Nick Couldry   July 21st, 2025

When the hypernudge becomes the rule in platform advertising

LSE's Professor Nick Couldry uses the framework of data colonialism to reflect on Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg's claim that his company can replace advertising agencies using AI-driven processes.

Very big changes are underway in the world of advertising. Although I am not an advertising specialist, this blog will reflect a little from a broader civic perspective on Mark Zuckerberg's recent claim that Meta will in future *replace* the 'creative' function of advertising agencies, even their targeting and measurement function, replacing it supposedly with an AI-driven automated process of designing, testing, and measuring the effectiveness of ads delivered *direct by* Meta to companies that simply want to promote their products. In the interview published by Stratechery, Zuckerberg billed Meta as 'the ultimate business agent' – his interviewer Ben Thompson quipped, 'The Best Black Box of all time', but it seems without irony.

Zuckerberg's claim is highly contested, particularly in the advertising industry, and we'll see over time how it works out in practice. Meanwhile, it's useful to examine that claim in the context of much longer social transformations. I will offer a provocative way of reading what's been going on, but I hope also a useful one: the data colonialism framework that I've developed with Mexican-US writer Ulises Mejias.

The hypernudge and data extraction

We're certainly not the first theorists to sense that something really big has been going on in market societies over the past two decades, a matter not just of the technical details of advertising markets, but a change in the very space where advertising and many other things are possible. Legal scholar Karen Yeung caused a stir a decade ago with an article on what she called the 'hypernudge'. The concept of a nudge needs no explanation, but Yeung asks: what if an individual's behaviour is nudged at *every* point in their digital journey, based not on static data, but dynamically evolving data, informed by that individual's actions and interactions? Then a real question arises

about how we view the choices of that individual: are they still in any sense authentic, free choices, or are they more like the motion of a ball in a pinball machine? Or, as Yeung put it, could we 'be slowly but surely eroding our capacity for authentic processes of self-creation and development' that is, our capacity to be the free, choice-making citizens that liberalism has always assumed we are?

Another legal theorist, Julie Cohen, went further in her 2019 book *Between Truth and Power,* writing about how continuous data extraction by advertisers, platforms and countless others is changing the scope of *where* profit is generated in society: it's changing the gearing of the whole capitalist machine. Cohen suggests that 'the overriding goal of data refineries and data markets is not *understanding* [of consumer behaviour] but rather predictability in pursuit of profits' (p 71, added emphasis). These data-driven operations, so standard in today's markets, according to Cohen 'work to maintain and stabilize the overall pool of consumer surplus so that it may be more reliably identified and easily extracted'. In other words, the very idea of *communicating with people* as a tool for making profits is put into question, as if, from the point of view of business function, it had become beside the point. The implications, Cohen suggests, are deep: 'for individuals and communities, the change in status from users and consumers to resources is foundational'. Meanwhile the whole public realm comes to 'subordinate considerations of human well-being and human self-determination to the priorities and values of powerful economic actors' (p. 73), that is, giant data harvesters such as Meta.

These quotations, though a little abstract, get the measure of the transformation that underlies Meta's attempt to literally take over the space of the creative advertising industries. This is more than a technological adjustment. And, for all its immediate shock value, it is anything but surprising from a longer historical perspective. I know that some respected commentators, including John Gapper of the *Financial Times*, are sceptical about whether Meta's moves really mean the death of advertising creatives, but others are less sanguine. And I think this second group is right to sense that something very big is under way. So let me stay with that concern and offer a way of making sense of what Meta has been doing as more than *economic* restructuring: in fact, as a historically significant shift in the basic building blocks of society. This is the transformation that Ulises Mejias and I call data colonialism.

Rather than seeking to convince you of the virtues of data colonialism as a theoretical framework, I want to see what we *might* gain by thinking about the dramatic potential changes in the advertising industry through a colonial lens, or rather a decolonial lens, because the point would be not to accept it, but to start seriously to resist it.

Making Sense of Data Colonialism

Ulises and I like to explain data colonialism through the four levels of a strategy video game.Colonization, the video game, was Game IV in Sid Meier's Civilisation series, launched in

1994, and relaunched in 2008. You can play the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Dutch and of course the English version. The goal is to win, which means moving through four levels:Explore, Expand, Exploit, and Exterminate. These four levels, melodramatic as they might first seem, are actually a pretty good picture of how practices of data extraction and data processing – and increasingly AI – have been unfolding across contemporary societies, and *changing them*. Taking each in turn, let's consider how these four levels might help us make sense of how it came to seem natural to Mark Zuckerberg to say what he did about advertising creatives.

- Explore

Let's start with Explore. It's really not a stretch to say that Facebook and Meta, and countless other platforms, have for two decades been exploring the expanse of social life, converting it into a domain which – in terms of the extraction of data – has very much come under their control.

- Expand

Similarly with Expand: ever more of our time online, even when we aren't on Meta platforms, is spent in spaces which automatically export data to Facebook, to build up its picture of us.

- Exploit

What about Exploit? It is clearly not enough to have access to multiple domains from where you can extract data: the point for Meta of course is to profit from this. Basically, this involves two steps. First, to acquire our data at the lowest possible price, that is, for nothing. So today, instead of the cheap (ie virtually free) land that was historical colonies, Meta and countless other platforms benefit from cheap (ie virtually free) data about each of us. This doesn't happen because we freely and consciously choose to give it up. It happens because digital platforms are designed so that it is impossible to act on them without data being extracted and stored about us. Every platform, in this sense, is what Ulises and I call a data territory. More than that, it is a territory where data can seemingly be taken pretty much for free – the only cost being the minimal one of complying with regulations for obtaining nominal consent to the data territory's operations.

