

Peer Learning (2 of 4): Abolitionist Tech and Visions from the Global South

This is a summary of the peer learning session on abolitionist tech and visions from the Global South held on 4 April 2022 as part of the decolonising digital rights field process. The session was hosted by Imani Mason Jordan, Chenai Chair, and Thenmozhi Soundararajan. The summary was written by Joel Hide. An audio version of this text, read by Laurence Meyer, is available [here](#).

Imani, who is an interdisciplinary writer, artist, editor and facilitator, opened the session by speaking about abolition and what it means to take an abolitionist approach. They started by defining the Prison Industrial Complex, using the definition from [Critical Resistance](#): “**The prison industrial complex (PIC) is a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems. Through its reach and impact, the PIC helps and maintains the authority of people who get their power through racial, economic and other privileges. The PIC maintains oppression and inequality.**”

Imani explained that the work of abolition is to eliminate prisons, policing, and surveillance and create alternatives. It is not an isolated system but a broad strategy and is both a practical organising tool & a long-term goal. It can serve as a placemaking strategy. At its heart, abolition is about challenging carceral logics. For instance, during the pandemic the drug policy community was asking for the release of specific prisoners, those imprisoned for non-violent possession. In doing so, these campaigners divided prisoners up into “good” prisoners, who deserve to be released, and “bad” prisoners who deserve to be in jail. Meanwhile abolitionist movements were calling for the release of all prisoners.

At the same time, Imani highlighted that progress does not necessarily require complete abolition overnight; however, it is crucial that any reforms that are made challenge carceral logics, rather continuing to entrench them.

Imani proposed that we check proposed policy reforms using the following questions:

- does it reduce funding to police?
- does it challenge the notion that police bring about safety?
- does it reduce the scale of policing?

Imani highlighted that policing and the state collude and collaborate with new digital forms, including surveillance technologies such as facial recognition, to further their capacity to criminalise and control. This is not only about the state, however; it is also about the capitalist drive of carceral logics, for instance in the form of private prisons. There is a carceral, capitalist, colonial matrix and we need to understand how these three elements are imbricated in each other.

In the ensuing discussion, Sarah pointed out that anticapitalism is also key in the digital world, where companies profit from introducing new tech. Laurence drew a parallel between reformist politics which don't challenge the fundamental logic of carceralism and those who deploy the terms “refugee” and “migrant” to distinguish between supposedly legitimate and illegitimate reasons for migration.

Next, **Chenai Chair** spoke about gender and tech from an African feminist perspective. Chenai is an expert on the intersection of digital technology and gender having worked on

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understanding the impact of technology in society through research and public policy assessment- she works on african feminist perspective on digital issues. Chenai is also a member of the advisory group of the decolonising process.

Chenai noted that when she begun her research work there was a lack of research concerning what is needed for african women to access the internet, with the exception of marketing tricks such as pink-coloured phones.

The dominant narrative around African women focuses on poverty and situates them as consumers of knowledge, never as a resource or source of knowledge, and does not consider their agency.

So what do African women do on the internet? African women are not all the same: class, education, geography, sexuality and gender diversity all shape differences in access and relationship to the web. When studies of access are done, particular kinds of African women tend to be highlighted and others overlooked; for instance, policies promoting the internet tend to take on a very heteronormative perspective.

For those African women who do have access to the internet, there is not a lot of information there produced for them. The information available for free, such as through Facebook's Free Basics, was produced outside of Africa.

Chenai then turned to the question of how we centre African women when talking about digital rights. She noted that APC have done work on making the [feminist internet by and for African women](#). They call for more African women online - this provides an alternative to the dominant narratives and enables African women to find connections and community and relate to each other around specific issues. They support upcoming feminists working on online gender based violence and engage in collective resistance including using memes to change the narrative. They look at how these women actually use the internet and reflect on how to make the internet safer.

Another good example of work done is [Holaaa!](#), which is a hub created by and for queer people in Africa that shows pleasure and fun on the internet, and promotes sexual and reproductive health rights.

My Data Rights Platform centres women in AI, privacy, data protection. They shift the conversation away from seeing tech as a silver bullet, instead placing it in the context of existing inequality. What are the issues that will be prioritised? What is the current understanding of gender? Often you hear people speaking about gender but rarely concrete intervention around data protection when it comes to African women and gender diverse people- the DPA rarely actually shares information on how data breaches differently impact African women and gender diverse people.

Chenai rounded up by saying that it is important to emphasise that we need to unpack the context and be aware of our own privileges and biases. We also need to reflect on what it means to hold space for complexity and different meanings.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan, who is a filmmaker, transmedia artist and storyteller, began by setting out what decolonising means in the south Asian context. Decolonising means not just understanding how the global north engages with the region, but also what preexisting hierarchies do we need to tackle. Here, caste apartheid is key. Caste is a social structure analagous to race, it began thousands of years ago, based on a social fiction which places some at the top

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and forces those at the bottom to fight for their piece of the pie. Brahminism is the ideology behind this system; [decolonising begins with debrahminising](#).

Thenmozhi argues that we *need to understand caste and its implications in tech*. Digital brahminism is the way in which caste reanimates itself from digital spaces.

When you take a community like South Asians, who are traumatised by castist mindsets, and then go to work for Big Tech. Many of them are from dominant castes and they are fully participating in carceral tech. How do we create a liberatory future - not liberal diversity & inclusion - for those working in these companies, some of whom are from caste oppressed backgrounds. We can't rely on a "diverse" facebook with Indian people working there to protect us.

Decolonising is not an idea in the sky, it's about understanding what kind of technology do we need to have that supports democracy.

In India right now there is a digital authoritarian government in India that is perpetrating genocide. Big tech has free reign here and uses it to gather huge amounts of data, particularly on cast oppressed and marginalised religious groups.

How do we respond? We know that philanthropy wants us to focus on rapid response, rather than addressing structural issues, such as by building a feminist and dalit internet. We need to fund women of colour to experiment with tech and then fund this to scale. This needs to be safe tech, tech that promotes justice and restoration after harm.

This moment of challenge for democracy is also a referendum of where carcerality has brought us, showing these systems are not working.

We need to invest in a decolonised internet that reflect the realities of what people need, we need a vision of transformative future, which is decolonised, debrahmanised future, not the absence of jails, but a positive vision of what we are for.

We need to draw on ancestors who had different scientific world views to open up the types of technologies and tools we need to get to our futures.

Following Thenmozhi's talk, the group came onto the question of funding, noting that much of the money that funders have, and therefore the funding for the work that we do, was made using oppressive systems, such as big tech. How do we square the need to use the money available now but also not support the capitalist system that provides it?

Imani stated that philanthropy is part of the problem, based in a situation of unequal resources and so is a feature that will have to be dismantled. For now however, the key question is - what are the consequences in the long term of the relationships we have with funders, are there strings attached to the money provided? What is the funder getting in exchange for that money?

Anasuya stated that she considers the equitable distribution right now as reparations.

Chenai said that this is one of the key challenges young black women face: funders don't want to fund the work we want to do. We need to look at sustainable funding and who gets it, pushing others to fund alternatives which might be less politically acceptable. We need to set up spaces

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where we can get no strings attached funds, especially for those of us in the Global South, the global majority.

One participant noted that they worry about the fact that so many funders engage in these conversations from a "diversity and inclusion" lens but are not committed to structural changes and even within funding orgs those with proximity to these conversations are not those with power to change. But they noted that part of the work of the design process is to build strategies to help change that.

Following this discussion, we moved to a check out.