UCI School of Social Sciences
Criticism Inside, Alternatives Alongside:
Organizing Otherwise to Intervene in Anthropology's
Future

Communicating and Community-Building:
Working in, with, and Against Big Tech

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Captioned by Joshua B. Edwards, RDR, CRR

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>> BILL MAURER: We will get started in just a couple of

minutes here as people file in from the waiting room.   Good morning

or good afternoon or good evening, depending on where you are.   It

always takes a little bit of time for people to file in virtually

from that Zoom waiting space, so we will just give it a couple more

minutes.

And again, good morning, afternoon or evening.

Welcome. Hopefully you are here for the Wenner-Gren Foundation

series Criticism Inside, Alternatives Alongside: Organizing

Otherwise to Intervene in Anthropology's Future. I am Bill

Maurer. I'm the dean of the School of Social Sciences here at UC

Irvine and I'm really pleased that you could join us today for this

our third conversation, I think out of 10 or 11 that we will be

doing through the fall and winter with the support of the

Wenner-Gren Foundation and the School of Social Sciences at UC

Irvine.

I think at this point I will turn it over to Taylor Nelms to say a bit more about the series, and then to introduce today's speaker. Taylor.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Thanks so much, Bill. Thanks everybody for being here. We are deeply excited and honored that we get to have this conversation today with Dr. Mary L. Gray. Mary is the senior principal researcher at Microsoft Research and an associate professor at the Luddy School of Informatics Computing and Engineering, Anthropology and Gender Studies at Indiana University as well as faculty associate at Harvard University Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society. She's authored, coauthored and edited a whole bunch of stuff and I won't read you her entire CV. But most recently she's the coauthor of Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass.

And before that, the author of Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America. Mary is also as many of you already know one of this year's MacArthur's fellows recognized for her work on digital technologies and economies.

So we are really excited to have the opportunity to talk with Mary today about the past, present, and future of public scholarship and really like all of our guests, there's no one better positioned with the experience and background to have this conversation with us.

So we are looking forward to it. Later on we will be

joined by three Ph.D. students, Kim Fernandes from the University
of Pennsylvania, Nina Medvedeva from University of Minnesota and
Nima Yolmo from the University of California Irvine who are here
to keep us honest in anything that we happen to say over the first
half hour, 45 minutes or so.

(Laughter)

>> TAYLOR NELMS: We do want to thank the Wenner-Gren
Foundation and the UCI School of Social Sciences for their support
for this series. And we want to remind you that we will be able
to answer your questions. So please feel free to use the Q&A
function at the bottom of your screen in Zoom.

And we will be keeping track of those to ask towards
the end of the hour. And also just a reminder that CART captioning
is available, live CART captioning is available. And thanks to
Joshua Edwards for providing that service here today.

So maybe we will just start by asking Mary to tell us
a little bit what you do and how you ended up doing the work that
you are doing.

>> MARY GRAY: Well, thanks for the invitation. This is
definitely a crowd of people I would love to be sitting in a room
with chatting and maybe swapping some gossip. And, you know, my
origin story, my path is a bit peculiar, but then I think we all
find ourselves often part of peculiar paths when we are bridging
these worlds of universities and other settings that appreciate
scholarship.

I started out as a queer youth organizer. I wanted to understand how could we be using the internet to the best of our ability to do different kinds of politics in places like the rural parts of the United States, places I came from.

It wasn't terribly complicated or theoretically heavy. It was what difference does the internet make anyway? And I started asking that question not too long after I left my undergraduate, finished my undergraduate degrees in anthropology in and American studies. I wasn't very good at school so I couldn't have gotten into a grad program if I wanted to.

But I was doing this political work and I also had become a member of a startup called Planet Out. And I realized that I felt like I didn't have the frameworks to help me understand whether I was asking the right question or not. So I was in an anthropology master's program very much a part of the world of queer anthropology at the American Anthropological Association.

And when I asked people should I go on anthropology, enough of them said don't bother. You will never really find a career path in anthropology if you want to study technology, young people, and rural parts of the United States.

So I actually never left anthropology in many ways, but my formal training is at a communication department in San Diego. And that's the project that started me on a path that led to a tenure track position. I trained like anybody does in graduate school to narrow my ambitions and think about an academic career.

And I found myself fortunate to match with an academic position at Indiana University which is a wonderfully peculiar quirky public institution that's mostly liberal arts. And when I finished the research for Out In the Country and published that book, I got tenure and I really wondered how can I make technology matter?

I was still asking the same question. So it was just serendipitous in many ways that Microsoft Research which is I believe now kind of the last institution standing, that afterwards academic freedom to its researchers, invited me to join them as a permanent researcher.

