

**DECOLONISING DATA IN THE AGE OF DATA COLONIALISM: AN
INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR NICK COULDRY**

**VERİ SÖMÜRGEÇİLİĞİ ÇAĞINDA VERİNİN SÖMÜRGEÇİLİKTEN KURTULMASI:
PROFESÖR NICK COULDY İLE BİR SÖYLEŞİ**

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Cristaldi, M. P. E. (2024). "Decolonising data in the age of data colonialism: An interview with Professor Nick Couldry". *Etkileşim*, 14, 346-350.
<https://doi.org/10.32739/etkileşim.2024.7.14.271>

This study complies with research and publication ethics

Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

In May 2024, the Faculty of Communication at Üsküdar University hosted the 11th International Communication Symposium, which this year has been delineated on the overarching theme 'Digital Inequality and Data Colonialism'. Among the scholars and subject matter experts serving as keynote speakers during its proceedings, Prof. Dr. Nick Couldry along with Prof. Dr. Ulises A. Mejias- gave an insightful keynote speech entitled "Data Grab: The New Colonialism of Big Tech", which focused on the subjects explored in the groundbreaking research recently published by the two scholars and entitled *Data Grab: The New Colonialism of Big Tech and How to Fight Back*. In this context, as founders of the concept of data colonialism, Couldry and Mejias discussed further implications of this concept and how Big Tech companies are nowadays grabbing users' data, exploiting labour and connections for their profit.

We interviewed Professor Nick Couldry on data colonialism and why it represents a radically different concept from those already existing in sociology and communication studies. Moreover, we asked what we can do as users of websites and social media platforms to decolonize our data, thus fighting back against the new colonialism of big technology companies.

-What motivated you to focus on data colonialism in your research? How does data colonialism relate to historical colonialism?

I became interested in questions of data in around 2011 when I realised in fieldwork about storytelling that the online presentation of stories was increasingly a challenging issue for community groups, and that this meant me-

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diating their stories through data analytics. I realised that this question – how as social actors we think about the process of datafication – was extremely interesting and, in some ways, new. At first, I approached this from a bottom-up perspective, but I very soon realised the huge power issues involved. In 2011 I met Ulises Mejias at a conference, and we became interested in each other's work: three or so years later we decided to write something, and the opportunity came up to make this into a book. We knew we wanted to write something critical about datafication, that engaged with postcolonial debates, but after a few months, in April 2016, we each had the simultaneous realisation that what was at stake was something more: a genuinely new stage of the evolution of historical colonialism that was increasingly taking the form of grabbing human life through the means of data and exploiting it for value. That was the origin of the concept of data colonialism, which we developed into our first book, *The Costs of Connection* which was completed in September 2018 and published a year later: we were excited to be at the launch of its Turkish translation in May this year in Istanbul. We have gone on doing talks and writing together since, and this year published a new book for a general audience on the same topic, called *Data Grab* published by *Penguin*.

All this work on data colonialism was motivated by a core concern: to find a framework that helps us understand the sheer depth and scale of the transformation of daily life through the extraction of data that has occurred progressively over the past 30-40 years, but within the historical context not just of late capitalism, but of the much longer, indeed 500-year-old, exploitation of the world's resources for elites that has been historical colonialism. Our argument is not that historical colonialism has ended and been replaced by data colonialism: for it is very clear that the consequences of historical colonialism *live on*, for example, in the world's extremely unequal global economy and the racism that disfigures politics everywhere. Our argument instead is that at the core of colonialism is the appropriation of the world's resources: initially in the form of land and everything that comes from and with exploitation of the land (minerals, agricultural products, slave labour), but why not allow for the possibility that colonialism's landgrab could today be taking on an additional form – the seizure of *human life* for value in the form of the extraction of data? That is data colonialism, which is just the latest version of historical colonialism, and exists alongside the ongoing effects of earlier forms and stages of colonialism, and indeed reinforces them in important ways.

- Why does data colonialism represent a different concept from those already existing in literature?

Data colonialism differs in a number of ways from some other approaches which see something colonial about what's happening with data and AI. First, because we insist that the word 'colonialism' here is not a metaphor, but a reality: what we are seeing really IS a continuation of historical colonialism, and really DOES represent a new stage of its appropriation of resources. Second, because we insist that this is much more than a continuation in the sphere of

technology of neocolonial forces that shape everything in the contemporary world: Michael Kwet's term 'digital colonialism', for example, refers basically to neocolonial shaping of tech, which doesn't tell us anything new about how colonialism might be evolving. Third, because we insist that data colonialism is potentially changing the conditions of life *everywhere* (since human life, its target, is everywhere), even though, because of the ongoing influence of historical colonialism, it is colonial subjects both within the Global South and Global North who are most likely to suffer from its harms. We also pay close attention to the role of China as a key pole of power in relation to this new stage of colonialism, while some other writers tend to dismiss China's importance. Finally, we put a lot of emphasis on not just the ongoing colonial landgrab (the data grab) but the ways of thinking that continue to justify it, which the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano neatly summed up through the concept of 'coloniality.' This point is missing from some versions of digital colonialism but is a point we share closely with Paola Ricaurte's formulation of data colonialism and coloniality, and also with frameworks of racial capitalism.

All of these approaches, including our own, are different from the most common approach to understanding data and AI, which is to interpret them as constituting a continuation, or possibly the next stage, of capitalism. Of course, data and AI are part of capitalism's huge recent expansion, but Ulises and I prefer to think in terms of the long-term historical relations between *colonialism* and capitalism, what we call the colonial-capitalist double helix. Certainly, the best accounts of data and capitalism, for example Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism and Nick Srnicek's theory of platform capitalism, make very important contributions to understanding what is going on, but they still miss the longer colonial time-frame within which so much of what's happening today makes most sense.

