

The Power of Digital Accessibility

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: Access to the internet has increasingly become a necessity more than a luxury. Now more than ever, connecting with our loved ones is both a challenge and a necessity. Some of us found solace in connecting digitally, and for others, it's hard to imagine a world without wifi, phones, or the internet.

But without Richard Thanki, many vulnerable populations would still not have access to the internet. In the summer of 2015, Richard volunteered at the Calais refugee camp in Northern France. While there, he had a lightbulb moment and realized there was a huge need for wifi connectivity, both for the refugees and the organizations working in the camp. Thanki and his co-founders established Jangala, a non-profit organization that connects vulnerable populations worldwide to affordable and accessible wifi.

From its initial concept till today, almost 7 years later, Jangala is a solution to digital access inequities.

I'm Tariq Al Olaimy, and this is "People and Planet."

A podcast from Expo 2020 Dubai's Programme for People and Planet, where changemakers from all over the world breakdown what it will take to create a sustainable future for our planet.

[INTRO STING]

During Travel and Connectivity Week at Expo 2020 Dubai, Thanki discussed the vital role wifi and other forms of connectivity provide to increase digital access to those who need it most.

MUSIC

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: Richard, you're an economist and a computer scientist. And while you run a tech startup, it's centered around perhaps the most vital of technologies and tools that we have access to as a humanity, which is radical empathy, community and collaboration. Richard Thanki is the co-founder of Jangala, a UK based charity, working to enable internet access for people in need of urgent humanitarian aid, longer term assistance. Welcome, it's a pleasure to connect with you today.

RICHARD THANKI: It's a pleasure being here.

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: I'd love to start from the beginning. Can you please tell me about your upbringing and how the environment around you inspired you to take this path in life both as a child and as a young teen growing up in the UK?

RICHARD THANKI: I'm the child of refugees. So my parents were refugees from Uganda who left in the 1970s, due to the kind of unrest that happened there.

And they kind of came to the UK and I didn't really understand what that was. I never felt like, say a refugee when I was growing up or the child of refugees. I was born in the UK, and there's always a feeling of being kind of slightly alien to a culture. My parents were slightly fearful of the UK. This was not where they'd grown up. But, you know, they thought that it would be best for me and my sister to be here, but I never felt kind of - maybe as I was growing up - kind of wholly apart of the things that were around me.

And my parents never really told me stories of what had happened to them and why they had to leave. I think they wanted to keep that kind of slightly traumatic part of their history away from me to protect me as a child, I think.

And so I kind of grew up in a small kind of small market town in England with my only kind of links being, kind of, stories my mum would tell about growing up in Uganda. You know, on the banks of the River Nile and being surrounded by rainforest, where in the small kind of trading post of Pakwach, where she grew up.

So, yeah, Wellingborough where I grew up was very different from that, like a small kind of former industrial town. And It was very, very interesting. There's a kind of stereotype that people have - especially of Indian immigrants in the UK - that they all want their kids to be doctors or lawyers or accountants or engineers. But, you know, my dad was quite different from that. I mean, he always, you know, he never paid close attention to my grades, but just assumed that I would work hard.

And I think he always just wanted me to create something new. And I always had that feeling from him and that's what he would say.

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: And do you remember the first time you got access to the internet?

RICHARD THANKI: Right. So I absolutely do. So my parents got me a big desktop PC that sounded like an aircraft carrier about to take off like a helicopter.

And I remember turning it on and connecting via dial-up to the internet, you know, as a teenager. And being just kind of mesmerized by the kind of slight kind of music of those sounds.

MUSIC

RICHARD THANKI: And I mean, it sounds a bit like techno and I love techno now, so I'm sure I was influenced by it in that way. And what was in front of me was just complete magic.

The idea that anyone in the world could kind of post to this medium and that anyone in the world could consume this medium. That kind of serendipity, that kind of richness of potential connectivity left an impression on me.

MUSIC

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: And in caring for the commons, I want to talk a little bit about Jangala's part of the story. You're leading Jangala, a not-for-profit UK-based tech startup that's dedicated to naming internet access for people in need of connectivity, especially refugees, which is a topic close to your heart and your lived experience.

What does Jangala mean, to start off with? And why did you choose that name as a source of your inspiration?

RICHARD THANKI: Like so many things we've done, it happened from a kind of serendipity. We were building this volunteer-run wifi network in the Calais Jungle refugee camp, and I had to choose a name for it.

I was told a story by a woman called Maya, a French woman, who had been kind of helping refugees in that area. And she was the one who told me this, told us the story of the name of the Calais Jungle refugee camp. It wasn't called the jungle because outsiders or reporters or politicians called it that, but the very first people that were living on that site were Afghans.