And I have been there for eight years.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Can you tell us, Microsoft Research the last institution standing, tell us a little bit about your perspective on kind of what kind of organization Microsoft Research is. And not just in terms of culture, but, you know, structurally and what's the history of those kinds of institutions? Especially in the tech world.

>> MARY GRAY: Yeah. The tech world has had these really interesting points of reference. Bell Labs is heralded as the institutional foregrounder. You can think of Xerox Park as another place that from its earliest days was working with technologies and thinking about technologies as somehow having something to do with society.

But, you know, those earliest labs for the most part

imagine they were designing closed systems, often designing objects, things, and then people would pick them up. We could probably make a case they were social all along. But the history of those early industry-based labs in technology spaces was rooted in the disciplines that were growing up alongside it.

So I think what's very interesting to me about a place, particularly Microsoft Research is that from its earliest founding, it was feeding the disciplines of computer science which mostly was this weird thing in electrical engineering departments.

And the field of engineering, that was starting to build things other than bridges. So the collision of that of an industry that absolutely needs foundational research to grow was the green House for Microsoft Research. It also could afford to basically lock, stock, and barrel grab tenured faculty just like all conservative institutions in academia, just grabs the most accomplished tenured faculty rather than nurturing emerging scholars.

So it took that methodology and created Microsoft Research. And I think what's unique about it is that it from the very beginning had always had this rotating door to academia. It didn't see the conflict, except when it came to intellectual property. So very clear expectations around if you create code what you do with it.

And I think that has profound implications for how we think about social media companies as research centers now, what

are the constraints and the possibilities there for feeding academic work, foundational scientific inquiry.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: And we will definitely come back to that question because I think it's a really, really important one. But maybe let's dig just a little bit deeper on kind of your day-to-day work. So can you tell us about kind of what a day in the life of Mary Gray looks like? And maybe in particular I think we are interested in what are the other kinds of labor? Right, maybe recognized or not so recognized involved in working at a place like Microsoft Research.

Institutional-building labor, mentorship, organizational maintenance, you know, admin. Tell us a little bit about that work.

>> MARY GRAY: Sure. And actually it's interesting because I think the kind of work I do day to day probably increasingly looks like the work you probably do, Taylor, but in settings where, you know, the interest is either private sector, public sector investment in opening up questions. Those kinds of spaces also ask of us to nurture lines of inquiry, research agendas, mentoring, as part of that.

So my day to day looks a lot like what I did at my university. It means I'm talking with students about their research projects, offering them support about everything from readings to navigating their methodology. The service load say very interesting mix of teaching and service in that I have

colleagues who have never heard of anthropology or have a very rudimentary understanding of social sciences.

So they might use the term "social," and they just mean co-present. So they assume that there's nothing social about being alone. And that, you know, my work, the service load is to bring the epistemologies, the way of knowing the world from my training to their day-to-day work life which was often just trying to build something or evaluate something they've tried to build.

So that's a piece of the service load, but it's really teaching and service. I find myself now offering kind of critical gender studies and critical race studies in my day-to-day conversations with colleagues in the same way if I was teaching undergraduates an internet and society course, that's what they would be learning about for the first, you know, usually two weeks of class.

So it's a really wonderful day to day. Microsoft Research is again somewhat unique in that next semester I am going to be co-teaching a course with a colleague who is a mathematician at MIT. That's a part of my day job. That's not something I have to do on the side. I write. I'm expected to write. I'm expected to publish. There's not so much perishing in this world, so that's good.

But I still have the expectations that I'm going to communicate what I have learned. That is my day to day.

>> BILL MAURER: On that point, could you actually say a

bit more about the different modes and registers of those communications and who they are for. Because I know you have to navigate among a number of different kinds of constituencies in this position as well as, you know, write back to the academic world.

So just a bit more about those modalities and communities.

>> MARY GRAY: Yeah. It's, you know, the white paper has been replaced by PowerPoint that's actually more of a video conversation. So communicating internally might look like I am going to produce a short video for you that's a tutorial on how to rethink on demand labor. So that's a really interesting shift that writing and really having luxury of writing a long piece doesn't really serve this environment well because there are many folks who need to be able to digest materials quickly. What I love about that is it forces me to constantly translate. I don't think there's anything that I'm arguing or that I study that can't be made accessible. It's just a lot of work to do that. And in an academic setting, I have the luxury of not having to do that. I can just exchange tokens of phrases and we can just enjoy saying, you know, neoliberal without talking much more.

I actually really relish how much I can't get away with using any language that carries its own freight. Every word has to count in a different way. But the modalities are also options. So does that look like, for me it increasingly looks like writing

public op-eds which in a university setting, maybe I might be incented to do that. Maybe I wouldn't care to do that.

