

RESEARCH FOR THE WORLD

Are we giving away too much online?

Published 19 January 2024



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Do we really know how much data we're giving away and how it's being used? A new book by **Nick Couldry** and **Ulises Mejias** explores the murky world of big tech and how we can fight back.

Do you use social media? Shop online? Use a fitness tracker? Have a smart meter in your house? Chat with friends on messaging apps?

So many of our daily activities now take place online, it's hard to imagine our lives without these services at our fingertips. But how often do you check the terms and conditions when downloading an app or signing up to an online account? How much do you know about the data that you're giving away and how it's being used?

In a new book, **Data Grab**, Professor Nick Couldry from the Department of Media and Communications at LSE and his co-author Professor Ulises A Mejias, a Mexican/US author from State University of New York Oswego, explore how big tech companies use our data and how it can be repackaged to manipulate our views, track our movements and discriminate against us.

They argue that through this "data grab", colonialism – which was historically a land grab of natural resources, exploitative labour, and private property – has taken on a new form where big tech companies control and exploit our data for profit.



A new land grab could be happening right now, right in front of our eyes, through human life being captured in the form of data. ”

The new colonialism

When undertaking research for the book, Professors Couldry and Mejas found data was being extracted from every aspect of human life. “We realised the closest parallel was in the colonial land grab that happened around 1500 when Spain and Portugal suddenly realised there was a whole new world they could grab for themselves,” Professor Couldry says.

“It seemed to us this was a good analogy for the serious scale of what’s happening with data and that’s when we started developing a framework for data colonialism. We weren’t the first people to come up with this term, but we were the first people to see this as not just a metaphor but a new stage in the evolution of colonialism. What if colonialism could evolve? And that a new land grab could be happening right now, right in front of our eyes, through human life being captured in the form of data?”

A curated universe

Professor Couldry argues we’re at a moment where we are facing a radical change in social life, which will “become enforced until there is no way out of it” and we become ever more reliant on these services.

“We are increasingly going to be locked into a completely curated universe which is governed by corporations rather than ourselves,” he warns. We are already starting to see something like this in China, for example, where the platform WeChat – which started off as an app to chat with your friends – is now being used for all aspects of life.

You can buy goods on WeChat, get credit, submit your tax returns and deal with the government. “It has now become a complete platform for life and, as we know, Elon Musk has a similar vision for the platform X,” explains Professor Couldry.

“All these platforms work off the network effect,” he says. “The more people who are on there, the more convenient it is for you to be on there and the more inconvenient it is for you to step off.”

Professors Couldry and Mejas call this a “civilising narrative” – something which distracts us from the reality of what is going on and makes it seem more palatable, even appealing. With data extraction, we are told that it will make our lives more convenient, and we will be better connected to each other. With historical colonialism, the notions of progress or Christian salvation were often given as a justification.



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The dark side of data

On a personal level, you might not be too worried about your data being collected, you might think you are resistant to its negative effects. At worst, you think it might lead to targeted adverts.

However, on a macro level, when our data is aggregated it can be used in ways we could never imagine. For example, it can be used to train algorithms to make decisions that affect large groups of people. Decisions such as whether you receive state support, are successful in a job application or have a visa approved. These algorithms can be opaque and discriminatory, leaving us with little knowledge about how a decision was made. And, like historical colonialism, the effects are usually felt most strongly by those who are already vulnerable.

And that is before we get on to the damage data collection can do to the environment. Data requires processing by huge banks of computers (known as data centres), which use a significant amount of electricity and deplete the power supply for other uses. In the book, the authors cite **the example** of west London where the building of much-needed new homes has been constrained until at least 2035 due to a lack of electricity supply caused by the expansion of data centres in the area.

Globally, it is estimated **data centres will use between 3 and 13 per cent of all electricity globally by the year 2030, compared to the one per cent they used in 2010**. This electricity creates heat which needs to be cooled down using vast amounts of fresh water. Thames Water has already **expressed concern** that its water supplies are getting dangerously low and data centres are a key reason behind this.



We can only change things together and we need to help each other make these changes. ”

How to fight back

This all paints a very bleak picture, but Professor Couldry doesn't want us to despair. He argues this future can be averted by a large, collective effort to resist data colonialism's injustices. "We can only change things together and we need to help each other make these changes. This is what we try and offer in the book: a new vision to help people understand that it doesn't need to go this way."

To offer inspiration, Data Grab provides examples of individuals and groups who are resisting. In the US, 17 communities have issued bans against the use of facial recognition software by police. Workers across the globe are taking a stand and there is an increasing number of unions for companies like Google, Apple and Amazon. Gig workers are taking matters into their own hands, exerting pressure on governments to guarantee their basic rights. Some are even undertaking "account therapy", which involves coaxing algorithms to behave in ways more favourable to workers and counter their exploitative effects.

Whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden and Frances Haugen have helped expose US surveillance apparatus and the willingness of big companies to put profit before the safety and mental wellbeing of their users. Some companies, such as Lush cosmetics, have closed down some of their social media accounts, and taken the financial hit for doing so, due to the harmful effects of these platforms.

Not all actions have to be on a large scale. As is noted in the book, “even putting your phone down for a couple of hours might be an act of defiance”. Likewise, refusing to accept cookies when visiting a website might be a form of resistance – something which **apparently so far only 0.5 per cent of users do**.

Professor Couldry also outlines several alternative platforms which are focused on community rather than profit and can be used instead of mainstream apps. These are known as “federated platforms”. The best-known is probably Mastodon which is an alternative to X. Pixelfed can be used for sharing photographs and PeerTube is a federated video-sharing platform.

With our lives increasingly taking place online, we are giving away more data than ever. Maybe, as Professors Couldry and Mejias state, “in the long run, a life full of smart devices is not really smart at all.” Maybe this is the time to take a stand. ■

Data Grab: The new colonialism of big tech (and how to fight back) by

Professor Nick Couldry and
Professor Ulises A Mejias is now
available to purchase.

Professor Nick Couldry was
speaking to Charlotte Kelloway,
Media Relations Manager at LSE.

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