- How do you see the emergence of colonialism in social media practices?

At its core it is two things: the grabbing of data, in the form of everything we do on those platforms, and the mentality that goes with extracting maximum value from that data. We don't dismiss the importance of social media platforms as they have evolved in contemporary life. But as federated platforms show, there are ways of allowing people to connect with those to whom they want to connect which do not involve extracting profit. Certainly there are ways of building social media which don't depend on business models designed to ensure that what appears to people on social media is not simply what their social connections say and are doing, but is what platforms believe will drive most 'engagement' on their platforms, because from engagement derives the potential for selling that attention to advertisers in some way. Not only have social media platforms been allowed by regulators and society to evolve on that basis, whatever the social costs (costs which are increasingly becoming alarming), but the ways of thinking of social media executives – to assume that the data they can gather on their platform is theirs to exploit for their company's benefit, whatever the impact *on wider society* of the model

that generates the data – is at core a colonial way of thinking, a pure extractivism.

This colonial dimension has recently been confirmed with the emergence of the latest form of AI, generative AI, for example *Chat-GPT*, which of course is increasingly being integrated into social media and every type of platform and search engine. Today's large language or image models depend on taking almost everything that humans have produced or displayed online as the 'free' input to train their AI models. Sam Altman in evidence given to the UK House of Lords in 2023 admitted this: that *Open AI's* business model, indeed its profitability, *depends* on using copyrighted material, ignoring the legal rights of those who produced it. This goes beyond the model of platform capitalism or surveillance capitalism, since it is not platform data or 'surveillance assets' (in Zuboff's term) that is being seized: it is simply everything that humans have produced and that is available online. This data grab is an act of appropriation that continues in the long line of colonial landgrabs, and provides fuel to the next advances of capitalism, just as the historical colonial landgrab was a necessary condition for the emergence of capitalism. And this is the core point that those who would dismiss colonial readings of data and AI tend to forget: that there would have been no capitalism without colonialism.

-What steps can be taken to create a more equitable system for users in the digital realm? What can be done to decolonise our data?

In our book *Data Grab*, we approach this in terms of a three-level model developed by Latin American activists: working within, against and beyond the system. Data colonialism, as we stress in the book, is a whole social order. Individual uncoordinated actions can never be enough to challenge it. We need coordinated action by many actors, including collective action based on the hope of wider change. That includes pressing for strong regulatory action and supporting those within Big Tech companies in their struggle to reform from within (that's 'within'). It also means critical action 'against' Big Tech, that is, to challenge directly the injustices caused to particular types of subjects, for example through algorithmic harms against those of particular races, genders, sexualities. But crucially it also means using the collective imagination to help each other remove our lives as far as possible from the power of Big Tech, reclaiming our spaces and times from their influence, helping each other live well, but another way: that's acting 'beyond' the system.

All those approaches are important, but we hope the framework of data colonialism is useful in all those sorts of struggle. Underlying them is the fundamental idea not, of course, that data in itself is bad (how could it be?), but that our current forms of datafication are damaging, many, being purely extractive, should not be allowed, and what we need to move towards is a world where data is gathered, if it is, for social purposes that are monitored and implemented for the social good, and subject to socially endorsed limits.

- Regarding Türkiye, as you know there is a legal representative for every

social media platform available in the country. What can be done for data decolonisation in this context? Do you have any specific recommendations or policy suggestions?

This is a very difficult question, because the practical influence and hegemony of the two great colonialism powers of the data colonialism age – USA and China – are vast. All other countries are struggling to exercise any sort of sovereignty in relation to this power. Social media corporations, though they deny it, seek a very high level of political influence, in order to secure their extractive resources. But what is important is to turn round the debate about Big Tech into terms that are focused on what is of benefit to a country's citizens, and all its communities. Needless to say, the answer is not to devolve to national governments all the power to control or censor digital platforms – after all, many national governments are trusted even less than social media management. The answer is to develop ways in which true *social* influence over the design and control of the platforms where we tend to live out much of our social lives is possible. That will be work of a whole generation, but again, we hope that the framework of data colonialism is helpful for thinking about this huge task.

-Looking to the future, could you share some insights about your upcoming book? Do you see further directions or topics that can be explored in the study of data colonialism and social media?

As I said, Ulises and published this year a follow up to *The Costs of Connection*, which refines and explains for a general audience the framework of data colonialism. But I also have coming out in the autumn a new solo book on the particular problem of social media platforms called *The Space of the World: Can Human Solidarity Survive Social Media and What if it Can't?*. This book builds on the critique of data colonialism (and also critical approaches to contemporary capitalism) but focuses on the specific problems of the dangerous 'rabbit-hole' down which contemporary societies have fallen, which is social media. There are some specific dynamics to this particular story, and some very distinctive problems in the case of social media that flow from allowing businesses (in a colonial way) to extract data from our *social* lives on platforms that they completely shape and control. The book tries to set out those problems as clearly as possible and explain why they are destroying the very basis of human solidarity, and therefore why we must dismantle and rebuild social media if we are ever to have a hope of a better politics that might, among other things, enable us to collectively address today's desperate climate emergency. In future solo work I will look further at AI and whether as societies we are thinking the right way about how to introduce it into society: I have grave doubts about that, especially given the data colonialism framework, but that is a topic for new work over the next year or two.

-Thank you indeed, Professor Couldry.