



## PAPERS

# Colonization.com: Empire Building for a New Digital Age

The Internet has become the new tool of old fashioned colonialism.

Digital corporations are organizing the world, extending their control over people and resources of the non-west, using the poor as cheap labor, and deny agency to those who are not white, do not speak English, and do not desire the same things as ‘white geeks’

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PERHAPS I SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SURPRISED THAT NEARLY EVERY INTERNET scholar I encountered while working as a summer researcher at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University stubbornly imagined the future of the Internet as being unquestionably American. As a white American geek, I cannot speak for the multiplicity of Internet users from across the globe or their preferred futures for the Internet, but I can say that the white American geeks building Internet futures have taken up traditional colonial attitudes when imagining the development or use of digital technologies. The Berkman Center, founded by Harvard Law School professor Jonathan Zittrain and author of *The Future of the Internet And How to Stop It* (2008), primarily conducts research on legal issues related to the Internet. Despite its legal-centric focus, fellows and researchers at the Berkman Center often get involved in geopolitical issues ranging from the development of high-tech surveillance or censorship circumvention tools (sponsored by the U.S. Department of State) to the design and dissemination of cheap technology meant to bring digital tools to poor populations (such as the “One Laptop per Child” project). While many of the projects developed at the Berkman Center are laudable and worthy of praise, much of research concerned with the future of the Internet or digital technologies rely heavily upon the dominance of Western cultures over the non-

Western “Other.” Paralleling what Ziauddin Sardar observed in the field of futures studies, the discourses and debates about the futures of the Internet are constrained and directed by a small group of elite American geeks, mostly white males, who effectively colonize the future and shape the Internet according to their preferences (Sardar, 1993).

Many American and European scholars studying the Internet understand that Americans and Europeans are already a minority of Internet users worldwide, and will constitute an even smaller minority in the coming decades. But nevertheless they often imagine that the “underlying architecture” of the Internet ensures the continuation of American-style liberalism, democracy, and capitalism well into the future. Those who challenge or attempt to redefine this architecture are often cast as either an evil and threatening “Other” (especially China) or as inept in the use of digital technologies and in need of education by those who better understand the logic of the Internet. However, these debates about the “white man’s burden” do more than simply exclude or chastise non-Western agents in the development of the Internet, they also refocus the attention away from traditional forms of colonization enabled by the spread of digital technologies and instead fetishize the ways in which media or technology companies take possession of immaterial “cyberspaces.”

In 1981, Tom McPhail coined the term “electronic colonialism” and argued that where earlier colonial institutions grabbed up soil anywhere they could, now multimedia giants try to capture the eyes, ears, and attention of the world (McPhail, 1987). McPhail theorized that mass media was leading toward a new concept of empire, not based on military power or land acquisition, but control over the mind. When McPhail theorized the new “Empire of Mind,” the global Internet was only just getting started, but his idea has remained dominant in the popular debates about Internet futures. Even before its full articulation, cyberspace was destined to be the new battleground of the “Empire of Mind” which bleeds over national borders and does not fit well into traditional maps. At the 2010 Web 2.0 Summit, Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, commented on a map hanging behind him which charted out the online “turf” claimed by tech companies saying “Your map is wrong. The biggest part of the map has to be uncharted territory” (Kincaid, 2010). The comment sparked little controversy, but numerous speculations that Facebook was planning on colonizing the Internet (Farber, 2010).

