VIEW to the U transcribed
Season 4: An Eye on 'Why'?; Episode #2
Professor Negin Dahya
Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology

[Intro music fades in and out]

Negin Dahya (ND): I think, even from the early days of the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees project, not quite a decade ago, but almost a decade ago, and there was still, at least at the early stages, of that and it was still thinking about computer labs and using university learning management systems and that kind of blended learning. And it a bit of a shocking realization I think that really the effective forms of blended learning were much more multimedia in their function and using mobile devices and sharing audio and video, and that the social media networks were really critical spaces through which people stayed connected but also shared important information.

I am Negin Dahya and I am in the Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology and I'm an Assistant Professor.

I know in one of my precedent studies, one of our findings there was that people were actually just learning about the programs that they might want to enroll in through their social networks on their social media sites or over WhatsApp or by calling on the phone more so than they were the community center next door.

Those kinds of realizations and the importance of that for women and the importance of those peer-to-peer networks and those support structures for women who are in the camps that also involved men. The peer networks for not necessarily only other women though other women who were role models and who had left the camps, were certainly important parts of their worlds, but that also involved allies in men who were supportive and also sharing information and encouraging continued learning and pursuing higher education.

[theme music fades in]

Carla DeMarco (CD): Technological tools for education & connection

For this next season of *VIEW to the U*, we tap into the amazing breadth of expertise on the UofT Mississauga campus and focus on a main driving question for the series this year or 'an eye on why?'

For this particular episode we focus on: "Why and how are mobile phones and social networks enabling education as it relates to refugees? How is this working in some remote places around the world?"

I am delighted to say that we are turning to Professor Negin Dahya from UTM's Institute of Communication, Culture, Information, and Technology for an answer to these questions, along with some other insights related to her research.

Over the course of the interview, we cover Negin's work that considers the cultural and social contexts of digital media production and use through the lens of education and learning with a particular focus on women in refugee camps in Kenya.

Negin also talks about how she got into the area of research initially, the potential impact of her work for things like educational design in blended-learning systems, and the importance of International Women's Day on March 8 but also that feminism is a fight for equality that should be recognized the whole year through.

Hello, and welcome to *VIEW to the U*.
I'm Carla DeMarco at UofT Mississauga. *VIEW to the U* is a monthly podcast that will feature UTM faculty members from a range of disciplines who will illuminate some of the inner workings of the science labs and enlighten the social sciences and humanities hubs at UTM.

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Negin Dahya is an Assistant Professor at UofT Mississauga since joining the faculty in the Institute of Communication, Culture, Information, and Technology in 2019. She completed undergraduate studies at the University of British Columbia, and obtained her Master's and PhD in Education at York University in 2008 and 2014, respectively.

Negin has a couple of ongoing projects currently, including the study of virtual reality concept-art creation with young people in a juvenile rehabilitation centre that is funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Service in Washington, D.C., and also a collaboration exploring the technology access and education opportunities for refugee women that also takes into account the role public libraries and non-profit government programs play in the provision of services.

Negin has a partnership with the Digital Youth Lab as well as the Technology and Social Change Group at the University of Washington Information School.

ND: Broadly, I study the social and the cultural contexts where girls and people of color and other minoritized or marginalized communities are using technology and sometimes creating technology, and often that is with a focus on different kinds of digital media. Sometimes that's digital videos, sometimes that's social media. I've worked in VR. There are some different tools and technologies that I have studied, but always looking at what are the sort of conditions around what are the cultural nuances and the social dynamics? Often I do that in learning settings, so that might also involve curriculum or pedagogy or the ways in which

people are teaching and learning using those tools or about how to use those tools.

CD: And when you say creating technology, I'm very curious about that. What does that mean?

ND: Well, more may be creating media than creating technology. Maybe using technology and creating media, which might be, again, digital video or social media.

CD: Would that be an example? They were doing some kind of online video?

ND: Yeah. I've done a good amount of work with girls of color in North America who are creating digital videos about their lives, about their communities, or about their interest areas. Sometimes putting those online, sometimes not, but looking at their process of creating a story and then putting that story into the medium of video. What they choose to tell, how they choose to represent it, how that's informed by the setting that they're in. If they are, again, in a educational environment, like a media education class, what's happening in that environment that is then shaping the way that they are producing a particular type of media content.

CD: And if they're producing that content, are they just then, they're uploading to YouTube?

