The Duality of Technological Advancement: Navigating Digital Colonialism and Employment Trends in the Global South

Globally, technological innovation provides immense potential for improving living standards and spurring economic growth. The impact and distribution of these developments, however, show glaring differences, especially between the Global North and the Global South. Using insights from the MIT Technology Review, reports from the International Labour Organization (ILO), and an article by Toussaint Nothias from the Boston Review, this essay critically examines the intertwined issues of digital colonialism and labour market trends in the Global South, with a focus on Africa. This essay makes the case—based on a study of these sources—that although technology has the capacity to stimulate economic growth, its present course frequently makes inequality already present worse, calling for a coordinated pull toward digital justice and fair labour laws.

The Impact of Digital Colonialism on the Global South

The dominance and exploitation of the digital landscape by a selected group of large tech businesses, mostly from the Global North, is known as "digital colonialism." Amrute (2019) examines this topic, describing how digital technologies frequently exhibit malicious paternalism and are hierarchical, extractive, exploitative, and have inconsistent results. According to Nothias (2022), this phenomena might be understood as a contemporary version of colonialism, in which internet companies like Facebook, Google, and Amazon force their economic and cultural hegemony on the Global South, taking money and data in exchange for minimal local growth.

Facebook's acquisition of WhatsApp and the ensuing modifications to its privacy policy, which required users to share their data with Facebook or lose functionality, are two striking instances of digital colonialism (Nothias, 2022). This undermined user confidence and brought attention to the monopolistic activities that deprive users in the Global South of options. These businesses' widespread influence has also had a negative impact on political manipulation and misinformation. According to Nothias (2022), Facebook has faced criticism for its involvement in escalating violence in Myanmar and supporting authoritarian regimes in the Philippines.

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Labour Market Trends and the Role of Technology

Sub-Saharan Africa's labour market is changing significantly as a result of globalisation and technology improvements. The ILO (2023) states that although digital platforms and tech companies present prospects for job development, job displacement and the quality of work remain significant concerns.

Offshoring and outsourcing have grown in popularity as businesses in the Global North attempt to minimise expenses by moving jobs to areas with less expensive labour. While this can lead to work opportunities in the Global South, the ILO (2023) report emphasises that it frequently results in precarious employment conditions with poor wages and little job security. This occurs in the computer sector, where professions like data labelling and content filtering are frequently outsourced to nations like Kenya and the Philippines. Employees in these positions, including those hired by Facebook's subcontractor Sama, occasionally face difficult working circumstances and low compensation (Nothias, 2022).

Furthermore, local workers have seldom benefited from job transfer in terms of skill development or upward mobility. While some positions have been relocated to less expensive areas, there are still little prospects for professional advancement and development in these areas, according to the CNBC story on Google layoffs and job migration (CNBC, 2024). This is exacerbated worse by the fact that a large number of highly skilled employment are still concentrated in the Global North, which feeds the underdevelopment and dependency cycle in the Global South. According to Amrute (2019), these kinds of dynamics are a reflection of the exploitative aspects of digital colonialism, in which the advantages of technological progress are not fairly shared.

The "race to the bottom" effect, when businesses continuously search for the cheapest labour, frequently at the expense of workers' rights and circumstances, is another result of outsourcing. According to the ILO's 2023 study, these behaviours can cause workers to experience problems like poor working conditions, insecurity in their jobs, and a lack of benefits. This is especially troubling for the tech sector, as there is a great need for inexpensive labour for jobs like content moderation and data analysis.

The Promise and Perils of AI and Tech Startups

For the Global South, AI and digital companies are a double-edged sword. They present opportunities for both economic expansion and innovation, on the one hand. Conversely, they have the potential to perpetuate current disparities and support digital colonialism. The AI colonialism series published by the MIT Technology Review emphasises how AI technologies, which are mostly developed in the Global North, are frequently implemented in the Global South without giving local circumstances and needs enough thought (MIT Technology Review, 2023).

Tech companies and developers in Africa have a variety of difficulties, such as restricted finance availability, weak infrastructure, and regulatory barriers. While there is a lot of room for expansion, the current ecosystem frequently favours foreign investors and businesses over local business owners and communities, as highlighted in The Star's piece on African tech startups and AI colonialism (The Star, 2023). This is corroborated by Google's Africa Developer Ecosystem report, which notes that many African digital businesses struggle to scale because of a lack of funding and support, even though the number of developers has increased (Google, 2023)

Table 2.1. Estimates and projections of working hours, employment, unemployment and labour force, regional and subregional, Africa, 2019–24

