11ᵀᴴ INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION DAYS / DIGITAL INEQUALITY AND DATA COLONIALISM SYMPOSIUM EVALUATION

11. ULUSLARARASI İLETİŞİM GÜNLERİ / DİJİTAL EŞİTSİZLİK VE VERİ SÖMÜRGECİLİĞİ SEMPOZYUMU DEĞERLENDİRMESİ

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This study complies with research and publication ethics

Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

In the digital age, while technological advancements offer numerous benefits, they also bring challenges that must be addressed, one of the most critical being digital inequality. The rapid expansion of digital technologies has not only reshaped communication and access to information but has also deepened existing social and economic disparities. As capitalism thrives on inequality, it continuously reconstructs these divisions in the digital sphere, making access to data, technology, and digital literacy privileges rather than universal rights. This growing gap reinforces a system where technological and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a few, further marginalizing those without the necessary resources to participate in the digital world. Consequently, digital inequality not only limits opportunities for individuals and communities but also reinforces "data colonialism," enabling dominant global powers to exploit digital resources for their economic and political interests. As Foucault stated, power cannot be exercised without knowledge (1980, p. 52); in this context, data colonialism strengthens global power structures by collecting and controlling digital data, while threatening individual freedom and privacy.

With the impact of digital transformation, culture and society are becoming increasingly dependent on the means of communication and their logic. As this dependency grows, digital inequality and data colonialism become more pronounced. For this reason, the main theme of the 11th International Communication Days Symposium (IFIG, 2024), organised by the Faculty of Communication at Üsküdar University, was "Digital Inequality and Data Colonialism". The Symposium brought together scholars from around the world to address

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the issues of inequality and colonialism brought about by the digital age from various perspectives. It was held on May 15-16-17, 2024, in a hybrid format, combining in-person and virtual elements via *Zoom*/Webinar. Topics such as digital capitalism, platform capitalism, digital inequality, digital labour, data colonialism, digital media literacy, democracy and capitalism, monopolisation, artificial intelligence, social media and cultural transformation were discussed within the symposium. The presentations of the invited keynote speakers and the abstracts of the participants explored the ethical, social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of the digital world. The Symposium, supported by TÜBİTAK (The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye), has received positive feedback in both academic and media circles.

World-renowned invited keynote speakers delivered presentations that provided profound insights into the main subject. The invited keynote speakers included Prof. Nick Couldry, Prof. Ulises A. Mejias, Prof. Natalie Fenton, Prof. Elena Vartanova, Emeritus Prof. Ümit Atabek, Prof. Tuğba Asrak Hasdemir, and Prof. Haluk Geray. In addition to invited keynote speakers, the symposium featured presentations of papers that had undergone double-blind peer review. Approximately 250 papers from universities in Türkiye and abroad were submitted to the symposium. The symposium drew participants from 13 countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, India, China, Egypt, Pakistan, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (KKTC), Iran, and Azerbaijan.

The conference commenced on Wednesday, May 15. Prof. Süleyman İrvan, Chairman of the Organizing Board, Prof. Nazife Güngör, Rector of Üsküdar University and Symposium Coordinator, and Prof. Nevzat Tarhan, Founding Rector and President of Üsküdar University, delivered opening speeches.

Following the opening speeches, on the first day of the symposium, Prof. Halil Nalçaoğlu from İstanbul Bilgi University moderated the sessions. The speakers, in order, were Prof. Natalie Fenton from Goldsmiths (University of London), with her presentation titled "Remiges of Inequality and Exclusion in the Digital Age: Thinking Towards an Egalitarian Imagination"; Emeritus Professor Ümit Atabek, who gave a talk on "The New Stage of Capitalism: Digital Data-Driven Exploitation Order"; and Prof. Haluk Geray (Ankara University), who spoke on "From Desktop Colonialism to Cloud - Slavery Colonialism." The scholars addressed the inequalities created by the capitalist world system and offered suggestions for changing this order.