ND: Sometimes yeah and sometimes it is more in the environment of a workshop or camp or a class and then there's a public screening for their families at the end, or it's showed to their peers in a little film festival. In that example, sometimes the permissions and the restrictions around young people and being in a video context and something being created in an educational environment sort of restrict our ability at least as a research program to participate in putting it online. That would be really up to them after the fact. I've done less research on what happens once those films go online and look more at what is the process of them actually creating those films.

In the other sort of side of my work looking at, for example, social media and the use and production of content on social media, that community that I've worked with mostly has been refugees and that is also looking at settings of teaching and learning in refugee camps and how people are engaging and what kinds of networks they're involved in and how that is enhancing or informing the teaching and learning environments in these camps.

I have predominantly been working in Kenya. Kenyan refugee camps are host to a lot of Somali refugees but also refugees from Ethiopia, from Congo, from

Rwanda and just a slew of other places. From Sudan, South Sudan. There is a lot of different cultural groups and language groups that are represented in those camps.

CD: I think just to give us a better sense of what are the refugee camps like, is it a big open space? And I don't know what this looks like.

ND: Sure. Yeah. The refugee camps in Kenya that I have been to are the Dadaab refugee camps and the Kakuma refugee camps and they are vast, arid desert kind of geographic regions where over 20, almost 30 years now these refugee communities working with the UN and with the government of Kenya and many other nonprofit organizations and government organizations have created tent based camps. Some of the people who have been there for longer now have metal pane or mud brick kind of housing structures that have been built over time and some of the newer people are still living in tents. And so it just kind of goes and goes and goes. As more people come, it expands out further and further geographically.

ND: There are dirt roads, there are marketplaces where communities are creating their own economies. People buy and sell food and cellphones and clothing and access to electricity to charge your phone and all kinds of goods and services. There are marketplaces, there are schools that have been built and created. And then there are also community centers and organizational hubs where the different development agencies that are working and humanitarian aid agencies that are working can do their work.

CD: And so then you sort of touched on my next question. I read it in one of your papers that you said 93% of refugees have access to some level of digital infrastructure to support intranet access and mobile communication and that refugees spend a third of their limited financial resources staying connected. You've touched on this with the marketplace that maybe there you have access to it. I was kind of curious about how do they access it. Maybe you can talk about that a little bit more, but why mobile phones and social networks enabling education and social movements in relation to the refugee camps?

ND: The first question, mobile phones are just the most accessible tool in terms of cost. And then in terms of what they can do. Even for us, it's such a multifunctional tool that we can kind of have with us all the time and in many parts of the world, access to mobile phones and internet on mobile phones and sort of networks that are globally situated really leapfrogged computers. A lot of people didn't have decades of dealing with these big clunky computers. They just sort of got access when mobile phones became more available. That is definitely part of it. I also work predominantly with a sub community. Those figures that you noted are broader stroke of what's happening in the refugee communities and I believe that those figures specifically are kind of global figures. There are very

different types of camps with very different populations and histories. And those are kind of big numbers.

CD: When I read it, it sort of knocked out my notion of people in the refugee camps might not have access to some of this technology.

ND: And so I think though a figure like that also having some access is different than having a smartphone that is internet enabled all the time. That might mean that a household to sharing a phone. It might mean that there is wifi available at a community center at certain times or that certain community members are able to purchase data for a time or once in awhile. It might be that there are still internet cafes, so it might be that people, if it's not a mobile phone that they are accessing internet by going to a location where they can pay for a period of time. There's lots of nuance and stuff like that.

But the subpopulation that I work with is predominantly people who are high school educated in the camps and who are going on to study in higher education. Either within the camps or outside of the camps and or they're working as teachers. Often in Kenya people will graduate from high school in the camps and then go on to work as teachers. And in my research to date, almost all of these people will have access to an internet enabled phone and often their own phone. But these are already in some ways an elite community because they are educated, which means that they have had some support, they have had maybe some access to resources even in those settings, whether it's buying a uniform or not having to do some other kind of work to help feed your family. There are all of these contours. There is a little bit of that distinction.

ND: And then if they go on to work as teachers, then they have some small income, I wouldn't call it a full employment, they call it incentive wages in Kenya. The UNHCR has a system by which community members can earn a stipend essentially for doing work and contributing back into their community. All of that said, we're not necessarily talking about riches. Just clarifying though that there are people who may only have access once a week or once a month to a shared phone. And there are people who have their own device in their hand and there are all these different ways in which that might be possible for particular people.

