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Today's colonial "data grab" is deepening global inequalities

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What are the parallels between earlier stages of colonialism and today's digital world? Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias argue that instead of a land grab, we are today witnessing today a data grab whereby our lives, in all their aspects, are being captured and converted into commercial profits. How does this new era of informational power deepen existing global inequalities?

The worker who knows that every movement he makes, every gesture and every delay, however slight, will be tracked and scored by his employer. The child whose every response, every experiment and every

mistake is recorded by an “EdTech” platform that never forgets or forgives. The woman who discovers that all the information she records on a fitness app is being sold to third parties with unknown impacts on her health insurance premiums.

Each case captures a very modern form of vulnerability that depends on a huge inequality of informational power. The three cases might seem unconnected in their details, but they are all part of a single phenomenon: a data grab whereby our lives, in all their aspects, are being captured and converted into profits that benefits corporations more than they benefit us.

The individual cases may well sound familiar, but the scale of the wider pattern probably is not. We are used to doing deals with individual services (clicking Yes to their impenetrable terms and conditions statements), but the larger picture tends to elude us, because it is intentionally being hidden from view. Behind the curtain of concepts like “convenience” and “progress” lies the audacity of an industry that claims that our lives are “just there” as an input for them to process and exploit for value.

It is easy to forget that this data grab is only possible on the basis of a form of inequality that simply wasn't practicable four decades ago. Not because there weren't businesses willing to exploit us in every way they could, but because around thirty years ago a completely new form of computer-based infrastructure emerged, connecting billions of computers and recording all interactions we had with them in the form of data. In itself, this might not have been a problem. What was crucial was the handing over of control of this infrastructure to commercial corporations, who developed business models that ruthlessly exploited those data traces – those digital footprints – and the new forms of targeted marketing and behavioural prediction that analysing those traces made possible.

And so, in the era that we usually associate with the birth of a new type of freedom (the online world), a new type of inequality was born: the inequality that derives from governing *data territories* – spaces built so that everything we do there is automatically captured as data under the exclusive control of that territory's owner.

The most familiar form of data territory is the digital platform. The most familiar form of platform is social media. Over the past decade numerous scandals have become associated with social media platforms, scandals that are still largely unresolved while the platforms continue to be only partly regulated. But those scandals are merely symptoms of a much wider inequality of power over how data is extracted, stored, processed, and applied. That inequality lies at the heart of what we call “data colonialism”.

The term might be unsettling, but we believe it is appropriate. Pick up any business textbook and you will never see the history of the past thirty years described this way. A title like Thomas Davenport's *Big Data at Work* spends more than two hundred pages celebrating the continuous extraction of data from every aspect of the contemporary workplace, without once mentioning the implications for those workers. EdTech platforms and the tech giants like Microsoft that service them talk endlessly about the personalisation of the educational experience, without ever noting the huge informational power that accrues to them in the process. Health product providers of all sorts rarely mention in their product descriptions the benefits they receive from getting access to our data in the growing market for health-related data.



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This is a pattern whose outlines has its most obvious historical antecedents in the landgrab that launched colonialism five centuries ago: a landgrab that reimagined much of the world as newly dependent territories and resource stockpiles for the benefit of a few nations in Europe. Today, what's being grabbed is not land, but data, and through data, access to human life as a new asset for direct exploitation.

Some think that colonialism as an economic force ended before capitalism properly got under way, and that colonialism was consigned to the past when the institutions of empire finally collapsed in the 1960's. But the neocolonial influences of historical colonialism live on in today's unequal global economy and embedded racism, and those inequalities are perpetuated by data colonialism.



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More than that, the ways of thinking about the world and its populations, about who has a prior claim on resources and the authority of science, live on in a process that Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano called “coloniality”. Coloniality – colonial thinking about how knowledge is produced and by who – is the clearest explanation for the sheer audacity of today’s AI giants who see fit to treat everything humanity has produced to date as fodder for their large language and other models.

In our recent book, *Data Grab: The new Colonialism of Big Tech and how to fight back*, we try to make sense of the parallels between the earlier stages of colonialism and today’s digital world. Doing so also helps us understand the ways in which the racial inequalities that are the legacy of earlier stages of colonialism go on being reproduced in the supposedly scientific guise of algorithmic data and AI processing today. Consider the forms of discrimination that black American sociologists **Ruha Benjamin** and **Safiya Noble** have outlined, or the hidden forms of work in the Global South that, as Ethiopian data scientist **Timnit Gebru** and others have shown, make a huge contribution to training the

algorithms of so-called “artificial” intelligence in ways that is rarely recognised by the Big Tech industry.

The ongoing realities of five hundred years of colonialism live on, and are now converging with new inequalities associated with a data grab whose technical means only emerged three to four decades ago. Indeed, as earlier in history, the first step towards resisting this vast and all-encompassing social order is to name it for what is. Not just the latest improvement in capitalist techniques, but a new stage of colonialism’s ongoing appropriation of the world’s resources for the benefit of a few.

Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias are joint authors of [The Costs of Connection](#) (Stanford University Press 2019) and [Data Grab: The New Colonialism of Big Tech and How To Fight Back](#) (W. H. Allen 2024). They are also co-founders of the [Tierra Común](#) network.

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