

Payal Arora

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With the proliferation of multi-functional smartphones and 3G or 4G mobile Internet in developing countries, the Internet has dramatically changed the ways of lives especially among the poorest in the Global South, including social networking, business, education, and entertainment. Payal Arora's new book, the Next Billion Users: Digital Life beyond the West, published by Harvard University Press, explores how digital technologies influence the everyday lives of users in developing countries. The book shows that the ways low-income users interact with ICTs are different from the assumption held by development agencies that technologies are a practical tool for improving the efficiency and productivity of the global poor. It also raises crucial questions on the social stratification of Internet usage within developing countries and identifies new forms of digital divides between the Global South and North: to what extent do emerging ICTs fulfil the needs of the information have-nots and have-less for work, social, romance, and play? How should governments, development agencies, and technology companies update their agendas for development projects to equip the global poor with digital capacities so that they benefit from the mundane uses of ICTs in everyday life? Most importantly, the author warns that users' motivations and aspirations for entertainment in developing countries might lead to potential risks such as the exploitation of digital labor, mass surveillance of the poor, and the wide spread of misinformation.

The book starts two chapters on how the global poor and rich differ in leisure. In recent years the world has witnessed a narrowing gap in Internet access between the rich and poor users. Thus, digital divides become less about the differences in digital infrastructure and more about differences in online services and users' capabilities to fully engage in diverse forms of online activities. But Arora also proposes a third type of digital divide in addition to the access and usage divides, a new divide in the 'access, intent, use of digital leisure time' (p. 8). She calls for more attention to when, why, and how global poor users pursue happiness online by linking to previous sociological discussions on work and leisure and how leisure is associated with labor. For example, she gives the case study of gold farmers, low-come gamers from developing countries whose time invested in online games turns into virtual equipment in games and is then commodified and sold to users in developed countries as 'other people's online leisure' (p, 20). However, the example of gold farmers also suggests that the line between leisure and work is not clear-cut in the context of everyday life. Although social media, mobile games, and short-video sharing platforms are designed by technology companies to attract time and attention from users in developing countries, these users, even those who live in underprivileged communities, still domesticate new technologies in ways that fulfil their everyday needs for self-development, business, or employment. A teenager living in rural China practices, for example, who speaks English by playing mobile games online with an international community of gamers, or a middle-aged female farmer who learns handicraft skills to make and sell traditional artifacts for tourists. By defining this third dimension of the digital divide in leisure, the author goes on to specify what distinguishes leisure from work and entertaining from practical use before focusing on the social stratification of leisure on the Internet.

The third chapter focuses on how the global media system prioritizes protecting the copyrights of Western media conglomerates and punishes the pirated reproduction of media content in developing countries. As the author argues, behind the high demand of pirated content among the global poor users lies an asymmetrical power relationship between the 'underrepresented' (p.52) media market in developing countries and Western media industry's dominance of media content production. The same asymmetry between the next billion users and technology companies is also reflected in the control of digital data, generated by the poor through their day-to-day use of digital platforms. Here the author shows successful practices where local and international companies develop digital products or services if they can consider the needs and challenges of the poor. There may also be practical business models that offer digital technology solutions to addressing poverty. But the author is also concerned that once hackers, the creators of 'frugal innovations' (p. 90) that benefit the poor, are 'absorbed into the formal economy' (p. 85), they will lose their grassroots-based innovation when they become allied with governments. Nevertheless, the grassroots digital economy is resilient to the formal economy and might even revolutionize or restructure traditional industries. For example, the Chinese cell phone manufacturing industry once produced cheap knockoff phones through copying the design of high-end cellphones. Yet it is now gradually implementing frugal innovations inspired from the market in developing areas and is continuing to produce affordable devices for the global poor.

Despite development organizations' expectations that playing games could facilitate learning among the global poor, the author argues in Chapter five and six that 'child-centered play with technology is no substitute for education' (p. 103) and that the poor 'should not be guinea pigs for new technology' (p. 150). The author's fieldwork with rural Indian students shows that encountering educational content through unguided and unsupervised online serendipity not only requires a child's familiarity with technological skills and online resources, but also basic algorithmic knowledge of search engines. The over-enthusiasm of about the role of technology in replacing institutional education and delivering knowledge, as the author argues, originates from myths about children in the global South as more desperate for knowledge than those in the West. Replacing teachers with computers is indeed impractical and unrealistic in marginalized communities. However, what has already been commonly implemented in education is the design of educational platforms using gamification and digitalizing educational resources into local languages. Both approaches are more practical than the example criticized in the chapter. In this case the author could have provided more discussion of cases where learning and playing or digital technologies and teachers are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary with each other in promoting education in the global South.

Chapter seven focuses on how the poor are monitored and policed by new technologies. Individuals' data has been harnessed by governments and technology companies to either maintain social stability or assess users' financial viability. The author argues that the poor are particularly vulnerable to biases and discrimination embedded in digital surveillance. Data shared by poor users is collected and reused to surveil the community, but information generated through big data is often inaccessible to residents in the community. Global poor users commonly experience a feeling of insecurity online due to technologies such as location-based tracking. As the author shows, compared to Western countries, users in developing countries are often exposed to higher risks online and yet receive fewer police protections from hacking and identity theft. The danger, as the author rightly points out, is a growing distrust towards new technologies among young users in poor areas.

Chapter eight looks at how digital technologies change intimate relationships for the global poor. Young female users are often more likely to face the clash between a patriarchal culture deeply rooted in society and an intimate relationship that they develop in the digital space. At the same time, some young men in developing countries become victims of fake love and financial fraud

that manipulates young men's desire for intimacy. However, what is missing from the chapter is how digital technologies influence not only the seeking but also the maintenance of the intimate relationship between partners, and how other forms of family relationships, for example, the bonding between parents and children, have been changed by the Internet.

To sum up, the Internet for users in developing countries serves both practical and entertainment functions. One of the main reasons is that technology developers, most of whom reside in Western countries, are not able to consider the needs of the poor or to understand the local context when designing technologies for development - is because they 'have exoticized the marginalized majority' (p. 202). This mismatch between middle-class designers and underprivileged users explains why the global poor still suffer from digital divides in Internet usage and participation. The book shows that gaps between the rich and poor, global North and South, urban and rural are unlikely to be eliminated only through digital technologies. Investment in digital technologies should not replace funding for political, economic, and cultural development in marginalized communities. Nevertheless, as devices and apps created in technology hubs in developing countries become increasingly popular in developing countries, perhaps the author's view that innovations are 'inherently unpredictable and disruptive' (p.144) is overly pessimistic. Technological innovations that are innovated from the grassroots and aim to fulfil the needs of the next billion users could potentially facilitate social development, give digital autonomy to the poor, and restructure the global digital media industry. Nevertheless, the author provides a useful corrective to the overly optimistic technology and development story.

Biography

Pu Yan is a PhD candidate at Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford. Her research focuses on the influence of emerging ICTs on everyday information practices in China. In her 15-months fieldwork in a village and a factory in Central China, she explored the adoption of ICTs in developing areas and studied how the Internet has influenced information-seeking practices in everyday life.

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