CD: And then I guess the other part of the question was just and how are they using the phone in enabling education and social movements?

ND: Social movements related to education, I would be wary of, I think the language of social movements kind of paints a picture of revolution and people marching in the streets and some of the ways in which we've seen social media used in other kinds of protests. In my research, it is more focused on how communities are using the networks that they have locally and sometimes the networks that they have internationally to share information that helps them make better decisions

about the work that they're doing or helps them gain information to learn more or succeed in their own schooling and higher education in their teacher training. And within that, taking a gender equity lens.

In my most recent work with my research team comprised of Olivia Arvisay at the University of Quebec in Montreal, Sarah Dryden-Peterson at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Decia Dohavie who's at York University. We identified through interviews and focus group discussions and survey data that teachers who were in a teacher training program and where there were gender equity initiatives embedded, we're using WhatsApp group communication to get fathers and brothers and male community members involved in discussion about why gender equity was important. About why it was important to send your girls to school for example. But they were also using it to problem solve as teachers across camp regions, how they can deal with retention. Why did this girl not come here? How should I approach the family to talk about whether or not this particular child should be in school? And being able to work together collaboratively through these sort of asynchronous chat groups that are available on mobile phones.

CD: If people want to get from one spot to the other, sometimes they have to travel a bit of a distance maybe either for education purposes, but I think that you've sort of answered this. They have these community centers and they're finding maybe more local places to tap into.

ND: There are regional schools. If there is a large colorimetric radius between sections of a camp, then there are also schools within each of those sections. Teachers are not necessarily often physically able to sit down in a room together unless they are already a part of the same school or the same more local community. But they are able to talk to each other through these chat groups and that doesn't mean that they never get together. There also are some mechanisms for moving around the different camp regions, or going to one of the organization had offices and sitting down for classes or for meetings. There are different ways in which people do connect, but day to day it's not always easy to get around.

ND: The last study, the first day that I was there and waiting at the nonprofit partner office to have research participants come and meet with me and it rained. And you're talking about dirt roads so that just...

CD: Shuts everything down.

ND: Yeah, certainly delays everything, whether people are walking on bicycles or in vehicles a muddy dirt road is a problem and a deterrent.

CD: And are there language barriers? Because I know you said that some people are coming from all over the place. Is there an issue with then having to communicate some of the information so that everybody understands?

ND: Yeah, that's a great question. Again, in this population everyone would have gone through the schooling system and in Kenya and under the UNHCR mandates, schooling in a refugee camp happens in the language of instruction of the host community. In Kenya, English and Kiswahili are the languages of instruction in schools and English is dominant. Yeah, the schooling in the camps basically happens in English. People speak English and yes there are language barriers and yes there are different levels of which people speak English.

CD: Do you speak other languages?

N:D I speak French. And I might encounter a French speaker from the Congo or from Rwanda who I might casually speak French with, but mostly everyone interacted in English. And the research is all collected in English.

CD: And how did you get interested in this area of research in the first place?

ND: When I was doing my PhD, I got involved with the Center for Refugee Studies out of interest. My PhD is in education and I was studying digital media in video and video games and that kind of domain with young people in schools. And I got involved with the Center for Refugee Studies. It was just out of interest and that just sort of built over time into, well I had an opportunity really to work as a research assistant on a project called the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees, which is still a program partly based out of York University as well as other partner universities in Canada and in Kenya.

ND: And it was offering university accreditation through blended learning. Online and in person classes at the university level in the Dadaab refugee camps. And this was one of the first of its kind. There are a number of other programs that were diplomas and certificates offered through universities that were happening and that were being delivered. And I think this is the first degree program. And now you're seeing more and more of these as well. People were starting to do this. Anyways, I worked as a research assistant on this project and then from there.

CD: This is where it took you.

ND: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

CD: Have you ever come across any findings in your research that really threw you for a loop? Or that you, I know this comes up a lot with researchers, it's like oh, every study. But was there anything in particular that stands out for you that it's like, oh, we really didn't anticipate seeing that in the research?

ND: Yeah, I think, even from the early days of the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees project, not quite a decade ago, but almost a decade ago, and there was still, at least at the early stages, of that and it was still thinking about computer labs and using university learning management systems and that kind of blended learning. And it was a pretty quick and a bit of a shocking realization I think that really the effective forms of blended learning were much more multimedia in their function and using mobile devices and sharing audio and video, and that the social media networks were really critical spaces through which people stayed connected but also shared important information.

