

Decolonising the Internet: An Introduction to the #AoIR2022 Special Issue

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Abstract

This paper introduces the ‘Decolonising the Internet’ themed special issue which includes research presented at the 23rd annual Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference (2022). The conference theme centred on decolonisation, highlighting the persistence of colonial practices but also the resistance they generate. Focusing on the internet as entailing colonial appropriations, reproducing inequalities, and foreclosing alternative ways of being, the conference theme asked participants to consider not only the ways in which the internet walks on the path forged by colonialism, but also how research practices are implicated in reinforcing the same exploitative patterns. This special issue includes seven papers that cover new and innovative approaches to studying decolonizing the internet, including contexts related to LGBTQIA+ digital spaces, neighbourhood and local surveillance, data colonialism, misinformation and conspiracies, and inclusion and access problems for indigenous peoples. The papers in this issue also focus on various geographic locations in the Global South, including Africa, South America, and the Asia Pacific.

Keywords

decolonisation, colonialism, internet studies, Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), power

Introduction

This special issue showcases some of the research presented at the 23rd Annual Association of Internet Researchers Conference (AoIR2022) on the theme of Decolonising the Internet. The conference took place in person in Dublin from 2-5 November 2022, hosted by the Technological University of Dublin, signalling a return to in person meetings following two years of online conferences. The chair of the conference organising committee was Kylie Jarrett (Maynooth University), and the committee included Caroline O’Sullivan (Technological University of Dublin), Aphra Kerr (Maynooth University), Eugenia Siapera (University College Dublin), and Tetyana Lokot (Dublin City University). The conference theme centred on decolonisation, highlighting the persistence of colonial practices but also the resistance they generate. Focusing on the internet as entailing colonial appropriations, reproducing inequalities, and foreclosing alternative ways of being, the conference theme asked participants to consider not only the ways in which the internet walks on the path

forged by colonialism, but also how our own research practices are implicated in reinforcing the same exploitative patterns. In parallel, the conference theme sought to complicate narratives of decolonisation that hollow out complex and difficult processes of accountability.

Hosting a conference on decolonisation in Europe has not been without controversy. Ireland is living through its own post-colonial legacies, celebrating a decade of centenaries charting the historical development of Ireland since its successful bid for independence. Ireland's post-colonial troubles and legacies point to the diverse experiences of colonialism, post-coloniality, and decolonisation, which the conference sought to thematise and address. In the spirit of decolonisation, the conference programme committee strove to privilege voices that are not often heard or who do not often have the opportunity to address an international audience. The programme committee was delighted that Nanjala Nyabola, a Nairobi-based writer, researcher, and author of *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya* (Zed Books, 2018), accepted an invitation to give the keynote speech, 'Decolonising the Internet,' which was also live-streamed. Nyabola discussed her work on the Kiswahili Digital Rights Project and asked conference attendees to reflect on whether they were seriously committed to decolonisation, and to working through the painful realisations that this entails.

Overall, the 2022 Dublin conference attracted 565 participants from 38 countries across six continents. In total, there were 226 accepted papers, 24 accepted panels, 10 roundtable and fishbowl sessions, and 166 publications in AoIR's *Selected Papers of Internet Research* (SPIR) proceedings. Other events included the Doctoral Colloquium, the online and in-person Early Careers Scholars Workshops, several pre-conference workshops, and social events.

The 2022 Nancy Baym book award was awarded to Catherine Knight Steele for her book *Digital Black Feminism* (NYU Press, 2021), while the dissertation award was awarded to Sebastián Lehuedé (London School of Economics and Political Science) for his thesis "Governing Data in Modernity/Coloniality: Astronomy Data in the Atacama Desert and the Struggle for Collective Autonomy." Finally, the best student paper was awarded to Vincent Obia (Birmingham City University) for his submission titled "Matrix of Dependence, Postcolonialism, and Social Media Regulation in an African Context."