And in Pashto "jungal" means a barren piece of land. And I thought that's really similar to the English word "jungle." So, what's the root of this word? And doing a

little bit of digging, I found that the stem of both those words is from Sanskrit, which is an ancient kind of Indo-European language

And Jangala has two meanings. It means a barren or stony place, but also it can mean a wild person that comes from that place. And I just really loved the double meaning of it. I loved the way the word looked. I loved its unusual accents. And I loved how it came from a language that connects everything from Iceland to Northern India.

MUSIC

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: So you spoke about that you were doing that work in the Calais Jungle. Can you give us some context of the camp, the work that you were doing at that time as Jangala was getting set up?

RICHARD THANKI: So Calais is a place in Northern France from which there is the channel tunnel that links France to the UK. And so for people who want to come to the UK over land, that's the kind of place to go from.

Now in 2015, the refugee crisis in Europe was kind of reaching its peak. You know, multiple crises all over the world from the collapse of Libya, to the civil war in Syria, to conflict in the horn of Africa to terrorist activity, militant activity happening in West Africa in the Sahel, was causing a huge amount of instability. There are so many people on the move.

And the Calais Jungle refugee camp emerged not as a kind of Red Cross-run camp - the kind of camps that people may be familiar with in other parts of the world - but it was an informal settlement, really, of people who were trying to get across to the UK.

At its height, there were over 10,000 people living there, including women and children. There was no real sanitation at all. There was no camp structure.

And my friend Ben Weatherall was talking about how his old school friend, Nils O'Hara and his sister Jaz were working in the Calais Jungle refugee camp.

And I thought that was great, and at this time I was working in Africa with Microsoft. I was kind of working in Ghana, Namibia, South Africa and Kenya.

MUSIC

Until the thought came to Ben, well, one of the things that Nils is always complaining about is that there's no good internet access in the Calais Jungle. That what will happen is that someone will ask to borrow his phone, to make a phone call to Somalia. Now a 30-second phone call to Somalia cost quite a lot of money. And Nils was like "I can't carry on doing this."

RICHARD THANKI: But when I kind of realized there was a need for wifi, immediately I thought, "okay, this is something I can help with." The projects that I've been working with in Africa have taught me how to build networks. Some of the techniques that we're using there could easily be transferred to the jungle.

And so when this idea hit me, it kind of was like a flash of lightning, really. I stayed up until four in the morning looking at satellite photos, and like the former consultant that I was, I put together a PDF with my credentials at the bottom with a diagram of how we would do it, but how much it would cost. And I emailed it to Nils at like four in the morning.

And things moved quickly. Within two weeks of that, Nils and myself were in the Calais Jungle in late autumn, in the rain and the mud, getting confused stares from the people in the camp saying, "what are these two guys doing?"

RICHARD THANKI: We crowdfunded the donations needed to build this network that Nil's kind of sister helped with.

MUSIC

RICHARD THANKI: So at the time I was doing a PhD, I was working with Microsoft and this was like a volunteer thing I was doing on the side. We went kind of every other weekend for a few weeks. And in late autumn, early winter, we were able to turn the wifi network on to kind of cover the camp.

And the effect that it had was amazing. I mean, we didn't have to tell anyone about the existence of this. Word spread like wildfire. And suddenly there was this kind of strange moment where there was a camp and the camp was normally noisy. There's a bit of silence..

As people were engaging with their online lives, like send it, you know, we ask people what they were doing. They were sending messages to family and sending photos and catching up on things that were from, in everything, from news, from their home country to how their favorite football team was doing. And then people started sharing what they were doing with the people around them.

RICHARD THANKI: And it was kind of a striking feeling, turning on the internet in a place where it's not been before.

MUSIC

And suddenly being reconnected allowed people to kind of re-engage. And people were kind of laughing and being emotionally engaged with what they were doing. As well as accessing information about asylum processes and so on. There was definitely that kind of practical element as well.

But also for the organizations working in the camp. So there must've been a hundred different volunteer organizations. And with internet access, they were able to coordinate their work. They were able to provide better services for the

people there. They were able to reduce duplication and waste and all of those things.

So it helped so many different aspects of life in that camp.

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: I'm curious as you're speaking, when, when you're in the camp, and you're coming from your own lived experience of a family of refugees, and you spoke about your parents almost shielding you from maybe some of those stories. Did it make you go back and reflect on actually wanting to learn a little bit more about my parents experience? And did it bring up anything for you personally, that then spurred the vision in lots of different ways?

RICHARD THANKI: Absolutely. 100%. And I spoke to members of my family who had also gone through the same experience.

And I mean, one of the striking things was how the notion of a refugee had changed, that back when my family were put through this position, they were offered citizenship by the UK. There was almost an ability to being a refugee.

MUSIC

RICHARD THANKI: But I mean, what happened in 2015 and still happens today is that refugees are demonized. That you have people who want to kind of inflame passion and anger against people who are often really desperate, fleeing from situations that kind of seem unimaginable. And that kind of difference in status was something that I recalled feeling quite strongly at the time. And it made me want to speak to my parents more about what their experience was like.

