The Origins of Digital Colonialism[*]

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the historical and structural foundations of digital colonialism by examining how contemporary digital infrastructures, dominated by powerful multinational corporations and nation-states, replicate and extend traditional colonial hierarchies. Drawing on perspectives from political science and communication studies, the study conceptualizes digital colonialism as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing economic, technological, epistemic, and cultural domination. It argues that digital platforms function as tools of extractive capitalism, enabling the appropriation of data, algorithmic governance, and monopolization of digital infrastructures. The article highlights how this digital hegemony disproportionately affects the Global South, reinforcing dependencies and limiting technological sovereignty. Utilizing the ethnography of written texts as a methodological framework, the study contextualizes digital colonial practices within broader histories of imperialism and capitalist expansion. While mapping the ideological and structural mechanisms of digital colonialism, the article also investigates possible resistance strategies, including digital sovereignty, open-source alternatives, and transnational cooperation. Ultimately, the article advocates for a critical rethinking of global digital governance structures to promote justice, autonomy, and equity in the digital age.

Keywords: Digital Colonialism, Media Studies, Political Communication, Digital Media, Social Media.

Received / Accepted: 09 February 2025 / 29 March 2025

Citation: Yılmaz, Ö. (2025). The Origins of Digital Colonialism, *İmgelem*, 16, 321-344.

Dijital Kolonyalizmin Kökenleri

ÖZ

Bu makale, günümüz dijital altyapılarının güçlü çok uluslu şirketler ve devletler tarafından nasıl kontrol edildiğini ve bu kontrolün geleneksel sömürgeci hiyerarşileri nasıl yeniden ürettiğini inceleyerek dijital sömürgeciliğin tarihsel ve yapısal temellerini araştırmaktadır. Siyaset bilimi ve iletişim çalışmaları perspektiflerinden hareketle dijital sömürgecilik, ekonomik, teknolojik, epistemik ve kültürel boyutları olan çok yönlü bir olgu olarak ele alınmaktadır. Dijital platformların, verilerin çıkarılması, algoritmik yönetim ve dijital altyapıların tekelleştirilmesi yoluyla sömürücü bir kapitalizmin araçları haline geldiği ileri sürülmektedir. Makale, bu dijital hegemonyanın Küresel Güney'i orantısız biçimde etkilediğini, bağımlılık ilişkilerini pekiştirdiğini ve teknolojik egemenliği sınırladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Yazılı metinlerin etnografisi yöntemine dayanan çalışma, dijital sömürgecilik pratiklerini emperyalizm ve kapitalist genişleme tarihleri bağlamında değerlendirmektedir. Dijital sömürgeciliğin ideolojik ve yapısal mekanizmalarını haritalandıran makale, dijital egemenlik, açık kaynak teknolojiler ve ulusötesi iş birlikleri gibi direniş stratejilerini de incelemektedir. Sonuç olarak çalışma, adalet, özerklik ve eşitliği önceleyen yeni bir küresel dijital yönetişim yapısının inşası için eleştirel bir yeniden değerlendirme çağrısı yapmaktadır.

Özgür YILMAZ

INTRODUCTION

Digital colonialism represents a new phase of global dominance, where technological infrastructures, data flows, and platform economies reinforce existing economic and political hierarchies. Unlike traditional colonialism, which relied on territorial conquest and direct governance, digital colonialism operates through control over digital infrastructures, software ecosystems, and algorithmic governance. Multinational corporations headquartered in the Global North, particularly in the United States, maintain disproportionate control over the digital economy, shaping how information is produced, disseminated, and monetized worldwide. This concentration of power enables these corporations to extract vast amounts of data from users in the Global South, generating economic value without equitable redistribution. As a result, digital colonialism perpetuates dependencies, limiting the ability of less technologically developed nations to establish autonomous digital economies, safeguard their data sovereignty, or compete on equal footing within the global digital landscape.

The emergence of digital colonialism cannot be understood in isolation but must be contextualized within broader historical trajectories of economic exploitation and geopolitical domination. The origins of digital colonialism trace back to multiple intersecting developments, including the expansion of intellectual property regimes, the monopolization of computational infrastructure, and the rise of data extractivism as a dominant economic model. The late 20th century witnessed an acceleration of these trends, particularly through agreements such as the WTO's Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), which enabled technology firms to consolidate their control over digital resources. As internet penetration increased across the world, multinational tech corporations strategically positioned themselves as indispensable intermediaries, embedding themselves into public institutions, education systems, and governance mechanisms in the Global South. This gradual entrenchment of foreign digital platforms and services created a structural dependency that mirrors historical colonial economic models, where raw materials and labour were extracted from colonies to sustain the wealth of imperial centres.

Beyond economic exploitation, digital colonialism also manifests in cultural and epistemic dimensions, reinforcing Western-centric narratives and marginalizing alternative knowledge systems. The dominance of English in digital communication, the privileging of

Western-produced content by search engine algorithms, and the expansion of surveillance capitalism disproportionately impact communities in the Global South, shaping their access to information and their ability to participate in digital spaces on equal terms. Algorithmic governance further exacerbates these inequalities, as content moderation policies, facial recognition systems, and AI-driven decision-making processes often replicate racial, gendered, and geopolitical biases. The increasing reliance on AI and automation in governance, policing, and employment also raises concerns about digital exclusion, as communities with limited technological access or digital literacy face systemic barriers to full participation in the digital economy. These dynamics underscore how digital colonialism is not merely about economic extraction but also about epistemic dominance, shaping whose knowledge, histories, and cultural expressions are amplified or suppressed in digital spaces.