The politics of colonialism are a persistent presence across multiple domains, and internet studies are no exception. The 2022 AoIR conference called for a sharpened focus on the practices and processes for decolonising the internet and internet research. The present moment requires scholars to think through, critique, and intervene into the colonial dynamics that manifest in various ways across our research objects, subjects, and contexts while new forms of coloniality and resistance are constantly emerging. Today, alongside conventional colonial legacies, our online lives are also shaped by new colonising forces in the form of multinational tech giants who are re-fashioning the world in their own image. A growing body of research is now examining the colonialist politics of digital and online infrastructures (Thorat, 2019; Aouragh & Chakravarty, 2016; Bresnihan & Brodie, 2021), big data and data-based discrimination (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Kwet, 2019; Mann & Daly, 2019; Madianou, 2019), algorithmic amplification and silencing (boyd et al., 2014; Arora, 2019), the inherent inequalities and expropriation of digital labour, resources, and culture from colonised spaces and subjects (Amrute, 2019; Jarrett, 2015; Casilli, 2017), and the geopolitics of multinational digital platforms (Gillespie, 2010; Gray, 2021). A number of scholars are also grappling with questions of what decolonisation might look like in these realities, pointing to, for example, indigenous approaches to digital governance (Mhlambi, 2020; Walter et al., 2021; Couture &

Toupin, 2019), issues of data justice in decolonial perspective (Taylor, 2017; Dencik et al., 2019; Siapera, 2022), developing constructive frameworks for data sovereignty (Duarte, 2017; Leone, 2021; Alcantara & Dick, 2017), possibilities of cooperative platform ownership (Scholtz, 2016), and decentralised, inclusive internet governance models (DeNardis, 2014; Oppermann, 2018; Bon et al., 2022).

Part of the work of decolonisation in academic scholarship also involves de-centring white European and North American narratives about the internet, its cultures, its economies, and its infrastructures. Researchers must do more than merely add in different platforms, apps, and user practices, paying attention to persistent structural power relations and hierarchies based in ongoing and historic oppressions in what we do on the internet as users and as internet researchers. Current scholarship should also acknowledge the importance of resistant and post-colonial digital practices that challenge these power relations. How we address the colonial legacies that shape what the internet has become, and the ongoing colonialism, may come to determine the future contours of the internet itself. Several attendant questions remain open to internet researchers. What new colonialisms are on the horizon? What subjects are inscribed in and produced through algorithms, AI, and machine learning, and who is accountable for their oversight? Is the internet colonising our social lives, ways of being, or imaginaries, and how should we resist?

Finally, with this special issue we seek to challenge what we mean by decolonising. Hollowed out in institutional settings and turned into a type of academic branding exercise, some may speculate as to whether the term loses meaning in such contexts. Researchers may also contemplate what decolonising means in the context of an intersecting politics of class, gender, sexuality, sex, and ability. Furthermore, do narratives of decolonisation sometimes serve the coloniser, erasing the histories and ongoing experiences of the colonised? Should we instead be adopting an anti-colonial, post-colonial, or intersectional position instead in our teaching, methodologies, ethics, and research? Who needs to learn (and in what ways) about the difficult work of decolonisation, and from whose perspective is “decolonisation” spoken?

The papers in this special issue cover a wide variety of topics related to decolonising the internet, including LGBTQIA+ digital spaces, neighbourhood and local surveillance, data colonialism, misinformation and conspiracies, and inclusion and access problems for indigenous peoples. The papers in this issue also focus on various geographic locations in the Global South, including Africa, South America, and the Asia Pacific.

The first paper, “Connecting in the Gulf: Exploring Digital Inclusion for Indigenous Families on Mornington Island,” by Amber Marshall, Kim Osman, Jessa Rogers, Thu Pham, and Hurriyet Babacan, contributes to the growing body of academic work dedicated to exploring the inclusion of Indigenous people in the digital landscape of Australia. The authors detail their research approach, which involved collaboration between researchers from Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds in order to establish a research methodology informed by Indigenous perspectives. This methodological framework was applied to examine the complex challenges and opportunities associated with incorporating Aboriginal families into the digital realm. The specific context of investigation was a remote community on Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The second paper, “Colonising the Narrative Space: Unliveable Lives, Unseeable Struggles and the Necropolitical Governance of Digital Populations,” by Kelly Lewis, asserts that an increasing fusion of corporate and governmental influence, combined with the unequal

exercise of control within digital platforms, forms what can be labeled as the necropolitical governance of online communities. Lewis explains how the characteristics of this necropolitics, rooted in platform dynamics, become apparent through unequal content moderation processes, platform rules, and alternative enforcement methods. Furthermore, Lewis outlines its operational modes, encompassing intentional acts of excessive enforcement, negligent lack of enforcement, and the establishment of extraordinary circumstances.

