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Countering Digital Injustices in Brazil: A Conversation with Lorena Regattieri

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MOVEMENTS & MOBILIZATION

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Just Tech invited several practitioners and researchers to respond to a simple yet fundamental question: "What is just technology?" This interview was conducted by Just Tech Program Director [Catalina Vallejo](#) and Program Assistant [Eliana Blam](#) who spoke with Lorena Regattieri about her work on algorithms, disinformation, and climate justice.

Regattieri is a senior fellow at Mozilla Foundation whose research has focused on technology and science, social-environmental activism, propaganda tactics, and the political economy of digital infrastructures.

In their conversation, Vallejo, Blam, and Regattieri discuss her project at Mozilla, [Eco-Mídia](#), as well as the state of internet equity and access in Brazil, in particular through the lens of the Covid-19 pandemic, providing some insights into how to build solidarity and move forward.

Catalina Vallejo (CV): Lori, you have been doing a lot of advocacy work, you also have a PhD, and you do research. How is it that you got to work on issues of technology and the environment? What brought you there?

Lorena Regattieri (LR): Let's journey back to my roots in Espírito Santo, a state etched with the history of globalization through its reliance on commodities like iron ore pellets, steel, and pulp. The narrative of globalization has divergent shades in the annals of industrialization and technology, a phenomenon eloquently articulated by Brazilian geographer Milton Santos as the "pervasiveness of globalization." My upbringing, intertwined with rural life, exposed me to the role of technology in society and its role in

development. However, the progress promised was a double-edged sword, entailing pollution and territorial dispossession shifting the very notion of development in the Global South. My experiences in social movements and engagement with agrarian networks unveiled how infrastructure projects and logistics shape lives. Settler colonialism also loomed large.

Rather than perceiving technology as a standalone solution, I view it as a canvas that is imbued with the collective knowledge of communities.

Guided by the intricate interplay of sociotechniques and the power of community and local cooperation, my approach to technology takes on a distinct hue. Rather than perceiving technology as a standalone solution, I view it as a canvas that is imbued with the collective knowledge of communities. This approach transcends the confines of data and information, extending its reach to encompass diverse spheres such as agriculture, climate resilience, and the pursuit of authentic environmental stewardship. A prime example lies in the concept of certified carbon offsets, often championed as a fix-all, but lurking beneath the surface is the potential for encroaching upon people's territorial rights.

My conviction is that technology alone is not the answer. This conviction is rooted at the core of technology itself. It's a concept that can be revitalized, breaking free from the shackles of settler-colonial influences that corrode our shared knowledge, land, and ecosystems—the very foundations that nurture all life. My vision of technology delves beyond surface-level issues, venturing into the realm of reimagining technology's role in alignment with values built on cooperation, solidarity, transparency, and accountability. It seeks to empower communities while safeguarding the delicate equilibrium of nature's and ancestral knowledge interconnected tapestry, which serves as the bedrock of our existence.