Addressing digital colonialism requires a critical reassessment of global digital governance structures and an exploration of alternative models that prioritize technological sovereignty, open-source innovation, and equitable digital development. Resistance to digital colonialism has emerged in various forms, from national policies aimed at fostering independent digital infrastructures to grassroots movements advocating for digital rights, data justice, and platform alternatives. However, achieving meaningful digital sovereignty demands structural transformations that go beyond individual policies or isolated initiatives. It necessitates regional and international collaborations among nations in the Global South to develop shared digital infrastructures, regulate cross-border data flows, and challenge the monopolistic power of Big Tech. Additionally, public investment in digital literacy, localized technological development, and decentralized governance models is essential to creating a more just and equitable digital future. By critically engaging with the mechanisms of digital colonialism, this chapter seeks to illuminate the historical continuities and emerging challenges of digital dominance while offering insights into potential pathways toward digital autonomy and justice.

In this study, the ethnography of written texts will be used. The ethnography of written text is a methodological approach that treats texts as cultural artifacts, analysing them within their broader social, historical, and political contexts. Unlike traditional ethnography, which relies on participant observation and direct interaction, textual ethnography examines how written materials -such as literature, policy documents, media narratives, and archival records- construct, reflect, and mediate cultural meanings. This approach draws from Clifford Geertz's notion of thick description, emphasizing how texts function as symbolic systems through which

individuals and societies communicate values, worldviews, and power relations. Rather than isolating a text from its context, textual ethnography situates it within its discursive environment, considering the ways in which authorship, audience reception, and intertextual connections shape its significance. The method also recognizes the dynamic nature of texts, acknowledging how meanings shift across time, space, and interpretative communities. By employing close reading, discourse analysis, and contextual interpretation, textual ethnography provides a critical lens for understanding how written materials serve as sites of ideological negotiation, cultural transmission, and social transformation (Frim 2018: 7-8).

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. First, it approaches digital colonialism from the perspectives of political science and communication studies but does not extensively incorporate insights from other disciplines such as economics, law, or anthropology. This may result in a partial analysis of the multifaceted nature of digital colonialism. Additionally, the study primarily relies on theoretical frameworks rather than empirical data, which limits its ability to measure the concrete impacts of digital colonialism. The absence of field research, surveys, or statistical analyses means that the practical manifestations of digital colonial practices remain underexplored.

Furthermore, while the article provides a broad overview of digital colonialism on a global scale, it does not examine in detail how its effects vary across different regions or countries. The ways in which digital colonialism manifests in Latin America, Africa, or South Asia may differ significantly, yet these variations are not extensively analysed. In terms of historical perspective, although the study draws parallels between traditional colonialism and digital colonialism, the specific differences between these two forms of dominance are not thoroughly explored. Lastly, while the paper discusses resistance strategies against digital colonialism, it does not provide an in-depth analysis of practical policy solutions or alternative models. Topics such as digital sovereignty, open-source technologies, and local digital infrastructure development could be further elaborated to offer concrete strategies for countering digital colonialism. These limitations highlight areas for future research and deeper investigation.

Conceptual Framework: Digital Colonialism

Digital colonialism refers to the concentration of digital power in the hands of a corporate and governmental minority. Similar to historical colonial practices where colonizers seized land,

exploited Indigenous populations through forced labour, and employed military force to maintain control, digital colonialism operates through the extraction and exploitation of digital capital across its entire cycle. Like traditional colonialism, it is founded on a logic of dispossession. Corporations, based in developed countries and possessing technological dominance, exert political influence over other regions and manipulate their internet traffic (Yılmaz 2022: 1118-1119).

Digital colonialism manifests as a semi-imperial force deployed over large populations without their explicit consent, shaping rules, infrastructures, languages, cultures, and belief systems under the dominance of a hegemonic power (Taiuru 2015). This concept primarily describes the dominance of Western corporations in providing digital services in developing countries. These corporations are overwhelmingly headquartered in the United States and exert influence across multiple sectors, including messaging, social media, search engines, music streaming, cloud storage, hosting, and domain name services. The pervasiveness of Western digital dominance is evident at every level of internet infrastructure. Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Uber, Airbnb, and other Silicon Valley-based corporations provide services that tend to align with a specific ideological framework. The values of Silicon Valley -a small region in California- are systematically exported worldwide. At the infrastructural level, the largest hosting services, domain name registries, cloud storage providers, and content distribution networks are controlled by U.S. corporations. In terms of content, Google and Facebook maintain monopolistic dominance over what people across the globe see and read (Guadamuz 2017). Through these digital practices, neoliberal modes of governance, as well as racialized and patriarchal ideologies, are disseminated and reinforced (Young 2019: 1245). These corporations operate in highly profitable markets, further consolidating their economic and political influence.

Digital technology corporations function as natural monopolies. For instance, Google possesses the financial and strategic capacity to acquire any emerging competitor that might challenge its dominance (Walsh 2020: 174-175). The parent company of Google, Alphabet, generates over 20% net profit from its annual revenue of $110 billion (Walsh 2020: 177). This demonstrates how digital technology firms perpetuate an oligopolistic market structure (Törenli 2011: 102). Digital colonialism materializes through the ownership and control of three fundamental pillars of the digital ecosystem: software, hardware, and network infrastructure - the latter granting the United States immense political, economic, and social power (Kwet 2019b: 4).

