

Digital Policy Hub – Working Paper

Navigating Digital Neocolonialism in Africa

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Key Points

- Digital neocolonialism represents a new form of control by global powers over Africa's digital landscape, integrating technological advancements with historical neocolonial practices and circumscribing relationships between African states and foreign entities.
- The legacy of colonialism, with its exploitation and economic dependency, shapes the current dynamics of digital neocolonialism. This ongoing struggle for autonomy is evident in the shift from direct colonial rule to more subtle economic and cultural influences.
- Increasing reliance on digital technologies developed by foreign corporations has reshaped African societies, enhancing connectivity and information access but compromising sovereignty and leading to new dependencies.
- The dominance of foreign entities in African digital infrastructure and data control threatens national sovereignty and perpetuates inequalities, with African data often exploited by foreign corporations, echoing colonial resource exploitation patterns.
- Ensuring equitable participation in the digital era necessitates robust data governance and regulations that uphold data sovereignty, fair compensation for digital assets and the prioritization of consumer rights in the digital economy.

Introduction

In a world rapidly transformed by the advent of the digital age and the rise of technology, Africa stands at a pivotal juncture, attempting to confront the intricacies of its past while simultaneously navigating the opportunities of a digitally driven future. Marked by a surge in technological breakthroughs and a significant increase in globalization, this era has ushered in a new world of great innovation and connection. However, under the veneer of success hides traditional power and influence dynamics, particularly in the context of African governments' interactions with foreign powers. Once hailed as a new frontier for emancipation and democracy, the digital sphere now poses a double-edged sword for African countries. On the one hand, it offers unprecedented information access, networking and development and modernization opportunities; on the other, it introduces new dependencies and vulnerabilities, particularly as African countries increasingly rely on digital technologies predominantly developed and controlled by foreign entities. This dependency not only challenges the sovereignty of African states, but also raises concerns about the unequal distribution of the digital revolution's advantages. Digital neocolonialism is a new and more sophisticated type of influence that global powers are exerting over the digital landscapes of Africa.

In this working paper, digital neocolonialism is defined as a contemporary phenomenon in which dominant global powers and multinational corporations, primarily from economically advanced regions, exert control and influence over the digital sphere in less economically developed countries that were previously subject to colonialism. Knowing the historical context in which these modern processes are developing is essential, as colonial history provides a lens through

which to view and understand the current problem of digital neocolonialism. The transition from overt colonial dominance to more subtle forms of neocolonial influence indicate the ongoing battle for true autonomy and self-determination in the face of external forces attempting to determine Africa's future.

Digital Neocolonialism in Africa

The digital age, which has been characterized by rapid technological improvements and increased worldwide connectedness over the past half-century, has presented a new challenge to African states' relationships with foreign powers. Digital neocolonialism, arising from the junction of technology and colonial activities, is a contemporary form of the dominating global powers' influence and control over African digital landscapes (Kwet 2019).

Historically, Africa's experience with colonialism has been marked by exploitation, cultural subjection and economic reliance (Rodney 1972). The legacy of colonialism is multifaceted, and this history has had a tremendous impact on the continent's socio-economic and political systems, providing context for understanding modern African digital and economic dynamics. Under colonialism, European powers exercised control over African territories, exploiting local resources and labour and imposing external governance to create dependency systems. Corporations such as the East India Company played pivotal roles by controlling infrastructures such as ports and railways, which were vital for resource extraction and suppressing local economies. These colonial infrastructures were strategically designed to enable the efficient extraction of raw materials that were then shipped to Europe for processing, with the finished goods then being sold back to the colonies, thereby undermining local industries (Adam 2019). In digital neocolonialism, a similar dynamic plays out in the digital sphere. Critical infrastructures, such as digital platforms, networks and data systems, are predominantly controlled by corporations from economically dominant countries. In the digital landscape, data is the "raw material," and foreign corporations extract, process and monopolize it without regard for African autonomy. This process often involves global powers outsourcing digital labour, such as content moderation or data processing, to developing countries, where labour costs are lower and regulatory frameworks may be less stringent. The resulting digital products and services, enriched by this extracted data, are then marketed back to these same developing countries, establishing a cycle similar to that of colonial trade. Digital neocolonialism thus results in new forms of dependency, exploitation and economic disparity, echoing the legacy of colonialism in the digital era (Casilli 2017). Although African nations have gained territorial sovereignty since the colonial period, the economic systems of these nation-states often remain tied to foreign interests, perpetuating a cycle of dependence and underdevelopment. Whether it is subject to political or corporate organizations, postcolonial Africa has struggled with many forms of neocolonialism in which external forces continue to shape the continent's economic and political opportunities.

