



Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders

A collaborative initiative of Centre for Financial Accountability (Delhi) and Environment Support Group (Bangalore)

In this climate of despair induced by COVID-19, various young researchers and activists have been working on emerging trends in Interdisciplinary Action Research which address some of the most pressing issues of our times, and that from various sectors: urban planning, public health, sociology, ecology and environment, digital commons, public education, migration studies, entrepreneurship, informal economy, and more. CFA and ESG collaborate to bring to focus various exciting explorations by such young researchers, who conscientiously draw attention to some of society's biggest challenges through their interdisciplinary efforts.

Webinar 6: Ensuring 'Commons' in Digital Commons: Licensing and Ownership

Discussants

1. **Anivar Aravind** is a Public Interest Technologist working in the intersection of technology, law and human rights. He is a free and open-source evangelist and has contributed to various digital commons movements. He has made significant interventions in technology policy, Internet Governance, language technology, identity, digital payments, etc. He is part of the leadership team in Swathanthra Malayalam computing and currently serving in the advisory board of Software Freedom Law Centre, India (SFLC.in)
2. **Sunil Abraham** is Endowed Professor for Digital Policy and Design Practices, ArtEZ University for the Arts, The Netherlands

Sunil Abraham, Endowed Professor for Digital Policy and Design Practices, ArtEZ University for the Arts, started off by explaining what the 'digital commons' includes. Free software, open software and open content, including open access to journals, educational content, data and science all come under the ambit of the term. He went on to draw references to how the open data movement in India can be traced to the work of information rights activists in Rajasthan in the 1990s, older information regimes globally and how most Right to Information regimes had personal information as an exemption.





Anivar Aravind, member of the Software Freedom Law Centre advisory board, began his intervention by quoting Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom, “principles on management of the commons is nothing but a reflection of local self-governance”. He followed this up by highlighting the need to politicise this issue: “I see parallels between rights based movements and the free software movement”.

Mr. Arvind went on to elaborate how governance was a key driver of Digital Commons by saying sustenance of society through tech policy and regulations was a key governance priority in the late 2000s. The framing of the 2014 National Mandatory Open Source Policy of the Government of India is already out. What’s more, in the 2009 elections, free software was an active point in the manifestos of most major political parties.

Highlighting the importance of pushing for digital commons in the Indian context, Mr. Arvind observed that open systems are increasingly being controlled by the Government. He also questioned the way in which systems like UPI and AADHAR have been implemented, noting that they allow centralisation of data and increase surveillance on citizens. He also called for allowing greater participation in the framing of data policies and protocols, arguing that if a person’s data is collected for whatever reason, the person should have a say in what is done with that data.



Ms. Bhargavi Rao, Deputy Director of CFA, raised a question regarding the privacy regulations surrounding the *Aarogya Setu* app. As a petitioner in the Karnataka High Court questioning the safety of users’ privacy in using this app, Mr. Arvind shared his concerns: “The *Aarogya Setu* app is encroaching into our personal devices. What you download on your phone should be your personal choice, but *Aarogya Setu* is being forced upon us by various authorities”. He went on to reveal that his petition has brought some positive results, including a revocation of the requirement for having the *Aarogya Setu* app to use the Bengaluru Metro.

The internet is a space which is constantly evolving. Speaking about emerging trends in Web 2.0, Mr. Arvind observed that users of information are also becoming producers and participation in the open movement is not just limited to code. It extends to content, music, videos, etc. Closing the session, he encapsulated his views on the digital commons in two brief sentences: “Digital commons is about collective action and self-governance. Ensuring user agency should be the major priority in all policies governing this field”.

ESG and CFA continue the “**Interdisciplinary Action Research: Conversations with Emerging Leaders**” series next Thursday, 8th October 2020 (5:00 - 6:30 pm on Zoom and Facebook) addressing the theme: “**Janapada Khadi: A Step Towards Swaraj Development**” with **Sumanas Koulagi** and **G.N. Raghu**. More details on this webinar series can be accessed on www.esgindia.org and www.cenfa.org. Recording of the webinar is accessible at:

[This report has been prepared by Ashwin Lobo, Research Associate, Karthik Anjanappa, Research Associate and Malvika and Satvika, Interns, at ESG. Bhargavi Rao, Trustee, at ESG and Leo Saldanha, Trustee, at ESG provided inputs.]

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