The claim that cyberspace is being colonized is about as old as the concept of cyberspace itself. A decade before Zuckerberg comment, many saw the announced AOL-Time Warner merger as an attempt to colonize cyberspace and wrest control over the Internet away from grass-roots innovators (Muwakkil, 2000). The position of “net neutrality” proponents might be best described as the fear that Internet Service Providers will conspire with content producers to effectively colonize the Internet and exercise an unfair monopoly over the attention of users. In 1995, just after the Web became popular and ubiquitous in wealthy regions of the world, Sardar was among the first to question the *modus operandi* of inventing a new virtual territory. Sardar argued that “Beyond postmodernism’s subjugation of the realities, modes of knowing and actual being of Other cultures, the West urgently needs new spaces to conquer...and where they don’t actually exist, they must be created. Enter, cyberspace” (Sardar, 1995, p. 778). For Sardar, the invention of “cyberspace” stemmed from the Western desire for conquest which, after running out of physical territories to colonize, focused instead on control over mental or cultural products. However, beyond the simple colonization of attention, Sardar also argued that Western technology companies operated much like the English and Dutch East India Companies which established themselves in India and Indonesia using military technology to exploit natural resources and enslave the natives. In the intervening two decades, the belief that control over cyberspace is primarily concerned with capturing the attention of users has intensified, rather than abated. The belief that “attention is the new currency” has become popular not only in advertising firms, but also dominates the portrayal of technology companies in the news media. While some features of cyberspace might resemble the “electronic colonization” of attention McPhail theorized, in significant ways the Internet still serves traditional colonial aspirations of control over people, resources, and labor. The materiality of the Internet and electronic consumer culture has fueled ongoing quests for rare earths in Africa, which in turn favors militarist regimes over potentially unstable democratic governments which Western companies might find less willing to exploit their natural resources or people. Rather than imagining a new global system in which corporations or governments colonize cyberspace, it is more useful to consider emerging system as what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri simply call “Empire” which is “composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule.” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. xii)

Despite contemporary preoccupations with the novelty and speed of networks, “cyberspace” has become more than simply a contested virtual zone where companies and organizations compete for user attention. If companies like Facebook were only trying to colonize “cyberspace,” we would wonder why only a few months after Zuckerberg criticized the Web 2.0 map Facebook would publish a map visualizing its own reach in cyberspace as though it had been playing a Parker Brother’s board game and had nearly won (minus China) “The Game of Strategic Conquest.”



Figure 1: Facebook intern Paul Butler’s map of friend connections juxtaposed with the game board from “Risk”

### A New World Order

The discourse on Internet development is shot through with colonial narratives, some obvious and others more subtle, but almost always pronounced. According to this narrative, Internet access almost always means economic growth, improved health, better education and the chance to be counted as a world “netizen.” The new tech colonial story was difficult to ignore while American media pundits attempted to name the waves of demonstrations and protests spreading across the Arab world beginning in 2009 the “Facebook” or “Twitter” revolutions. The American media weren’t the only organizations hoping to claim the revolutions as products of American tech innovations. In June 2009 during protests in Iran, Jared Cohen, in his capacity as a member of Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s Policy Planning Staff, contacted Twitter and requested that the company not perform scheduled maintenance which would have temporarily shut down the service in Iran. The White House was furious with Cohen’s violation of Obama’s commitment to non-interference, but Cohen defended the decision arguing that the American tech company was a necessary tool for digital activists to communicate with the outside world.

In his book *The Googlization of Everything* (2011), the critical Internet scholar Siva Vaidhyanathan pointed out that Google's mission statement "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful" sets it apart from any other company in history. A few months after Cohen sent his request to Twitter, he organized the first delegation of tech executives to post-invasion Iraq (Levy, 2009). Included in the delegation was Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of Google. Cohen and Schmidt quickly became friends while touring Iraq's decimated infrastructure and planned future collaborations. Google's interest in participating with the reconstruction of a nation occupied by the U.S. military was much more than simply helping to organize information, but demonstrated the company's plans help create policies which would organize people and institutions in foreign lands as well. Schmidt was impressed with Cohen and a year later Schmidt asked him to head Google's own quasi-philanthropic new policy think tank, called "Google Ideas," which works to figure out "how technology can enable people to confront threats in the face of conflict, instability or repression." Cohen, who "spent time in Iran" and "hung out in Iraq during the war" as a Rhodes Scholar, is not unlike a modern Lawrence of Arabia promising independence from empires while also working for one (Dykes & Melton, 2013).

While in Iraq, the two men also conspired to write a book about the changes they imagined for the future of an Internet-connected and digitally savvy world. The resulting product of their collaboration, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business* (2013), goes well beyond search engines and social media. The book predicts an exciting future where the tech industry can improve everyone's health, make education universal and easy, build better governments, end the need for physical wars where people die, and terrorism becomes the disruption of digital services without bloody consequences. At the same time, the book's colonialism is difficult to miss. Unabashedly, Schmidt and Cohen acknowledge that most of the 2.5 billion people with Internet access today aren't American, but have no trouble predicting the continued dominance of American business and ideals as the remaining 4.5 billion get wired up.