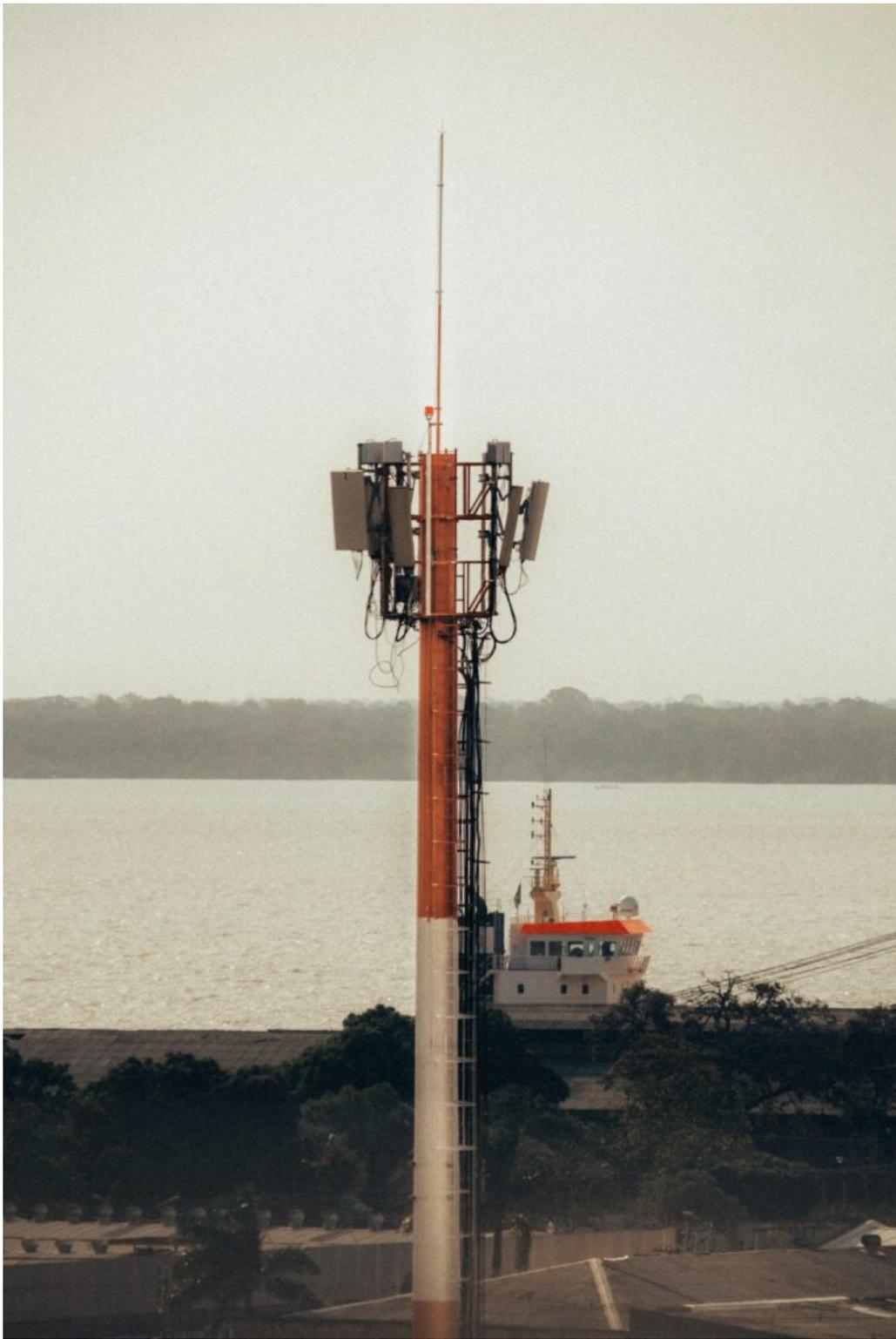


Photo source: Francisco Ferreira/Pexels.

CV: Industrialization happened way later in Latin America, and it changed rural life to urban life. It provided families with a path to class mobility and to higher education, but at the same time, it has had all these major environmental impacts. With globalization, we thought we were going to be better economically speaking but we're not. And, at the same time, we are facing all these other consequences.

Can we talk more about what the problem is when we are thinking about technology in Brazil in the context that you are thinking about. How does technology look in these places? In the United States, most reflections on technology, for instance, are about the surveillance of mostly the Latine and Black communities. And, of course, information disorders. What are the technologies that you are working on,

and what are the problems around them?

LR: Your question is astute as it anchors the issues I'm grappling with in concrete reality. Surveillance surfaces as one crucial theme, intertwining with my Mozilla project on trustworthy AI. Amidst eroding trust in institutions, discussions center on trustworthiness, a quality even artificial intelligence must possess. This era spotlights "new materialities," where technologies like AI are interwoven with surveillance, data, and logistical optimization.

The perspective of thinkers like Sandro Mezzadra, who proclaims logistics as a form of power, ignites the drive for counter-surveillance initiatives. This sparks the creation of frameworks for controlling logistics and collaboratively shaping these technologies. Our path navigates through the annals of the free software movement, underpinned by the principles of software freedom—running, copying, distributing, studying, altering, and enhancing software. It stretches back to the 1999 WTO Seattle protests, tracing the origins of surveillance woven into the fabric of technological progress. This notion is a culmination of an extensive journey through a tapestry of military interventions, the birth of the internet, and the establishment of infrastructures and logistics that intertwine with the tenets of racial capitalism.

Contemplating the revered citadels of knowledge such as Harvard, Stanford, and the esteemed Ivy League institutions, inextricably entwined with the very birth of what we now recognize as the internet, beckons us to pause for a moment of reflective introspection. As we embark on this journey, let us cast our gaze not only upon the digital frontiers but also rewind the chronicles of time to unveil the persistent struggle over concepts predating our digital epoch. The echoes of this dialectic reverberate even now, 20 years hence, resonating through the corridors of trust eroded—a consequence intricately woven into their complex narrative. Because what we have seen is that, in the case of surveillance, the techniques perpetuated by markets and the State police have been about how they frame what and how we see these flows of people, of goods, and how they control them without transparency and accountability.

