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Mejias and Couldry's Data Grab: The New Colonialism of Big Tech and How to Fight Back

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Drawing on the chilling lessons of historical colonialism, *Data Grab: The New Colonialism of Big Tech and How to Fight Back* (2024) highlights the exploitative role Big Tech plays in colonising and capitalizing on human experiences through the continuous extraction of data by digital means. The book emphasises that the consequences of this colonial-like undertaking are diffused in all levels of society but are most profound in previously affected areas such as the Global South. To this end, Mejias and Couldry voice the struggles and efforts of people who fight to decolonise data and question the future that is in store if human freedom and autonomy are lost.

This book reimagines the argument put forward in their 2019 co-authored book *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism* (Couldry and Mejias 2019). The principal theory of both books is that data colonialism is "a social order in which the continuous extraction of data from our lives generates massive wealth and inequality on a global scale" (12). The goal of this book is twofold: (1) to convey a sense of evolution from historical forms of colonialism to data colonialism and (2) to argue that an alternative vision can be imagined by way of resistance. And, while Mejias and Couldry refer in the title to data grab as the "new colonialism of Big Tech," they contend that this phenomenon is not new, but rather a continuation of colonial ways. For instance, practices of colonial *landgrabs* are compared to the *data grab*, examining the new way in which Big Tech utilises the colonial formula to organise the world's resources. They refer to the formula as the four X's of colonialism: Explore, Expand, Exploit, and Exterminate.

Unlike theories that observe the exploitative nature of datafication as a new form of post-industrial capitalism (notable theories include surveillance capitalism by Shoshana Zuboff [2019] or platform capitalism by Nick Srnicek [2017]), the authors situate capitalism as a parallel and interlinked process, one that cannot be understood without colonialism. It provides prominent historical context on practices of surveillance, extraction, and exploitation of our data by the Social Quantification Sector (SQS). The SQS refers to all industries in the economy that are in some way involved in the quantification of various aspects of human life. We are given a glimpse into several such sectors throughout the book, ranging from a detailed analysis of the US Data Empire (Google/Alphabet, Amazon, Facebook/Meta, Apple, and Microsoft, also

known as GAFAM) and the Chinese Empire titled BATX (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, and Xiaomi). However, Mejias and Couldry expand beyond these examples to advance their argument.

Each chapter introduces a fictional character who is faced with a consequence of data colonialism, illustrating to the reader how smart appliances and gadgets datafy our lives or how algorithmically driven systems determine whether we are successful in a job application. They illustrate how the SQS extends to any computer-accessed space or software, whether it is in agriculture, policing, healthcare, education, or work (including precarious work like the gig economy). The authors assert that this process of expansion of data territories reorganises spaces where we live and work. The impacts of these processes are yet to be seen in totality, but new forms of symbolic violence—discrimination, loss of opportunities, and classifications that have physical effects—are evident throughout the book. While the focus here is primarily on demonstrating the trajectory of data colonialism, the evident consequences are notable for surveillance researchers in any of the above-mentioned sectors.

The authors extend their analysis to new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), making the book particularly useful for academics engaged in debates surrounding how AI expands surveillance capabilities. They contextualise the colonial logics imbedded within AI technologies, including those of biometric surveillance, and their role as tools of extraction. They also explore how AI disrupts the production of art, music, or other cultural and social products. Mejias and Couldry argue corrective mechanisms such as AI ethics, including a human-in-the-loop approach and other regulatory efforts, do little to address the dominant premises of science and technology that developed under a colonial and capitalist view.

The impact of symbolic violence is most evident in the book's empirical chapters. Here, the authors examine what they call "civilising narratives" of data colonialism: convenience, connection, and scientific advancement. By drawing a comparison between historical narratives, such as those which suggest that colonialism is a *civilising mission*, the new narratives legitimise the disruptive practices of Big Tech and deepen the asymmetrical power held by it. Throughout the chapter, the authors draw our attention to the language used by advocates of Big Tech—of providing a "safer home," of giving us the ability to connect with loved ones through social media platforms, or of promising that the digital realm and AI will deliver a higher quality of life. As they begin to unpack each narrative, we are faced with the realities of forced convenience, Big Tech's privileged position to dominate telecommunication infrastructures in the Global South, and the rise of business models that allow for the spread of disinformation and the creation of digital "echo-chambers" that reinforce radical worldviews.

Driven by historical voices of defiance, the authors create a "playbook for resistance" inspired by Latin-American activist organisations. They propose three levels at which collective resistance can be tackled: by working within the system, by working against the system, and by working beyond the system. The playbook is unique in its format, offering practical advice and ideas on how anyone can act in their local communities, at work, or in universities to decolonise data. Its holistic approach to resistance is harmonious with the research and activism in the decolonial movement. Indeed, by referencing the various groups, projects, and people who fight against extractivism and support data sovereignty, *Data Grab* acts as a resource for surveillance researchers and others who consider resistance and data colonialism broadly within their work.

The sense of urgency to act against the colonial evolution present in *Data Grab* is notable. The book situates itself in an interdisciplinary landscape drawing from a variety of literature, making it particularly useful for researchers navigating the fields of surveillance studies, sociology, politics, or critical data studies. It establishes surveillance practices as a deep-rooted colonial practice to control populations and indigenous peoples and demonstrates the evolution from early forms of information/data collection to the automated forms that we are more familiar with today. Moreover, the format of the book makes it an accessible and thorough read for anyone who is concerned by the injustices amplified by automated systems of data

extraction—workers, activists, indigenous and marginalised communities, civil servants, those in local or national governments, or students. Overall, it achieves its implied goals, providing a complete evaluation of how the new colonialism of Big Tech emulates historical colonial practices that have a global reach and how, through collective action, these can be resisted.

References

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