These colonial attitudes reappear in nearly every section of Schmidt and Cohen's book. In his review of the book, Julian Assange pointed out a few specific common tropes noting that "the authors happily take up the white geek's burden. A liberal sprinkling of convenient, hypothetical dark-skinned

worthies appear: Congolese fisherwomen, graphic designers in Botswana...and illiterate Masai cattle herders in the Serengeti are all obediently summoned to demonstrate the progressive properties of Google phones jacked into the informational supply chain of the Western empire” (Assange, 2013). Of course Assange (who is nothing if not a white geek himself) became famous after publishing 251,000 secret U.S. diplomatic cables on Wikileaks, without redaction, potentially exposing thousands of vulnerable people named in the documents to harm or death (Ball, 2011).

We might be right to question Assange's suitability to speak on the subject of Google's proposed colonization, particularly considering his own willingness to impose his understanding of free expression on others. But Assange at least recognizes that some of the five billion new users predicted to join the global Internet in the next few decades may not be the passive recipients of progress Google imagines. However, missing from both the book and the review is any consideration that people might resist the “help” offered by Google or by Wikileaks, might even prefer to be let alone, or might have much more agency in determining their own futures than they imagine now. Google might be particularly good at reorganizing the world into something it can understand and make use of, but non-Western companies and governments might be better at using the Internet as a colonial tool than Schmidt, Cohen, or Assange are willing to accept.

When Geremie Barme and Sang Ye coined the term “Great Firewall” their 1997 *Wired* magazine article, only 150,000 people in China had access to the Internet and 86 percent of Chinese citizens had never touched a computer (Barme & Ye, 1997). In 2012, it was estimated that approximately 538,000,000 people use the Internet in China, or 40.1 percent of the total population and 22.4 percent of all Internet users in the world are in China (“Top 20 Countries - Internet Usage,” 2012). The idea that China's Internet exists inside a bubble, isolated from the rest of the world, is in need of serious revision. In the article, Barme and Ye cynically quoted from the Beijing journal *Strategy and Management* which argued that “following the end of the Cold War, certain developed nations are determined to protect their own interests by labeling themselves as internationalists. They pretend to be the benefactors of all mankind, while constantly expanding their sphere of influence and attempting to contain the development of others...They want to envelop everything in their information umbrella” (Barme & Ye, 1997).

Barme and Ye called the Beijing journal's analysis "Paranoid nationalism" and read it as a way of garnering support for the burgeoning Chinese tech industry. Nearly two decades later, the journal's analysis proves to be a better way of thinking about the remote control over territories facilitated by powerful telecommunications technology than the idea of people living in a fishbowl behind Barme and Ye's imaginary Wall.

In June 2013, Google announced that it would begin sending experimental balloons, loaded down with Internet hotspot equipment, into the stratosphere to help connect the estimated 4.5 billion people who do not have access to the Internet, many of whom live in rural areas ("ICT Facts and Figures," 2011). While imaginative, Google's "Loon Project" is not the most ambitious plan in the works for spreading the American technocracy abroad. Twitter has made recent deals with cellular phone service providers to give free access to their services in over a hundred countries (Olanoff, 2013). Not content with having only a seventh of the world's population on Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg announced in August 2013 that he would be partnering with half a dozen of the world's largest tech giants to provide cheaper Internet access for those in the developing world in what he unabashedly considers to be the merging of humanitarian goals with profit motives (Facebook, 2013). As it becomes increasingly difficult to get new users in North American and Europe, these tech companies are setting their sights on poorer countries and people in Asia, Africa, and South America. However, these firms aren't the only players competing for control over remote territories and markets. They may not even be the best players.

Not only is China rapidly connecting more of its citizens to the Internet, but Chinese Internet and telecommunications companies (some owned partially by the Chinese government) are rapidly expanding beyond the limits of state borders. Rather than rely on Silicon Valley, China has developed its own tech companies which work better in Chinese, follow Chinese regulations, and are not beholden to foreign powers. Already, the Chinese versions of Twitter (Weibo), Facebook (Xiaonei), eBay (Taobao), and Google (Baidu) attract far more users than their American counterparts. Increasingly, these company's services are successfully extending beyond the territorial boundaries of China.

