Q and A with Nick Couldry and Ulises A Mejias on Data Grab

In this interview with **Anna D'Alton** *(LSE Review of Books),* **Nick Couldry** *and* **Ulises A Mejias** *discuss their new book,* **Data Grab** *which explores how Big Tech ushered in an exploitative system of "data colonialism" and presents strategies on how we can resist it.*

Nick Couldry and Ulises A Mejias will speak at a public LSE event to launch the book on Tuesday 14 May at 6.30pm. [*Find out more and Register*](#)*.*

[***Data Grab: The New Colonialism of Big Tech and How to Fight Back.*** **Ulises A Mejias and Nick Couldry. WH Allen. 2024.**](#)
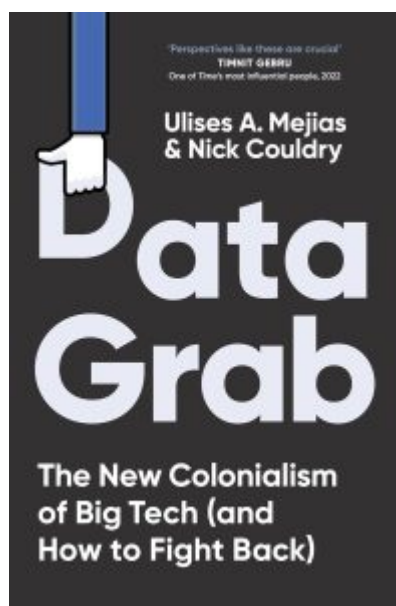
Q: What is data colonialism and how does it relate to historical colonialism?

Data colonialism, as we define it, is an emerging social order based on a new attempt to seize the world's resources for the benefit of elites. Like historical colonialism, it is based on the extraction and appropriation of a valuable resource. The old colonialism grabbed land, resources and human labour. The new one grabs us, the daily flow of our lives, in the abstract form of digital data. And, crucially, this new colonialism does not replace the

old colonialism, which very much still continues in its effects. Instead, it adds to the historically enduring process of colonialism a new toolkit, a toolkit that involves collecting, processing, and applying data.

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We are not saying there is a one-to-one correspondence between the old colonialism and the new, expanded one. The contexts, the intensities, the modalities or colonialism have always varied, even though the function has remained the same: to extract, to dispossess. And violence continues to reverberate along the same inequalities created by colonialism. We personally may even benefit from the system. We might not mind giving up our data, because we are the ones using gig workers; we are not the gig workers themselves. We are the ones who don't get to see violent videos on YouTube, because someone in the Philippines has done the traumatising work of flagging and getting those videos removed (while working for very low wages). These are not the same kinds of colonial brutalities of yesterday, but there is still a lot of violence in these new forms of exploitation and the whole emerging social order of data colonialism is being built on force, rather than choice.

Q: Why is it important to frame Big Tech's extraction of data to form "data territories" as a colonial enterprise? How is data territorialised and extracted?

Something central to colonialism (and capitalism) is the drive to continue accumulating more territories. Colonisers are always looking for new "territories" or "frontiers" from which to extract value. Lenin once said something to the effect that imperialism is the most advanced form of capitalism: once you run out of people to exploit at home, you must colonise new zones of extraction that also become new markets for what you are selling. That is the strategy behind data colonialism, seen as the latest landgrab in a very long series of resource appropriation.

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Data colonialism is a system for making people easier to use by machines. Corporations have, in many cases, managed to monetise that data by using it to influence our

commercial and political decisions, and by selling our lives back to us (the platform can "organise" your life for you and even track and predict your health and emotions). And even where data cannot be directly monetised, accumulated or anticipated data still generates value in terms of speculative investments that build stock market value.

We are not saying that all extracted data necessarily becomes a valuable commodity. Data markets are complex and still developing: much data retains greater value when kept and used inside corporations, rather than being sold between corporations. But value has been extracted all the same through the process of abstracting human life in the form of data.

Q: Data extractivism or "social quantification" is being embedded into our lives in sectors from health and education to farming and labour. How is it reshaping society?

When the internet was not yet controlled by a handful of corporations, we were told that it could be the ultimate tool for democratisation, because it allowed the sharing of information from many to many. Today, what we have is a monopsony, a market structure characterised by a handful of "buyers" (the platforms that "buy" our data or rather acquire it for free). So many-to-many communication cannot happen without first going through a many-to-one filter, concentrating power in a few hands.

In addition to this, the people who manage this system have become quite adept at fragmenting the public into communities that mistrust and hate each other (often called filter bubbles, or echo chambers, though some prefer to think in terms of wider forces of polarisation). The original intent was to make it easier to market to these individual communities, and to do so by targeting ever more personalised content which, because it is more personalised, is more likely to generate the response that advertisers desire. But the system has spiralled out of control because it rewards the circulation of sensationalist misinformation that appeals to base emotions and promotes an us-vs-them parochialism, all while also encouraging addiction and increasing time spent on the platforms.