Approaching these matters from a Global South standpoint, the advent of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's presidency in 2003 ushered in a paradigm shift that emphasized the accessibility of communal resources. This transformative vision extended beyond national borders, echoing the sentiments of similar global movements about the commons. Gilberto Gil's tenure as minister of culture during Lula's administration from 2003 to 2008 stands as a pivotal moment in Brazil's cultural and political landscape. Beyond his renowned musical career, Gil brought an artist's perspective to the realm of public policy. His influence went beyond the surface, redefining the role of culture in society and its intersection with technology. Gil encapsulated his comprehensive view of culture, emphasizing its significance beyond mere utility, as a driving force that defines a nation's identity and expressions. In the context of our conversation, Gil's perspective resonates with the importance of the commons and the role of public policy in democratizing technology. His commitment to cultural diversity, symbolic representation, and community engagement mirrors the broader mission of ensuring technology's accessibility and inclusivity.

As we delve into the currents of social movements and scrutinize the intricacies of metadata, we unearth a chilling truth: Surveillance serves as both the conductor and consequence of power dynamics.

At the same time, in a world where the ominous gaze of surveillance extends beyond what meets the eye, Simone Browne's groundbreaking work *Dark Matters* reveals the racializing processes at play in technology. As we delve into the currents of social movements and scrutinize the intricacies of metadata, we unearth a chilling truth: Surveillance serves as both the conductor and consequence of power dynamics. This journey into the underbelly of surveillance also unveils a narrative intertwined with environmental racism and the shadowed history of racial capitalism. Amidst this tapestry, we navigate a perplexing paradox—visibility implies engagement, yet the obscured narratives, tainted by racial capitalism, evade our grasp due to the lack of data sovereignty of individuals and communities.

The ramifications reverberate far beyond mere information; they encroach upon the very sanctity of our lands and ecosystems. Within this intricate logistics, different players exploit data to further environmental degradation, particularly within Indigenous and Afro-descendant (known as *quilombolas*) territories—a stark embodiment of racial capitalism's enduring legacy. As we dissect these layers, a potent call to action emerges: a clarion for mapping strategic bastions to dismantle the remnants of settler colonialism. In the crucible of the Global South, lands mapped with precision are scrutinized through the lens of territorial management for extraction at scale. Yet, in our pursuit of countering surveillance's grip, we encounter the crux of the matter: dismantling the predatory nexus between knowledge extraction, land exploitation, and racial capitalism.

This is the rallying cry against surveillance's insidious clasp—a pivotal chapter in the saga of environmental justice and the unmasking of our history's covert workings.

Eliana Blam (EB): We'd love to hear more about projects that you're working on or other projects you'd rather focus on.

LR: The Mozilla fellowship came at a good time because I had finished my PhD. My project's called Eco-Mídia. It is a platform for research and community practices that bridges media, information and communication technologies, digital rights, and socioenvironmental climate justice within the context of the Global South's territories. Our application, the Eco-Mídia Dashboard, serves as a content curation technology for social media platforms, aiming to enhance visibility and promote narratives, information, and images from the socioenvironmental communities in the Global South. The primary objective of the Eco-Mídia Dashboard is to map and gain insights from publicly available data posted by various actors engaged in socioenvironmental, climate, and territorial rights advocacy on social media. Currently in its beta phase, the Eco-Mídia Dashboard has already established the Brazilian community as a data source. As development progresses, we aim to expand the database to incorporate additional sources from the Global South community. The concept of a dashboard that displays content exclusively from a curated list of profiles on social media arises from the daily challenges of information overload and the perception of the (in)visibility of voices, information, and images within a diverse community. This curated approach

helps counter the tendency for diverse voices to be drowned out in the overwhelming noise of social media platforms.

During the fellowship, I have also been working on workshops and webinars and participating in events debating the intersection of digital rights and environmental justice. For example, what does mis- and disinformation mean from a pan-Amazon perspective? What we see is that we don't have conversations about what's peculiar about disinformation in countries like Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil, and the pan-Amazon region. The causes of disinformation are somewhat similar, but the content of it that is related to environmental issues are completely different. It's not even related to fossil fuels mostly, but to land regularization, land ownership, and the expansion of the agriculture frontier.

