

Tech & Biodiversity: Legado 2060
Podcast transcription
AWID Forum Bangkok | December 2, 2024

Co facilitators: Soledad Magnone and Cybelle Oliveira
Guests: Shruti Nambiar, Liz Njambi and Muthoni Muriithi

(Shruti) Hi, everybody. I'm so happy to welcome Tech and Biodiversity: Legado 2060... The story continues. We are at the AVID forum in Bangkok, Thailand, and having a very informal, unexpected chat today. I want to start with a quick introduction of the recording room folks here, two wonderful women who are trying to bridge the gap between technology and sustainability, climate action, a lot of it.

Okay, so the description of the project, we live in a technological society practically without nature. So true. A love story between uh, Mucha Lucha Robot? An androgynous AI machine being, and an inverted mermaid, top fish and bottom human, was born out of a hostile environment of an already degenerated nature.

Nature practically no longer exists, exploited by illegal gold miners for chips and electronic components. Rivers are polluted, and wild animals are almost extinct for the production of miracle remedies, protective amulets, and other purposes of dubious characteristics. Woo. However, there are still cyborg natives defending what little biodiversity is left.

The story has a happy ending though, where everything is resolved and technology, biodiversity and human beings live an ideal romance. And as one of our friends said, a throuple, a happy throuple. Welcome. We have this discussion. Let's know more about this amazing, what should I call it? Sci-fi telenovela. And let's see what form it takes.

(Soledad) Thank you Shruti. I am Soledad Magnone from Uruguay, director of the Jaaklac initiative, that is dedicated to critical digital education and youth participation. And I'm here with my colleague.

(Cybelle) Hi everyone. I'm Cybelle from Brazil. I'm based in San Paolo. I work with cyber threat intelligence and we are partnering in this awesome project.

(Soledad) Yes. So to tell a little bit about the backdrop of biodiversity. We have here some fellow partners in crime that we're going to keep ideating this story with us today.

(Muthoni) Hi, everyone. My name is Muthoni Muriithi. I'm from Kenya. I'm a lover of tech.

(Liz) Hi, everyone. My name is Liz Njambi from Kenya, currently studying in Edinburgh. And I try to do my best with tech.

(Muthoni) She's our super producer.

(Soledad) She is our super producer. We just had a creative workshop from the Tech and Biodiversity. We started this at the Mozilla festival with Cybelle, last... a couple of years ago. And we came up with different chapters on what this telenovela would look like. Cybelle wrote that introduction. We created different chapters, to work with environmentalists, with activists, with researchers, artists, and, and so on. Do you want to talk about the chapters, Cybelle?

(Cybelle) Yes, well, first, like a telenovela or a movie or something like this, we have to introduce, you know, the scene, the story and the characters. So what's happened? What's going on? First, we start talking about... thinking about, you know, that movie "Don't look up". It is very dramatic. It's so real. You know, some characters, really real characters. So, we have to do something about this. And as a Latina person, I don't like soap operas, but we are Latinas, we love drama.

So we created this story about, so what gonna do? It's a happy ever after. There's a prince charming, a princess... And then, well, technology and climate crisis and politics and everything about society, and feminism included, is all interconnected, you know?

Then there's a drama between characters, as I said, politics, economics, and society, and the chapter three, of course, there's a lot of plot twists in our story: Technology is evil or Prince Charming? You know that squirrel, dramatic squirrel is this. And then, we choose to believe in utopia because we need utopia to live so happily ever after between humans, nature, and biodiversity. So we choose this. Even I don't believe anymore.

(Soledad) We need hope, and we're here also to think through this story with you. So we can do the exercise of going through the four chapters, if you want, or diving into one in particular. Is it, would you like to talk a little bit about what is the scene, what is that world in 2060 about? And think of a specific character.

(Shruti) I would love to know how. These three meet. Like what's going on? Like what's the meet cute.

(Soledad) The meet cute between humans, technology and biodiversity. Yeah, do you have any ideas?