But here I have room to make that one of the modalities. And then lastly just on a point, I feel like I really get a chance, I get a chance to reflect on what is it that I don't like about journal articles. I really struggle with journal articles as an interdisciplinary writer or scholar because I have -- it's humbling. I'm quite insecure as a writer.

It means I have to learn how that journal's readers expect me to speak. And I'm not very good about that. So it's been a real pleasure to learn where do I want to place essay-length pieces? What do I think about the performance of a particular voice? What are my motivations for singing in that register?

And I feel like it's given me a place to interrogate, you know, when you are coming up, there aren't very many options. You have to have those publications, those journal publications. What would it be like if that wasn't the coin of the realm for coming up through an academic career? I really, I wonder about that.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: As you think about these different modalities, I mean, first of all, Filene where I'm at, the think tank where I'm based, we haven't moved past the PowerPoint deck. So I look forward to the moment we can communicate via short four- to five-minute videos.

As you think about the different modalities, who are you trying to influence or what impacts are you trying to have on

those people? Do you imagine there are different categories of
kind of constituents that you are trying to shape in different
ways? Or how do you approach that question?

>> MARY GRAY: Yeah. For my work, and I'm sure this is
true for others on this conversation. You know, I know that there
are several audiences I could reach. And I'm greedy. I want to
reach them all. So I'm often trying to think, like, if I take,
for example, the most recent work I did with computer scientist
Nadara Suri (phonetic). That work is meant to speak to
entrepreneurs who are going to create the startups that could be
thinking very consciously about the work they are producing and
distributing. Reaching engineers who are building those
platforms and thinking about algorithmic management, but not
thinking they are managing people. That's an audience. Public
policy people who actually don't often understand how technologies
work at all. It's quite stunning to me that it's still really hard
to convince people, particularly with this face, that no in fact
artificial intelligence doesn't work the way we are told it works.
So those are all different audiences, but being able to find a way
to speak to them and in many ways use the same words but perhaps
emphasize different parts of what I'm saying, that to me is the
work that I can do here. That I really can put energy into these
different constituencies.

My audiences here at Microsoft Research are often the
software engineers, the day-to-day developers, but also their

managers who need to give them space to think differently about their responsibilities as builders. It's making a case that that's worthwhile. And ultimately actually at the end of the day I'm more interested in meeting the students who are going to populate these companies.

So I want to reach undergrads, grads who are year one, year two of their programs and are going to be the recruits for these companies. Because if you change what they expect, then none of these companies can hire someone who doesn't hold higher expectations than they currently have.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: And so there's a kind of story that you are telling, I think. Maybe I will just kind of talk it through with you and see if we are on track and then I have a kind of question. So there's a way in which you have an external audience, a broader public audience that includes public policymakers and the people that influence them. That includes entrepreneurs and engineers who are building stuff out in the world.

It includes, you know, there's a general public there, too, especially in the kind of op-ed work that you do. Then there's that internal audience at Microsoft Research. And then there is this kind of, the student audience, right, that is really compelling to hear you talk a little bit about the power of changing companies by changing their recruiting pool, so to speak, right.

I wonder, you know, if you could reflect a little bit on the role of, if there is a role for kind of community-building

in the communication that you have with these different groups.
You started this story by telling us that you came up through
political organizing, queer political organizing, right. And
there, right, there is a really profound kind of
community-building that happens.

        And so I wonder if you might reflect on those kind of
two different modes of community-building and are there
similarities? What are the differences? And then I have a
follow-up question.
(Laughter)

     >> TAYLOR NELMS: But yeah, maybe talk a little bit about
that first.

     >> MARY GRAY: I love that question because I realize,
like, the work doing right now since March 5 has been working with
this team called the Pandemic Response Network. It's a group out
of North Carolina. We have been working nonstop trying to think,
well, how would you better equip community healthcare workers?
What would it take to be able to bring systems built around their
work flows to address COVID-19?

        But more broadly, be able to create an extension of
public health, to build out the public health that particularly
in the United States we do not have? I mean, that is a political
question for me. It's on fire for me. And at the same time it
is precisely saying the domain experts missing from what we build
right now are community organizations and communities hardest hit

by COVID-19. Everybody is assuming what individual patients might need.

    And they have this odd abstraction of who gets sick, even though the preponderance of data is it's historically disenfranchised marginalized communities. So if they are not at the table and this is certainly an iteration of don't build it without us, that chant, I'm a relentless optimist. I believe there's something profound that could happen if our approach to building technologies, assuming the technology would never be right, there's nothing that technology can fix about society's problems.

