



## Book Review: The next billion users: Digital life beyond the west

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*BOOK REVIEW: Arora, P. (2019). The next billion users: Digital life beyond the west. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.*

The Next Billion Users is a critical attempt at dewesternising our understanding of the use of the internet and digital devices in rural and underdeveloped regions of the world. Arora takes the reader on a journey through. Arora's engagement with the poor communities of the Global South, coming from her extensive travel across the region, helps her in examining various development activities charted and executed to improve the lives of the global poor.

The book begins with a blow of reality; poverty is more widespread than what the affluent would like to believe. The global poor are mostly young and live outside of the West; interestingly mobile phones are becoming as much a part of their life as their urban counterparts. There is a notion that the global poor are somewhat virtuous in their internet usage and engages with it primarily for utilitarian purposes. By presenting observations and findings from her ten years of experience working in the Indian slums, Brazilian favelas, and South African townships – Payal Arora proves this notion wrong.

The book voices that a large number of new users in the emerging markets who are young seek romance, and entertainment online, much like their counterparts in the West. The most successful digital ventures in these regions are famous for providing leisure, such as Facebook and Jio. There is a vast difference in the way privacy is perceived in the Global South and the West. Arora looks at how young men and women identify the online world as a space where they can counter the conservative norms of their communities.

The first chapter, The Leisure Divide shows us how the online behavior and usage pattern of the poor is not different from that of the youth in the rest of the world. They spend most of their time with the device seeking entertainment. But, they have to build strategies to effectively use technology to suit their needs as they are continually battling issues such as network coverage. The author states that to eliminate the digital divide, merely providing the internet is not the solution, it needs to be preceded by an understanding of their concerns in access, and usage divides of all kinds. The chapter delves into the gender divide that comes into play at a very young age with the boys spending their time in leisurely activities, while the girls have already gotten into housework. Being busy with chores naturally cuts down the time spent on leisure. The author identifies similar patterns in usage and the gender divide in rural India and among aboriginal communities in Australia.

Deviant by Design (Chapter 2) looks at the lives of youth from rural backgrounds who engage in leisurely activities in the online space. Community Information Centers that commenced in the 2000s in Himachal Pradesh turned out to be ‘recreational hubs for the poor’ (pg. 32), with young people frequenting to engage with platforms like Orkut and Facebook. The global poor find social networks a space for ‘friending, frolic, and fantasy,’ says the author – where they find an opportunity to make friends with people from around the world, especially of another gender, which is a taboo for them in their real world. Arora discusses how many development projects fail to identify that the needs of the global poor are not very different from the rest of the world.

In Media Bandits (Chapter 3), the author accuses corporates of having created a pricing model that is unaffordable to the global poor, which in turn forces them to undertake illegal means for their share of entertainment. They are then shown in poor light on the scale of morality over their act of piracy. Arora points to the hierarchy that exists in the digital spaces, and how the global poor are excluded due to lack of consideration. The author defends media piracy as the only means left with the poor in a time when pricing concerns exclude them and their affordability. She emphasizes on how some of the dominant digital media corporations of today had started as pirate organizations – Spotify, Pirate Bay are stated as examples. However, there is a shift in perception of the enterprising spirit among the needy in their pursuit of entertainment.

This follows onto the next chapter; The Virtuous Poor deals with the innovation born out of necessity among low-income communities. Frugal innovation or what is known as ‘jugaad’ in India is explained with examples of how the poor innovate their way to various resources. Arora adds how the ubiquitous mobile phone has found new ways to serve the poor. The author mentions governance projects that were carried out in collaboration with citizens and achieved significant results – focusing on the use of technology for good. The adverse effects of these frugal innovations, especially on safety, are not ignored. The author carries the reader through informal economies of different kinds around the world, especially the ones in India, which are born out of poverty.

In Slumdog Inspiration (Chapter 5), Arora criticizes technology-driven social development initiatives such as Hole-in-the-Wall by Sugata Mitra. She questions the results achieved by the Hole-in-the-Wall project and its likes, interrogating their projected results and scrutinizing the same. Arora questions the project based on her studies and experiences in rural India. In the section, ‘Myths, Messiahs, and Miracles’ the author sheds light on how these projects succeed in winning awards and achieving funds. The Poverty Laboratory (Chapter 6) is a continuation of the previous chapter and explains how the poor have “been used as test subjects for social experiments” (pg. 128). Arora takes the reader through various educational experiments that she has been a part of, and the experiences and learning she has gathered from the same. The chapter deals with the fetishization of using technology in education and takes the reader through the Global Learning XPRIZE event of 2016. The many contenders for the prize and the attempts made to improve the quality of education in various parts of the world are critically examined. Arora discusses the funds received by technology-aided education initiatives, especially those working in deprived communities.

The author continues to elaborate on the tragedy involved in these projects through Privacy, Paucity, and Profit (Chapter 7), which mostly looks at how privacy is conceived in various parts of the world and draws similarities. The chapter delves into the various surveillance systems such as the Aadhar system in India and digital tracking in China, used by Governments around the world, and looks at it from the point of whom it benefits. Arora also discusses the online

behavior of teens in India and Brazil and their concerns on the digital space. The chapter examines the corporate interests behind various digital development initiatives in developing countries, especially those of Facebook.

Chapter 8, *Forbidden Love* is concerned with how romance changes the dynamics in privacy and usage. In communities where strict norms are keeping young male and female members apart from each other, the digital space provides an avenue for them to interact with each other. It discusses the risks taken by both parties in their pursuit of romance; the deceptions on the online spaces and the traps it holds.

In the Epilogue, Payal Arora emphasizes the need to analyze and understand the current online behavior of the global poor before devising schemes to get them out of poverty through online means. The author suggests that the poor are often being tested in the name of development and innovation and that this needs to stop; she advocates for people centricism in the use and application of technology.

Throughout the narrative, the author critically evaluates various elements such as development, digital access, development through digital tools, and funding for digital development initiatives. Payal Arora states that many a time, projects, which sound promising and over the top get more funds than the ones that are truly worthy and deserving of funds. Funds are driven into the promises of magical digital transformation, often at the expense of what they already had. She explains in depth the issues with the One Laptop per Child program by Nicholas Negroponte and Sugata Mitra's Hole-in-the-Wall experiment; how they have both been massive failures, as they did not look at the basic requirements in the communities, they went into.

The book takes a side and it is not difficult to see. But, at the same time, it also leaves the reader wondering if the digital did not leave anything significantly positive in the lives of the poor after all. Arora picks on technology-based development projects and its failures, throwing light on how it should not be done. The right path is perhaps yet to be discovered, after some ethical reconsideration.

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### Notes on the Contributor

**Renza Iqbal** is a PhD candidate at Erasmus School of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam and a research fellow at the Fellow Programme in Management – Communications at MICA, Ahmedabad. Currently, she is exploring digital inequalities among marginalised communities in the Global South through a cultural lens.