(Muthoni) Are we setting the scene?

(Shruti) Do they fall in love, um, like in her? Like, it's an automated voice, which is like an assistant, But then, um, you grow clothes and all that.

(Soledad) Do you want to talk, explain a little bit about Her?

(Shruti) About the film, Her? Loved the movie. Also, saw so much, familiarity. Because it's this one person who seems like a slightly socially isolated kind of person. I really enjoy his job. If I remember it correctly, he writes letters. Like, it's like, oh, I met my friend. I want to send her a birthday present. So he kind of imagines stuff and writes it. I think that would be great. I would love to do that job. So, yeah, but kind of isolated. It has a lot of nuanced feelings, but surprisingly doesn't have a lot of human friends. And, gets introduced to this AI assistant on the phone who happens to have a female aura and a voice and, you know, that sexy, kind of very heterosexual kind of thing.

So, they've, he starts falling in love and there is this conversation about how this can be real and, and I'm sure it's happening and probably will happen more. I think combined with the loneliness of our times and also the parasocial relationships that we build through online stuff, be it TikTok or anything, everything seems real, you know, even if it's just a voice. I think maybe that's how this meet cute happens. And maybe the person, the human is in the biodiversity field. So the three things are meeting.

(Liz) I have another idea. Which also includes adding a fourth character.

(Shruti) What? What's a four thing called?

(Liz) So, okay, the fourth is also a human. But I'm also going into the drama chapter. So this is inspired by one of my friends. So we introduce ourselves, I hope they don't identify who we're talking about. So one of my friends keeps joking. Change my voice.

(Soledad) Is it an AI friend?

(Liz) No. But, but there is an AI friend. One of my friends keeps joking that she thinks she's in love with her chatGPT. So she was saying to me the other day... Oh shit! I should say they were saying to me the other day, that ChatGPT or AI was teaching them how to flirt and so they got a really interesting. You know how on Bumble or dating sites where the one this one has to start the conversation and so they used it to start the chat and it was such a good pickup line.

So, my story is they meet while this, building on your idea, this person who's an introvert, doesn't have many friends, is trying to get into the dating scene. And so they're using the AI to learn how to flirt. They're interested in someone else who works in the biodiversity space.

(Soledad) Actually, the AI girlfriends have been researched quite a lot recently because they've become trendy and results show that they were actually kind of toxic relationships.

Drama between politics, economy and society? What do you think? Within that character in a relationship with an AI automated and dedicated being dedicated to biodiversity.

(Muthoni) Oh gosh, uh, what would be the conflict? I mean, I feel like with this individual using who's using AI also to get the flooding tips or whatever and to be able to talk to the person they really want to talk to. Also is using AI to generate ideas around because they thought, Oh, okay. Oh, I can use this for flooding. I can also use it for What do I think about certain political issues that are happening around me or in my country? Why not ask? AI because there is a trust relationship that has been built, and so they are now starting to feed off information that's being given to them.

And because they feel close to the AI in the case of the Her type of situation, they believe that content, right? There's no, there's no challenging it or trying to think beyond what it is they're receiving. But because AI is confusing, chatGPT will give you all kinds of information. They end up not being able to really decipher for themselves really what they as individuals want to see in their own country and their own context in terms of politics, right?

But instead, I just relying on these kind of sound bites and pieces of information from AI. That's just kind of feeding it to them without reflection of, you know, where this content is coming from, I think.

(Cybelle) Are you saying Chat GPT is a man? Because you described a man right now.

(Soledad) Because I was going to say that it lands us into the third chapter the plot twist on: is technology evil or prince charming?

(Shruti) But I don't even see that as an if either or. Because you said Prince Charming or what, what was the other one? But I see similarities there. Prince Charming is not good for me in my head. At least the Disney version.

(Muthoni) Yeah, and I think it's a mixed bag though. Because on the one hand, chat..., we're not gonna say, well this AI is really helping them develop these social skills. That they didn't have and it's working out really well in this case. The person they like is really responding well to... it's really, yeah.

