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interview with Ramesh Srinivasan

Lovink, G.W.

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Tech Anthropology Today: Interview with Ramesh Srinivasan

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By Geert Lovink

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“How can we embrace the realities of communities too-often relegated to the margins?” In *Whose Global Village?* (NYUPress, 2017) UCLA scholar Ramesh Srinivasan travels the globe in order to find out much techno-autonomy there’s still left. Now that more than half of the world has moved to urban centres, the rural population is literary a minority and is kindly asked to adjust accordingly. This makes Srinivasan’s work even more urgent when he asks “what the internet, mobile phone or social media platforms may look like when considered from the perspectives of diverse cultures.”

The communities Ramesh Srinivasan visits are on the defensive, in a process of fragmentation. “There is a disconnection not just from one another,” he writes, “but also from the common threads of their history and culture. The tribes and villages experience “placelessness, fragmentation of identity, and dissolution of social bonds.” Throughout the study, which took place between 2004-2013, Srinivasan reports from the rising gap between the proposed technologies (such as videos, websites, databases) and the ‘techno-solutionism’ (as described by Morozov) that he wants to prevent. Ramesh is so honest to present this dilemma as an inner struggle of today’s anthropologist with a technology background. Computers and smart phones are an integral part of the everyday life—no matter where we go—and can no longer be presented as liberating tools. This put the ‘ICT for development’ researcher in an awkward position. Post-colonial theories have widely been read and their influence (from Fanon, Said to Spivak) is having an inevitable impact. This in turn leads to a new attitude that I would describe as ‘radical modesty’ (if not ‘vital pessimism’).

While studying the impact of the Tribal Peace system that he and others installed to connect the different Navajo tribes in San Diego County, Srinivasan realises that he has to work with rather than ignore the networks that exist. “It was neither the technology nor institutions that connected the people I had met. Instead, the very few threads of kinship I noted were related to revered individuals, regarded by most with collective respect and as a source of inspiration.” It is with and through the elders that he starts to draw up information architectures (or ‘ontologies’), listing topics, themes, and values across the native reservations. How can ‘lateral networks’ be supported in a process of what James Carey calls ‘ritual communication’?

Needless to say this approach takes us light years away from Facebook and other social media. This is only in part a question of translating interfaces to local indigenous languages. The proposed systems require the design of its own visual metaphors, reminding us of 1990s multi-media navigation screens, meant to represent digital storytelling. This is dealt with in closed, or semi-open networks, paying respect to the different experiences of time and space. These ideas are put to the test in the last part of the book that describes the encounter with the Zuni tribe (Arizona/New Mexico), where Ramesh Srinivasan worked together with Robin Boast. It is amongst the Zuni peoples that the researchers encounter the distrust against anthropologists. “Our Zuni friends voiced feelings of misrepresentation and anger at their objectification. They explained that social scientists would visit their community, exoticize their traditions and customs, and extract what they could to benefit their own agendas rather than those of the community.”

The gained detachment aims to put the researcher “at the service of our friends and partners.” Important is no longer the one-way transfer of knowledge but the art of listening. Towards the end of his study Ramesh asks: “What would it mean to step away from top-down understandings of the internet and instead ‘splinter’ the way we think about technologies and the communities they may support?” As an activist in Egypt explained: “We do not need another NGO or a new dialogue.com to solve our problems—we just need you to listen, support our voices, and pay attention to what we we do.” *Whose Global Village?* adequately describes the moral and methodological crisis in the ‘ICT for Development’ field. The wide condemnation of Facebook’s neo-colonial internet.org balloon campaign to bring access (to Facebook) to hundreds of millions of rural poor in India clearly marks a paradigm shift. Access is no longer a benevolent project. It’s clear that it does not contribute to a redistribution of wealth and makes global inequality only worse. So much for internet charity.

Ramesh admits: “Trained as a designer and engineer, I recognize my innate tendency to valorise my power to come up with a set of solutions for any challenge at hand. Yet every project I have described illustrates the valuable insights gained when I put aside my own agenda and bias as much as possible to open myself to experiences that could not have been predicted

from afar.” This modesty sounds like a new starting point. But it is resulting into new concepts and narratives? This might be too much to ask of a single publication (in fact, the first book publication of this author). The ‘tactical distance’, created out of respect for the communities-in-defence, results into rather sparse information about the places we visit. There are no interview fragments included in the book, and the few local leaders that we encounter do not speak to the reader in a direct manner. The chosen way to report creates a vague cloud of secrecy around the research itself. Were more detailed research results published elsewhere or only accessible for donors (a common practice in NGO land)? What happens when we listen but do not acknowledge the Other? Is it too risky to give them a voice? Might their opinions and desires be too ordinary, too radical, or simply not what we want to hear? What if they do not fit our Western expectations? The Others are humans, after all, and, like us, tend not to live up to expectations. These, and more, are some of the questions we encounter once we give up on the development rhetoric.

Geert Lovink: You’ve been in a lucky, privileged position to travel so often and witness events and encounter communities in diverse places such as Cairo during the 2011 uprising, with the Zapatistas Chiapas, doing research in the land of your ancestors, South India and on reservations in the South-West of the United States. The offline encounter in-real-life seems to be constitutional for your theory. In the past scholars travelled through the library and many these days do not leave their screens while processing their ‘big data’. Digital ethnography, on the other hand, seems to require direct exchanges with the Other. This assumption pops in all chapters. Is traveling the new luxury? Or should we say that it is rather dedicated time? Once you arrive elsewhere there is suddenly another time regime.

