

## Digital Colonialism, geopolitics and the internet

With the rise and advancement of digital technologies and the tech industry as a whole. From things Artificial intelligence (AI) and big data analytics and Social media platforms. The Internet has transformed economies, societies, and daily life. Yet, these innovations have not been distributed equally. Instead, they often reinforce and allude to existing social inequalities, creating what Lutz refers to as digital divides[1]. These digital divides form a framework for understanding the concept of “digital colonialism.” Providing on how digital inequalities constitute gaps in access and general power that are coherently controlled by big tech companies. This term “digital colonialism” refers to the exercise of imperial power over large populations through systems of rules, designs, languages, cultures, and beliefs that serve dominant interests, allowing control over essential digital infrastructures and data.[2] This paper uses Christoph Lutz’s (2019) article, “Digital Inequalities in the Age of Artificial Intelligence and Big Data,” to systematically examine these divides through a three-level framework: disparities in access (first-level), skills and usage (second-level), and outcomes (third-level)[1]. To compare and evaluate the relationship between digital colonialism and digital divides, while also examining their impact on the tech industry, global society, and how they influence geopolitical decisions; supported by relevant examples.

Lutz begins his discussion with evaluating evolution of digital inequalities research, structured around three levels of the digital divide, the first being an inequality of access in the digital space/industry. This highlights that “access” goes beyond its traditional meaning, it is not merely about the gap between those who have and those who lack information technology[1], but also refers to the quality, control, and agency users have over that technology. As digital standards evolve, so do expectations around equitable access. Lutz contextualizes this through the example of mobile internet access, noting that in many countries, mobile connectivity is the most common form of access. While this is certainly better than having no access at all, it still represents a significant digital divide. Mobile internet is often slower, less reliable, and offers limited content availability[1], unfairly affecting users in low-income and developing regions. This highlights the geographical inequalities that persist in the digital age[2], where the quality of access, not just its presence shapes participation, opportunity, and even digital literacy, emphasizing that mere internet availability is not enough. The geographical divide presents itself between nations that control digital tech industries and those who rely on foreign technology corporations for basic connectivity and access. This creates a form of digital dependency, where developing regions remain consumers rather than equal participants in the digital economy and be at the mercy of the big tech companies.

The second digital divide that Lutz article extends as a form of digital inequality, it expresses the disparity in digital skills and literacy. This builds on the first digital divide, which focuses on the quality of access, but the second digital divide goes further by highlighting the ability to use digital tools effectively. He alludes that while many are able to use the internet for generic research, searching and scour social media platforms for entertainment purposes and communication, they are unable to utilize its capabilities into skills that matter and provide value in the digital economy. This gap often exists because users in disadvantaged regions, usually in developing countries, frequently lack the contextual knowledge or digital literacy needed to use technology effectively. This challenge is compounded by the

algorithmic control exerted by major tech companies, which can manipulate the data and content users intake. These algorithms shape what people learn, think, and believe online, giving powerful companies control over digital spaces. This is a form of digital colonialism, where powerful countries and tech companies stay in control by limiting others' access to information. They shape online content to promote their own interests, giving their citizens an advantage while keeping less powerful groups at a disadvantage. A good example is the article comparing Chinese and American TikTok algorithms, showing how content is tailored differently in each region to push specific values or ideas[3].

A Google employee for ethical tech use, compared China's approach to TikTok saying that China's algorithm, focused on education, science and things of good use in the digital economy while they shared addictive and "opium" versions of content for other countries except their own[3]. In China, children under 14 are shown educational content such as science experiments and educational videos and their usage is capped at 40 minutes per day[3]. This reflects how technology can be intentionally designed to shape youth development and national values. Compared to the American version of the algorithm, it promotes more entertainment-focused and often addictive content, with far fewer restrictions on the youth. This sparks disparity conversations on the powerful role of geographic and political choices in shaping digital experiences and narratives sparking more social and cultural change. This hence shows how technology can promote nation interests and spark subtle digital colonialism into other nations along with reinforcing specific cultural values and behaviors showing that the internet is not a neutral tool.

The third digital divide that Lutz expresses is embedded in exposing and alluding to systemic constraints and unfair biased outcomes. This is a contrasting relationship between the second and third divide. The second digital divide focuses on disparities in skills and meaningful usage, the third digital divide shifts attention to inequitable outcomes. Simply put, the second digital divide is about having the skills and The third is about whether the system treats you fairly and lets you succeed, even if you have the skills and access. These structural barriers often prevent marginalised groups like this from translating digital engagement into economic, social, or political gains. One of the root causes stems from the systemic power of digital platforms to shape narratives and exploit user data. This involves the large-scale collection and analysis of personal data through algorithms and privacy regulations. Platforms use this data (digital footprint including browsing history, location etc) to train models that personalize content. These algorithmic processes can reinforce existing biases, leading to discriminatory outcomes in areas like job advertising and content exposure. This demonstrates how data exploitation and lack of algorithmic transparency contribute to the third digital divide. This type of control also impacts the socio-economic environment. Marginalized groups, who are more vulnerable to mass data exploitation, are disproportionately affected. They are more likely to be targeted with misleading information, manipulated by algorithmic biases, and more prone to discrimination. This reinforces existing inequalities and shows another way digital colonialism can be pushed. This can lead to digital exclusion, not just in access, but in the quality and fairness of online experiences.

Christoph Lutz's (2019) article provides a foundation for understanding digital equality and the digital divide. It offers in-depth context on the digital factors that trigger and expose attempts at digital exploitation and digital colonialism. With having read this article, real life examples can be analysed and exposed. A recent example occurred in February 2025, when Google Maps renamed the Gulf of Mexico to the "Gulf of America" for U.S.-based

users[4]. President Donald Trump in his first day in office initialised this command as an executive order to federally obtain and overturn its economic and cultural significance to America's national economy[5]. To provide some context: a gulf ,defined by the United Nations ,is an inland sea that extends across a country's borders[6]. The so-called "Gulf of America" lies in close proximity to the Gulf of Mexico, which raises concerns about who owns the territory and brings potential justifications for the inland claims. The "Gulf of America" incident exemplifies how digital platforms exercise colonial power by unilaterally reshaping geopolitical narratives through algorithmic control and data-driven power. This renaming order disregards the extensive period of the established usage of the name and the water body's significance to multiple nations' and its cultural identity. It demonstrates digital colonialism in action, as tech corporations now assert authority over geographic representation much like colonial powers used to take over specific lands they desired. This controversy reveals how platform algorithms and imperial powers exert dominant geopolitical views. This sidelines local and historical claims, creating modern power imbalances where those who control digital platforms can erase or change not just territory identities but cultural ones as well which further shows the disparity in power in the geopolitical space.

In conclusion, the relationship between digital divides and digital colonialism reveals a deeply rooted imbalance in how digital technologies are accessed, used, and experienced globally. Christoph Lutz's three-level framework offers a lens to evaluate these inequities; from disparities in access and digital literacy to biased outcomes shaped by systemic structures. As demonstrated through real-world examples like TikTok's algorithmic control and the controversial renaming of the Gulf of Mexico, digital platforms not only reflect but actively reinforce global power disparities and imbalances. These platforms have evolved into modern instruments of influence that are able to change the shape of cultural, economic, and geopolitical narratives. The term "digital colonialism" captures this reality where control over data, algorithms, and digital infrastructures enables dominant entities to impose their values and interests to disadvantage others.

## REFERENCES

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