By Geert Lovink

Ramesh Srinivasan is an ambitious worldwide traveller. Maybe we could best describe him as a techno antropologist. He is based in LA where he is assistant professor both in the Department of Information Studies and in Design|Media Arts at the University of California Los Angeles. He is describes himself as a "hybrid of an engineer, designer, social scientist, and ethnographer." His research and consultancy work focuses on the interaction between new media technologies and global cultures and communities. This involves studying the ways in which information technology shapes global education, health, economics, politics, governance, and social movements. So far he worked in places like Kyrgyzstan, India and Native America. Every now and then he shows up in Europe where I met him in Amsterdam at the New Network Theory conference in June 2007. Ramesh earned a doctorate in design from Harvard University, a Master of Science in Media Arts and Sciences from MIT Media Laboratory and a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Engineering from Stanford University. In this interview we discuss how to balance the fast-changing global community IT research and the scholarly requirements of U.S. academic life.

Geert Lovink: Correct me if I am wrong. The overall ambition of your work is rewriting the architecture of the machinery. You believe, as I do, that it should be possible for grassroots organizations, activists, artists and others to change the very structure of information technologies and networks. Code is not fixed. Could you give us possible versions of the history of this idea? How does this notion differ from Henry Jenkins' participatory culture and the idea of the prosumer on the one and free software/open source on the other hand?
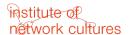
Ramesh Srinivasan: I'd argue that creative and strategic *uses* of technologies are important as a grassroots form of appropriation, yet still fail to challenge the dominant value-systems embedded in the machines themselves. Instead, what I argue is that through sustained, embedded, and ongoing partnerships with local communities, technologies can be inscribed with other types of meanings, ones that computationally express a different set of ethical values, and consider diverse practices of making and sharing knowledge. A creative, grassroots use of a mobile phone differs from the design of a system that presents and models information according to, for example, a Native American way of describing a cultural object, or mapping the land. The latter is a much more active mode of re-writing systems to

consider value systems that have been largely absent from our dialogues around technology, culture, and society. And I'd argue that with digital media, much more so than older, linear and analog forms of media (including video), there is a possible to introduce a read-write culture that places diversity and diverse communities as pro-coders or pro-designers rather than merely prosumers.

GL: Every now and then you leave Southern California to go on a big trip. You're on the road right now. Where have you been so far and what's new in comparison to a few years ago?

RS: It's been a fascinating process of moving around the world every year. My work is built around collaboration. I have grassroots partners based in different parts of the world whom I am in continuous contact with. This ensures that the projects we co-develop live every day on the ground, where they matter the most, and that I, as a designer, can work concurrently with different communities in a way that creates sustained projects, all involving a strategic design of a technology to impact an economic, political, or cultural reality faced by a set of local communities in different parts of the world. What I have noticed, of course, is the ubiquity of mobile phones and their absorption worldwide. I think that this reality runs the danger of forcing us to take our eye 'off the (proverbial) ball', evangelizing equal forms of access while failing to recognize that access itself has many layers to it – our ability to access information and act upon it has much to do with social, economic, and political conditions outside of the technology. At the same time, I'm impressed and excited by the growth of organizations (within the developing world itself) that focus on technology's role in democratized governance, public health, and grassroots politics, and more. This last summer I actually spent time in New Guinea, a country that has pretty wide access to mobile phones but little in the way of bandwidth. My interest in New Guinea though has much more to do with an interest in its profound biodiversity and linguistic/cultural diversity (over 800 languages spoken in a single country!). My sense is that a place like New Guinea can teach those of us concerned with the future of internet how to learn diversity sustains itself, and to try to consider these realities when we consider the world of digital media.

GL: In your work you propose to 'rewrite databases' as a post-colonial act with the aim to empower local agendas and bring out marginalized voices. Do you feel that the database structure itself (as the dominant mode to store

and retrieve information) should also be questioned?

RS: Precisely – I have argued in previous work that networks and databases are two key features that are present in 'new' media. Neither are new, but both are 'new' relative to analog, linear media. Our interactions with systems, whether through the act of browsing or searching, creates a narrative focused on databases. This differs from the experience of watching a video or listening to a radio broadcast, in that the information we access and interact with is dependent on the logic of the database, how it organizes, classifies and retrieves an information object. So indeed my argument is that the database itself is largely only conceived of in hierarchical forms and through binary logic – that is, an information object can only be considered 'on' when it = true within a particular database table. Of course information need not be classified solely under this logic. We see examples of aboriginal meteorology that do not see a particular day as only within Winter, but instead existing concurrently within multiple states of time. Thus, a non-discrete, and non-binary notion of knowledge. As I said earlier, there's a lot that we can learn from these types of approaches and part of how we apply them to the internet requires critically considering the contexts in which a hierarchical, western database is appropriate (or not).