CD: I think that's where we were talking about earlier with the WhatsApp, with having the dads and the other male family members involved. I just think that's so important. It's key.

ND: Yeah. And those are programs that exist, so those programs exist and have been in existence for a long time in terms of gender equity initiatives and there are many really good nonprofit organizations and government agencies that are working on that continued sort of agenda. I think what we uncovered that was important was the way in which social media tools were being used to further those agendas. In ways that maybe could not otherwise be seen.

[Interlude music fades in]

CD: Coming up, Negin talks about the impact of her work and International Women's Day.

[Interlude music fades out]

CD: I think that you're touching on this a lot in a lot of different points, but I'm curious what you would say is the biggest impact of your work.

ND: I think and hope that the work can help the organizations that are, and the institutions that are running these projects to think really carefully about the structure of some of their teaching and learning practices. Some direct impacts is definitely possible in terms of educational design. What kinds of tools are we using to create these blended learning systems? And what kind of practices are we adopting in terms of supporting these people in these settings in ways that work for them given the tools that are available to them? And I think related to that is I'm trying and continuing to try to build an agenda towards really centering what these individuals are already doing and showing that these technologies are just enhancing and facilitating the strength and the expertise of the community members as opposed to this idea of needing to bring something external in, in order to fix a problem, which is a very kind of colonialist perspective on the role of the international community to contribute.

ND: And I think that is also very much the spirit of the new project that I'm working on, which is trying to use technology, use mobile phones, use WhatsApp, probably largely in particular, to have community members in refugee camps be the embedded researchers themselves and document teaching and learning practices with technology that are already happening and that are happening maybe in a classroom but maybe not in a classroom. How are people teaching each other how to use a mobile phone or social media or to transfer money in mobile money banking? Or how are they learning to fix a bike? And which of these technologies is actually the most prevalent and the most important and the most meaningful in their actual lives? And also what are the practices of teaching and learning each other that they are already doing that we might participate in documenting and in sharing so that that can again, maybe help us learn how to support in a more meaningful way, in a more relevant way?

CD: Is this project that you're talking about, is that the one that you have already mentioned with your other two collaborators?

ND: Right. It's the same folks involved, but this one is, yes, the newest one.

CD: March 8th is International Women's Day. And as I understand, the theme of the day this year is each for equal. Do you do anything in particular to celebrate or commemorate this International Women's Day? What would you say is something that we could do to help foster the aim of a more gender balanced world?

ND: I've participated in the Women's Day marches. And I certainly value taking that time to remind the world that this is a fight that still needs to happen, that we are not yet there. And I think that that often is a idea or an argument that people kind of take like, oh, women are liberated. And of course that varies immensely by location, geographic, but also regionally in terms of class and in terms of race. And I think that bringing that back to the forefront is valuable. I certainly have participated in those events. I generally, I think all the time encourage people to recognize that feminism is a fight for equality and not see it as a bad word and to name patriarchy where a patriarchy stands. Because I think we skirt away from that language as well as we do with racism and classism and ableism, homophobia and transphobia.

        I think taking ownership of that language and naming things as they are and just reminding each other that many of us at different intersections and axes of these problems face discrimination. And the Women's Day March can be a good moment to just see how many people are affected and just to remind each other that we are all kind of in it together and that there are many of us, but also to try to keep it going past the day. And before the day.

CD: You're preaching to the choir. Thank you so much for telling me about your work today.

ND: Thank you so much for your interest.

[theme music fades in]

I would like to thank everyone for listening to today's episode of *VIEW to the U*.

I would like to thank my guest Negin Dahya for telling us about the work at the Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology here at the University of Toronto Mississauga that she does related to technology with women, marginalized people, and in refugee camps in Kenya.

I would like to thank the Office of the Vice-Principal, Research for their support.

If you listen to the show through iTunes, please consider rating *VIEW to the U* so that others can find the podcast.

And please for this new season – if you have other burning questions for our long list of experts at UTM, please send them my way. Details for getting in touch are on our website, or send them directly to car.demarco@utoronto.ca. Stay tuned!

Lastly, and as always, thank you to the musical director, Tim Lane, for his tracks and support.

 Thank you!

[theme music fades out]