her past research activities “on the ground” and what surprising insights she gained especially regarding practices and preferences of diverse digital lives. For her, assessment and governance of digital technologies should be based on recognition and responsiveness to actual concerns as well as expectations. In this way, her research approach, active participation in policy and stakeholder advice and extensive experience brings fresh insights for technology assessment with a global perspective.

Payal, your research looks at the wide array of digital lives beyond the West, focusing on patterns and habits of use as well as new global publics and their societal implications. What are your main research questions in this area?

My expertise lies in digital anthropology which basically means I study how people use and make sense of digital media in their everyday lives. This demands that we attend to their concerns, aspirations, motivations, and perceptions of the digital world and how these tools mediate and impact their social lives. In today’s terms, we are particularly focused on how people manage their presence, privacy, and pleasure online. Moreover, true to the anthropological discipline, we recognize that our social actions shape and are shaped by institutions, platform designs, socio-cultural norms, economic contexts, and legal regulations so it is important to recognize this dialogic space of the socio-technical when investigating these practices. My



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INTERVIEW

How the next billion users are challenging global tech assessment

Herausforderungen für die globale Technikfolgenabschätzung durch die nächste Milliarde Nutzer*innen

Interview by Julia Hahn

focus on young people from low-income, vulnerable, and marginalized communities in the Global South comes with added complexities. My team and I have spent the last two decades doing fieldwork in several contexts outside the West – from villages in Namibia, to so-called ‘slums’ of India, and the ‘favelas’ of Brazil – often informal and dense settlements where much of these populations live.

What main interests are driving your research?

Some key questions dictating my research pursuits in such contexts are: what are young people’s perceptions of and practices in privacy and data management? How do they self-actualize online and what are the tools that they leverage on the most to do so, and why? What constitutes as digital citizenship, identity, and community when they are online and how does this impact their social lives? What kinds of platforms make them feel most “at home”, and which digital spaces do they feel most safe, most joyful, and moreover, most understood? What are their everyday tactics to cope with what do they consider as their biggest concerns and to what degree does this help them in achieving their goals? In the last two years, my questions have revolved closer towards the future of work as I co-founded an organization with Professor Usha Raman from University of Hyderabad called FemLab.co. Here we look at how to inform designers, programmers, aid agencies and policy-makers on how to take on feminist approaches to the future of work as these efforts become increasingly platformized and mediated through algorithmic logics and cultures.

What motivates you about researching “the next billion users”?

It is well worth acknowledging first that the “next billion users” is a buzz term that has generated much enthusiasm especially among tech companies as it promises an extraordinary flow of data capture in this highly competitive so-called global AI race. Basically, this “market group” is referring to the millions of young people coming online for the first time due to recent disruptive dynamics in the Global South, particularly cheap data plans and mobile phones. These people are primarily from the low-income tier and live in precarious and marginalized contexts. They are however deeply aspirational and are avid and enthusiastic users of the mobile internet. This gets companies very excited about the prospect of this yet “untapped market”. My angle is clearly from the non-commodified and non-corporatized side: how these users can be treated

with dignity, respect, as legitimate customers, and be protected in ways that take seriously their concerns around data breaches and privacy violations, and cyber-harassments of all kinds.

However, many digital media scholars tend to disproportionately channel their energies on protecting these users. I am just as invested in talking with a variety of stakeholders to build on the next billion users' love for technologies and the allowances these new tools bring to their everyday lives – the joys, the pleasures, the intimacies, and human connections that humanize them, allow them to finally be visible and heard, and perhaps even build new forms of livelihoods especially when governments are letting them down.

Your research approach is very much “on the ground”, how did you come to explore this anthropological field?

I was originally motivated to invest in these populations in my early days where I was a master's student at Harvard University and I was given the opportunity to go travel to a rural community town called Kuppam in Andhra Pradesh, India funded by World Bank and Hewlett-Packard. This was the so called i-community project (Arora 2005) which was about digitizing this village with so-called ATMs for information, 24/7 streams of knowledge at the village center, learning kiosks for children and more. What I discovered after staying there for what became almost a year was that the local communities were deeply resilient and creative in collectively figuring out how to optimize their limited resources and how new tech, while important, was still a marginal part of social change. I witnessed firsthand how the techno-solutionism can divert precious resources in a top-down fashion with little engagement with the end users – often due to condescending worldviews on what these communities need and want and how the tech sector can deliver it to them better and faster while of course making a profit.