In historical colonialism, there was a legal fiction, developed to its most sophisticated form by the English, called *terra nullius*, no one's land: Australia was called a terra nullius, because no one (no one important) was assumed to be there, so it could be taken for nothing and without obstruction, in the eyes of the law. Now the domains of our lives are treated as if they were *data nullius* – to all intents and purposes, business models operate as if that data can just be taken from us and used for the benefits of the business: the restrictions are minimal. Which means – and here's the rub – that, once Meta had developed some of the most advanced AI tools to analyse its huge data harvest, it no longer made sense for Meta to do *anything other* than use that AI and that data to generate the product from which it has always wanted to profit, which was advertising.

- Exterminate (or Eliminate)

And this is where the comparison gets most interesting. You'll recall the final level of the colonization game was **Exterminate**. Ulises and I don't for one moment suggest that our digital lives, our relations with platforms, or indeed advertisers' relations with Meta, involve the hideous violence that characterised historical colonialism. Of course not. But what if we replace the emotive term 'exterminate', with the less emotive description: 'eliminate previously effective and well-functioning ways of life'? That too was the consequence of historical colonialism, alongside the physical violence, making unliveable what were once perfectly well-integrated and viable forms of life. The *logic* of colonialism required them to be overridden by different logics, different rationalities, different ways of doing things, so that profit and resources could be extracted *from them* without obstruction or interference. That has been the history of colonialism.

Zuckerberg's new vision for the ad industry

But this puts in a very different light the arguments of legal theorists Karen Yeung and Julie Cohen that the space of market society is being changed fundamentally. Zuckerberg's vision for Meta today is about exploiting its data territories (the platforms) as directly and seamlessly as possible to generate profit: the goal is not understanding consumers' behaviour, but extracting profit from the predictability of consumer action. It is not about using AI power to present sovereign consumers with the chance to enjoy creative messages that express their culture and their society. In fact, Zuckerberg's vision is not about *communication* at all. It is about extraction: profit extraction through a continuous machine-fitting of automated product to automatically tracked response. This is indeed, recalling the phrase from Zuckerberg's May interview, 'the best black box of all time'.

The historic idea that there is space in market societies for communications that creatively try to persuade consumers to make choices about products, brands, and the like belongs to a very different idea of markets and the public world from that of the data colonialists, if you allow the term. For data colonialists, data is the medium, AI the ultimate seamless tool, and creative thinking (by humans about their fellow humans) is beside the point. No wonder Zuckerberg felt he could say at a conference in May that 'Meta's tools can find interested users better than human marketers can'.

The end of human creativity in advertising?

For data colonialists, there is nothing at all strange about *overwriting* the creativity of advertising agencies or anyone else with 'machinic processes'. The replacement of advertising creatives may not be total, but, I fear, it will be progressive and accelerating – unless its root causes are confronted and resisted. What is going on here in advertising is not fundamentally different from what is under way in music or education, where battles are under way today to preserve the idea of

music as more than just fuel for large AI models, or to preserve the space of the classroom as a place where dialogue between teacher and pupil can still happen (rather than just automated tracking and evaluation). Under way, through AI, across societies, is a redefinition of cognitive production – the spaces of ideas and creativity – with long-term consequences we can barely yet formulate. I'm not reassured when Stephen Pretorious, WPP's AI lead, says, that 'creativity, in its purest form, remains a human skill'. Exactly, but that does not mean that this purest form is going to thrive in, or even survive, the AI transition.

For a long time, it seemed as if Big Tech platforms were just *part of* a wider ecology alongside traditional ad agencies and other specialist companies – a 'frenemy' perhaps, as WPP founder Martin Sorrell once famously put it, but still for some purposes recognisably a friend – but increasingly this will cease to be the case. Yes, the largest ad agencies, like WPP, will seek to tame this beast, to live and sleep with it, but that will not make the idea of an automated advertising delivery platform any more compatible with the historically important idea, which we risk losing, that markets are places where creative communications go on.

But, you might respond, AI's celebrators in advertising say that their goal is to releaseto overworked executives the time to engage in advertising's truly creative processes. That is, overall, to conserve existing ways of life while exploiting the resources of the earth more rationally. But that is what the colonizers have always said.

This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. It is based on a speech given to open 'The Media-Marketing Ecology', a public event at the Media-Marketing Integration conference, London College of Communication, 3 July 2025. Thanks for Jonathan Hardy for the invitation, and to Gia Thom (Impress) and Alex Murray (the Conscious Advertising Network) for the discussion in the panel afterwards.

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About the author

Nick Couldry

Nick Couldry is Professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. As a sociologist of media and culture, he approaches media and communications from the perspective of the symbolic power that has been historically concentrated in media institutions. He is interested in how media and communications institutions and infrastructures contribute to various types of order (social, political, cultural, economic, ethical). His work has drawn on, and contributed to, social, spatial,

democratic and cultural theory, anthropology, and media and communications ethics. His analysis of media as 'practice' has been widely influential. In the past 7 years, his work has increasingly focussed on data questions, and ethics, politics and deep social implications of Big Data and small data practices. He is the author or editor of 16 books and many journal articles and book chapters.

Posted In: Artificial Intelligence

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