Digital colonialism provides a contemporary framework for understanding the inequalities emerging within digital spaces, both among individuals and between nations. In this landscape of structural disparity, ownership and control remain concentrated in the hands of developed countries. The legal frameworks governing digital activities are shaped by these nations, while investments in education, infrastructure, and research and development (R&D) are also predominantly conducted by them. The prohibitive cost of digital products serves as a visible manifestation of this inequality, acting as a key factor in exclusionary processes. Thus, rather than reducing inequalities, information, and communication technologies (ICTs) and technological advancements often exacerbate them (Huberman 2023: 27). Additionally, the dominance of English as the primary language of the digital sphere constitutes another form of inequality, reinforcing its cultural hegemony within the digital domain. Control over how technology functions constitutes the foundation of digital colonialism. Software is proprietary, meaning that users are unable to read, modify, or distribute its source code. This restriction prevents individuals from understanding and controlling how their own devices operate. U.S.-based technology corporations, which dominate global markets, exert influence not only within the United States but also beyond its borders. As domestic markets reach saturation, these corporations increasingly target developing markets for digital colonization. Users across the world are subjected to norms dictated by U.S.-based companies, effectively shaping their digital experiences and interactions.[*] In this context, code itself becomes a form of law, establishing privatized regulatory structures that govern all users. Major social media platforms leverage algorithms to censor content, curate news feeds, and determine the formation and visibility of activist groups. This algorithmic governance extends the influence of Silicon Valley beyond national borders, effectively placing users outside the U.S. under a form of extraterritorial digital governance (Kwet 2019a).

China's approach to digital colonialism operates through a parallel yet distinct mechanism, leveraging state-backed technological expansion to entrench influence across the Global South. Unlike the market-driven dominance of U.S.-based firms, China's Digital Silk Road Initiative (DSR) strategically integrates state-sponsored digital infrastructure projects

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[*]U.S.-based technology corporations shape user experiences through algorithmic control, platform dependencies, and content curation, reinforcing digital inequalities. Google prioritizes Western media in search results, marginalizing local perspectives, while Facebook's algorithms influence political discourse, as seen in the amplification of misinformation during the 2016 U.S. election. Netflix promotes Western-produced content, limiting regional visibility, while Amazon's algorithmic advertising favors larger vendors over smaller competitors. Apple's restrictive App Store policies further constrain digital autonomy. These mechanisms illustrate how dominant platforms mediate online interactions and entrench economic and epistemic hierarchies, reinforcing digital colonialism.

with broader geopolitical ambitions. By exporting telecommunications networks, cloud computing, surveillance technology, and AI-driven governance models, China establishes long-term dependencies on its digital ecosystem, shaping not only technological landscapes but also regulatory frameworks in host nations. Under the banner of cyber sovereignty, Beijing promotes a vision of the internet that prioritizes state control over digital spaces, challenging the open and decentralized model historically championed by the West. The 2016 Cybersecurity Law legally binds Chinese technology firms to share data with the state, fuelling concerns about covert intelligence gathering and strategic cyber influence. Furthermore, initiatives such as Huawei's New IP proposal advocate for a redesigned internet infrastructure, granting nation-states greater surveillance and policing capabilities. As China extends its digital footprint, many developing nations risk becoming locked into asymmetric technological dependencies, where reliance on Chinese infrastructure curtails digital sovereignty and reinforces a new mode of technopolitical subjugation. This evolving digital order underscores how contemporary forms of colonialism no longer rely on territorial occupation but rather on the monopolization of data flows, algorithmic governance, and infrastructural control, perpetuating global inequalities through the architecture of digital power (Wright 2021: 90). After taking a general look at the concept of digital colonialism, it is time to take a look at its origins.

Origins of Digital Colonialism

The term to colonize originally derived from the Latin colon, meaning farmer, tiller, or planter, reflecting the Roman practice of establishing settlements in newly conquered or hostile territories. These settlements were composed of citizens who, while retaining the legal rights of their original citizenship, cultivated land granted to them by the occupying power. This conceptualization of colonialism, which emphasized the settlement of specific groups and their claims over particular geographical areas, remained central in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century narratives concerning the colonization of the Americas. In this context, colonies referred to territories occupied by settlers who established new communities for themselves and their descendants while maintaining political and economic dependence on the mother country. However, settler colonialism represents only one historical form of colonial relations, as colonialism has manifested through various structures beyond settlement, including economic exploitation, political subjugation, and cultural domination (Ypi 2013: 160).

Colonialism constitutes an asymmetrical power dynamic fundamentally rooted in spatial displacement, representing one among numerous hierarchical structures that shape interactions between individuals and collectives. Various axes of social differentiation -including class,

gender, race, ability, age, socioeconomic status, language, accent, cultural practices, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religious identity- contribute to the maintenance of systemic inequalities, often intersecting in fluid and complex ways. Similarly, capital operates as a social relation that entrenches profound disparities. However, colonialism is uniquely characterized not only by displacement, which establishes the bifurcation between the metropole and the colony, but also by the systematic violence that facilitates dispossession and appropriation. This violence is intrinsic to colonial domination, rendering the colonial encounter inherently coercive. Without violence, colonialism ceases to exist (Veracini 2022: 1).