The third paper, “Clones and Zombies: Rethinking Conspiracy Theories and the Digital Public Sphere through a (Post)-Colonial Perspective,” by Iginio Gagliardone, Matti Pohjonen, Stephanie Diepeveen, and Samuel Olaniran, delves into the process of reexamining online conspiracy theories from a decolonial perspective, with the aim of challenging the prevailing certainty with which these theories are often swiftly rejected as anomalies and negative outcomes within digital environments. The authors empirically investigate a specific conspiracy theory that circulated in Nigeria between 2018 and 2019. Their conceptual analysis is informed by Achille Mbembe's insights into power dynamics in postcolonial contexts.

The fourth paper, “Queering the ‘Resourcing’ of LGBTQ+ Young People in the Asia Pacific,” by Amelia Johns, Paul Byron, and Niki Cheong, explores concerns about development approaches where organizations from the Global North create aid programs and allocate resources to address inequalities in the Global South. These initiatives often mirror Western values, frameworks, and cultural viewpoints. The authors demonstrate how a critical response to this method is apparent in ongoing attempts to reshape the allocation of resources for LGBTQ+ youth in the Global South, aiming to decolonize the process. Drawing inspiration from postcolonial perspectives such as ‘Asia as Method’ and an adapted version called ‘queer Asia as method,’ the authors propose embracing a ‘queer’ approach to digitally provide resources for LGBTQ+ youth in this region.

The fifth paper, “The Unhomed Data Subject: Negotiating Datafication in Latin America,” by Esteban Morales and Katherine Reilly, takes a critical look at how datafication reveals the effects of algorithm-driven digital changes on both societal processes and how people view themselves. The authors demonstrate how these digital transformations incorporate fundamental beliefs into information systems that guide new ways organizations operate. These changes come with optimistic views about technology, emphasizing the benefits of these strategies. Drawing from insights gained through five digital literacy projects conducted by partner organizations in Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay in 2021, the authors delve into how people experience datafication in their lives.

The sixth paper, “Colonizers in the Neighborhood: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Nextdoor Users’ Postracial strategies,” by Jenny Lee and Chloe Ahn, delves into how the process of neighbourhood colonization has become more accessible than ever before due to digital platforms like Nextdoor. The authors analysed user-generated content in West Philadelphia from May 2019 to April 2021, using a critical approach to understand how racist language or topics were used by users. The authors argue that users actually used three post-racial strategies to make their anti-Black views and settler ideologies seem normal and hidden. This happened while larger social and political events involving racial profiling and care crises were happening.

The seventh and final paper, “Challenging the Legacy of Past and Present Intimate Colonialization: A Study of Ugandan LGBT+ Activism in Self-Controlled Digital Media,” by Cecilia Strand and Jakob Svensson, uses a mixed-methods approach, combining a focused content analysis of the social media engagement of five established LGBT+ organizations on Twitter and Facebook during a specific month in 2022, along with in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with content creators. The primary objective of the paper is to explore the role of self-administered digital platforms in addressing oppressive systems within Ugandan society. The study’s findings suggest that these self-regulated spaces fall short of effectively challenging the fundamental aspects of repression, including indigenous patterns of oppression and the encompassing shield of collective post-colonial forgetfulness.

In conclusion, decolonising the internet remains an open and challenging question in internet studies, both for the subjects of colonialism and the researchers investigating its modalities. Such questions will continue to be addressed by AoIR in conferences to come. The theme from the 2022 conference compliment’s that of the 2023 conference, to be held in Philadelphia, on the theme of ‘Revolutions,’ where AoIR researchers will present work on the promises and failures related to revolutions and digital technologies.

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