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**Data & Society I**

Academic Essay

**Data colonialism and societal challenges**

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## Introduction

Democracy, a concept that can be traced back at least to the Athenian times of Ancient Greece in the fifth century BC, originally relied on the concepts of equality among citizens, their participation in the political regime and the accountability of the representatives holding office (Clarke and Foweraker, 2001). However, Clarke and Foweraker note that this concept, essentially contested for its lack of transparency and its ambiguous significance beyond the simplistic idea of the rule of people, is highly ideological and a key tool for powers to advance their interests. From a perspective of power structure, the rule of people is both decisive and a threat, which creates for the hegemonic class the urgency to try controlling its exercise by hacking and manipulating the Human life. The business of appealing to the audience and manipulating it into obedience is not new and has been largely analysed by the Frankfurt School who argued that the “culture industries” is capitalism’s weapon to naturalise ideas that serve the interests of the governing groups, by propagating them in cultural forms such as the press and the media (Kellner and Gigi Durham, 2006). Conversely, advancing the domination tactics towards a large scale, total control of the human experience and their social world, is distinctively beyond modern complex propagandist narratives and is nothing short of modernised slavery, or more succinctly, given the final objective of extracting economic value through datafication of individuals and their social world, Couldry and Mejias (2019) describe it as data colonialism.

In this essay, I intend to draw on the appropriation and control exercised by corporations that are politically influenced by a democratic or an authoritarian system. I look into the

hegemony, ideological dominance and the need to control people's decision-making process on one hand, and at economic value extraction, accumulation of capital and the need to control people's social behaviour and their cognitive abilities on the other hand. Then I will discuss data colonialism and how it differs in its form and motivation when backed by states with different regimes. Finally, I want to criticise the idea of colonialism and its narrative that intends to draw clear differences between the capable global north and the incapable global south.

### **The classical colonialism redesigned**

Couldry and Mejias (2019) list four key components that constitute historical colonialism. They speak about the *appropriation of resources, unequal social and economic relations, unequal distribution of benefits and the spread of ideologies* that cover up and frame nicely the colonial attitude. They then make a parallelism with a new form of resource, a "raw material" called data, resulting from a complex process of datafication of social life and social interactions. They argue that unlike labour relations as described by Marx, the emerging social order has become centred around "data relations" and the optimisation of data extraction for profit.

De Sousa Santos (2014) describes this resuscitation of colonial ordering as the "return of the coloniser", which is happening equally to both the metropolitan societies and the post-colonial societies. He attributes this return to the increased privatisation and the withdrawal of the state from social regulation. This idea immediately brings to the foreground the neo-

liberal doctrine that Klein (2007) calls the “Shock Doctrine” which is a non-violent appropriation that exploits the temporary incapacitation of a victim. De Sousa Santos further observes the disturbing resemblance between the classical colonialism and the “privatised, depoliticised contractual obligation under which the weaker party is more or less at the mercy of the stronger party” and which Couldry and Mejias (2019) illustrate in an example of Google Chrome’s EULA, describing it as the “Requerimientos of our times” considering the absolute power that it gives to Google over a user’s data.

In the sections that follow, I will concretise the above ideas with examples of corporations that have economic interest backed by governments that have political interests.

### **The interplay of power between states and corporations**

Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, corporations were governmental instruments, regulated and overseen by the governments and their primary role was to build institutions for the public good, such as hospitals and universities (New Internationalist, 2002). As of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, corporations became an important source of funding for the western colonial expansion which was operated as a joint public-private venture (Wikipedia, no date; New Internationalist, 2002). Operating under the cover of imperial powers and having a total monopoly on the trade, the market and the resources, these companies grew into vast enterprises and grew with them their power and influence. They were no longer instruments of the government but major allies with mutual interdependent benefits. The scale of corporations continued to grow, backed by the advancement of communication technologies

such as the telegraph and the telephone that facilitated the flow of information. In the late 1970s with the free-market fundamentalism doctrines of the 'Chicago School' or neoliberalism, there was a new wave of forced appropriation that was not very different from the classical colonial appropriation. The US corporations, the CIA and the US Secretary of State, supported General Pinochet in Chile to conduct a coup against the democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende for fear of his socialist plan to nationalize the telephone company among other major industries. Following the coup, the nationalisations were reversed, private assets were privatised, natural resources were opened up for unregulated exploitation, foreign direct investment was facilitated, unions were neutralised, and foreign companies were guaranteed the right to repatriate the money they made in Chile. The corporations' share was assured and so was the share of the US government by reserving the copper and not privatising it. (Harvey, 1990; Klein, 2016; Benjamin and Davies, 2019) This same economic model that in theory should be "the institutional guarantor of choice, opportunity, and limits on government control over people's lives" (Ebeling, 2006) was later endorsed by Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Donald Raegan in the US and was in practice brutal and coercive and has been applied again in Iraq, Haiti, Honduras, Egypt and Lebanon (Benjamin and Davies, 2019), where economic freedom and political terror coexist, and where the west can turn a blind eye on the atrocities of the states for the sake of a free-market. With that being said, it becomes clear that political institutions and corporations have always coexisted and continue until today to work hand-in-hand, supporting one another in securing political power and economic advantage.