Initially perceived as tools for liberation and democratization, new technologies promised an entryway into global connectivity and access to information, marking a pivotal shift in the continent's socio-economic landscape (Unwin 2009). However, in their efforts to modernize, African nations began depending more and more on digital technologies created and owned by global firms. While the spread of mobile phones,

social media platforms and the internet has changed daily life, trade and communication in African civilizations, these changes have come at the expense of African sovereignty.

Threatening Digital Sovereignty

As African markets became more open to global technology business, foreign entities began to increasingly dominate infrastructure, software and services (Mann 2018). This dependence was not only technical, but also included data control and digital commerce, consolidating power in the hands of a few multinational firms and foreign governments, thereby threatening national sovereignty. While globalization was essential to fuel innovation in African industries such as banking and infrastructure, it also created a digital divide, in which access to and control over digital resources became another layer of inequality between African nations and foreign powers: these powers have continuously exerted their influence by providing development support at the cost of economic or political subjection (Soulé 2023).

Furthermore, the adoption of foreign technologies in governance and administration has introduced new dynamics in state-citizen relationships. As citizens' access to digital technologies has become integral to economic development and industrial growth, African governments have begun leveraging digital tools for service delivery, surveillance and citizen engagement to gain public approval, despite these tools being under foreign control (Jain 2024). Reliance on these digital platforms has raised concerns about digital sovereignty and the potential for external influence in domestic affairs. While these platforms have opened opportunities for accessing global knowledge resources, they also highlight disparities in digital access and raise questions about the relevance of content dominated by foreign perspectives.

This dependency on foreign digital technologies remains a central concern of digital neocolonialism and is evident in African economies, extending beyond the import of hardware and software. Dependency on foreign entities also affects the skills and expertise of African citizens (Carmody 2017). African industries, particularly those heavily reliant on digital technologies developed and managed by foreign corporations, find themselves entangled in a new form of economic dependency that hinders autonomous technological development and innovation (Mann 2018). This dependency is further complicated by the dominant role that global tech giants play in African digital markets through significant aspects of the digital landscape, including e-commerce platforms, social media and online advertising networks. The market dominance of foreign tech companies stifles the growth of local enterprises and skew economic benefits in favour of foreign entities, often at the expense of local development.

The issues of digital sovereignty and independence also highlight the constraints that African nations face when seeking external support, most notably the priorities of the other party in trade agreements. The investment landscape in Africa's digital sector is characterized by significant contributions from both Eastern and Western partners. For instance, China's Digital Silk Road initiative underscores the Eastern approach to Africa's digital expansion and includes substantial investments in digital infrastructure, such as broadband networks and smart cities. A notable project under this initiative is the collaboration between Huawei and various African nations to

deploy Chinese-built 5G networks, which support internet connectivity and modern digital services such as e-commerce (Huawei 2023). However, due to political tension and differing regulations with China, Western powers refrain from using and working with these Eastern networks (Soulé 2023). Western initiatives, by contrast, often focus on creating a sustainable digital ecosystem, such as the European Union's Digital for Development (D4D) strategy, which integrates digital technologies into development policies. As a result of this strategy, innovation hubs have been established throughout Africa, promoting the creation of regional start-ups, fostering information sharing and improving digital skills — but only in accordance with European and Western practices.¹ China's Digital Silk Road initiative and the European Union's D4D strategy demonstrate the competing priorities of their respective agreeing partners; due to the political complexities between these partners, African nations could be left with the dilemma of what to prioritize, leading to an incohesive digital system.

Data Exploitation

The influence of tech giants is most evident in their control and exploitation of African data. In the digital age, data is a crucial resource, and its control by foreign entities represents a new form of resource extraction. African data is often collected, processed and sold by these corporations back to African consumers, echoing traditional colonial patterns of resource exploitation in which little benefit accrues to the local population (Couldry and Mejias 2019). The economic implications of data commodification are profound, as the value derived from raw data is predominantly harvested by these multinational companies, while African economies do not reap these benefits of data analysis and utilization. A significant reason for this is that there remains a lack of standard privacy and data protection laws in Africa, signalling free reign for foreign entities: for example, the 2014 African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection law was signed by 14 nations and ratified by only eight as of 2020.

In the digital era, this exploitation of data poses important questions regarding economic independence and sovereignty. When foreign businesses keep and handle data, the idea of data sovereignty — that is, data that is subject to the laws and governance systems of the country in which it is collected — becomes a difficult problem. Losing control over this vital resource can compromise national interests and policies, especially when it comes to sensitive subjects such as security and privacy.