    But if we were to engage communities as participants and collaborators in what we build, we would more quickly see what's being built against their interests. So I chaired the Microsoft Research ethics program here. It's the only federally registered institutional review board in a tech setting. And the reason I am doggedly holding onto making that program live is because it is a possibility of imagining what it looks like to assume you are always interacting with people when you build social technical systems. I actually hate that phrase because it's been picked up so quickly. But whenever you are building technologies that are going to become ubiquitously part of people's everyday lives, you are interacting with them as much as I am when you are doing field work.

    So what would it look like to assume that and take on

the responsibilities of building around that premise? That's
what I'm trying to do with this, with the Pandemic Response
Network, and more broadly convening these different interlocutors
that I imagine with my scholarship is precisely to say there should
not be such distance between a software engineer and the
African-American churches that we are working with in Durham.

There's not a good argument for why they are assumed
to be so far apart. They actually need each other. So what would
a kind of mutuality to that relationship look like?

>> BILL MAURER: I wonder in those sorts of moments of
trying to build these new kinds of connections and relationships
how you really convey this, especially to the technology side who
I imagine are going to go straight to gee Wiz tech solution. We
can do it, we can fix it. How do you slow down, calm down, now
let's really have a time to hear what people are trying to tell
you? How do you do that?

>> MARY GRAY: You know, Bill, the most helpful thing has
sadly been historical racial uprising in a pandemic. It takes
that kind of shock, and I actually hear the language of shock quite
a bit these days. I think that has made my work a little less hard
because I do think I entered this space eight years ago thinking
it wouldn't be so hard to convince people it's not the technology.

And I feel naïve in saying that out loud now. But what
has changed is everything around us showing the failure of
continually throwing tech at something and seeing it short fall.

It doesn't mean people stop trying. To your point, there's still this, oh, but maybe it will work in this situation. But where I'm most hopeful is when I talk with graduate students particularly in computer science and engineering, they get that that's not working.

They really do. Not all of them, but enough of them, that I actually can imagine we're on the, you know, we are, well, we could be at a place where we can rethink what are the social sciences and what would it look like to include computer science under that shingle?

>> TAYLOR NELMS: And this really touches on a question that we've gotten in the Q&A, and a question that I have about, you know, in your work today, you've hinted at this. You talked a little bit about it. But how does Microsoft Research having you kind of nurture emerging scholars, young scholars, students, and who would you consider to be your fellow travelers?

That's a kind of theme that we've had kind of throughout our conversations. Someone in our very first conversation said they first heard it as fellow troublers which we also really like. If you could categorize some of those fellow travellers, people you are working with, who would those people be?

>> MARY GRAY: Yeah. Let me start with that last question, because I want to say I'm so appreciative of being able to work with Barbara Gross. She's a computer scientist. She was a pioneer in natural language processing. Multiagent systems.

And she until recently was on faculty at Harvard. She's retired.

And she's co-chairing a national academy's study on computer science and engineering ethical responsibilities. So what I appreciate and I'm holding her up as this key fellow traveler is that she is someone with incredible curiosity who has clear disciplinary training and knows the limits of that training and sees the value of convening a kind of a creation of an interdisciplinary space that sees the complementarity of disciplines and isn't looking to co-op one discipline to serve computer science. She's such a model of how do we move forward so we keep the strength of interdisciplinarity. I stayed as much as I could in anthropology to keep my feet to the fire so that I would always have a group of people who would call out, you are not really holding the rigor of this approach.

And it's so critical that we have that kind of disciplinary strength to bring to these interdisciplinary problems, rather than jockeying for which discipline is going to figure it all out. Those aren't the kinds of problems we have if they ever were.

So she's my fellow traveler. And there are many graduate students. There are a few on the call who I consider hopefully they consider me maybe I'm in the back seat with them, but now I have "Driving Miss Daisy" in my head. That's sad.

But I genuinely hope that the fellow travelers are other scholars who take very seriously the rigor of what they do

and have the humility to recognize the limits of what they can offer and what they can't. I think I lost track of the first part of your question.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: No, no, that's actually great. I think you touched on both of those. And maybe that actually provides a nice transition point for us to be thinking about, you know, the public-facing social science that you do, interdisciplinary science that you do and many of your colleagues do as well.

What are the possibilities in your mind and if there were some of the kind of key limitations you have run up against, I wonder what those are, too.

>> MARY GRAY: Yeah. I think the key possibilities here are that we would see that for particularly critical scholarship, and by that, I mean scholarship meant to call out inequity as constitutive of the spaces we hold in the world. A theory of power which would just go with the analysis of society and technology's relationship to it.