Prof. Fenton stated in her speech that capitalism creates inequalities and that democracy requires equality. Therefore, democracy and capitalism are incompatible. She also pointed out that since most media and communication systems are based on capitalist principles, they cannot be democratic themselves or serve any form of democracy. Continuing her speech, Fenton referred to her book, "Democratic Delusions," and highlighted two major delusions. First, in many countries, the media portray themselves as an essential

organ of democracy, promoting the belief that democracy cannot function without them. Second, she emphasised that the concept of neoliberal democracy has been stripped of any meaning related to the common good, turning into nothing more than a tool that protects the interests of the powerful and often serves as a shield for global capitalism's exploitative and expropriating nature. She states that at the core of democracy, there should be an egalitarian imagination that seeks justice for all, free from notions of power and hegemony. Capitalism is deeply and structurally anti-democratic because it is fundamentally based on social inequality. According to her, achieving true equality requires rethinking all power and domination relationships. The issue of equality cannot be reduced to merely equalising access to communication services without eliminating the various forms of inequality. Otherwise, inequality is reduced to the ideology of freedom of expression and communicative participation, on which platform capitalism feeds. Fenton concluded her speech by emphasising that with an egalitarian imagination, information and the production of knowledge should not be a commodity but a common good. Instead of being controlled by capital, it should be shared. There should be common control over communication conditions. For a transformative and just democracy, communities and individuals should participate in this process together, and the media should be owned by the people. Technology should also belong to the people.

Emeritus Prof. Ümit Atabek started his speech with these words: "Capitalism is still at work; We are in a new stage of capitalism, but the process of appropriation of surplus value by capital continues". He emphasised the importance of using terminology correctly by defining imperialism and colonialism. Making a distinction between analog and digital data, Atabek emphasised that today, digital data-driven colonialism is at the forefront, but analog data has also led to colonialism. He stated that only 10% of data today originates from digital sources. Therefore, he referred to the current form of colonialism as the "digital data-driven exploitation order," not just the "data-driven exploitation order". Emphasising that the principal mode of exploitation in the digital data-driven economy remains the conventional one, Atabek underlined that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) account for only 6% of the Gross World Product (GWP) and 1.7% of total global employment. Before sharing striking data from Türkiye, Atabek stated that digital data processing companies controlled by national capital can increase their share in the digital data-driven exploitation order to the extent that they are integrated into global finance capital. Atabek stated that Türkiye's ICT sector ranks 16th globally, with 93 million broadband subscribers. He also emphasised that international capital dominates in Turkey and that an oligarchic structure prevails in the industry. This points to a situation where a significant transformation is occurring in areas such as digital infrastructure and data management. According to Atabek, the ICT sector in Türkiye is an example of a digital data-driven exploitation system, following global trends in an integrated manner with

transnational capital, and the global ICT market is expected to continue growing. Atabek, in the absence of political intervention, predicts that technological developments will continue accelerating trends towards monopolisation, lower wages, and greater inequalities. He argues that while AI technologies will not reduce the total labour force, they will lead to job displacement and devaluation of labour in certain sectors, highlighting that these issues are political, not technological, and require new forms of political struggle, such as supporting free and open software and copyleft movements.

In his speech, Prof. Geray discussed the concept of "desktop colonialism", which he initially introduced in 1994, focusing on digital networks rather than the internet itself. In article published in 2005, he refined the concept, describing "desktop colonialism" as the set of actions and policies through which core countries market various information and communication technology products, alongside the new products of a new accumulation regime, to peripheral countries via digital networks, starting with high-income segments. Referring to Yanis Varoufakis, Geray introduced the concept of "cloud capital," which he argued has undermined the foundations of traditional capitalism, where profit generation is dependent on market forces. Varoufakis referred to this shift as"techno-feudalism". Geray pointed out that institutions like the IMF and the World Bank do not support the funding of advanced scientific research in developing countries, urging them to lag and prevent them from developing high-value products to compete in global markets. He likened the process of cloud colonialism to the exploitation of indigenous populations, where capital cannot access Southern resources, but Northern countries continue to benefit from them. Geray emphasised the need for the South to establish its own cloud infrastructure. He criticised the West for forcing the South to abandon industrial and protectionist policies while continuing protectionism under the guise of "national security". Highlighting that today's system can be described as "cloud slavery colonialism".

Concluding his presentation, Geray advocated for resistance to the cloud slavery system. He proposed the creation of non-commercial, cooperative platforms based on solidarity. He suggested that barter systems should replace trade, and public, non-commercial networks should be established, even if nation-states are weakened. He called for a public common AI and stressed the importance of promoting collaborative research.