British rule over India after 1857 represents a paradigmatic case of colonialism, whereas its more ambiguous control over the regal states of South Asia deviates from this prototype, and the United States' occupation of Japan following World War II is even more distinct -though its significance remains undiminished. Any comprehensive definition of colonialism must encompass such varied cases while also accounting for their differences. A preliminary definition might frame colonialism as the systematic restriction of one political entity's autonomy by another. However, this definition is inadequate, as it presupposes that the colonized entity already constitutes a nation. This assumption is problematic because many colonial territories, such as India or Ireland, did not exist as unified nations prior to their subjugation. Excluding such cases from the scope of colonialism would be misleading and consequential, particularly given historical attempts -such as those by the British government- to distinguish its imperial conquests from Nazi occupation in Europe by invoking notions of national sovereignty. To circumvent such rationalizations, two approaches to defining colonialism emerge, both of which broaden the concept of nationhood. The retrospective approach considers pre-existing autonomous political formations as national entities, thereby classifying colonial rule over them as colonial domination -whether it be a structured polity like the Sokoto Caliphate or a smaller-scale Igbo village. The prospective approach, by contrast, recognizes colonial rule over a region as domination over a national group if such an identity later emerges, whether through state formation or widespread aspirations for statehood. Under this framework, British rule over disparate groups in present-day Nigeria may be understood as colonial domination over Nigeria, as its eventual nationhood retrospectively reconfigures the scope of colonial subjugation (Hogan 2023: 34).

Earlier colonial powers extended their empires by leveraging local labour to extract valuable natural resources and raw materials, often constructing essential infrastructure such as railroads to streamline the extraction and transportation of these appropriated goods. This

exploitation was central to the colonial economic model, reinforcing asymmetrical power dynamics. In the contemporary era, colonial structures have taken on a digital form. Rather than physical conquest, today's digital colonialism operates through the monopolization of data, algorithmic governance, and platform dependency, extracting value from digital labour and user-generated content while consolidating control over information flows and technological infrastructure (Coleman 2018: 420).

Colonialism has evolved from its historical forms of territorial occupation and resource extraction into a digital paradigm that extends economic and political dominance through technological infrastructures. In this context, digital colonialism and prosumer capitalism have emerged as key mechanisms through which economic power is restructured in the digital age. Rather than engaging in epistemological debates centred on Anglophone or Eurocentric interpretations of (de)coloniality, this analysis focuses on the political, economic, and technological dimensions of digital colonialism, emphasizing how global technology corporations such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter consolidate control over digital economies. The expansion of prosumer capitalism reinforces economic dependency by commodifying digital labour and concentrating profits within a handful of dominant firms, perpetuating inequalities that parallel historical colonial structures. As digital platforms increasingly shape economic and social interactions, the structural imbalances inherent in the global digital economy demand critical examination. This study contributes to the broader discourse on the political economy of digital capitalism by addressing the ways in which digital labour, data extraction, and platform dependencies sustain contemporary forms of economic exploitation. In the absence of robust regulatory frameworks, digital colonialism continues to shape global economic hierarchies, highlighting the urgent need for critical engagement with its impact on labour, agency, and sovereignty in the digital age (Opi 2024: 381-385).

The origins of digital colonialism can be traced through two primary conceptual frameworks. The first is a metaphorical approach, which likens the digital realm to a new frontier awaiting exploration and exploitation, much like the colonial territories of the past. In this view, technology corporations function as modern-day colonial powers, using digital infrastructures to extract and commodify human experiences. This perspective, influenced by Habermas's colonization of the lifeworld, posits that as individuals and societies integrate with digital platforms, their data becomes subject to extraction and commodification, creating a new mode of dispossession. However, critics of this approach argue that data, unlike natural resources, does not merely exist waiting to be discovered; rather, it must be actively constructed

and shaped to hold economic value. This perspective aligns with Harvey's accumulation by dispossession, in which surplus value is captured by extracting data from the individuals who produce it. The second conceptualization emphasizes the continuity of colonialism, arguing that digital technologies do not merely create a new mode of exploitation but rather extend and reinforce existing structures of colonial domination. Scholars have explored how multinational technology corporations engage in practices similar to historical colonial powers, such as infrastructure monopolization and economic dependency. Just as colonial railways and roads were built to facilitate imperial extraction, contemporary digital infrastructures -proprietary software, cloud computing, and surveillance systems- reproduce asymmetrical power relations, disempowering local actors and consolidating foreign dominance. A crucial distinction introduced in this debate is between digital colonialism and digital neo-colonialism, following the historical differentiation between colonialism and neo-colonialism. While digital colonialism refers to direct control over digital infrastructures and platforms, digital neo-colonialism operates through subtler mechanisms of domination, allowing states and corporations to exert influence over formally independent digital economies. Similar to how Nkrumah described neo-colonialism[*] as a system where economic and political policies are controlled externally, digital neo-colonialism enables corporations to maintain control over global data flows, software ecosystems, and AI development while presenting a façade of digital sovereignty. This distinction highlights the evolving strategies of domination in the digital age, where power operates through both visible and invisible mechanisms, necessitating new forms of political resistance against technological imperialism (Mouton & Burns 2021: 1892).

Global data flows and software ecosystems are increasingly controlled by U.S.-based technology corporations, reinforcing digital neo-colonialism through infrastructure dominance, software monopolies, and regulatory constraints. Cloud computing services such as Amazon Web Services (AWS), Microsoft Azure, and Google Cloud centralize data storage and processing, limiting the digital sovereignty of developing nations by making them dependent on foreign infrastructure (Zuboff 2019a: 167-169). Additionally, proprietary software ecosystems reinforce digital dependencies, as Microsoft, Apple, and Google control operating systems, app stores, and cloud services, marginalizing open-source alternatives that could enhance digital autonomy (Morozov 2011: 215). The dominance of artificial intelligence and

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[*]Kwame Nkrumah states "The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside" (Nkrumah 1965: 4).

algorithmic governance further extends digital colonialism, as AI models and digital platforms are trained on datasets that privilege Western knowledge systems and exclude non-Western epistemologies, entrenching existing global inequalities (Noble 2018: 71). These mechanisms illustrate how digital neo-colonialism operates through the monopolization of technological infrastructures, legal asymmetries, and algorithmic biases, ensuring that the flow of digital capital, data, and knowledge remains concentrated in the Global North.