We are working with other research groups in Europe and the United States, for example, to come and listen to us that if you want to actually fight back disinformation in climate analysis, you have to give it context. Mostly my work now is working with rural communities in Brazil, specifically with groups in Pará, which is a state in Brazil's Amazon as well as groups in Amazonas, another Amazonian state.

CV: The question that I have is more about the pandemic, its relationship with technology and these platforms, and whether you feel that something has changed over the past three years. Though we cannot grant all changes to the pandemic, one reality for Latin America is that the pandemic has had a profound economic impact and has basically taken the region back 10 to 15 years. At the same time, there has been all this technological advancement because that's how people were connecting. What has changed with the pandemic, if anything, when you are thinking about these questions that you are working on?

LR: It's very crucial to understand aspects of the pandemic and our time online in context. Let's look at the pandemic in Brazil during the Bolsonaro years. During a time when information was crucial and it's the government's responsibility to deliver this information, they did their job horribly. How do you communicate public policy health issues or how do you communicate the logistics? What we have seen in the pandemic is, at first, the need to build and use technology to communicate public policy.



Photo source: Agência Senado/Flickr.

Early in the pandemic, information wasn't even reaching urban populations, which have better access to the internet. They were receiving information through WhatsApp, Kwai—which is banned in the United States—and TikTok. Government wasn't acting at all. We depended on the press, the media, to play a role, as well as civil society.

We also needed platforms to play a responsible role and share responsibility for something that is part of a common good: our collective health. But we also had the issue of internet access. I'll give you a real-life example, which is my friends that live in Santarém alongside the Tapajós river in Pará. They do a podcast and needed to send it on a USB drive, which was an important part in the logistics of the flow of information, because in Brazil we still have inequality in access to broadband internet.

Despite what the data shows, broadband internet is not equally distributed in Brazil. Research shows that broadband internet access has been increasing over the years, pushed by the agribusiness sector. However, when we see 100 percent broadband access in midwestern or northern Brazil that's not accurate. There's another number we have to look for: access to 4G, which many people buy credits to access, a very common practice in Latin America.

The pandemic has shown places like Brazil that we need to work hard on improving internet access, and we need to work hard to create spaces where we can hold these platforms accountable.

What we see is that most of people who still don't have stable internet access have low access to quality information. When you receive a link through WhatsApp, to read it you have to exit WhatsApp, which eats your data. Many of these websites that people are visiting pretend to be newsworthy, but are instead disseminating misinformation about alternative treatments for Covid. The pandemic has shown places like Brazil that we need to work hard on improving internet access, and we need to work hard to create spaces where we can hold these platforms accountable.

I think two lessons we can take from the pandemic are, first, access to broadband internet is not as equal in Brazil as we think. Second, we have an issue related to media, which we need to think of in terms of reparations. How can we take a step forward and think about how to achieve sustainability of newsworthy websites that the audience can trust, because some of these websites are close to some communities. For me, these particular issues are connected to the future of regulations and the future of the digital public sphere. One next step for Brazil would be what we are calling the fake news bills and media reparations. And, it's also a technological issue because we are going to see how those infrastructures can sustain newsworthy websites and not be an industry of disinformation.

EB: We'd like to end on a little bit more of a positive note, so my question is: Where have you been finding inspiration lately?

LR: First of all, I would like to highlight the work by a group of technologists who are building a network that is called Movimento Plantaformas. They are a network of builders, researchers, and professors. This initiative, at its core, is thinking about the cosmopolitics of technology.

There's also a colleague, Tarcízio Silva, who is doing research into algorithmic racism. He's bringing to tech Black studies from a Brazilian lens. And, I want to mention Denise Ferreira da Silva and Luciana Parisi who are working at the intersection of autonomists and Black studies, which is just phenomenal. Parisi talks about colonial recursivity in artificial intelligence. Another example is the work Abeba Birhane, a senior fellow at Mozilla with me, and she's working on AI audit and accountability systems, how to make platforms accountable, and thinking about relational ethics. These are some of the pieces that are in my map and that I want to call into my research and how I want to practice this research. My desire and my effectiveness are founded on the transnational solidarity we can build as south to south in the many parts of the globe.

Because I think there is south in United States; there is south in New York; there is south in Russia. If we look into these dynamics and put the pieces together, I'm sure we are going to build beyond thinking of possible governments or types of regulations. We are going to build in solidarity and in recognition of the reparations that we need to do.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.