So that we can work with that assumption, start with that assumption. And that is an assumption. It's the qualifier to what we're doing. But if I start there, the possibilities are to shift out of the gee Wiz-ness that Bill referenced and be able to move to an interrogation of the conditions under which we find people in the world and what we want to change about those conditions, that we would stop thinking in terms of externalities as though you can carve up things into clean, you know, causal

statements. And we would really be able to contend with the dynamism that is social life, you don't find answers. You continually pick away at what are the problems? How have we come to decide which problem counts most? And then we would literally say, and we are going to, some folks are going to go and work on that problem and always be willing to say gosh, I have sharpened.

I have narrowed my view and I have lost sight of the other problems I'm generating by the way I approach what it is I want to fix in the world. So it's not giving up on there ever being a way of building something. It's the opposite of that. It's saying whatever I build has to be constantly in conversation and iterating with what do I know about the world? What are the differences, the groups that are out there that are not being addressed?

And that you just don't stop asking that. There's no relief from asking that. And that's okay. And the limits are going to be people get sick of doing that. People say I would like a quick fix, so I would like some health communication that tells me how to get people to take vaccines. That's becomes, we are stuck with this diminished sense of how different people are and how much their lives matter to how we consider what we need to do to meet what's not working in the world. If you can't tell, this is me quite exasperated and angry.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: I can't tell, actually, you sound really -- you sound way more optimistic than I would sound!

(Laughter)

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Talking about these things. But I mean, this is incredibly powerful already. You know, I wonder if maybe as I think about what you've said and Bill, feel free to jump in here, too, but there is this kind of alternating modality, an alternating modality between the kind of never letting up about the -- allowing yourself to be pressured by the communities that your work is touching, and the reality that they live; and the moment of let's give people a tool that they can act on, right, or a pathway that they can follow, something digestible. I don't want to say simple because it's not that, but there is this kind of alternating where you can give people something, and then, you know, keep ahold of that something and be able to keep it in touch with the world at the same time.

I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what role maybe that something is technological, right, that thing you can offer people to act on. Are there roles for technology in addressing social problems? And maybe think through what those might be.

>> MARY GRAY: Well, you just landed on my favorite role for technology, Taylor, which is that it's a prompt. It's a prompt for thinking what am I thinking? What are the assumptions that I'm making right now that are going to foreclose this being useful to someone else? Because that question is actually the more valuable part of all of this.

So I mean, again, I think the reason that Barbara Gross or other colleagues that I consider fellow travelers are so critical to this, you know, this sea change that we desperately need within the, you know, the worlds I am traveling, it's because they are willing to concede, oh, technology isn't the fix here, but it can do some good.

It's just letting it be a little bit of good instead of a solution. And the little bit of good is to open up space for us to start interrogating who and what am I leaving behind? Who is benefitting here? And I'm hoping that somebody on the call will call out, like, look where I work. I work at Microsoft. So, you know, my job here is to constantly call out how -- what is the conflicting tension between a capitalist imperative and what good technologies could do in the world. Because there's a constant conflict. And it's not about resolving that conflict. It's saying that conflict is going to be there, so what do we do with that conflict? Again, theory of power for me is there's no outside of capitalism. Not looking for the side door this magical beautiful capitalist-free world.

I don't believe that will exist in my lifetime. I see what it would look like to try. Maybe I'm meek in that way. But what I am looking for is for us to note that technology companies and information societies which are basically information service work like that is our economy globally. Really, that is the engine of our economy.

So if we thought about the exchange of information and communication as an economic zone, how would we populate that zone with an awareness of gosh, what a different orientation to productivity, to all, you know, all the terms we throw around that to me are opportunities to say oh, people's contributions are incredibly valuable.

Oh, anything we're creating is actually collectively an aggregation, a collective contribution. Oh, that should change everything we do about how we compensate people, how we recognize people, how we valuable people. Like, all of that is possible even within a company at least within this company.

>> BILL MAURER: You know, you are reminding me very much of something that I can't remember who said it, either Jane or Jean about how we are not after solutions, but resolutions and resolution kind of in the sense of a new year's resolution, right. I will now recommit and affirm my values which are X, Y, and Z which isn't going to take away the problem. But help us see the new problems.

I think we are about to transition now to where our grad students, Nina, Nima, and Kim, are going to jump in and start posing some questions to you, but also some questions that have popped up in the Q&A field in the chat. And if the other folks attending want to add in some questions, please feel free. Go down to the bottom of your screen. Click on the Q&A balloon and type away.

Nima, Nina, and Kim, I will hand it over to you.

>> NINA MEDVEDEVA: Thanks, Bill. I guess I will ask the first question specifically with regards to the possibilities that corporations present for research and maybe also some of the -- I am going to use the word fragile, but some of the fragility in these interdisciplinary collaborations. I am thinking specifically here the firing of (name).

I was wondering if you could speak to how you navigate at Microsoft if that's a tension that is inherently there and how do you make sure that you are taking -- you are building a company culture that can embrace and put forward someone like that doctor instead of firing them?