Ramesh Srinivasan: Indeed, I think all of us as researchers and teachers are nothing if not ‘lucky’ or ‘privileged’. And you’re certainly on point to recognize that the root of my scholarship and activism locates technologies within an assemblage of other factors – peoples, places, infrastructures, and environments. That is why the ‘offline’ if you will is so critical to understanding the ‘online’—because they do not exist in isolation and what we have constructed is an illusory binary between the two. If we want to be of

service and understand the complex relationships between technologies, politics, and cultures—as I attempt to do via the multiple case studies discussed in the book, we need to put our bodies and hearts in places rather than our distant gaze. It’s critical for me to not step foot anywhere where I am not invited first, and to critically think about my role and power as I enter different environments. Indeed, the book is full of ethnographies of how I worked to listen more than make, and how I eschew the ‘study of’ any community and instead write about what we create and work on together. My goal is to collaborate rather than study, rather than fetishize from afar.

GL: *Whose Global Village?* has an unusual time span of 10-14 years. First research goes back to 2003-2004. Some case study closed in 2005 while most literature dates from 2012-2013. In between, the 2008 global financial crisis occurred, the smart phone was launched and apps became mainstream. How did you deal with these constant changes? Are you proposing a ‘longue durée’ in media studies and internet criticism? What are the benefits of this approach? How do you see ‘grassroots storytelling’ dealing with the relentless changes of platforms, interfaces and protocols? Do remote communities have a different approach to the latest fashion and the famous ‘fear of missing out’?

RS: There are some dynamics that don’t change no matter what app, gadget or platform has captured the popular imagination. That is—the realities of power over how technologies are designed, owned, and politically or economically appropriated. The book starts with the simple but surprisingly ignored sociotechnical truism – People and societies shape and are shaped by technologies. Yet such a small percentage of Internet users have any power over the design process let alone any sovereignty over what occurs with their data and identities as they are refracted onto digital networks. Those issues are timeless and all the more urgent today. I focus on the political and cultural flashpoints where by users and communities can reign in their blind trust of new digital platforms and instead take power over these in relation to their local concerns and agendas.

GL: As a media activist you have a background in engineering. However, at UCLA you work inside library science (called ‘information studies’). However,

you seem to relate most to the role of anthropologist, in that you deeply desire not make past mistakes in encounters with ‘the Other’. In this context you work with Mary Louise Pratt’s theory of the contact zones and apply this to the design of ‘multiple ontologies’. I never hear IT engineers talking about contact zones. How do you want to carry your insights into the tech world? After all, you live in California. Who else is going to do this? What could be a good strategy? How do you look at the Bay Area and the global geek class they still dominate in terms of its global imaginary?

RS: I see myself as a scholar who can contribute to fields that tend to remain mostly distinct in the academy—design, engineering, cultural studies, media studies are but a few. To engage in the charge of the book, of locating our understandings of digital networks and systems in relation to diverse cultures and users worldwide, all of these fields are useful to invoke and bring into dialogue with one another. I’m fortunate to be in a department that supports this interdisciplinarity and indeed as you stated, coming from California and trained in engineering here, I believe it is all the more important to question the black boxes not just of Silicon Valley hardware and software platform design but to push these incredibly powerful technologies to open up to an engaged, conversational social contract with diverse publics.

GL: Over the past 10-15 years we’ve seen the closing down of the possibility space of the Web and the rise of the ‘easy to use’ template culture of social media. The technologies that you’ve proposed and built seem to move away from the consumer culture. In South India you’re spread video cameras, elsewhere you’ve developed a dedicated Tribal Peace system interface (as part of a stand-alone website) while for the Zuni communities you’ve utilized the FileMaker Pro Advanced database software. Not Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube (and no wikis either). Can you elaborate on this?

RS: It’s important to not assume that merely putting content online, on top of platforms that we know hardly are designed to directly support a user’s interests are the way forward. The interest, across each of the book’s chapters, is to instead think about how the communities with which I collaborate can have their interests served via technologies either that we design together or appropriate/subvert in various ways. I don’t inherently

believe that any of us of Facebook or Google is anathema to this but far too often we see examples where such ‘participation’ actually does little to shape any cultural or political cause from the grassroots. So we think agnostically and critically about the systems, networks and infrastructures we use in relation to our collaborations.

GL: Can you tell us what you’ve been doing over the past few years? Did you continue to work in the same direction? The book indicates that your collaboration with Robin Boast and the work with the Zuni Native American Reservation seems to continue.

RS: My interests lie in that important space between understanding how technologies may aid and support grassroots political movements and diverse user communities. The Zuni collaboration, described in chapter 4, is interested in that cause in relation to the political and cultural sovereignty of a tribe that was not just historically colonized but still faces the objectification and misrepresentation of new forms of coloniality online.

The cases in the book look at both political movements as well as diverse cultures and communities. Currently, I am collaborating with activists and indigenous Zapotec and Mixtec communities in the Oaxaca Mexico region, one of the most bio-diverse and culturally/linguistically diverse parts of our world. In this work, I am writing about the Rhizomatica project (invoking Deleuze’s rhizome) where these communities are designing their own collectively-owned cell phone networks in cloud forests all around the region. This has massive political and economic effects. What we see here is the rhizome in action, a set of networks, systems, and infrastructures shaped and produced from the grassroots, by communities and for communities, and not for the major corporations of our world that tend to on the surface exploit and monitor the activities of these people. More on this amazing project, including some videos at www.rhizomatica.org. I believe that as we start to think about this new effort, that Lisa Parks and I describe as ‘network sovereignty’, we can start to embark on a path I describe in detail in chapter 5 of the book, of getting back the social contract and communitarian potential of technology to serve democratic agendas located in people’s politics and cultures.

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Ramesh Srinivasan, *Whose Global Village? Rethinking How Technology Shapes Our World*, New York University Press, New York, 2017.

