

# **Aruna Sundararajan forecasts the future of Digital India**



**A Q&A with the Secretary of the Indian Department of Telecommunications during her Pacific Leadership Fellowship**

By Rachel Hommel | GPS News



To date, we are in the most disruptive phase of technology's evolution. Hoping to use digital technology to change society for the better, [Aruna Sundararajan](#) is leading the vast expansion of India's telecommunications services. With over three decades of experience, she was eager to share her expertise at the Center on Global Transformation at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS).

During her October [Pacific Leadership Fellowship \(PLF\)](#) residency, she visited San Diego's leading telecommunications hubs, including Qualcomm and Viasat, as well as delivered a public talk on "Digital India: Opportunities and Challenges" to a standing room only audience at the Ida and Cecil Green Faculty Club held on Oct. 3.

"The Indian telecommunications market is going through enormous consolidation," said Dean Peter Cowhey in welcoming her at the event. "Sundararajan is someone who has deep technical knowledge, good common sense and the willingness to deal with what is often the hottest regulatory disputes in the world."

Sundararajan discussed aspects of India's sharing economy and the public policy lessons that emerge from this engagement. With India having the largest Facebook and WhatsApp customer base, Sundararajan addressed the role of social media, the emergence of new digital leadership and the future of its regulation.

"Data and digital assets are going to be even more important than physical assets in the future," said Sundararajan. "It would be important to understand the concept of digital property and have institutional mechanisms to deal with the challenges this would raise."

Read below as Sundararajan shares her impressions about the fellowship, including how it inspired her own goals for India's ongoing technological transformation.

**What led you to GPS as a PLF Fellow and what has been your overall impression so far?**

**AS:** I've actually known Professor [Teevrat Garg](#) for a long time. I know his family, so I was excited to be invited. I really like the format of the program. It allows you to have a set of conversations that broadly touch on public policy, giving you different insights and therefore, time to reflect. It's something we hardly get to do in our busy official lives.

From conversations between neuroscience and public health professionals to experts that have shared the similarities and learning outcomes between Mexico, India and Brazil, I've been privy to a lot of cross-cultural insights. These kinds of free-flowing conversations are often the most meaningful and rewarding.

**During your residency, your focus will be on telecommunications, e-solutions and SMART cities. What do you hope to learn at GPS and across campus?**

**AS:** The conversations I had at GPS have been extremely interesting, engaging and relevant. I enjoyed meeting Ricardo Tavares, who is working on SMART cities and E-solutions in Brazil. A lot of his work and experience is directly relevant to what I'm doing.



One very important visit for me was to Qualcomm. I am in charge of

telecommunications and Qualcomm is a global leader in wireless technologies. The Indian government is looking to see how we can work with Qualcomm to bring advanced communication technologies to India, such as 5G. To see the technological breakthroughs and frontier areas they are working on is hugely valuable.

**For your talk, you will discuss aspects of India's ongoing technological transformation and the public policy lessons that emerge from this engagement. Where do you see this transformation headed?**

**AS:** With the rise of technology, governments are having to sit back and think much more about what kinds of technology we want, what kind of internet we want and what role do we want these to play in our lives. Looking to the past is not going to get us to the future. We have to manage this human-technology interface much more carefully and negotiate these spaces much more wisely.

Technology is like water - it just flows into every little crevice, its advance is relentless and it will fill up everything. We have to be careful, especially those of us who are in a position to shape public policy. India has much more at stake in digital technologies than any other country, simply because we have so many deficits in our infrastructure and services. Public policy will play a very key role, both in innovation and regulation.

**As an expert and leader in telecommunications, what are the key public policies lessons we can learn and what role does social media play in the Digitization of India?**

**AS:** Social media is incredibly large in India. A lot of social interaction has moved to social media. It's really taking the place of media itself, and that might sound like an exaggeration but it's happening. People would rather form opinions that way. It's a big challenge. We have a much more vulnerable population with high levels of illiteracy and many believe everything they see.

The government is really taking a hard look at the role of social media. While it's a hugely positive force, we are beginning to ask the hard questions about how to protect citizens and what is the role of social media. We will have to work closely at both the global and local level, the latter with a much wider set of stakeholders to make sure we get it right.

**What's been the most surprising visit or activity on the agenda so far during your stay?**

**AS:** I liked the free-flowing format of the fellowship, that's the best part. It was a pleasant surprise, I thought it would be more structured. It allows me time to ask questions and engage in interesting conversations that might not have had otherwise.



**Do you have any parting career advice for students looking to get into this industry, particularly in the areas of economic development and IT investment?**

**AS:** My hope is that universities and governments can figure out a way of interacting much more closely and collaboratively. I know any student here would add so much value to the work we do.

In terms of career advice, when we look at the number of challenges around us, any graduate from GPS will not have a shortage of career options. We are going to need a lot more good advice in the future than we did in the past.

View a [photo gallery](#) of Sundararajan's visit.