>> MARY GRAY: Yeah, I'm glad you brought it up, because it's definitely on my mind. It's on a lot of the minds of colleagues in my world. So thank you for bringing that up. And it gives me a chance to touch back to something Taylor had raised. I think supporting emerging scholars is precisely as more established scholars being loud, making room, taking risks, because we afford to.

So it frustrates me that emerging scholars are the ones absorbing so much of the heat and taking stands that their more established colleagues are not better able to take those stands, but owe it to make room. Because again, they can afford it.

So, you know, I think what's distinct and I'm frustrated to realize that Microsoft Research at least the labs that I'm affiliated with, so I don't even want to speak for all

of Microsoft Research, the value proposition if you will is academic freedom. And it is the thing that we can offer researchers who could otherwise go to Google or Facebook or somewhere else and get access to more data, but would then have a vetting process.

So let me just say loud and publicly as much as this is as public as it gets, Microsoft Research doesn't vet research. It doesn't have a process where you have an internal review board review your written material. It assumes that the only review you need is an ethics review before you start your work and any security review that goes with releasing software on the world.

But otherwise peers at other institutions are the ones who are the experts who would be able to evaluate the strength of the scholarship. So I would argue what the public needs is the commitment that researchers at institutions like mine are underwriting the foundational research that's going on at institutions like yours.

Now, that can take a lot of different shapes. It can be Ph.D. internships that are really good supportive internships that have academic freedom for those who take on those internships and ask the questions they see as important to ask. I think there's an incredible role for industry-based research to play a part in underwriting the scholarship they are going to profit from.

So right now universities are not getting a fair exchange. And if we are not careful, we are going to find

ourselves where biomedicine is today, which is having a hard time making sure that it has the basic science in place in universities to train who is going to be the next scientist. We can't afford to keep doing that.

And it's peculiar to the United States, I would say, maybe not so much, but that our higher educational institutions are not better funded by private industries that profit from them is appalling. So that's about the de-funding of public institutions and making them private goods. They are not private goods. They benefit our economy. They benefit the public. So we need to stop this shit of thinking it's an individual investment.

And that starts with yes, our tax dollars, but those tax dollars should also be coming from corporations. So I can probably tell I have a little bit of anger about that one. But I think there are other things that particularly when it comes to products and services that are going to have an impact on society, and I think we could probably come up with some litmus test for that, there needs to be oversight. There has to be public governance.

There has to be a space for the public to deliberate about technologies before they are built. It makes no sense to sit here and wait and figure out, gosh, can facial recognition be used to harm people more than it helps? You can't have a serious conversation about technologies once they are built. But you can

actually, and I would argue the most important thing we can be doing
is saying you have to have a robust conversation about what you
build before you build it. What are the questions that have to
be asked? And that's where I think, gosh, the perspective we bring
from the social sciences from humanistic social sciences are the
questions that computer scientists and engineers should be trained
to ask. They've just never had that training.

>> KIM FERNANDES: Mary, I wanted to build on another side
of this question and ask about as a researcher in a social sciences
researcher in an applied context, how does your positionality and
the positionality of so many of the colleagues you admire shape
the kinds of research that you do? Also building on a question
from the chat, how do corporations build on this positionality and
think about what it means to support their employees, their workers
in less secure places? Things like that.

>> MARY GRAY: Yeah, no, that's a really important
question because it shapes, I would argue positionality shapes
everything. Not in any definitive foreclosing way, but in terms
of what do I consider important questions? How do I ask those
questions? I'm rooted in a specific kind of training and I'm
rooted in this body that's trained in particular ways.

So any institutional context is just layering on that
positionality. And actually I love that you used that, Nima,
because I think positionality as a concept would be a far more
interesting concept to bring to the table than bias. If you get

into the debate about bias, you actually get people thinking you can de-bias things.

But if you get in a conversation about positionality, it means you are constantly calling the question of the intersectionality of many of our ways of being in the world. So this context and I will be more concrete because that question is probably asking, well, how does this institution shape my research agenda?

Doesn't it mean I'm not asking particular kinds of questions? Or maybe I'm incented to ask particular kinds of questions about products or services. I remember when I first moved to Microsoft Research people asked me what are you going to work on? Are you going to work on new phones or, you know, improving PowerPoint?

And I do confess, I spent the first year I was here making sure people understood what I had written and what kind of research I do. I mostly at the time cared about queer identity formation and boundary publics, and the lack of technology's capacity to address marginality.

So I don't know that people when I was first hired fully understood what I was bringing. But I do think being in this setting at Microsoft Research as an industry setting allows me to ask the questions that I think are important. And what I have to constantly track is has what I considered important changed because of where I am? Am I sidetracked? Do I feel sidetracked

by that service teaching load of helping an engineer understanding gender?