One of the roots of digital colonialism can be seen in the concept of data colonialism, which, while drawing parallels with historical colonialism, lacks clear connections to specific mechanisms of extraction and control. Although data colonialism is described as a transformative mode of resource appropriation through the commodification of human life, the text does not explicitly demonstrate how this process structurally mirrors historical colonial practices beyond broad notions of economic exploitation. While it is mentioned that historical colonialism restructured societies to generate economic value, the exact means through which data infrastructures replicate these historical dynamics remain underexplored. Furthermore, while the argument that data colonialism operates beyond traditional geographical divisions is compelling, the absence of a detailed comparison with the administrative, legal, and economic frameworks of historical colonialism weakens the claim that it constitutes a direct extension rather than a conceptual analogy. The discussion would benefit from illustrating how digital infrastructures function as contemporary equivalents of historical mechanisms of control, such as monopolization of trade routes, forced labour, or resource extraction. Without these explicit linkages, the argument risks remaining at a surface-level comparison rather than offering a robust historical continuity between colonial and digital forms of domination (Couldry & Mesias 2019: 336-340).

Data colonialism exhibits fundamental similarities to historical colonialism, particularly in its mechanisms of appropriation, control, and systemic inequality. Just as traditional colonialism was driven by the extraction of land, resources, and labour for economic and geopolitical dominance, data colonialism operates through the large-scale appropriation of human life via digital infrastructures. Both systems function through asymmetrical power relations, where dominant actors -historically, imperial states and today's technology corporations- consolidate control over marginalized populations, particularly in the Global South. This dynamic is evident in the digital economy, where corporations extract user data under the guise of providing services, mirroring how colonial powers justified territorial expansion through discourses of civilization and development. Moreover, racial and gender

biases embedded in digital technologies reinforce pre-existing colonial hierarchies, as algorithmic discrimination perpetuates social inequalities that were once codified through imperial rule. Surveillance, another hallmark of colonial governance, is now replicated through digital infrastructures that monitor, categorize, and regulate populations, often without their explicit consent. The illusion of choice, exemplified by platforms like WhatsApp imposing unilateral data-sharing policies, echoes colonial-era coercion, wherein subjects were granted nominal autonomy while remaining under hegemonic control. Additionally, just as colonial economies depended on extractive industries to sustain metropolitan wealth, today's data-driven capitalism thrives on the commodification of personal information, turning individuals into exploitable assets within the global marketplace. Data colonialism extends the logic of historical colonialism into the digital age, maintaining systemic exploitation while adapting to new technological paradigms (Helms 2024).

Digital colonialism manifests in many ways beyond economic and technological control, encompassing linguistic exclusion, labour exploitation, ethical transgressions, racialized surveillance, and geopolitical imbalances in AI development (Yeşilkaya 2022: 955-956). One prominent feature is the marginalization of non-Western languages in AI systems, particularly in natural language processing (NLP). While historical colonialism suppressed Indigenous languages to assert cultural dominance, modern AI-driven language models continue this pattern by prioritizing Western languages while neglecting widely spoken African and Indigenous languages. This exclusion reinforces digital linguistic hegemony, leading to misrepresentations and inaccuracies in translation, as well as the perpetuation of biases in content moderation and information dissemination. Another critical aspect is the exploitative labour conditions in AI-related industries, particularly in data annotation and content moderation. Many AI systems require extensive human input for training, yet the workers who perform these tasks -often located in the Global South- are subjected to low wages, economic precarity, and psychological distress. The phenomenon of ghost work, where digital labour remains invisible to end users, mirrors historical colonial labour structures in which workers were dehumanized and made economically disposable. Similarly, the concept of ethics dumping -where companies outsource AI testing to regions with weaker regulations- follows the same logic as past scientific and medical experimentation on colonized populations, reinforcing a global hierarchy where marginalized communities bear the risks of technological advancements without reaping their benefits. Digital surveillance further entrenches digital colonialism, particularly through private security technologies and AI-driven policing systems.

In highly segregated urban environments, such as post-apartheid South Africa, AI-based surveillance disproportionately benefits wealthier, white populations while exposing marginalized communities -often Black and lower-income- to increased scrutiny, misidentification, and algorithmic bias. The deployment of facial recognition technologies, which exhibit higher error rates for darker-skinned individuals, exacerbates racial inequalities in law enforcement and security access, demonstrating how digital colonialism maintains historical structures of discrimination under the guise of technological progress. Furthermore, digital colonialism is reinforced by Africa's exclusion from global AI discussions, as private corporations, and powerful states -primarily the United States and China- dictate the development, regulation, and deployment of AI technologies. The overwhelming concentration of AI research and datasets in Western institutions ensures that the priorities and ethical considerations of economically dominant nations shape AI's trajectory, sidelining the perspectives, needs, and local knowledge systems of underrepresented regions. This asymmetry results in a form of epistemic colonialism, where AI governance frameworks and ethical guidelines are developed without meaningful input from the communities most affected by AI-driven transformations. Collectively, these dimensions of digital colonialism highlight the continued reproduction of global inequalities through AI and digital technologies. While framed as neutral and universal, these systems function as instruments of exclusion, control, and economic extraction, reinforcing long-standing disparities in power and representation in the digital age (ElGhadban 2023).