GL: Why is important for you to stress that these are 'complex, adoptive systems'? Isn't the use of the word complex another way of saying: you don't understand anything so please shut up? It could backfire, no? People know very well that the secret of blogs, Facebook etc. is that they are supposedly easy to use.

RS: There's a lot to the notion of complexity that can be actually understood and learned from – and indeed it tends to be a good term for describing a lot of what I am arguing for in terms of how we design digital media systems and networks to connect and share knowledge that is practiced in different ways by different communities. David Turnbull has argued that a CAS (complex adaptive system) is a network of autonomous agents that act in parallel, actively acting and reacting to the other agents in the system. Therefore, a CAS is decentralized. Consider a CAS in contrast to a top-down database that gathers and accumulates information from a variety of sources, communities, cultures, or traditions and stores all this information according to a single set of classifications. This is the opposite of what diversity actually is in my mind – and our very acts to digitally preserve and empower diversity end up doing the opposite, imposing a single logic via the

database. Instead we can promote decentralized communication networks between communities allowing for knowledge to be developed through the interaction between communities rather than according to a pre-created database logic. If you think about it, biological, linguistic, or cultural change occur not through their static preservation but instead through the interactions between the agents that practice these knowledges. Yet these knowledges themselves ontologically differ; they cannot neatly be fit into one another. For example, a simple dictionary of translation fails to allow us to learn a new language relative to the actual practice of just entering that new linguistic world as it stands.

I'm currently developing a project based on this very idea, the idea that different knowledges need to stand on their own and be shared with one another as they are. We are designing a digital system that connects groups of archaeologists, curators, and indigenous peoples to share their knowledges around a set of digital objects that were excavated in Zuni, New Mexico (USA). However, instead of presenting each's perspectives via a pre-created database we are simply enabling each group to communicate with one another 'as is', allowing new ideas and insights to occur through interaction and emergence, even if they don't make sense at first.

GL: Can you tell something about the concept of the 'fluid ontology'?

RS: This is a key idea within my earlier research – namely that local communities can look back at themselves and their practices by viewing media they have created, whether that involves writings, video, audio, or something else. Through a collective act of reflecting on these pieces, the fluid ontology approach engages communities to techniques to sketch and map out their ways of collectively describing their knowledge. Some fluid ontologies I have looked like trees, while others more recently have begun to take on more rhizomatic features!

GL: Can you tell us where ethnography and its methods are today? This discipline seems to get more and more influence these days, in particular in internet research. I associate this with the decline of speculative and general theory. We could see it as 'narrative turn' that, even though part of the social sciences, is qualitative in nature (like theory) and is not in need of quantitative data and visualizations.

RS: The growing excitement around ethnography relates to the increased understanding (finally) that visualizations may provide explanation but

embedded within each visualization is a certain ontological perspective around how that information is to be counted, mapped, and coded, and thus visualized! Instead ethnography which starts with raw, unbridled observations, and attempts to be explicit about the bias of the researcher and present as much information as possible from the ground-up, can be seen as more respectful and at least at first puts bias aside to present data in less structured forms. I'm interested in the more general movement toward the digital humanities in this vein and the associated understanding that much like the dominant logic of the database, tools and technologies have been designed that are better suited for quick decision-making rather than interpretive understanding. Finally, there's appropriately increasing interest in the relationship between ethnography and design – it appears that the design world has increasingly understood the importance of building tools out of raw, observational insights rather than focus groups and interviews that tend to bias the answers they gather via loaded, priming questions.

GL: You publish first and foremost in academic journals that very few have access to, and in fact almost no one reads. What the rational behind that decision? At first sight it seems to contradict all the community work you do.

RS: Indeed this is a real challenge – navigating the conservative traditions of academia that value exclusivity in being able to publish with the reality that my work is ethically built around principles of respecting equity and diversity. While promoting the importance of open access journals in my work on editorial boards and committees, I also have launched a public blog where many authorized copies of these papers are available, talks and tweets are linked to, and open commenting is made possible. Finally, through the active traveling I've been doing, I hope to reach as many people as possible in person! However, I very much agree that this is a challenge that scholars need face. The credibility and quality of academic work need not be compromised by making it more publicly available and engaging.

—

More info on Ramesh Srinivasan can be found on
http://rameshsrinivasan.org.