I'm so tired some days of needing to explain gender or race or other constructed senses of self that have deep consequences. But it's a fair trade because that means in this setting, I can be that person who pushes someone who has never thought about those questions before and that's worthwhile to me but I think it's really important.

I want people to keep asking me, is this place changing what you consider important? More so if I was at a university. Every university is also a context. It's also a corporation in the United States.

>> NIMA YOLMO: Thank you, Mary. And now I am going to fold the questions into the one that I have. And this is related to setting standards in the industry. You mentioned briefly about IPR and the tensions. I was wondering if you could speak a little more about your observations about the tensions and relationships between IPR and censorship that you also, like, at Microsoft.

>> MARY GRAY: Yeah. You know, I think that, you know, the phrase -- censorship is subtle. All of this is happening through soft power. If I go back to the question about Google, and I would be the first to say in any workplace setting, things are probably really complicated where, you know, we can't always know what are all the complications.

But there's kind of a simple reality of when you are

in a research setting, if you are doing research, what are the
expectations and the agreements that are in place for your room
to do your work? And that I think for all of us to consider if
we are coming out of university training, what do we expect of each
other?

What is it that -- what culture can we build that both
pushes us all to ask questions like did you get consent before you
got that document? Like, does that become a basic question we
always ask? And that will we have a way of explaining when we don't
have consent? That is a genuine explanation instead of a
defensive deflection? Being able to come up with what are those
core questions are the things that I think can address those places
where we foreclose certain research agendas. So to the question
of censorship, when I started asking questions about queer young
people under 18, and I wanted to ask those questions and have waiver
of parental consent, it was really hard to find other scholars who
had done that work. And the reason most scholars were not doing
that work, it was because it was discouraging to try and get through
a review process.

And that meant there were a lot of graduate students
who were choosing to just work with people over 18 because that's
just, you just want to move on. That to me is a failure of
institutions. When we don't have much research on the lives of
people because it's too inconvenient, then that's a place for us
to collectively say well, that's a loss. And it really does become

this collective obligation rather than one individual's heralding it onto make sure certain kinds of lines of research get asked. I think that's even more true in industry settings. So if you don't see particular kinds of questions being asked, or you notice something consistent about what's absent from the publishing profile of particular industries, you know there's something going on there. And, you know, we all know there's no way to be in a tech industry-based research setting without reading the papers of people in university settings. So what can university settings be doing to say enough, enough? You are not going to be allowed to publish in our journals or participate in our proceedings if you aren't also willing to present work that's dealing with these difficult topics. Or if you are working with proprietary data, what access are you going to guarantee?

Otherwise you don't get to publish on it. If universities could make those strong requirements now, ethics reviews, nothing, nothing gets published without some version of an ethics review and tell me what that program involves. And it's not a legal review or a PR review.

Those kinds of things that I feel are ways to raise the bar. Because I'm not thinking tech companies are going away any time soon. I'm just going to say that out loud. I think for the most part people are still going to be using social media for a while. Like, if we would all stop using it, these companies wouldn't exist.

So there are some options there. But if these tech companies are going to continue, and if we are going to continue to live parts of our social lives through these networked systems, we need a way to study society that recognizes how dependent social scientists and tech company also on each other.

Full stop.

>> NIMA YOLMO: Thank you.

>> MARY GRAY: Sure. I hope I'm not sounding too ranty.

>> NINA MEDVEDEVA: You are good. So just to kind of build on what you said and to bring forward a question from the Q&A, can you talk a little bit about just somebody mentioned community-based research as kind of encoding justice into knowledge production. And Connie asks if you could walk us through a process where in your work, maybe in the pandemic response work, that you have been able to build a bridge between the tech folks and impacted communities. What does that look like on all sides and how do you ensure trying to solve social issues with tech solutions isn't another version of the white savior complex?

>> MARY GRAY: Yeah, thank you. If that's the Connie I know, hi, Connie. Let me use Pandemic Response Network as an example because I think it's an interesting one. If you think about the beginning of the pandemic, if you heard from tech companies, it was mostly, like, let's build a digital tracing app. South Korea's got one. It seems to have worked.

There was no awareness that perhaps the other things that helped make it work were universal healthcare in a very different relationship to citizenry and government and information-sharing. Everything I just said, was wait? What? But they have cell phones. So think about the beginning of that approach and the corrective to use a concrete example, the corrective now is, look at what it looks like to have a community healthcare worker quite literally speaks the language of the person they are contacting. And isn't just tasked with getting a list of contacts, but is actually building ongoing relationships with particular sets of people who need groceries, who need child care, who need a host of other things that we don't consider part of caring for a patient.