Addressing the challenges posed by data commodification requires robust data governance frameworks at both national and continental levels. African nations need to develop policies and laws that protect their data sovereignty, ensure fair compensation for their data resources and promote the development of local data analytics industries. This approach is crucial for transforming data into a tool for sustainable development as opposed to a commodity exploited by external entities (African Union Commission 2020).

Progress

¹ See https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/projects/au-eu-digital-development-d4d-hub-shaping-joint-digital-future_en.

While this paper has focused on concerns for the digital sovereignty of African nations amid their collaborations with global partners, this should not undermine the significant progress that these nations have made to work against digital neocolonialism while continuing to fuel economic and technologic growth throughout the continent. Continued progression in a range of areas — such as enhancing digital infrastructure, fostering innovation and developing robust regulatory frameworks — is pivotal as Africa works to position itself within the global digital economy.

In terms of regaining data oversight, African governments have begun onshoring their citizens' data by investing in new national data centres, including in Benin and Togo. These centres would allow governments to locally handle data, thereby preventing exploitation. In addition, these centres are often funded through the support of joint political organizations (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, among others) as opposed to independent entities; in cases in which funding is reliant on a sole contributor, African nations have ensured that infrastructure and oversight are conducted locally and by nationals (Soulé 2023).

Renewed partnership efforts to foster greater continental growth is just one example of how Africa's digital transformation is significantly influenced by various trade agreements and initiatives. There are several initiatives that have arisen with the aim to foster a cohesive environment for digital trade and cooperation with partners from around the world. The Policy and Regulatory Initiative for Digital Africa, funded by the European Union and implemented by the African Union, plays a pivotal role in supporting digital inclusion and the larger objective of digital transformation. This initiative seeks to enhance broadband access and develop information and communication technology throughout Africa, as well as ensure that digital policies are coordinated throughout Africa and that there is adequate capacity to carry them out successfully.² By using existing European legislation as their template, African countries can ensure that their citizens are protected by similar laws with equal protections.

Additionally, Africa has prioritized continental initiatives in order to collectively increase their digital autonomy. For example, the Pan-African e-Network Project, which was launched in India but continues under African management, connects several African countries through a satellite and fibre network. By providing crucial access to tele-education and telemedicine across borders, this initiative demonstrates a successful partnership model that is organized by African citizens and from which they will also benefit.³ Another example is the Smart Africa Alliance, which was established to transform Africa into a single collaborative digital market by leveraging its rapidly developing economies. The alliance is led by several African national leaders from across the continent and promotes the implementation of sustainable policies that support digital infrastructure development across its member states, thus making digital services more accessible throughout Africa. This alliance aims to put information and communications technology at the centre of

² See https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/programmes/policy-and-regulation-initiative-digital-africa-prida_en.

³ See <https://au.int/en/flagships/pan-african-e-network>.

national socio-economic development agendas, which involves aligning broadband infrastructure with existing plans and ensuring affordable access for all.⁴

Recommendations

- **Proactive formulation and implementation of government policies:** African countries need to be proactive in developing and carrying out policies in which digital sovereignty and economic independence are given top priority.
- **Transparency in digital operations:** Transparency should be emphasized in digital transactions and operations to dismantle digital neocolonialism. Clear and open policies and practices will enable better scrutiny of foreign involvement in Africa's digital sphere, safeguarding against hidden agendas and ensuring mutually beneficial collaborations.
- **Increasing domestic capabilities in technology:** Enhancing domestic technological capabilities is vital. This includes investing in local talent development, supporting technology education and creating incentives for innovation within African countries. Focusing on building domestic technology sectors will help reduce reliance on foreign technologies and strengthen the African digital economy.
- **Consumer-centric digital policies:** African consumers' rights and interests should be top priority in the digital marketplace, with advocacy for privacy, data protection and fair access to digital resources. Consumer-centric policy development will guarantee that all Africans may profit from and have widespread access to the advantages of the digital era.

Conclusion

The examination of digital neocolonialism in Africa in this paper reveals a landscape in which technological advancements, though promising progress, have also facilitated a new era of foreign dominance and dependence. This underscores the need for strategic efforts to counterbalance these influences and leverage digital technologies for true African development. Africa must move forward into the digital era with a vision that promotes empowerment and self-determination. By embracing the aforementioned recommendations, African countries will be able to transform the constraints posed by digital neocolonialism into opportunities for long-term development, creativity and true independence in the digital sphere. Adopting this route, despite its challenges, could lead to a time in the future when digital technology serves as both a tool for emancipation as well as a catalyst for equitable advancement.

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on the development of the Global South and the potential of emerging technologies. He will expand on this research as an undergraduate fellow with the Digital Policy Hub.

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