Essay 2: Digital Colonialism

Digital colonialism, as explored by Amrute (2019), mirrors the pervasive and insidious nature of colonial relationships through digital technologies, which are often hierarchical, extractive, exploitative, and paternalistic. This essay will discuss the modern manifestations of digital colonialism, using Google’s recent decision to lay off employees and relocate positions to lower-cost regions as a case study. By framing digital colonialism through Sareeta Amrute's work, we will explore the broader labour dynamics within global software development and analyse how multinational tech companies exacerbate economic disparities and dependency in developing regions such as India, Mexico, and the African continent. This discussion will be contextualised within the South African software development industry, highlighting the unique challenges faced by local developers.

Similar to historical colonialism, digital colonialism represents a new form of domination and exploitation, rooted in control over digital technologies. As Amrute (2019) outlines, traditional colonialism involves direct or indirect control over territories and people, primarily for economic exploitation. However, this definition alone does not cover the extensive impact of colonial relationships. Digital colonialism, as defined by Kwet (2019), involves the use of digital technologies for political, economic, and social control over other nations. This form of colonialism is achieved through the ownership and control of the digital ecosystem designed primarily for profit, data extraction, and economic exploitation. Kwet (2019) asserts that digital colonialism is also intertwined with traditional power structures, including financial dominance, legal systems, and labour exploitation along global supply chains.

Birhane (2020) states that while historical colonialism was often driven by political and governmental forces, digital colonialism is mainly driven by capitalist tech monopolies seeking wealth. In the era of artificial intelligence political, economic, and ideological domination manifested as 'technological innovation' and 'AI solutions' to societal issues. This new form of colonialism, referred to by Birhane (2020) as algorithmic colonialism, treats human behaviour and actions as raw materials to be mined for profit. The authority to categorise and organise human activity lies with technologists, reducing individuals to mere data-producing resources.

The South African software development industry faces unique challenges in this context, grappling with the pressures exerted by multinational tech giants. As a developer in South Africa, it is important to understand the historical and ongoing efforts by South African policymakers to resist foreign dominance, illustrating the potential for developing a more autonomous and equitable tech ecosystem. However, achieving this requires a multifaceted approach that includes strong policies to protect local developers, support for local startups, and a commitment to fair labour practices. Despite these efforts, local developers often struggle with limited access to resources and opportunities compared to their counterparts in Western countries.

Like traditional colonial powers, digital colonialism aims for unilateral control and domination over targeted populations. Birhane (2020) explains that this control is exerted not through physical force but through the nuanced mechanisms of digital ecosystems and infrastructure. Both traditional and digital colonialism share the objective of dominating, monitoring, and influencing social, political, and cultural discourse by controlling essential communication and infrastructure mediums. Despite technological advancements and innovation, digital colonialism allows wealthy individuals and corporations from the Global North to continue exploiting the poorest communities under the guise of 'revolutionary' technology. As Birhane (2020) notes, financial technologies often profit from poverty, expanding their financial empire by indebting Africa’s most vulnerable populations.

Birhane (2020) states that currently, a significant portion of Africa’s digital infrastructure and ecosystem is dominated by Western tech giants such as Facebook, Google, Uber, and Netflix. These companies often present their exploitative practices as efforts to "liberate the bottom billion," offering banking services to the 'unbanked' or connecting the 'unconnected.' This narrative mirrors historical colonial rhetoric, now masked by technological innovation. According to Birhane (2020), this form of algorithmic colonialism presented as technological solutions for the developing world is often celebrated and rarely questioned. She also highlights the negative impacts of digitisation and how these so-called 'technological solutions' affect marginalised communities. For instance, Kenya's implementation of national biometric IDs risks excluding racial, ethnic, and religious minorities who have historically faced discrimination. This highlights the broader issue of how technology can perpetuate existing social inequalities.

Verdi (2020) promotes the idea of the global dynamics of AI development illustrating a stark disparity between the supply and demand thereof. While AI is crucial for the future prosperity of countries, only a few have established comprehensive national strategies for AI, namely China and the United States. This is made possible by their domination in the tech world through powerful multinational corporations such as the American companies Google, Apple, Meta, Amazon, Microsoft and IBM and the Chinese leaders namely Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent and Xiaomi. Verdi (2020) points out that these companies benefit from economies of scale, where more data leads to better products, attracting more customers and generating even more data. In contrast, European equivalents lag significantly behind, with only a fraction of the market capitalisation. This underscores the dependency of developing nations on tech giants from more dominant economies.