Region/subregion	Ratio of total weekly hours worked to population aged 15–64						Total weekly working hours in FTE jobs (FTE = 48 hours/week) (millions)					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Africa	23.6	23.9	22.4	23.1	23.1	23.2	363	347	365	386	397	411
North Africa	17.9	16.1	16.8	17.6	17.5	17.7	57	52	55	59	60	62
Sub-Saharan Africa	25.0	23.4	23.8	24.5	24.5	24.6	306	295	309	327	337	349
	Employment-to-population ratio (percentages)						Employment (millions)					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Africa	58.5	57.2	57.6	58.1	58.3	58.4	459	462	478	496	511	527
North Africa	39.2	37.7	38.2	38.8	38.8	38.8	65	64	66	68	69	71
Sub-Saharan Africa	63.6	62.4	62.7	63.1	63.2	63.3	394	399	412	428	441	456
	Unemployment rate (percentages)						Unemployment (millions)					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Africa	6.5	7.1	7.2	7.1	7.1	7.0	32.0	35.3	37.0	37.9	39.1	39.8
North Africa	10.9	12.0	11.6	11.3	11.3	11.1	8.0	8.7	8.6	8.7	8.8	8.9
Sub-Saharan Africa	5.7	6.3	6.4	6.4	6.4	6.4	24.0	26.6	28.4	29.3	30.3	30.9
	Labour force participation rate (percentages)						Labour force (millions)					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Africa	62.5	61.6	62.1	62.6	62.7	62.8	491	498	515	534	550	566
North Africa	44.0	42.8	43.2	43.7	43.7	43.7	73	72	74	77	78	80
Sub-Saharan Africa	67.5	66.6	67.0	67.4	67.6	67.6	418	425	441	457	472	487

Source: ILOSTAT, ILO modelled estimates, November 2022.

International Labour Organization (ILO), 2022. Estimates and projections of working hours, employment, unemployment and labour force, regional and subregional, Africa, 2019–24.

ILOSTAT, November 2022. [Image] Available at: <World employment and social outlook : (un.org)> [Accessed 1 June 2024].

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The distinct socioeconomic circumstances of the Global South are occasionally disregarded in favour of rapid implementation of AI technologies in these areas. For instance, it has been argued that Kenya's AI credit scoring systems further marginalise already disadvantaged people by eliminating individuals without digital footprints and reinforcing pre-existing biases (MIT Technology Review, 2023). This emphasises how inclusive and context-aware AI development must be in order to ensure that technologies are developed and applied in ways that are advantageous to all facets of society. According to Amrute (2019), the hierarchical structure of digital technology frequently results in the most marginalised people suffering the worst effects while being excluded from the advantages.

Digital Colonisation in South Africa: Labor Situations in Global Software Development

Multinational companies' dominance of regional software development markets is an example that digital colonialism appears in South Africa and has an immense impact on the labour market. These multinational organisations frequently put their own interests ahead of those of local developers, which results in a dependency on foreign technology and knowledge. Instead of being integrated into the upper echelons of global digital innovation, this dynamic reinforces a loop where South African engineers are frequently confined to lower-tier roles or outsourced labour (Farley et al., 2015). As a result, local talent is underutilised and devalued in the labour market, which increases reliance on outside technological leadership and knowledge..

Operation Phakisa Education: Addressing the Skills Gap

Launched in 2015, Operation Phakisa Education seeks to address South Africa's educational crisis and digital divide by accelerating the adoption of digital technology in school settings. The effort aims to improve digital literacy and competency from an early age by incorporating stakeholders from a variety of sectors, including companies such as Microsoft and Google. This will ultimately result in a workforce that is more skilled (Radebe, 2015). "The fast-track implementation model, inspired by Malaysia’s 'Big Fast Results,' is designed to bring rapid progress in critical development areas, including education" (Radebe, 2015, page 5). But the involvement of big multinational companies in educational reform begs the concerns of whose interests are being served first and whether local labour markets are actually benefited.

Implications for the South African Software Development Workforce

Operation Phakisa Education's emphasis on digital literacy has the potential to empower South African developers.However by making users dependent on foreign platforms and software, the initiative's reliance on proprietary technologies from international businesses runs the risk of perpetuating digital colonialism (Farley et al., 2015). "Operation Phakisa’s approach, which includes partnerships with tech giants, aims to modernise education but risks perpetuating a cycle of dependency on foreign technologies" (PMG, 2018, page 148).

The lack of liberty among local developers to build and own technical developments could impede the growth of indigenous tech solutions and innovation.

The Role of Multinational Corporations in Shaping Labor Dynamics

Multinational corporations involved in Operation Phakisa Education play a dual role. On one hand, they provide necessary resources and expertise to modernise South Africa's education system. On the other, they may shape the labour market to serve their interests, often prioritising their global business models over local needs. "Corporations like Microsoft and Google are integral to Operation Phakisa's success, yet their involvement raises concerns about the long-term impact on South Africa's technological sovereignty" (Farley et al., 2015, p. 6). This involvement can lead to a workforce that is trained to operate within the confines of these corporations' ecosystems, potentially stifling local innovation and perpetuating a form of digital dependency.

