

Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Mariana Valente

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Mariana Valente, a director at [InternetLab](#) in São Paulo, Brazil, and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

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Transcript begins.

[Mariana Valente, a Latin woman with blonde hair, wearing a white blouse, sits for a video conversation with Hilary Pennington, a white woman with short blonde hair, wearing a sleeveless green shirt and sitting on an orange chair.]

MARIANA VALENTE: When I started working with this, we were so much more optimistic. But, at the same time, I still love the internet. And when I'm speaking of gender and feminism, for example, uh, that's so evident in Brazil—how organizing online and having access to certain discussions and just being able to develop your expressional line has been so influential for so many women.

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Mariana Valente]

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

HILARY PENNINGTON: Mariana Valente is one of the directors of InternetLab, an independent, interdisciplinary research center based in Sao Paulo, Brazil, that focuses on the intersection of law and technology and online spaces. And I am so excited to have the opportunity to talk to you today, Mariana. You do such innovative work on issues many people have a hard time understanding—technology policy, privacy, the intersections with freedom of speech and gender. Let's start by giving people a better sense of the mission of InternetLab.

[on-screen text: Mariana Valente, Director, InternetLab, Brazil]

MARIANA: Thanks, Hilary. I'm really happy to be here, to be here talking to you. So we're a think tank, we're a nonprofit research center. We founded InternetLab with the idea in mind that policy making in the area of technology needed to be guided by fundamental rights. And that, for that, policy makers needed the evidence of the impact that digital technologies were having in these rights. There's strategy in that, right?

Because sometimes we're trying to reach policy makers, sometimes we're trying to raise awareness. If more people are aware of their privacy rights, we understand that that has a deep impact on how policy makers address this too.

Private stakeholders are also doing policy, right? And even if we need to have a critical approach, uh, with the corporate sector, it's also very important to address them with things that come up in research regarding rights. And that relationship with social movements and civil society is also very important to understand what really is at stake, what the needs are. We're really trying to build these relationships, and that shapes a lot the kind of research that we do.

HILARY: And I know you are actually ahead of many researchers in other parts of the world in how you are trying to bring public attention and public policy attention to big tech and some of the ways in which it can target particular communities. Can you talk about why you feel it's important for you to function in this kind of role and how that is going?

MARIANA: There's a lot of need of research regarding how the digital sector is evolving, how it impacts rights. And bringing all those things together is not so easy, right? So within our team, we have people with a legal background, people with social sciences background, a tech fellow who's always helping us do the research with, uh, platforms and data. I think one of the things that's really important is realizing what kind of research can really have an impact on, uh, how these platforms—they shape their policies, right?

So I'll give you a few examples. One of the pieces of research that we developed analyzed how a particular tool developed by a particular company was trying to identify hate speech within the platform. And this is happening a lot, right? Because, because of the amount of content that's out there in the platforms, these platforms are all the time developing tools to try to automatically identify kinds of speech that are harmful, kinds of content that are harmful. But, as we were testing this tool, we were able to realize that it was discriminating against the very people it was trying to protect because of how LGBT people were using certain words in a way that's not derogatory. Certain words that are understood to be offensive were being used by the community itself in a way that was appropriated and meant something else when it was used by them, about them. So when we were testing this tool with particular profiles, we were seeing, for example, that some profiles were being considered more toxic than white supremacists, in some cases. And it's really important to flag that.

HILARY: That's an incredible example. And you, you have had a similar kind of experience as you—working around the issues of, of, um, online violence, and especially targeted against women. Do you want to talk a little bit about how you've done that work?

MARIANA: So gender technology is something that has been at the heart of InternetLab since the beginning. And the first larger research that we did on that topic was about what's called nonconsensual intimate images. It refers to women and girls

having their images disseminated without their consent. Feminists and groups of women were just discussing how pervasive that was at the time and how there seemed to be no solutions. So we started doing research on that and trying to understand what the legal landscape for that, we were even able to influence legislation to address that at a later point.