The recent layoffs at Google highlight the broader implications for tech workers globally. Ahead of its first-quarter earnings report on April 25, Elias (2024) writes that Google announced the layoff of at least 200 employees from its “Core” teams, responsible for building the technical foundation behind its flagship products and protecting users’ online safety. These roles, which included key technical positions in information technology, Python development, technical infrastructure, and various engineering roles, were primarily in Sunnyvale, California. However, many of these positions will now be moved to India and Mexico, illustrating the trend of outsourcing jobs to cheaper labour markets.

This restructuring at Google underscores the exploitative nature of digital colonialism, where tech monopolies seek to maximise efficiency and profit by relocating jobs to countries with lower labour costs. While Google frames these changes as strategic investments in efficiency and prioritisation, the reality is that such moves often result in uneven consequences for the global workforce. Amrute (2019) discusses how workers in developing nations become the new labour force, shouldering the risks and burdens of technological development, while corporate elites continue to innovate and profit. This shift mirrors historical colonial patterns of labour exploitation and economic control. As a result, workers in lower-cost regions are often subjected to poor working conditions, lower wages, and limited job security, furthering global inequalities.

According to Amrute (2019), colonialism historically exploited labour through state-sanctioned or state-supported violence, benefiting the privileged while imposing risks on colonised subjects. In the digital age, this dynamic persists through the outsourcing of programming and gig economy work. For instance, the phenomenon of microwork, as detailed by Mary Gray and Siddharth Suri (2019), involves small tasks mediated by large online markets like Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. These jobs are often hidden and organised to prevent labour collectivisation and adequate remuneration, reflecting the global expansion of precarious work.

The labour exploitation in the tech industry is not limited to blue-collar work but extends to white-collar programming jobs. Historically, the field of computing constructed its prestige by excluding women and marginalising contributions from Black, Indigenous, and Asian mathematicians. Amrute (2019) suggests that today, outsourcing remains prevalent, sending less desirable and more dangerous jobs overseas or to marginalised communities, continuing a cycle of exploitation and inequality within the tech industry.

Historically, colonial powers had built infrastructure such as railways primarily to exploit natural resources. Similarly, today's tech giants like Facebook and Alphabet are establishing network connectivity infrastructure not for the long-term economic prosperity of communities, but to benefit from the use of their online services. Dahiya (2023) highlights that these digital networks, which now form the backbone of our communities, are internationally coordinated, corporate-owned, and prone to exploitative control, with most headquartered in the United States. This presents significant geo-economic and socio-political challenges that require urgent attention.

Historically, South African policymakers have attempted to resist the dominance of foreign Big Tech corporations. In the early 2000s, recognising the rapid advancement of the digital revolution, they commissioned extensive reports to determine the best software policy for the country. These reports recommended adopting Free and Open-Source Software (FOSS) in the public sector to foster an open tech ecosystem based on knowledge sharing and open software code rather than proprietary ownership according to Kwet (2022). Birhane (2020) also mentions that developing and implementing responsible and ethical AI requires a variety of perspectives and approaches. This variety is a strength, as it allows for context-specific solutions that are more effective than a one-size-fits-all framework. Companies like Facebook, which often enter African markets with projects such as creating population density maps without considering local norms and cultures, risk enforcing a homogenised worldview. For South African developers, start-ups, and policymakers, it is crucial to recognise that ethical and responsible technology practices are inherently tied to local contexts and expertise.

In the financial sector, the narrative around FinTech and the digitisation of lending in Africa is often portrayed as a revolution that will lift the continent out of poverty. Since its emergence in the 1990s, FinTech has been described as a system that provides opportunities for the 'unbanked' to access formal financial services through microfinance. However, according to Birhane (2020), a critical examination reveals that FinTech’s microfinancing often mirrors colonial-era practices, enriching Western multinational shareholders while leaving African communities in perpetual debt. Moreover, Kwet (2022) discusses that the market dynamics in the digital age reflect colonial practices of domination and dependency. He states that modern tech companies are establishing digital infrastructure to extract rents, conduct surveillance, and maintain imperial control over key markets. This continues the dependency on foreign-owned digital infrastructures, locking developing nations into the products and services of Big Tech and reinforcing their economic dominance.