Local African Responses and Initiatives for Digital Justice

Despite these challenges, there are promising initiatives aimed at addressing digital colonialism and promoting digital justice in the Global South. One such initiative is the Kiswahili Digital Rights Project led by Nanjala Nyabola. This project aims to democratise digital rights discussions by translating key terms into Kiswahili, enabling local communities to engage in these issues on their terms (Nothias, 2022). This effort is crucial for fostering informed local debates and ensuring that digital policies reflect the needs and aspirations of local populations.

Nanjala Nyabola, 2024. Nanjala Nyabola portrait. [Photograph] [Accessed 1 June 2024].

Programs such as the iHub have been essential in promoting innovation and helping indigenous tech firms in Kenya. For IT entrepreneurs, The iHub offers a collaborative environment with tools, networking opportunities, and mentorship. Due in part to this, Nairobi has developed a thriving tech scene known as Silicon Savannah, which has given rise to companies like M-Pesa, Ushahidi, and BRCK (The Star, 2023). Building resilient and

self-sustaining tech ecosystems that can compete with the dominance of foreign tech giants is made possible in large part by these local initiatives.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

In order to address the concurrent problems of digital colonialism and labour market disparities, a comprehensive strategy comprising legislative measures, regulatory structures, and global collaboration is necessary. First and foremost, more robust data protection laws and rules that put the rights and privacy of users in the Global South first are required. Governments ought to endeavour to establish a legislative framework that guarantees digital corporations' accountability and ensures their operations benefit nearby communities.

Second, in order to develop local capacity and promote innovation, investments in digital infrastructure and education are essential. In addition to promoting sustainable economic development, supporting local tech industries and initiatives can help lessen reliance on foreign tech companies. Initiatives like Lelapa AI, for example, which seek to create AI systems appropriate for African environments, can be quite important in this area (The Star, 2023).

Thirdly, in order to address the global dimension of digital colonialism and guarantee that digital rights are respected everywhere, there is a growing need for international cooperation. This involves promoting cross-border partnerships that prioritise equitable and inclusive technical growth in addition to supporting the work of organisations and activists for digital rights in the Global South.

Policies pertaining to the labour market should also work to raise the calibre of jobs generated by means of offshore and outsourcing. This entails providing chances for skill development and professional progression, as well as fair salaries and employment stability. To safeguard the rights of workers in the Global South, international organisations such as the ILO can be crucial in establishing guidelines and ensuring adherence to them (ILO, 2023).

Policies that promote local startups and encourage entrepreneurship should also be implemented. This may entail opening up financial resources, lowering legal restrictions, and establishing rewards for creative thinking. Governments and international organisations ought to work together to establish conditions that allow regional tech ecosystems to flourish and contend globally. .

Lastly, programs for education and training are crucial to ensuring that the workforce has the skills required for the digital economy. In addition to technical abilities, these also include critical thinking and digital literacy, which help people efficiently traverse and shape the digital landscape. Investing in education will ensure that the advantages of technological innovation are distributed fairly and support inclusive economic growth.

Personal Reflection on My Role in Decoloniality

I am a third-year University of Witwatersrand student studying in interactive media and animation with a particular emphasis on digital arts, and I am well aware of how digital colonialism affects our regional economies. Although my degree has equipped me with the abilities to produce creative digital material, I frequently see how multinational businesses have a widespread influence on the platforms and technologies that we use. Using Photoshop and Adobe Animate for drawings and animations while operating my streetwear brand Rushbite emphasises this reliance on foreign software even more. My brand is primarily made in South Africa using locally obtained materials, demonstrating my dedication to bolstering domestic industries and minimising dependency on imports.

Using local culture, trends, and storylines as inspiration, Rushbite specialises in streetwear within the South African context. By concentrating on this topic, I can both oppose the dominance of international streetwear businesses and celebrate and promote our own identity. Knowing my place in this industry, I consider myself to be a decolonialist who supports and contributes to the creation of regional digital solutions. I hope to lessen our dependence on outside systems and advance a more fair digital environment by cultivating a community of like-minded artists and encouraging the development of indigenous technologies.

By emphasising local resources and technologies, I hope to encourage other young innovators and support a larger movement toward digital and economic independence. My goal is to contribute to the deconstruction of digital colonialism's mechanisms and the development of autonomously flourishing South African creativity and innovation through my academic and professional endeavours.

Rushbite, 2024. Pile of Rushbite hoodies stacked on each other. [Photograph] [Accessed 1 June 2024].

Conclusion

The intertwined issues of digital colonialism and labour market trends in the Global South present significant challenges but also opportunities for transformation. While Big Tech's expansionist practices have exacerbated existing inequalities and undermined local self-determination, there are promising initiatives and strategies being developed by local communities to resist these trends and advocate for digital justice. By addressing these issues through comprehensive policy interventions, investments in local capacities, and international cooperation, it is possible to create a more equitable and inclusive digital future for all.The fight against digital colonialism and the quest for fair labour practices in the Global South are intrinsically linked, and addressing them requires a critical and concerted effort from all stakeholders involved. As we navigate this complex landscape, it is essential to ensure that technological advancements truly benefit everyone, leaving no one behind.

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