(Shruti) It's really responding. Man splaining in woman's voice.

(Muthoni) Yeah, but really responding well to the tips. So they're like, Oh! this actually really works.

(Shruti) But you know what I think, I think, building on this, I'm thinking that, okay, this AI assistant or whatever. Is giving me what I want, right? So it is also building its own echo chamber. So it's learning from, Oh, when I give this answer, it is triggering a happy response. So I'm going to keep giving this.

It's not like a sentient being with its own substance and moral compass, that, "Hey, what you said is wrong". I guess maybe I'm not going to get that from the AI assistant.

(Liz) So it is a toxic relationship, I guess. There's no disagreements.

(Shruti) I think so. It's the partner who always tells you the things you want to hear. It's a really, it's not a relationship where it's like there is probably a counter, you know?

(Soledad) What would technology be talking about if our character is in a relationship with AI and it's dedicated to biodiversity and asking AI about biodiversity, what would AI be recommending, would it be on its own self interest? AI is also, generating a lot of CO2 emissions. There's a lot of mining off materials, particularly in geographies from the Global Majority. So what would AI be recommending in the interest?

(Liz) And just also slightly back to the previous question on the drama with politics. So this introverted person is trying to flirt with someone in biodiversity, which is why they're trying to learn. But what if they are policymaker. So in their field, they're a policymaker. They want to learn, how do we influence change? But what so that they're as they're only regurgitating what ChatGPT is telling them.

(Shruti) I think, I think a great, a great twist would be that the conversations about "Oh climate action. What do we do? How do we save the environment?" And this guy figures out that the AI Assistant company is owned by a big oil lobbyist.

(Muthoni) But then on the other hand, this is the tricky part, right? On the one hand, the technology is helping the AI. Is helping the individual. So there's a benefit, a really real benefit. So that. Can you undo the benefits that you're enjoying in the sense that if they find out that, yeah, perhaps either that the AI of course, creates a lot of challenges for the environment. Are they willing? I think the question for me is not whether the AI may or may support, biodiversity or not. But is the individual who relies on the AI really interested in... Because they're having to make a choice, right? Between the biodiversity, maybe on the one hand, and using AI, which is very useful at this time. So in the case they're like, do I have to get rid of the AI to preserve the biodiversity, or do I.

Like, "what do I do?" So, it's beyond even just the conversations that are coming out from the relationship, it's actually self interest the individual has, perhaps.

(Shruti) And that connects to environmentalism just generally, right? Because people are okay to talk about a lot of big things, but when it comes to, "oh, does this mean that I have to give up my car, or do something else" that they may not want to do? But the larger picture they may be willing to talk about very eloquently.

(Muthoni) Or even just trying to reimagine. Alright, what could technology look like? And maybe that's what happens on the plot twist if it's a fairy tale that ends well. Actually, it might be that. I really like this AI technology, but I also really love biodiversity.

Maybe that creates a spark in them to be like, well, how can I create technology that respects the biodiversity? So in a way that I have both of these things as opposed to having to choose one, maybe.

(Cybelle) So that is, of course, I put fire and drama

(Soledad) Robots are rising. Okay. Yes. Robots are rising here. We're fighting.

(Cybelle) Yes. Well, behind all this, we can think people, workers mining these minerals. She's using technology, this sucks, and more surveillance because AI and government surveilling the people because they are... they have interests. And then is my part, spywares, big spywares, not just in the phone. And what else? Poverty. And we will have a small town because we create. The people create a small town. When they are working mines, mining things, they, well, they bring sex workers. So a lot of issues around this. There is not a prince charming at all. They are Oh, what we'll say it in Spanish, "pinche pendejo".

(Soledad) So what would be that happily ever after? Is it a triple? Is there anyone, is there someone else involved? How do we make something that it's not choosing between biodiversity or technology?