As Africa navigates the digitisation and automation of services, it is essential for policymakers, governments, and tech firms to carefully consider the societal impact of technology. Birhane (2020) suggests that ensuring the protection and respect of the rights, freedoms, and privacy of the youth, who are often at the forefront of these technological advances, should be a priority. This can be achieved through the implementation and enforcement of guidelines as well as safeguards that protect individual rights and freedoms.

Resistance to digital colonialism involves multiple initiatives aimed at decolonising the tech industry in South Africa. These efforts support local startups and promote fair labour practices. Amrute (2019) highlights several obstacles to decolonial thinking in tech spaces, such as time pressure, job descriptions, high salaries and perks, existing hierarchies, and the belief that the smartest and most capable are predominantly European and American men. Additionally, there's a prevalent ideology that tech is inherently noble and best positioned to solve global problems, reinforcing the dominance of Western tech companies. However, decolonial thinking can still be practised within these constraints through collective action. Amrute (2019) suggests several strategies to practice decolonial thinking in the workplace, including radicalising and politicising ethics, joining existing movements, practising refusal, extending support to others, critically thinking about the broader implications of one's tasks, using material practices as guides, starting from pleasure and eros, and rethinking agency as counter-conduct rather than opposition. By reframing the narratives of tech inevitability and challenging fixed engagement patterns, these efforts can help dismantle tech colonialism.

Amrute (2019) emphasises that supporting local startups and promoting fair labour practices are crucial to this decolonial effort. Encouraging local innovation and ensuring that tech development benefits the community rather than exploiting it can create a more equitable tech industry. By fostering an environment where local developers can thrive and contribute to technological advancements, South Africa can begin to shift the power dynamics away from Western tech monopolies and towards a more inclusive and fairer tech ecosystem.

A case of a successful local development is SIVOXI (2024), a South African software development company. SIVOXI's journey began with a desire to bring an application idea to life but soon faced the harsh realities of the digital development landscape, realising that success required more than just coding expertise. This realisation led to the birth of SIVOXI, which now combines first-rate service providers and expertise to deliver world-class digital products. SIVOXI's (2024) story highlights the importance of professionalism and building meaningful relationships. By fostering a positive, collaborative environment, both internally and with clients, they create impactful technological solutions. This approach challenges the dominance of Western tech monopolies and promotes a more inclusive and equitable tech industry in South Africa.

In conclusion, decolonising the tech industry involves not only recognising and resisting these colonial patterns but also fostering an environment where local innovation can thrive. By embracing diverse perspectives and context-specific solutions, South Africa can challenge the dominance of Western tech monopolies and promote a more inclusive and just technological future. As developers, it is imperative to engage in collective action, critique prevailing narratives, and support ethical practices that prioritise community well-being over corporate profit. In doing so, we can contribute to dismantling the structures of digital colonialism and build a more equitable digital landscape for all.

# References

Amrute, S., 2019. *Tech Colonialism Today.* [Online]   
Available at: https://medium.com/datasociety-points/tech-colonialism-today-9633a9cb00ad  
[Accessed 6 June 2020].

Birhane, A., 2020. Algorithmic Colonization of Africa. *The Irish Software Research Centre,* 17(2).

Dahiya, B., 2023. Digital Colonialism: Neo-Colonialism of the Global South. *ResearchGate.*

Elias, J., 2024. *Google lays off hundreds of ‘Core’ employees, moves some positions to India and Mexico.* [Online]   
Available at: https://www.cnbc.com/2024/05/01/google-cuts-hundreds-of-core-workers-moves-jobs-to-india-mexico.html  
[Accessed 6 June 2024].

Gray, M. L. & Suri, S., 2019. *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass.* s.l.:s.n.

Kwet, M., 2020. Digital Colonialism and Infrastructure-as-Debt. *University of Bayreuth African Studies Online.*

SIVOXI, 2024. *SIVOXI.* [Online]   
Available at: https://www.sivoxi.com/

Verdi, G., 2020. The Road to Technocolonialism. *Institute for Internet and the Just Society.*