So, this got me committed to pushing back on the persistent myths about these communities that continues till today. It

is no wonder we keep seeing these demographics getting reinvented through new buzz terms. We exhaust older framings like the “emerging markets” or the “bottom of the pyramid” initiatives that promised and failed to deliver miracle societal impact – much because they were more techno than human centric. I hope my efforts, and shall I dare say missionary zeal to push back against these reproductive practices may hopefully pivot the direction a bit, so we don't reinvent the “a-ha moment” at the cost of these vast marginalized majorities.

Where and how do you conduct your research in this area? What methods and approaches do you use?

I work closely with the people on the ground. I have invested much time in looking for quality and passionate people who are local, who have community insight, and ideally are from the communities themselves. They have credibility that no amount of time an outsider like my-



Bildquelle: M. Muus

Payal Arora

Payal Arora is a Professor and Chair in Technology, Values and Global Media Cultures at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her expertise lies in inclusive design and user experiences among low-income communities worldwide and comes with two decades of fieldwork in such contexts.

self can build despite all good anthropological practice. When I look back at my teams, they have been dominantly women led and based and that's not surprising. They are so motivated when treated with respect and as true collaborators in these projects, especially when living in patriarchal societies where often they are not even given a chance to be a leader, a spokesperson, or a driver for change. It is important to get messy first and what I mean by that is immerse in the communities of choice, find interesting people and work already going on and continue to check this against presumptions of what you believe the context needs and wants. Then you start with informal conversations to inform yourself on the right kinds of meaningful questions. In digital ethnographies, what is most important is to also get on digital spaces of congregation (like Facebook messenger groups, WhatsApp groups etc). and trust to gain insight into what people really think about things – what they find appropriate, funny, important as much public expression is severely contained and curated particularly if you belong to a community that is at the margins.

Is there an example “from the field” you found especially memorable? Why was it special?

The fun part about being in the field is that your life is full of memorable moments that you take with you and carry with you for years. It's like a fuel that keeps me going especially when you get bogged down by toxic academic cultures. One of my favorite experiences was in Almora in the Himalayas where I wrote my first book 'Dot com mantra: social computing in the central Himalayas' (Arora 2010). I volunteered to work at a cybercafé as that is where the teens were getting together to compute for the first time. What I found was that these computer centers, set up for education and job hunting became proxy spaces for dating as that was and remains in India a taboo thing especially for girls as your reputation can be “damaged.” It was quite an awakening for me as I was expecting them to use their pre-



A call shop and internet café in Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

Photo: Arora Payal

cious and limited time at their computer stations for practical purposes – instead, it was infused with romance, flirtations via chatting across stations, and the full spectrum of teen angst while their friends stood outside keeping watch lest an adult comes by. This put me on the pathway to channeling my energies on digital leisure as I recognized that few get motivated by the practical, useful, utility driven needs but rather on that which keeps us awake at night- romance, love, social belonging, entertainment, pleasure.

Besides the leisure aspects of usage, which potential do you see in the use of digital technologies beyond the West?

When we ask about the use of digital technologies beyond the West today, it is akin to asking what use is of essential infrastructures, everyday public spaces, and social institutions. These technolo-

gies have become so embedded in our way of life, partly by choice but just as much due to governments and industries building their products and services on these platforms. Moreover, leisure cannot be seen as the other side of the coin of labor or the practical. It is infused in all aspects; it is about getting users to adopt mobile currencies given that almost two billion people remain unbanked in this world, mostly these next billion users – so what we find is that they are introduced to essential banking cultures and practices through gaming apps. A classic case being Alipay and WeChat and how these got most unbanked Chinese users into digital finance. We can say the same for the gamification of education, the ways of earning new forms of livelihood through content creators and the like.

Do challenges regarding digital technologies such as data protection or radical-

ization tendencies differ for users beyond the West? If so, in which ways?