In the past years, we moved to looking more to public speech against women. And last year during the elections, we were monitoring women candidates. It was female and male candidates we were comparing—candidates for local offices—and we were monitoring their social media on Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. And it was so clear from the numbers that being a woman candidate is something that, uh, just means more risks.

In the case of Brazil, at least, we're speaking of underfunded candidacies. So the internet is essential. Their online presence is so important. And if it's a risk to be out there, if you're being threatened just because you're out there speaking in public, that's of course another barrier, right? And it's a barrier that's greater if you're a Black woman in Brazil, if you're an Indigenous woman, if you're a lesbian woman, for example. There were even some cases in which you had male candidates who were getting—facing a lot of attacks, but you could see that the kind of attack was different. You know, they were being criticized, for example, for what they did, for their careers, whereas women are all the time criticized for what they are, and it's just so hard to convey your message.

HILARY: That is so, um, unbelievably important and powerful. And I know that you have, actually—this is just sort of coming to the ways in which you—and you, personally, not just the lab—have really put gender and technology together.

I know you are in Brazil, and I really want to just express gratitude for you taking the time to do this interview, um, because, of course, Brazil, like so many countries, is facing enormous challenges and loss during the COVID crisis. And I'd love to hear your reflections on whether there are lessons we can take away from that work and from this public health crisis on how to use technology to better organize in the future.

MARIANA: We've also been doing work, Hilary, for the past year and a half, about social protection and technologies. And, uh, we, we were involved in a large research about the Bolsa Família program, the largest welfare program in Brazil. And during the pandemic, there was this new benefit that was developed for people who are in an economically vulnerable situation. But the way it was developed, because we were in the middle of a pandemic and it was hard for people to, uh, go outside and do the normal things they were doing, data is now collected through an app and everything is automated—the collection of data, the selection process—and so many problems arised from that, starting with connectivity. We know that the most vulnerable people in Brazil, sometimes they share equipment. For example, they share cell phones. It was impossible to have, uh, two people using the same cell phone and, uh, and applying for the benefit. But another thing is that this has been seen as a very effective way of

dealing with social protection, because it's cheaper. And we know that there is an intent to make all social protection work like that.

And this could also be a legacy, a very bad legacy of the pandemic—that technology and digital technologies are seen as solutions when they're not because of this idea that, well, we can just digitize everything and that's just so much more effective. And this could be a legacy, as well, and a very bad legacy. This is something we're working on—the problems with this kind of impersonal use of technology that also takes for granted how people access or do not access technologies.

HILARY: I just can't help thinking as I listen to you, you, you are, um—the work is so important and inspiring and so are you. You play a role in the broader ecosystem and you do that, as you've been describing, you do that very, um, very intentionally. And I think, you know, just for a last, a last question, when you do look at the power of technology, the unchecked power of so many of these private companies and the ways in which nation-states are beginning to use these technologies, I'm curious, you know, just what makes you hopeful—and, and when you, when you look at the odds that we are up against?

MARIANA: When I started working with this, we were so much more optimistic. But, at the same time, I still love the internet, and I think everybody who's working with us—and so many people—just love the internet. And there's a reason for that. I don't think we see, necessarily, clearly how things changed after we started having the internet and social media. And when I'm speaking of gender and feminism, for example, uh, that's so evident in Brazil—and there's people doing research on that, on how organizing online and having access to certain discussions and just being able to develop your expressional line has been so influential for so many women. And there's people in Brazil even showing that that led to a reappropriation of the streets by the feminist movements. And we're having more women elected for office, we're having subjects that weren't even out there in the public sphere now being picked up all the time by the traditional media. I think we can't take that for granted. And while we have to change that same environment, because at the same time we're seeing abuse, we're seeing data expropriation happening all the time, uh, we're seeing violence, but still, there are so many possibilities, so many things that we can't give up on.

HILARY: This has been fantastic, Mariana. Thank you so, so, so much.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

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