Digital colonialism represents an expansion of extractivist practices, transforming data into a commodity while embedding itself in the material infrastructures of the internet. This process parallels historical forms of resource plunder but extends beyond natural resource exploitation to encompass surveillance, algorithmic governance, and the commodification of human experience. While data has economic value, its extraction also results in tangible socio-environmental consequences, including privacy erosion, intensified surveillance, and ecological degradation linked to digital infrastructure. The conceptual framework of body-territory underscores how digital colonialism materially impacts individuals and communities, reinforcing mechanisms of control, dispossession, and inequality. These effects are not limited to the virtual realm; they intersect with physical territories through the expansion of technological systems that operate across geopolitical and economic asymmetries. The reconfiguration of colonial power relations through digital technologies manifests in algorithmic bias, the exploitation of low-wage data labour, and the deployment of AI-driven

surveillance, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups worldwide. Additionally, the monopolization of digital infrastructures by transnational corporations perpetuates dependency, as regions with limited technological sovereignty remain subject to external control over data governance and digital economies. The persistence of sacrifice zones -where marginalized populations bear the costs of technological expansion- highlights the structural inequalities inherent in digital colonialism. Addressing these power imbalances requires an interdisciplinary approach that bridges social sciences, political economy, and environmental studies to examine how digital and physical spaces are increasingly entangled. Recognizing digital colonialism as a continuation of historical patterns of dispossession allows for a critical reassessment of digital sovereignty, data justice, and resistance against emerging forms of technological domination (Tait, dos Reis Peron & Suárez 2022: 12-13).

The origins of digital colonialism stem from historical and structural developments, particularly the expansion of intellectual property regimes, monopolistic control over digital infrastructures, and data commodification. A key moment was the 1990s Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) negotiations, where technology corporations, particularly U.S.-based firms like Microsoft, lobbied for stricter intellectual property laws, ensuring that digital assets remained concentrated among a few dominant actors. This system extends beyond traditional patents and copyrights, as ostensibly open or free technologies often remain proprietary due to technical barriers and knowledge asymmetries. Another core aspect of digital colonialism is data surveillance (dataveillance), where digital infrastructures systematically extract and monetize human activity, reinforcing economic dependencies. Additionally, monopolization of digital infrastructures by a few corporations allows them to control internet infrastructure, including cloud computing, data centres, and undersea cables, dictating economic flows and regulatory standards globally. In regions with limited technological sovereignty, this dominance forces governments and institutions to depend on proprietary digital solutions for critical services, reinforcing economic and structural inequalities. The legal asymmetry between wealthier nations with strong data protection laws, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the weaker regulatory frameworks of the Global South exacerbates these disparities. Many multinational corporations exploit this gap, testing artificial intelligence (AI), surveillance technologies, and data-driven governance models in less regulated environments before rolling them out in jurisdictions with stricter oversight. The absence of robust legal protections further amplifies

the risks of digital colonialism, allowing corporations to consolidate power and reinforce systemic inequalities (Al Dahdah 2021: 2-4).

Amazon's Alexa exemplifies the integration of surveillance capitalism into everyday life through the extensive collection and commodification of behavioural data. With hundreds of millions of Alexa-enabled devices in use globally, the system continuously processes vast volumes of voice interactions, refining predictive algorithms for commercial applications. Research indicates that a substantial portion of user interactions are systematically stored and analysed, often without explicit awareness from consumers. Patented technologies, such as voice recognition algorithms capable of detecting key phrases associated with consumer intent, facilitate real-time responses that drive targeted advertising and service recommendations. Moreover, the incorporation of Alexa into smart home infrastructures through agreements with property developers and appliance manufacturers embeds data extraction mechanisms into domestic spaces, further extending its reach. This pervasive integration allows for the detailed profiling of user habits, influencing not only e-commerce but also service industries such as home maintenance, transportation, and hospitality. As these predictive analytics become increasingly sophisticated, the data extracted from user interactions serves as a foundational resource in shaping behavioural futures markets, where insights derived from personal routines and preferences are monetized. This model of data-driven economic activity illustrates how digital assistants function as key instruments in the broader architecture of surveillance capitalism, where personal information is transformed into a strategic asset for corporate interests (Zuboff 2019b: 15).

Digital colonialism originates from five interrelated elements that mirror historical colonial structures: oppression, exploitation, dispossession, monopoly, and dependence. Oppression in the digital sphere manifests through algorithmic biases, economic restrictions, and the dominance of Big Tech corporations, which dictate the flow of information and resources much like colonial powers once controlled territories. These corporations, alongside governments engaged in mass surveillance, impose digital hierarchies that disproportionately impact marginalized communities. Exploitation, another defining feature, is evident in the extraction of personal data, digital labour, and national infrastructures for corporate gain. Just as historical colonial economies were structured to benefit the colonizer at the expense of the colonized, digital infrastructures and regulatory policies today are shaped to serve the interests of powerful technology firms rather than local needs, particularly in regions with weak data protection laws. Dispossession, a hallmark of past colonial systems, has been reconfigured in

the digital age through datafication -the large-scale conversion of human activity into commodifiable information. Unlike natural resources, data is not pre-existing but is generated and extracted from individuals, often without their knowledge or meaningful consent. This process results in the loss of privacy, autonomy, and control over digital identities. Monopoly further strengthens digital colonialism, as a handful of dominant corporations consolidate control over platforms, infrastructures, and services. Through acquisitions and market dominance, these companies eliminate competition, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where access to digital tools, cloud storage, and AI remains under their exclusive authority. Finally, dependence ensures that even as digital access expands, control remains centralized. Similar to how former colonies remained economically reliant on their imperial rulers, digital infrastructures today keep societies dependent on foreign technology providers, limiting their sovereignty over communication networks, cybersecurity, and data governance. Collectively, these elements form the foundation of digital colonialism, perpetuating economic and technological inequalities on a global scale (Bori 2024: 217-220). Having thus identified the roots of digital colonialism, the question then arises as to whether resistance to it is possible.

