

Margarita Quihuis:

Peace Is About Cooperating To Solve Problems

—by Jinxia Niu

Margarita Quihuis, Co-Director at Stanford Peace Innovation Lab, has an unconventional take on peace. Using behavior design techniques and persuasive technology, she and her team are working out how to design and increase ‘positive peace’, which will hopefully lead to more collaboration among individuals and groups. In this interview, she explains how ‘positive peace’ can contribute to business and government innovation.

Peace means more than absence of conflict

What is peace? What is peace innovation? Here we are in Palo Alto and it’s a very peaceful place. Communities that have a high degree of peace have low friction. It’s easier to do things, everything works well. So peace is a proxy for a lot of social stability. In the US, in California, we take that peace for granted. Our peace is invisible. On the other hand, if you’ve ever been in a low-trust country or a country that doesn’t function well, everything’s just hard and a lot of conflict gets generated.

However, Silicon Valley is an incredibly prosperous area not only because we’re socially stable, but also because we have a high degree of cooperation and collaboration. It’s very easy for people here to exchange ideas, to say, let’s get together and create something. We have the social and intellectual ability to get along enough to create things like an iPhone, which is an incredibly complex bit of engineering. How do we do that in other parts of the world? In other parts of life?

Take climate change as an example. That’s going to require a high degree of cooperation and collaboration, before we come up with something or a series of things that work. **To me, peace is really about how to get people to come together long enough to work out something, to be successful, and do it in a way that is not exhausting.** We’ve all been in teams that have been dysfunctional. There has been so much conflict and inner fighting that we were nowhere near to accomplishing anything. The world is at a point where we need all kinds of solutions, which means we need to have the ability to work together.

Peace innovation is about positive engagements

What does peace mean in the corporate domain, for instance? It means if we are able to engage with our customers in a positive way, we secure their loyalty. It means how I can make you feel good every time you interact with a brand, whether it’s online or through the store, through a purchase, or through advertising..... at every touch-point, they want to

reinforce the fact that you really made a good decision by investing in good technology. And that is a type of peace innovation. That's when you see the peace dividend, the positive engagement dividend, that's where 'positive peace' comes from. The companies who always engage positively with me are going to charge more and I don't mind that, because the company takes care of me and does not just talk about the product.

One of the things I learned about Apple and Apple retail is that when they hire people for the genius bar they don't hire them for their technical ability, they are hired for compassion. They want you to feel emotionally secure that your problem will be taken care of, that they will do whatever it takes, however long it takes, to take care of your needs and requirements. That's why Apple is the most successful company on the planet. Because they've really mastered this issue of positive engagement. The contrast to that is United Airlines. I look at the incident with the doctor on the plane and how they dragged him off the plane. It was a case of corporate violence. They weren't thinking of positive engagement with customers, they weren't thinking of how to surprise and delight their customers.

This applies not only to companies, but to governments as well. If governments were to think of engaging with citizens in a positive, peaceful way, they will find that citizens support the government. I am happy to pay taxes, because I get so much benefit in return. I am loyal to them, I tend to think this is the best government ever, because I am treated with respect, they are prompt, they are courteous, and my experience is out of this world. That's because it competes in the market for products and services. It's a competitor. Taxes is just another form of payment.

So, when we talk about peace innovation, we are actually talking about positive engagements, we are actually talking about how good we can be to each other. **Our work is really about making people mindful of that and giving people the vocabulary and saying how do we positively engage, how do we make it by design, how do we make it easy.** And when you design the engagements, you should always design for emotion. Emotion is critical for any kind of behavior change. If you do something, how do you feel about the new fit, do you feel good enough that you want to do it again and again.

How the Peace Innovation Lab works with companies or governments

Mark, the co-director of the Peace Innovation Lab at Stanford, and I just worked with some Norwegian executives. They are very interested in transformational change. Their problem was to go beyond product and service innovation alone. The trick is how to get to that point. How do you transform your employees, how do you help employees to change from within, so that they are equipped for the challenges of the new way of working?

So that requires behavior change. Again in terms of different ways of cooperating, collaborating, communicating, in terms of Peace Innovation Lab's engagement stack, it touches all of that. For example, we are working with a company who have problems with silos, have groups that don't talk to each other, because they have difference boundaries in this department. How do we get them to work together? Our game design research group

informs us about this, because we look at how we can transform an organization so they are playing cooperative games.

In the United States, we're very good at playing competitive games, both on an individual basis and on an organizational basis. Even inside a company you have competitors. People competing for resources, attention, recognition and so on, within government and civil society, all competing. It's a zero-sum game, it's a mentality, it's a mindset.

And yet, there is an alternative way of playing, a cooperative way of playing, and you see this in European style board games. In order for us to win in this game all have to survive. And we all have special talents and powers. I am not competing against you, because you're a warrior and I am a magician, you have something that I need and I have something that you need, we're going to cooperate together to win this game. It's a different mind-set altogether. Not competing against each other, focus on how do we come together and innovate and collaborate in new ways.

In a word, all the things we see in society, we see it in corporations as well, they have the same challenges. We've fallen into that line of work. The difference is an enterprise is a closed garden, we can do research, we're looking to develop technologies and measure baseline behavior. For instance, if you want to have more collaboration between management and labor, what technologies you have available already, what kind of plugin do we need to put in, to do a social probe, to observe the communication, and then what we need to do in order to bring about an improvement.