Yes and no. Yes, in terms of enforcements – many countries outside the West have weak and overburdened legal institutions and law enforcement entities, so a law is as good as its implementation. In other words, they may talk the talk, but it may not be enforced in the Global South context. Further, data localization initiatives are in full swing much like what's happening in the West but with a twist. This is driven by the need for national sovereignty and control – what is looked upon as a push back against data colonialism of western companies coming to extract the data from these global south nations, so they can build their tools and services and even resell it back to these contexts. And of course, it is well worth reminding ourselves that liberal democracies are an exception and not the norm in the world – less than five percent of the nations can call themselves liberal democracies – most fall in the spectrum of paternalistic authoritarianism that can in some ways deliver essential services like affordable housing, education and more at the price of restrictive freedoms – e.g. Singapore. Yet, it still appeals to many people in the Global South to choose a Singapore over a United States as it resonates with what a dignified life looks like for their family.

How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the “next billion users”?

There is no doubt that they have been at the forefront of this pandemic and continue to be and bear the most brunt physically, and emotionally. Women have suffered far more as the burden of care has fallen disproportionately on their shoulders. Moreover, as we celebrate the silver lining of accelerated internet access and usage and the amplification of ecommerce and more especially during the pandemic, women in patriarchal societies are double victimized as they are losing out on an education, a job, as being online is typically considered indecent, inappropriate, and comes with high

risks that can make these girls lose their reputation and thereby family honor. So, stakes are high here.

Recently we have become witness to Meta's (previously Facebook's) problematic practices, for instance regarding data collection and their use of targeting algorithms. How do you assess the newest revelations of these practices regarding users beyond the West?

Good technology assessment is iterative, dialogical, and recognizes the social at the heart of its success.

These so-called new revelations are very old. Facebook/Meta has been immersed in numerous scandals and have had their reputation damaged over the decade, so this comes as no surprise. What is more interesting is how this company remains strong and powerful despite these numerous scandals; and how it remains an essential and critical public service for many of the Global South countries. It is ridiculous to be morally upright about being on Facebook; instead, we need to invest in regulating it, containing it, making them accountable to the public, often a public with few choices but to be on them for a various set of reasons.

How can processes for governing AI and digital technologies be developed that are based on universal values, not only European ones?

We need to stop talking about European values as if they are unique to the European context. If you look at the latest Green Deal document and other such EU texts, what you see peppered across the document is about European values. I get it. There is moral panic about the future of the European project – of the unity in diversity especially with Brexit and the rise of tensions with increasing authoritarian and non-liberal policies within EU that go against its stated values. But this

is not the way. When you speak about European values, it opens the gateways to more national centered values – Dutch values, German values, and then let's go global – and we can see the rise of Chinese values, Indian values – where nations are granted their unique cultural systems and thereby are forgiven for not subscribing to universal rights. In a time where we have compounding and urgent global problems like the pandemic cri-

sis and other expected global health crisis, the urgent need for global financial reform to push against the growing economic inequality, the climate crisis and more, we need to come together to agree on what we value the most as a society, as a species despite our differences. Instead, we are going hyper-local, to each nation to fend for themselves.

What processes are needed for this governance? And who are important actors to include in this?

The usual, of course, i.e. civic actors, NGOs, aid agencies, governments across the spectrum, industries etc. While this is obvious, what we see are academics refusing to engage with 'bad companies', national governments refusing to engage with state and municipal leaders, the fragmentation of NGOs competing for tiny crumbs of funding rather than coming together as a powerful consortium of actors. What we also need are independent global watchdogs for auditing and keeping tabs of violations across board on data governance, as much as they should valorize and amplify good data practices, policies, groups, and initiatives across cultures.

Which role could technology assessment (TA) play in this governance endeavor?

TA has a role across the global value chain in data governance. Good assessment is iterative, dialogical, and recognizes the social at the heart of its success. Assessments come with engaging with people who are the producers as well as the (active and passive) consumers of these products and services. We see a lot of demand for toolkits, assessment modules that should address all kinds of discrimination and should serve to build responsible, ethical, feminist, decolonial, and sustainable design. That's a lot of pressure. That's a lot to put on the shoulders of TA researchers. Rather, we should see the limits of tech and how these limits can be shaped by other social actors on an ongoing basis. By shedding the god complex, one can assess more realistically and humbly by doing the hard and boring work of everyday recognition and responsiveness to legitimate grievances.

What are your main research interests in the near future?

I will continue with femlab.co and focus on marginalized populations in the Global south. FemLab is coming out with a book on FemWork as an alternative approach to femtech and I am ready to get my head down to write my next book on designing for the next billion.

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