Forbes' list of the world's largest public companies for the year 2020 shows that the top 100 ranks are dominated by the US with 37 companies, then China with 18 companies, followed by Japan and Germany with consecutively 8 and 5 companies. At the top 50 of the same list, are the digital giants, Apple, Alphabet, Microsoft, Amazon, Alibaba Group, Facebook and Tencent Holdings, whose business model relies heavily if not entirely on data and data relations. While China and the US seem to be the two biggest technological poles to

Country	# of Companies by Country from the top 100 ranks
United States	37
China	18
Japan	8
Germany	5
Switzerland	4
France	4
Canada	4
United Kingdom	3
Russia	3
Hong Kong	3

be hosting the tech companies, these companies have offices around the world (Google has 70 offices in 50 countries) and thus neither their operation nor their influence is restrained by the geographical location of their headquarters.

To understand how these tech companies/corporations work we can look at two of the most debated models: Facebook's Free Basics and Huawei's penetration of the African market. Flensburg and Lai (2020) suggest that the 'turn to infrastructure' is essential to capture the complexity of the digital systems and the influence of the big tech companies such as Facebook, Alphabet and Huawei among others. Infrastructure is the 21st-century regulatory force that condition and is conditioned by political and economic structures. They argue that if a population does not have access to the internet, which requires an infrastructure to become accessible, there is no market for web products and tech companies who heavily rely on the commodification of users and their data.

Nigeria is one example of the post-colonial countries that was shattered by the post-colonial military regime that remained until 1999 and whose democratic government aggressively implemented the neoliberal economic model, overseen by the ‘usual suspects’, the World Bank and the IMF. The employment of the twin policies of privatization and liberalization allowed transnational companies to bid for the ownership stakes in the government-owned Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL) breaking the state’s monopoly of the telecommunication industry (Ojo, 2017). This fostered what Ojo calls the institutionalised ‘corporate mercantile capitalism’ by which the country and the local telecom players become dependent on the large transnational companies, mainly companies like Huawei who has a semi-monopoly on the Nigerian market, with its high-quality products and cheaper than its competitors’ prices, given that it is strongly supported by state loans from China’s with low-interest loans. **The contractual relationship between Nigeria and Huawei not only focuses on the installation of network equipment and their maintenance but mainly on Huawei’s manufactured mobile phones and tablets that are sold with mobile service bundles, and an operating system that has its ecosystem of applications, games, stores, e-commerce, data collection and targeted ads.** The practice is not exclusive to the Nigerian market alone or Africa but also to Europe and Western Asia, that combined, made 24% of the global total revenue of Huawei in 2019 (Huawei Investment & Holding Co., 2019). Today Huawei is present in the telecommunication arena at every level starting with hardware and infrastructure such as enterprise wireless and fiberoptic cables, connectivity services such as landline and mobile network structures, enterprise software, smart cities, web services, cloud solutions and data storage, all the way up to consumer products such as mobile phones,

laptops, tablets, wearables, IoT devices and AI. This omnipresence raises big questions about the data originating, passing through and terminating at its devices and networks. For instance, how all this data is capitalised and how does Huawei use this data especially if we consider its close ties with the Chinese government and the alleged instances of spying that have been persistently denied by Huawei (Parkinson, Bariyo and Chin, 2019; Prinsloo, 2019). The other question that arises is about China's neo-colonial policy to push Chinese corporations like Huawei into foreign markets with unbeatable tenders and an almost-total control of the weaker country.