What the Peace Innovation Lab has achieved in 7 years

I was becoming very fascinated with the area of persuasive technology and what it meant when I became a part of the Persuasive Tech Lab at Stanford, because I had worked previously in mobile banking, and, like many entrepreneurs, I had my share of failures, and there were a variety of reasons why it didn't work, but ultimately the reason why it didn't work was it didn't get any traction. When I became part of the lab, I realized this is the missing piece. You need to understand the dynamics of people, psychology and technology. That was of profound interest to me. And the idea that you could shape things with good intention was very attractive to me.

At a personal level, I grew up in San Diego, I am Mexican-American, that is significant because I am ethnic minority in the US. I grew up amidst a lot of discrimination and racism and so whatever I did had extra significance. My father worked hard to inculcate leadership qualities into us, such that we could as individuals change people's perceptions of our community. So when I was growing up I was raised with this sense of whatever I did had to have some sort of significant social impact. And so that is a strong motivator.

In 2008, BJ Fogg, the director of the Persuasive Tech Lab taught the Peace Innovation class at Stanford, leading to the first Peace Innovation project, Peace Dot, launched in 2009. With BJ's continued advice and mentorship, the project led to the founding of Stanford Peace Innovation Lab in 2010. And BJ asked me to run the lab.

From 2009 until now, we've been able to establish peace innovation as a new field of study. we have something to say about the intersection of people and technology and we're looking at it from an ethical stand point, from a humane standpoint, not just from how can it make you rich. That mindset is a bit of a commodity in Silicon Valley. If you want to talk to people about how you can use this technology to get people to do things to make you a lot of money, there are a lot of people who can do that. If you want to talk to people about how you can use technology to solve intractable social problems, there are fewer people. There are people who do that, but then you ask questions, for instance, what is the behavioral aspect, the psychological aspect, the number of people responding positively to that will get very small. We happen to be some of the few people on the planet working on that.

We've also been observing how technology is being used in the world, for good and for ill. We look broadly at what people were doing. And then contrast that with government innovation, citizen engagement, psychological operations and so on. We can survey all of that and that makes us a subject matter expert in this area. And that's unusual.

I would count the Berlin Peace Innovation Lab among our most successful pilot labs. Because it actually went from creating the community to engaging with diverse people to finding solutions that would benefit. The leader there is Anne Riechert. She created a community of practice with over a 1000 people. She would have regular meet ups. In the Fall of 2015 the Syrian refugees started to come into Germany and Europe. So they had a series of workshops and meet ups to address that and then they came up with 30 different ideas and projects. Pilots. And the one project that really got momentum was the ReDI school for digital immigration. It is basically a coding school for Syrian refugees. After being trained, those Syrian refugees started developing mobile apps and other technologies to help other refugees. And now you can see it trickling down to the next generation, now the Syrian refugees are empowered, they're going to come up with solutions to make things better.

Another story I love is Manor Labs, it is a meta experiment in mass interpersonal persuasion. We were able to try out a lot of different things while basically trying to turn that city into an incubator for new ideas. This project was recognized by the White House and they wrote about it on the White House blog. It is also a very successful outcome for the lab.

Of course, we're still very small. On the one hand being small allows us to be agile and do things, on the other hand we're resource-constrained in terms of talent. There aren't that many people who do what we do. If I was to recruit people it would be with a very narrow filter. They would need to come out with behavior psychology, behavior economics, some favorite technologies, data science, from those intersections.

Peace innovation city labs in the future

On designing and changing people's behavior, we've looked at several questions before. Like the matter of trust. we taught a class at D school a few years ago to explore that. And we've looked at issues like empathy and emotion, how do you design for emotion. This year we're

looking at the weaponization of technology. This means focusing on issues like cyber attacks in Russia , US election, how disinformation is being used at scale and so on. Meanwhile, we are also looking at how we might be able to design new technologies that are less vulnerable, less likely to be weaponized. Another thing we're looking at is ethics, ethical design and how do you do value-based design. For instance, we have a research topic around gender and technology this year: how can we improve relations between men and women in the technology industry. And we are researching this with gmail team.

We're mapping our plans for the next 12 to 18 months. We have a couple of pillars of activities. We have game research thinking group, we're looking to launch a research group at the intersection of political science and technology, that's one stream of work.

The other stream of work that we do is the city lab network. And we'll be launching that in Europe. We have key stakeholders and funders within The Hague in the Netherlands, it's starting in the second half of the year. And the initial focus is to have a network of labs in the Netherlands, and then satellite labs in other key cities in Europe. In parallel we'll be launching a city lab network in Mena, in the Middle East, starting with maybe 2 to 3 labs, going up to 5 labs and they will collaborate with the labs in Europe.

The research interest in the city labs is what are the challenges and needs of at-risk communities, in Europe, specifically refugee communities, immigrant communities. Question is: how can we improve the opportunities and social interactions between these communities and the mainstream communities in each country.

How to coordinate all these city labs is what we are looking at in the Netherlands. Because it's a fresh start, we will be launching these city labs brand new in the Netherlands. And the office at The Hague will have oversight over them. We will be able to select those people, recruit them, and put them in the place in these city labs. They will be given the agenda, and the protocol of how to do coordinated research with each other. So the key thing in the next 12 months is building the infrastructure so that we really can do that. Basically we are building up the city labs framework at The Hague right now, so that we can do the coordinated work. The office in The Hague will be the coordinating entity. Everyone who launches a city lab will be trained at The Hague by the same trainers, the same facilitators. And that will provide some consistency, they will be certified out of the office in The Hague.