RICHARD THANKI: And it made me really kind of understand the sympathy that I've always seen in my dad, for example, where, you know, he will always humanize every situation and every person, because I think, he himself had been that stranger, had been that person that was the object curiosity of, maybe, suspicion.

And so a lot of things started kind of making sense to me that, maybe, it provided me with a deeper understanding of where I had come from, as well.

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: And of course, one of Jangala's greatest achievements was the creation of the Big Box, which is a small device, which provides portable wifi connection, and enables internet access for people in need.

And I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about the Big Box, what it is, its other uses other than the Calais camp, and maybe for our listeners, as well, to talk about what goes in the box?

RICHARD THANKI: So the Big Box was kind of born out of frustration really.

And after we built the network, news of what we'd done had spread. So we were contacted by organizations from all over Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, even saying, well, we have this situation here where there is no internet access.

And so as volunteers, we did what we could, we traveled whenever we could. We spent a lot of time kind of going to the Greek islands or the mainland. Going to other places in France. But the need was much greater than we could fulfill.

MUSIC

RICHARD THANKI: And it was in kind of 2016 that I thought, can we find a way of mass producing what we're doing. And so I kind of sketched some ideas of what that would be. I spoke to Nils and Samson Rinaldi. And Samson was also a volunteer in the Calais Jungle. Sam is a trained sculptor and a fine artist. And so the three of us spent a few weekends thinking about this and we put together the first prototype, a Big Box. And that point it was big.

And I still remember vividly the first time we used Big Box, we took it out to Greece to work in a kind of mobile library project. And, it was quite funny. We almost

managed to leave it at the airport as the doors of the bus were closing, Samson saw that it was outside. He leaped out like a gazelle and picked it up and got it back

MUSIC

RICHARD THANKI: People loved how easy it was to use. I still remember getting Whatsapp messages from our partners on the ground and saying, "this is great, we're connecting like a hundred people or 200 people are using the system right now." I mean just in the field of refugees there are 80 million people who are displaced around the world. There are 200 million people around the world who need humanitarian assistance. And there are over a billion people who are living in the least developed countries. And of those 80% don't have access to the internet.

And then it was in 2018 that we became a full-time organization; that Jangala as an entity was born.

MUSIC

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: And I wanted to go a little bit into your thoughts on Expo 2020. You've been here for a little over a week now. You've engaged earlier in January. You held a talk at Expo's Closing the Digital Divide event, where you also showcased Jangala as a solution to digital access inequities.

What are some of the takeaways that you hope audiences listening to your talk took from it?

RICHARD THANKI: I was immediately struck. When we were asked to apply for the global best practice program of Expo 2020. I immediately saw Expo's motto, its strap line of "connecting minds and creating the future." And we can't stop and say, well, "okay, there's 50%. That's pretty good." We can't stop at 80% and say, "well, now we've almost solved the problem". That's still not good enough.

RICHARD THANKI EXPO TALK: And I will say that the provision of connectivity in a kind of open-source transparent way is something that empowers other infrastructures on top. That, you know, we will work with partners, you know, we don't have the whole solution ourselves, but our goal at Jungala is to create the underlying infrastructures that other people can use to build their own public goods on top of.

RICHARD THANKI: We will not be the complete answer. There's no one organization that will be. But we want to be part of the answer - an important part of the answer. And for us to come from a volunteer project that was a couple of people working in their spare time in the rain and the wind to being given this opportunity to have much bigger impact.

MUSIC

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: On a closing note, where do you see the future of connectivity and digital access moving forward?

RICHARD THANKI: So I think something that always rings true in this kind of situation is that the future's already here, it's just not evenly distributed. And I think we can all see examples of that when we saw the Calais Jungle in Northern France, this informal refugee camp. To some eyes that must've looked like the past, like a kind of Victorian or medieval setting. And I would say the internet of today is in danger of becoming brittle. We depend increasingly on a small number of companies, as you said, these conglomerates that control large parts of our internet infrastructure.

So I think for me, our digital wealth in the future will come from communities being able to build their own infrastructure. To build the cloud in miniature, in their own communities, to be able to deploy applications and things from the household to

the community level, to the national level, regions, cities. And I think that that is going to become possible.

And in terms of the future that we see for Jangala, our goal is to equip communities with the ability to deploy the internet on their own terms, to be able to make use of it in a way that works for them. And to allow people to innovate with it as well.

I think again, another one of the dangers that we face is that the internet becomes remote for people. That people don't have the experience of building it and putting it together themselves. And now we in Jungala, we're lucky we've had this experience. But many people won't, and it would be great. That'd be a great achievement of ours if we could inspire a new generation of people to, you know, roll up their sleeves, get their hands dirty and build the infrastructure that they need.

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: Thank you, Richard. It's been incredibly inspiring speaking to you. And it's been a real honor to connect today.

RICHARD THANKI: Thanks, Tariq.

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People and Planet
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