On the second day of the symposium, under the moderation of Assoc. Prof. Bahar Muratoğlu, Prof. Helena Vartanova (Lomonosov Moscow State University) delivered a presentation entitled "Reassembling Media Systems Under Pressures of Digital Platforms: Evidence from Russia". Additionally, Prof. Nick Couldry (London School of Economics and Political Science), and Prof. Ulises Mejias (SUNY Oswego) jointly gave a talk entitled "Data Grab: The New Colonialism of Big Tech." Furthermore, Prof. Tuğba Asrak Hasdemir (Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University) delivered a speech titled "From Borders to Bytes:

Data, Power, and the Global Struggle in the Web of Digital Colonialism". In their speech, the scholars only provided insights into understanding the contemporary world but also proposed solutions to its current challenges.

Prof. Vartanova began her speech by emphasising that the issue at hand is not only digital transformation but also the transformation of the international relations system. She highlighted that we are going through uncertain times, a view shared by many academics. The rise of digital media platforms has led to a major structural breakdown in traditional media systems, triggering a profound transformation. This process has been described in various ways, including de-globalization, anti-globalisation, de-Americanization, and the nationalisation of media policy. In this context, the resurgence of nation-states has emerged as one of the key trends that require analysis in today's media ecosystem. Although the world appears to be becoming a more comfortable and prosperous place due to technological advancements, it is far from being a just system. Even in the digital age, various social divisions and inequalities persist. Traditional social inequalities such as social injustice, poverty, and unequal access to education have gained new dimensions with digitalisation. In many regions, access to the internet remains unequal, directly affecting individuals' social and professional development. On a global scale, the world remains divided between the wealthy North and the impoverished South. Prof. Vartanova emphasised the importance of digital media systems and provided an overview of the Russian digital media ecosystem. She pointed out that Russia should be considered outside the conventional global media framework, as international digital platforms like *Facebook* are unable to operate in the country due to its legal regulations. In this context, traditional media have been losing their significance, while new media platforms have become more dominant in Russian society. People are spending more time on digital media, offline time has decreased, and loyalty to digital content has increased.

Prof. Couldry and Prof. Mejias began their talk by emphasising the importance of understanding the role of data in our lives and explaining that data colonialism is a new form of colonialism. They pointed out that to understand what is happening nowadays, it is necessary to look at the history of colonialism, which spans hundreds of years. While digital data is often associated with the future, colonialism is typically viewed as a phenomenon rooted in the past. According to Prof. Couldry and Prof. Mejias, historical colonialism focused on the seizure of land, whereas data colonialism involves the capture of human life itself. They emphasised that both historical colonialism and data colonialism share a common function: dispossession. Just as historical colonialism dispossessed people of their land, data colonialism dispossesses individuals of their data and personal information. Prof. Couldry and Prof. Mejias pointed out that data colonialism is more than just another capitalist innovation; it is a social order that extends colonial extraction in new ways, achieving this by commodifying human life through data. They explained that colonialism, together with capitalism, has entered a new phase. Historically, colon-

isers justified their actions through civilising narratives, the belief that their actions led to progress and modernity, salvation, and the promise of more peace and prosperity. This narrative also implied that the coloniser knew what was best for the colonised. These same civilising narratives continue to shape our world today, albeit in different forms. In the context of data colonialism, new narratives are emerging. Prof. Mejias mentioned that, for example, the idea of progress through artificial intelligence is promoted, with claims that AI is helping humanity transcend its limitations and creating a more convenient and simplified life. Moreover, they argued that the concept of community has been redefined, claiming that digital technology enables the creation of a more democratic and participatory society. The narrative that CEOs and companies know best is also prevalent, like past colonial discourses.

Prof. Couldry and Prof. Mejias introduced a formula they termed the "Four X's of Colonialism", categorising the phases of data colonialism as Explore, Expand, Exploit, and Exterminate. Prof. Couldry and Prof. Mejias explained the four stages of data colonialism. "Explore" means "acquiring new territories", where generative AI learns from our interactions, utilising our data, such as AI models trained on 280,000 hours of music. "Expand" means establishing online data territories where data can be continuously extracted, restructuring social life to optimise profit from data. "Exploit" means turning the extracted data into profit, with a worldview that justifies cheap data as a valuable commodity. Exterminate, eliminating alternatives, where data colonialism manifests through algorithmic bias, job precarity, health deterioration and environmental destruction.