(Liz) The biodiverstist, biodiverstist? Whatever. The love interest, the introvert, fall, actually fall in love thanks to the AI, but then they create their own AI that is climate just, that promotes climate justice. So they leave the one that's owned by the... once they discover that it's owned by a company that is maybe even manipulating the responses that it's giving people. So they create their own.

(Cybelle) Oh, it's a gremlin. Hmm.

(Muthoni) So it's like, it's like they break away. They, they break away, they divest in, in the thing that brought them together and instead decide to create, uh, something new.

(Cybelle) Better or worse?

(Shruti) The next generation which is more committed to the environment. Probably this generation is not able to kind of see or apply, not saying that they're not principled, but they just don't know how to apply those principles. So maybe the next generation is able to be more proactive there.

(Muthoni) And that's the next movie, the sequel.

(Soledad) Yeah! Yeah! That's the new generation. But how we are good at that. Yeah, but also in search of that knowledge and how AI can help us archive that knowledge and communicate with biodiversity and nature. Is AI helping us communicate with trees with animals

(Shruti) Your script says that animal kind is kind of lost. How are they coming back to life, you think?

(Muthoni) I think that, so that's what I think that. Okay, so following up from the the next episode, where they've fallen in love, they've created this AI, because they are interested in people, preserving the biodiversity of the place, they together, in addition to creating a better technology, use the technology to help them think about how they could, for example, regenerate some of the biodiversity that's lost, whether it's, plants or whatever, flora and fauna, or how they could actually help kind of rebirth back.

Because, I think to your point, the good thing about AI, because it's data sets, right? So it's an archive and archive and archives of knowledge. It's not that anyone blocks that knowledge. It's just understanding how to use the technology in a way that allows you to be able to get the information that you need to be able to build the thing that you need, perhaps. I don't know.

(Cybelle) But, this big data set consume a lot of energy, so this is not good for environment as well. The cloud, the people say cloud is a huge computer but they use a lot of power. I mean, I'm not so sure how we can deal with this in the future.

(Muthoni) But this is the thing because this is now utopian world is that these two individuals with others because they find community and they have great minds think together how they could actually do it differently. So they will be using technologies that we don't know about today. But it's the idea of wanting to create something that is better as opposed to relying on something that is existing.

So I think, that's the beauty of the utopia is that they could actually figure out that they could reimagine it differently.

(Shruti) Yeah. And also, okay, maybe we are thinking like way ahead, but maybe in this utopia, it's not just earth. It's just other planets have also come into the game. Maybe there are other energy options. Maybe, there is a way to... balance stuff out.

(Soledad) That is great. Uh, I think we have a lot of ideas. AI, are you listening? We're gonna definitely come together as a community and create something better with other planets, other beings, hybrids, learning through generations for sure, and having a lot of hope. Thank you so much for this Legado 2060 session. We're looking forward to continue building this story with everyone. Yes. Stay tuned.

(Shruti) You're going to get so many ideas. And I don't know how you're going to make one project out of it.

(Muthoni) Thank you both so much for this. Because, first of all, I like the format of how you do this. And engaging people in like, world creating and like, I just. Such a brilliant session just when we're doing it. I was like, Oh my gosh, this is so much fun. And I'm so glad that we just stumbled in here and we were just like, what's going on?

And then this has been the most fun thing we've done since we've got, like, did you expect this?

(Soledad) But it wouldn't have been possible without your podcast superpower.

(Liz) Yeah, the power of feminist community, right? Because I was also thinking the same with podcasts and the way we segment things. Maybe we have a segment on our podcast that's "build your utopia on whatever topic you're talking about"

(Everyone) Yes!

(Cybelle) You know when how we can work with this? I specialize in cyber security. You and sociology and you in every part, of everyone is specializing something so we can work together to build this in real life. This is the most important, of course, writing and think and film and record such as awesome is the best more fun party part, but we need to hands on, really hands on so we can do this together. So thank you. Thank you. Thank you a lot.

(Everyone) Thank you. Thank you. Thank you Shruti.