Q: Have there been any meaningful attempts to regulate the extraction and commodification of data? What are the dangers in it going unchecked?

In terms of regulation, governments have until recently done very little to prevent or even regulate this. Partly because it took them a long time to understand what was going on, but also because most governments have actually pursued policies of media deregulation, interfering less and less in the "free market" and giving corporations more power to act unhindered. Let's not forget that governments are often very happy to get access to the vast datasets that commercial corporations are amassing, as for example Edward Snowden revealed a decade ago. Many think that recent EU legislation (the [2018 General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)](#), new legislation such as the [Digital Services Act](#) and the recently approved [AI Act](#)) provides counter-examples, but we have some doubts. The GDPR depends on the mechanism of consent, and our consent is often obtained through market pressures. Meanwhile the newer EU legislation, when it comes fully into force, while it will impose significant inconveniences for Big Tech companies, especially the largest, is not designed to challenge in a fundamental way the trend towards ever more data extraction and the expanding use of AI. Its goal rather is to help data and AI markets work more fairly, which is very different.

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There is no doubt a role for regulation, but it is unlikely ever to be enough, because it does not think in terms of changing how we live, of reimagining a whole interlocking social and economic order that favours corporate over human interests. Unless we do something to stop its advances, the emerging social order will ensure that there is no living space which has not already been configured so as to optimise data extraction and the wider operation of business logics. As such, it will be just the latest stage in the ever-closer relations between colonialism and capitalism.

Q: What are the inequalities or power asymmetries that data exploitation introduces, and how do they connect to or reinforce existing inequalities?

Data colonialism entails a form of data extractivism that has one main purpose: the generation of value in a profoundly unequal and asymmetrical way whose negative impacts are more acutely felt by the traditional victims of colonialism, whether we define them in terms of race, class and gender, or the intersectional of those categories.

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If we think in traditional Marxist terms, we think of exploitation and expropriation as something happening to workers in the workplace. In data colonialism, exploitation happens everywhere and all the time, because we don't need to be working in order to contribute to this system. We can in fact be doing the opposite of working: relaxing and interacting with friends and family. But the extraction and the tracking are happening nonetheless.

The reason why increasingly fewer areas of life are outside the reach of this kind of exploitation is because the colonial mindset tells us that data, like nature and labour before it, are a cheap resource. Data is said to be abundant, just there for the taking, and without a real owner. In order for it to be processed, it needs to be refined with advanced technologies, just like previous colonial resources. So, our role is merely to produce it and surrender it to corporations, whom we are told are the only ones who can transform it into something useful and productive. The more data we surrender, for instance, the smarter AI can become, and the more capable of solving our problems. This premise is of course deeply flawed, because it is based on an extractivism model, and because it results in an unequal order where a few gain, and most of us lose. But it is a premise that is being installed increasingly into how the spaces of everyday life (from the home to the workplace, from education to agriculture) are being organised.

Q: Taking inspiration from existing movements, what strategies of resistance can citizens mobilise against Big Tech's commercialised datafication?

In the final chapter of *Data Grab*, we discuss many examples of these kinds of movements. One such example is [Los Deliveristas Unidos](#), a group of gig food delivery workers, mostly immigrants, who work in New York City. They successfully organised to demand better working conditions and a minimum wage. Not all their demands have been put into action, but their example demonstrates that people can confront platforms and push for reform.

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educational.

Examples like this suggest that a decolonial vision of data is already being mobilised, and it requires encompassing not one mode of resistance, but many. The project of decolonising data must be able to formulate solutions that are not only technological but social, political, regulatory, cultural, scientific and educational. And it must be able to connect itself to struggles that seemingly have nothing to do with data, but that in reality are part of the same struggles for justice and dignity. That is why many creative responses to data colonialism are coming from feminist groups, from anti-racist groups, from indigenous groups: we can and must learn from these rich responses. And with the Mexican feminist scholar Paola Ricaurte we have set up a network, the Tierra Común network that aims to do just that.

We are hopeful, that decolonising data can become not a movement that is co-opted by certain parties and individuals for political gain, but a larger, pluriversal, global movement of solidarity where regular human beings can reclaim our digital data and transform it into a tool to act on the world, instead of a tool for corporations to act on us.

Note: This interview gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Read an interview with Nick Couldry about the book, "Are we giving away too much online?" from March 2024 for LSE Research for the World.

Watch a short video, What is data colonialism? with Nick Couldry on LSE's YouTube channel.

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