

BOOK REVIEW

The Next Billion Users

Arora, P. (2019). *The Next Billion Users: Digital Life Beyond the West*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. ISBN: 978-0674983786. 280 pp. Listed price: \$35 USD.

Review by Nanditha Narayanamoorthy, York University

Payal Arora's *The Next Billion Users: Digital Life Beyond the West* eloquently interrupts our discussions of Western engagement with digital technologies, and redirects our focus to the *other* billion users who originate from the Global South, largely from Asia, and whose lives are deeply entangled with the digital world. Arora's timely intervention is an exploration of how the poor from the South, who are the largest consumers of technology in the world, engage with new media (p.4). The author's intention with the book is twofold. She is interested primarily in opening the debate towards the investigation of internet activities of non-Western users. She is equally motivated in dismantling the clichés about our perceptions of the global poor and their digital interactions. Our belief is that the poor take to technology to raise themselves out of poverty and that technology and its presence in the South automatically translates to financial, economic, and social development. Media corporations and tech industries have largely created the image of "geeks as the new messiahs" who have set out to end poverty through "simple and clean technological solutions" (p.123). As Arora destabilizes the stereotypes of the digital poor, she critiques the massive investment of industries and projects that are launched under the banner of techno-utopianism. Ultimately, she disputes the grand myth that poverty requires extreme measures, and underscores that the poor are not radically different from everyone else (p.123).

To expose “how and why the fictions of online behaviours of the digital poor are perpetuated” (p.5), the author employs the “leisure framework” to indicate that the Global South primarily uses the Internet for leisure, entertainment, and social networking (p.12) as we do in the West. The Global South, in other words, is a “leisure economy” (p.33). Using extensive data that she collects through interviews, and case studies in developing countries like India, Brazil, China, and Saudi Arabia, Arora humanizes the global poor by demonstrating how they play, learn, create bonds, find love/intimacy, battle privacy and surveillance concerns, and create solutions for scarcity of resources through hacking and piracy practices on these platforms. She positions digital spaces for them as both designed and employed for play, and as sites of depravity, and even romance. The poor are consistently “commodified in the name of inclusivity” (p.71), and are left to build their own creative systems through “frugal innovation” (p.72). The digital becomes an oppositional site of resistance through which the poor display their engagement in leisure activities.

The book, and the central arguments around which it deftly maneuvers, are compelling in their banality. The poor are not invested in technology to uplift themselves, and therefore refute the Western idea of capitalist progress (p.29). The Internet is, therefore, neither a great leveler (p.6), nor a grand project to transform the poor. Arora uses her own experience of fieldwork in India, and her journey as an anthropologist in low-income communities to confront powerful industries that exploit the poor, and experiment with their learning through investments. The poor have everything to lose (p.123), and they need *less* innovation. She skillfully brings down, through evidence, techno-enthusiasts including Nicholas Negroponte (One Laptop Per Child) and Sugata Mitra (the Hole-in-the-wall experiment) who champion self-learning by the poor via the Internet. Another strength of the book is the author’s framing of Western perceptions of the Global South as a product of colonial attitudes. This occurs in the form of corporations that seek to collect information, commodify, and (through surveillance), control the minds and bodies of the digital poor which are “marked at the fringe,” or the periphery (p.204). A similar colonial logic drives the impression of the poor as “asexual beings” (p.208) who are liberated through labour. The author rightly demands why we burden the poor with these expectations.

Equally fascinating is Arora's brief foray into the gendered nature of digital spaces in the South. Her argument that men dominate the space at the intersection of the digital and leisure may be a point of interest for future scholars to expand on. Perhaps the Internet can operate differently for the other gender in the South. This might occur with a more emancipatory function in a leisure economy driven by masculine desires towards entertainment and idleness as described by the author.

This book is a significant contribution to literature at several junctures; including new media studies, big data studies, digital media studies, Global South studies, cultural studies, anthropology, and social sciences that together seek to unearth the power dynamics shaping the interactions and identities of the global poor in relation to new technologies. It opens a necessary space for debates that involves the other billion users we forget to bring into our discussions of technology and digital media. We must begin by redefining our perceptions of the digital poor, and how they use technology. This will eventually enable the creation of more productive solutions in how we design these spaces; in how the poor can be protected against control through surveillance; and making these spaces are made more available for such that the digital poor are not demonized by media corporations. We must also ask, as Arora compellingly does, whether technology corporations should continue to play messiah, as well as leading with assumptions of the positive influence of new media technologies for the poor.

This book is recommended for larger audiences. This will help them to be acquainted with who uses the Internet, and to rethink how they personally use it. Finally, the book is equally useful for emerging scholars who need to further their knowledge of the complex entanglements between technology and the poor.