Is Resistance Possible?

Digital technologies and information systems are deeply embedded in political, economic, and social structures worldwide. However, rather than fostering equitable development, U.S. transnational corporations are perpetuating new forms of colonialism through their dominance over intellectual property, computational infrastructures, and digital intelligence. These firms, including tech giants like Microsoft and Apple, exert overwhelming control over the core digital ecosystem beyond U.S. borders, ensuring that key computational functions and industries remain under their proprietary ownership. This asymmetry reinforces a global division of labour that maintains peripheral economies in a state of dependency while exacerbating economic inequality and mass impoverishment. Instead of facilitating knowledge-sharing and technological transfer to promote mutual prosperity, wealthier nations and their corporate actors entrench their advantages, extracting cheap labour and economic rents from the Global South. By monopolizing critical digital infrastructure, integrating their technologies into educational systems and workforce training programs, and forging alliances with both corporate and state elites, Big Tech secures control over emerging markets. This extends even to sectors such as policing and incarceration, where surveillance technologies generate profits at the expense of civil liberties. Despite these entrenched power structures, resistance to digital colonialism persists. Historical movements against corporate complicity in oppressive regimes, such as

protests against IBM and Hewlett-Packard's operations in apartheid South Africa, exemplify the long-standing opposition to technological imperialism. Early 2000s initiatives promoting Free Software, and the digital commons represented efforts to reclaim technological sovereignty, though many of these movements have waned. In recent years, however, renewed opposition to digital colonialism has emerged, linking digital justice to broader struggles against economic exploitation and political authoritarianism. Moreover, this struggle intersects with the urgent ecological crisis driven by capitalist expansion, necessitating a comprehensive approach that integrates environmental sustainability with digital resistance. Dismantling digital colonialism requires a fundamental rethinking of the dominant conceptual frameworks that uphold it, alongside grassroots mobilization aimed at challenging the intertwined forces of corporate hegemony, state power, and the ideological structures that sustain them (Kwet 2021).

Efforts to resist digital colonialism and corporate control over technology can be approached through three interconnected strategies: developing accessible language for digital rights, shaping public opinion, and fostering transnational solidarity. The first strategy emphasizes the necessity of linguistic accessibility in digital advocacy. Given that much of the discourse surrounding digital rights is dominated by English, it remains inaccessible to large portions of the world's population. Initiatives such as Nanjala Nyabola's Kiswahili Digital Rights Project address this exclusion by translating key digital governance concepts into local languages, facilitating engagement among communities historically marginalized in global digital policy debates. Similarly, digital rights organizations in Latin America have launched multilingual platforms to increase awareness and participation in internet governance discussions, ensuring that policy frameworks reflect diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. The second strategy, shaping public opinion, highlights the power of mass mobilization in challenging corporate influence. The 2015 net neutrality movement in India, which successfully pressured regulators to reject Facebook's Free Basics initiative, demonstrates how digital activism can counter corporate control. Activists utilized humour, viral content, and accessible explanations to engage the broader public, leading to legal reforms. A similar campaign emerged in Brazil, where digital rights organizations mobilized against the expansion of zero-rating services, framing the debate within broader concerns about digital sovereignty and economic justice. These cases underscore the importance of grassroots movements in shaping regulatory policies. The third strategy, fostering transnational solidarity, focuses on uniting digital workers and activists across regions to challenge exploitative labour practices and monopolistic control over digital infrastructures. The case of Daniel Motaung, a Facebook

moderator from Kenya who was fired for attempting to unionize, illustrates the exploitation faced by low-wage digital workers. In response, initiatives such as the African Content Moderators Union and the Fairwork Project have sought to establish industry-wide labour protections. Similarly, digital labour movements in Southeast Asia have begun coordinating with unions in Europe and North America to demand fairer wages and working conditions, highlighting the potential for cross-border collaboration in advocating for labour rights. These strategies collectively emphasize the need for an inclusive and sustainable global digital rights movement. While linguistic justice, public mobilization, and international solidarity are crucial to resisting digital colonialism, their long-term impact depends on institutional support, legal protections, and transnational cooperation. As digital rights activism continues to evolve, concrete initiatives such as multilingual advocacy campaigns, public pressure on regulatory bodies, and worker-led international coalitions offer critical pathways for challenging digital power structures (Nothias 2023).