So it is blowing apart the idea of what constitutes patient care. And it's making a case that the domain experts who have to be in place are the people who best understand the circumstances, particularly if you are talking about communities of undocumented workers, for example. So that the extension of public health are the familiar faces who actually already provide a lot of support because the nation state has abandoned so many of those communities. So it's technologies that literally start from a premise of I'm building for that relationship. I'm building out the trust that's already there. Digital tracing apps, the assumption was I need to protect healthy people from sick people. That's ridiculous in a pandemic. If you are not starting

with how do I care for people who are sick, you are perpetuating a pandemic.

That's all we have done, is perpetuate a pandemic. I mean, not just that. So it looks like and why I'm hopeful is that it obliterates this sense of my intuition or my own projection of what people need could ever possibly build something useful in any meaningful sense. It will literally just build something useful for me because that's what I have been built.

And it will be a coincidence that other people adopt it because they have no other choice because that was the thing that I built and marketed. So it's letting go of assuming that something that has marked share is meaningfully good. That's just bullshit. That was good marketing, and usually obliterating your competitors.

So it's thinking walking through an example of not just user-centered design, but a socially aware approach to technologies. And that social sensibility is not the end-all be all. That is not the end. I think Bill said it earlier. It's the beginning of this process of identifying more problems and taking them on, and not getting defensive about it.

Like, we shouldn't be defensive that we are steep in a structurally oppressive state of being. That is just, that's true. We perpetuate it. That's true. So move on. Do something about it. Yeah.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Mary, we could have this conversation

for the rest of the day and through the weekend, I think. And
unfortunately we can't. But I wonder if I might end just with one
kind of final question and we will try to wrap it up and I am going
to try to combine a couple of existing questions.

        Just to bring it back to the university or bring it back
to social science research, what in all of this process have you
learned about the ways we need to change the university or maybe
the ways we need to change anthropology or social sciences?

        >> MARY GRAY: Oh, yeah.

        >> TAYLOR NELMS: Go ahead.

        >> MARY GRAY: I'm so glad you asked that question because
I meant to say this earlier. The thing I've learned is that I was
never trained to offer a possibility for moving forward. I was
quite literally formally trained to go into a setting fully
comprehend what a shit show something was, point out what a shit
show that is and walk away.

        And I got more points if I could say it in an incredibly
obtuse way. So the thing we have to change is assuming that we
actually as anthropologists and humanistic social scientists, and
I mean particularly for qualitative researchers who spend time who
value longitudinal studies that assume time and space matters,
that the most pressing thing we have to learn how to do is to
translate what we've learned into here is what we could do about
it and don't treat this as a solution. Treat it as an approach
we can take. It's one of many possibilities. So we absolutely

have to train ourselves to do that, because what's not working, particularly for people oriented to building things is to tell people don't build things.

It's like telling us don't study things. So, you know, the thing that has to change for social sciences and particularly for anthropology, qualitative, sociology, critical studies of any kind is we have to push ourselves to say and so what would we do next with what we've learned? What would you recommend? Because if we can answer that and also have the capacity to say and here are my other colleagues who can help fill out the answer, we will be more useful. So, but in terms of the university, we have to make room for being able to have interdisciplinary conversations and what that means is, I get points for going and learning technically what is artificial intelligence. I should know what that is before I critique it.

I can't treat it as a metaphor anymore we ever should have treated AIDS as a metaphor. You have to understand what that is in the way that a domain expert is fluent in what that is, have literacy in what that is. And universities don't leave much room for that. And that's a collective loss.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: That's an amazing place for us to kind of tie this conversation up. Thank you so much for joining us. I can't believe that an hour has gone by already. That was, like, the quickest most productive hour I have had since the pandemic began.

So thank you.

(Laughter)

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Mary, for joining us. Thanks, everybody else, for being on the line. Thank you, Bill, for joining us. Thank you, Kim, Nima, and Nina for your questions and support. Mary, any final words before we sign off?

>> MARY GRAY: I think I might have mixed Kim and Nima, so apologies for that when you were asking questions. But thank you for the chance to be part of this series. I'm so appreciative. This is a real gift to scholars, so thank you.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: It's a gift reciprocated. Thanks very much for being here. And just to let everyone know, we are recording this conversation and it will be up online for everyone if you would like to revisit or who would like to -- who weren't here and would like to see the conversation.

So thanks, everyone, again for being here. And thank you, Mary. I hope you enjoy your Friday afternoon.

>> MARY GRAY: Thank you. My pleasure. Good to see you all. Take care.

>> BILL MAURER: Take care.

>> MARY GRAY: Bye.

>> TAYLOR NELMS: Bye, everyone.