In their speech, Prof. Couldry and Prof. Mejias also discussed the future implications of data colonialism. They acknowledged that resisting data colonialism would be challenging but emphasised the importance of focusing on what we can change rather than what seems impossible to change. They called for complex solutions to complex problems and outlined strategies for decolonising data. Within the system, fundamental policy changes are essential, including regulation, antitrust measures, and impact assessments. In opposition to the system, protests and political resistance movements should draw inspiration from other decolonial movements. Beyond the system, they advocated for alternative technologies and the concept of digital sovereignty, which should be considered not only at the state level but also within communities. They emphasised that independence and self-sufficiency in the digital realm are crucial. In conclusion, they described decolonising data as a cultural and public project that needs to be undertaken on a large scale, believing that resisting data colonialism can help establish justice.

Prof. Hasdemir, in her speech at the symposium, provided a broad perspective on the topics discussed, referencing Taylor's scientific management, which emphasises the use of data to analyse processes and enhance performance. Addressing the categorisation of perspectives on digital technologies,

Prof. Hasdemir examined two fundamental theoretical streams: the liberal/mainstream theory and critical theory. Highlighting the societal transformation brought about by digital technologies, Prof. Hasdemir emphasised the vast amount of data being collected and how this data directly influences decision-making processes. From a critical perspective, this phenomenon raises various concerns, including issues of privacy, surveillance, inequalities and power imbalances. Critical theory also underscores the importance of transparency, accountability, and ethical considerations in the use of digital data technologies. In contrast, the liberal approach prioritises economic growth, innovation, efficiency, and competition, emphasising the significance of data-driven technologies in optimising corporate operations. Prof. Hasdemir argued that a balanced approach, situated between the critical and liberal approaches, could be adopted by weighing the risks highlighted by critical theory against the benefits underscored by the liberal approach. In this way, data-driven technologies can be developed to contribute positively to society. She further asserts that, considering the concerns raised by critical theory, data collection, storage, and processing should be regulated within a legal framework, ensuring accountability and transparency while safeguarding individual rights. Otherwise, there is a risk that data could be used against individuals. The concept of "From Borders to Bytes" was introduced, summarising historical colonialism and the notion of data colonialism. Prof. Hasdemir concluded her speech by emphasising the necessity of interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration to address these issues and rethink the existing order. She stressed that engineering and information sciences should collaborate with social sciences, while social sciences should also engage with engineering and information sciences. Such an interdisciplinary exchange, he argued, would foster a more inclusive and solution-oriented perspective.

The keynote speeches were followed by 48 sessions featuring paper presentations spread over 3 days, which included various topics such as "Digital Transformation and Social Dynamics", "Digitization, Social Media and Boycott", "Media and Critical Approaches in The Digital Age", "Artificial Intelligence, Media and Data Colonialism", "Discourses On Turkey Within The Internet Galaxy: The Manifestations Of Data From Freedom To Exploitation, Resistance and Hope", "Digital Inequality, Culture And Media", "Artificial Intelligence, Digitalisation, and Communication", "Contemporary Dynamics In The Digital Sphere: Insights From Varied Academic Perspectives", "Media and Culture in The Era of Artificial Intelligence", "Digital Surveillance, Media and Society", both online and in-person.

Conclusion

To summarise the symposium thoroughly examined the issue of colonialism and inequality operating in the context of digitalisation, proposed solutions, and made predictions about the future of the world. Preventive plans were

discussed to mitigate the negative impact of technology and transform it into benefits. Throughout the symposium, valuable contributions were made to serve as a resource for academic studies. The discussions held during the symposium played a pivotal role in advancing academic research in the field of communication studies.

As Prof. Güngör emphasised in her opening speech, it is crucial to be sensitive to the negative impact of technology, take precautions against potential issues, and foster awareness and consciousness. While we may not be able to solve these problems directly, even small contributions towards raising awareness among people worldwide can help build resistance against the exploitative aspects of technological transformation and its manipulative and harmful effects on people's lives. In this regard, since 2014, Üsküdar University's Faculty of Communication has organised International Communication Days. This annual symposium has gained recognition as a distinguished forum offering a free discussion platform in the field of communication, where the trajectory of humanity is explored through the lens of communication.

Furthermore, in line with significant steps towards internationalisation, the International Communication Days this year will be held in Baku from May 14 to 16, in collaboration with the Faculty of Communication at Baku State University, marking the 150th anniversary of the Azerbaijani National Press. The 12th International Communication Days will critically examine the theme of "Media and Communication Studies in the Digital Age". The symposium this year aims to provide a vital platform for discussing the latest developments in this field by addressing the digital transformation of media and communication science. It will feature interactive panels, presentations, internationally distinguished keynote speakers, who will share valuable information and experiences about the future of the communication discipline.

References

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