Another strategy is digital sovereignty, which counters digital colonialism by advocating for technological autonomy in infrastructure, data governance, and innovation. While monopolized digital ecosystems reinforce dependency, sovereignty efforts aim to decentralize control, promoting self-reliance and security. Achieving this, however, requires more than legal frameworks; long-term investment in education, infrastructure, and policy reform is essential. Open-source technologies have been adopted in countries like Brazil and Ecuador to reduce reliance on Western corporations, though sustaining independent ecosystems remains challenging due to infrastructure and expertise gaps. Hardware independence also poses security concerns, with nations like Cuba and Russia attempting localized alternatives, yet financial and industrial constraints hinder progress. Regional collaboration among Global South nations offers a potential solution by pooling resources and expertise to counter foreign technological dominance. Beyond state efforts, community-based movements -such as Māori advocacy for indigenous ICT policies- seek to preserve cultural identity in digital spaces. The push for digital commons and decentralized governance models challenges extractive digital capitalism, emphasizing public ownership of technology. However, corporate dominance in cloud computing, AI, and data storage complicates sovereignty efforts, as international trade agreements often restrict state control over digital assets. Strengthening constitutional protections and fostering cross-regional alliances can bolster collective resistance against monopolies. Digital sovereignty is a political struggle intertwined with economic justice and human rights, requiring state policies, grassroots activism, and international cooperation to

counteract digital colonialism and establish a more inclusive, autonomous digital future (Avila Pinto 2018).

Digital sovereignty provides a crucial framework for resisting digital colonialism by emphasizing technological autonomy, decentralized infrastructure, and regulatory independence. A key aspect of this approach is the adoption of open-source technologies, which reduce dependence on proprietary software controlled by foreign corporations while enhancing transparency, security, and adaptability. Open-source solutions enable governments to customize digital infrastructures, mitigate surveillance risks, and eliminate licensing fees that create long-term financial dependencies. Countries such as Brazil, Venezuela, and Ecuador have implemented policies mandating the use of open-source platforms in public administration, demonstrating their potential for strengthening digital independence. Additionally, open-source software fosters local innovation, supporting domestic technology sectors and reducing reliance on Western tech monopolies. Beyond state-led efforts, open-source development facilitates knowledge-sharing and collaborative governance, reinforcing efforts to create decentralized and democratically managed digital infrastructures. Investing in open-source education, public-sector free software projects, and independent digital ecosystems can provide sustainable alternatives to corporate-controlled technologies. Furthermore, cross-regional collaboration in open-source software development and digital governance can challenge monopolistic control and promote equitable access to digital resources (Avila 2020).

CONCLUSION

Digital colonialism represents a restructuring of global power relations, where control over digital infrastructures, data flows, and algorithmic governance reinforces economic, political, and epistemic hierarchies. While technology is often framed as a neutral force of progress, its deployment within an unregulated global framework has entrenched existing inequalities rather than alleviated them. Multinational technology corporations, based in the Global North, monopolize digital infrastructures and services, dictating the terms of participation in the global digital economy. This systemic imbalance has left many nations in the Global South dependent on foreign technologies, limiting their ability to establish autonomous digital ecosystems, regulate data governance, or foster local technological innovation. As this study has demonstrated, digital colonialism does not operate solely through economic extraction but also through cultural and epistemic domination, shaping how knowledge is produced, disseminated, and controlled in digital spaces.

The mechanisms of digital colonialism -data extractivism, algorithmic governance, monopolistic control, and surveillance capitalism- have far-reaching implications for digital sovereignty and democratic governance. By embedding themselves into national infrastructures, public institutions, and everyday digital interactions, technology corporations exercise an unprecedented level of influence over political and economic decision-making. This corporate power extends beyond the traditional reach of state authority, often bypassing national regulations and legal frameworks with minimal accountability. Moreover, the expansion of artificial intelligence and automation exacerbates these dynamics, as AI-driven decision-making processes become increasingly integrated into governance, labour markets, and security systems. These developments raise critical concerns about the future of digital justice, privacy, and equitable participation in the digital age.

Despite these challenges, resistance to digital colonialism is gaining momentum through policy interventions, grassroots activism, and technological alternatives that prioritize digital sovereignty. However, meaningful change requires a structured and multi-level strategy. A roadmap for building digital sovereignty must include the following key pillars:

1. Legal and regulatory frameworks that establish strong data protection laws, digital rights charters, and national regulations to prevent the monopolization of digital infrastructures while ensuring user control over personal data. Governments must harmonize regulations across regions to prevent corporate exploitation of weaker legal environments.

2. Public investment in digital infrastructure to reduce reliance on foreign-controlled cloud storage, internet backbone systems, and AI development. This includes national and regional data centres, decentralized networks, and alternative digital platforms that prioritize public interest over corporate profit.

3. Open-source and localized technologies as alternatives to proprietary systems, ensuring that governments, academic institutions, and public organizations promote local innovation and collaborative technology ecosystems.

4. Digital literacy and workforce development to empower individuals as active participants in digital innovation by equipping them with coding skills, data ethics knowledge, and awareness of algorithmic governance.

5. Transnational collaboration and alternative models that encourage cooperation among Global South nations to develop independent digital ecosystems, including regional

internet infrastructure, alternative social media platforms, and digital policy coalitions that challenge Big Tech dominance.

6. Platform cooperatives and community-owned networks that prioritize community governance over shareholder profits, ensuring that digital platforms serve the interests of their users rather than corporate investors.

7. Strategic engagement in global digital governance through active participation in international digital policy-making bodies such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the United Nations, advocating for a more equitable digital order that does not favour technology giants from dominant economies.

To counteract digital colonialism, these strategies must be integrated into a broader vision that prioritizes equity, inclusion, and digital justice. Rather than solely resisting technological dominance, the goal should be to reimagine the role of digital technologies in fostering a more just, democratic, and sovereign digital landscape. By reclaiming technological autonomy through public investments, policy reforms, and alternative digital governance models, nations and communities can work toward a decentralized, equitable, and sustainable digital future.

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