On the other side of the planet, Arora and Scheiber (2017) note that citizens in Myanmar had a negative response when asked if they use the internet while they majorly confirmed using Facebook. This notoriety that Facebook has been gaining is not limited to Myanmar but to 65 countries around the world, where Facebook has launched its Free Basics program, as part of the internet.org initiative (internet.org, no date). The program was rolled out in 2015 and is aimed at bridging the connectivity gap between the Global North and the Global South. In their mission statement, internet.org, which I will refer to as Facebook for simplicity, state that *"Internet.org is a Facebook-led initiative with the goal of bringing internet access and the benefits of connectivity to the portion of the world that doesn't have them"*. (ibid.). However, the internet that Facebook was referring to is far from looking like the internet that we (the rest of the world) know. It's a "poor internet for poor people" as Cory Doctorow (2016) described it in The Guardian, and it consists of a mobile app that Facebook call a platform, in which users can access a small number of "light" websites and services such as the Ask.com search engine, Wikipedia, OLX, AccuWeather, BabyCenter and others. The users however cannot access



alternative websites and content outside the App's "walled garden" to discover and explore the global internet (Global Voices, 2017). In their report that is based on six cases studies about Free Basics, Global Voices identify a number of privacy concerns that result from using the Free Basics App. For instance, upon opening the app, it asks for permissions to access the device and app history, the SMS, the phone, all photos and media files, Wi-Fi connection information, the device id and call information. Also, 8 out of 10 of the offered services belonged to for-profit companies based in the US. Users who wish to visit a website that is not part of Free Basics are prompted with a message informing them that "Data Charges Apply". Of course, **Facebook is the only available social media platform that can be accessed**, and the app does not include an email service. The most worrying part is the streams of metadata that Facebook can collect about its users and their activities by having semi-unconditional access to their handset and by packaging all the services inside one single mobile app (Solon, 2017) from which data can be gathered about the user's interests, habits, behaviours, time spent on each website/service, their location, the Wifi-Access points near him and many more. Some of this data is also available to the carrier who provides access to Free basics through their SIM and network. The app is very similar to the Chinese Tencent all-encompassing platform. These untapped streams of behavioural data are valuable for Facebook and for other companies that are looking for opportunities in virgin markets, and Facebook has shown unprecedented generosity when it comes to donating personal data for "political behaviour modification" (Zuboff, 2019) such as in the case of Cambridge Analytica or selling personal data on youngster's "Psychological insights" i.e., vulnerable moments, to Australian and New Zealand advertisers (*ibid.*).

## Conclusion

The two examples of Facebook Free Basics and Huawei are a sample of how Corporations use their power and influence, to control a weaker entity, backed by governments who in return gain political and diplomatic advantages as well as revenue and intelligence. We saw how Facebook is trying to control the choices of the most underprivileged populations who believe that Facebook is the internet and whose personal and behavioural data is being appropriated by Facebook in return for a mediocre illusion of freedom and participation in the wider world. It is important to note however that Facebooks “political behaviour modification” and exploitation of its users through extended exposure to, and forced consumption of targeted ads and misinformation is not only a practice limited to the poor South but rather an institutionalised practice that equally occurs in the Global North, especially in the benefit of politics. Qiu (2016) describes this “coercion and/or deception, socio-cultural alienation, and politico-economic domination” as a mode of slavery rather a form of colonialism and he argues that these characteristics of slavery can be obviously seen in the current labour conditions and in “the New World of digital and social media”.

In my opinion, exploitation, appropriation, manipulation, control, are all expressions that describe a situation in which one party has an advantage over the other but with different degrees. Therefore, it remains a question, whether employing imperial epistemology that represents the other as weak and incapable (Santos, 2014) is appropriate or whether it reinforces the feeling of strength for the strong and the feeling of helplessness for weak in addition to rooting deeper in society the narrative of slavery and colonialism. This is especially

relevant when we consider the fact, as Qiu observes, that such injustice is always faced with efforts of resistance as it happened with India's net neutrality activists who rallied in millions against Facebook's Free Basics and its claims of charity and development (Doctorow, 2016).

To conclude, my observation is that Facebook and Huawei as corporations, have very strong ties with the government, and while their ultimate goal is to increase their revenue and accumulate capital, their obligation towards the governments of the US and China raise big questions, notably about the directing the narrative of democracy in the US and the strengthening of the state's control of its population in China. I close with a supporting statement from Noam Chomsky, that cannot describe my observation any better:

*"Indoctrination is the essence of democracy. In a military / totalitarian state It doesn't matter what people think because you've had a bludgeon over their head, and you can control what they do. But when the state loose the bludgeon, when you can't control people by force, and when the voice of the people can be heard, you have this problem, it may make people so curious and so arrogant that they don't have the humility to submit to a civil rule and therefore you have to control what people think. [...] and the standard way to do this is the resort to what in more honest days used to be called propaganda, manufacture of consent, the creation of necessary illusions, various ways of either marginalising the general public or reducing them to apathy in some fashion". (Chomsky, 1992)*

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