In 2003, eBay bought the top online auction site in China called Eachnet for \$180 million (van Hasselt, 2006). In response, with backing from the

Chinese government, one of the top Chinese websites Alibaba launched Taobao to compete with eBay's new market. In two years, Taobao increased its market share from 8% to 59% while eBay went from 79% to 36% (Ma, 2006). A little while later, eBay shut down its site in China and in 2012, Taobao went international. Today, Taobao is the 10th most visited website in the world and it is estimated to be worth about \$814 million ("Taobao Launches New Taobao App Store," 2010). More interesting is that Taobao claims at least \$65 billion in goods were traded on Taobao last year, including trades between vendors in China and purchasers in the United States or Europe. Other Silicon Valley companies are going the way of eBay and ceding control over China's markets too. In 2010, Google relocated its servers from Beijing to Hong Kong and is still active in China, though far less popular than Baidu. In September 2013, Yahoo! announced that it would be ending its news services in China and has already closed its email services there (Brewster, 2013). Many American online services are slow in China, don't work well in Asian languages, and constantly risk disruption from Chinese censors. Read another way, China is proving to be a more difficult colonial subject than other regions of the world and is becoming a colonial power in its own right.

Earlier in 2013, New Zealand announced that it had awarded major electronic infrastructure development contracts to the Chinese company Huawei, despite fears that the partially-government-owned company might use the new infrastructure to spy on New Zealanders (Pullar-Strecker, 2013). The U.S., Canada, and Australia have blocked Huawei from participating in national infrastructure projects over similar concerns which, since the revelation of the U.S.'s massive surveillance program PRISM is particularly ironic. However, fears that China is capable of remotely exercising power and surveillance over domestic national spaces echoes colonial attitudes about who has the right, or duty, to colonize and who must be subject to improvement by the colonizers. New Zealanders feel the Chinese government should be kept away from domestic spaces whereas China resists the exercise of American foreign policy agendas over its own territory by blocking mainland access to Twitter and Facebook. However, the colonial control over remote populations might be most obviously apparent in the use of digital technologies as a means to capture poor and rural populations and subject them to global labor markets.

### **Tapping Into the World's Poor**

Shortly after the advent of the global Internet, researchers and entrepreneurs

realized that digital technologies could be used to satisfy the need for large-scale human labor, skilled and unskilled, to acquire or make use of digital data. Stories of digital sweatshops in places like China and Vietnam have made headlines in the U.S. and the U.K. profiling workers sitting at Internet-connected computers for days at a time performing repetitive tasks for people in wealthy countries. The “Chinese Gold Farmer,” someone who plays games like ‘World of Warcraft’ to acquire in-game currency which other players purchase in exchange for real-world money, has become a particularly popular story for media outlets to follow (Davis, 2009). Part of the fascination with the “Chinese Gold Farmer,” as pointed out by Alexander Galloway, is not the conditions under which these people farm or the political economy which has sprung up around digital leisure, but the sense in which it is the “Chinese”—not the gold, which is actually being farmed (Galloway, 2012, p. 136).

However, experiments using crowd sourced labor are hardly new. In 1714, the British government offered a longitude prize for a method of determining longitude at sea (Taylor, 1971). Since then, communications technologies have significantly lowered the barriers which kept people in remote locations out of the global labor pool. Beginning in 2005, Amazon's Mechanical Turk provided employers with freelance employees capable of completing “human intelligence tasks.” Payment to these employees was done on a micro-level based upon the tasks performed. Simple or monotonous tasks, paid usually a few U.S. cents per task if paid at all, could be farmed out to anyone willing to perform them. Since this early innovation in micro-labor, crowdsourcing has become substantially more popular among both workers and employers. As the Internet and digital technologies made their way into poorer regions of the world and unskilled laborers could be given a computer and Internet access, numerous other companies have been formed to facilitate the request for cheap micro-labor largely emanating from the wealthy Global North.

Much like the recent projects by Google, Facebook and Twitter to spread their services to disconnected populations, these micro-labor companies sometimes present themselves as humanitarian organizations providing work to those who need it most. One of the most prominent examples of this recent phenomenon is Samasource, a nonprofit organization based in San Francisco whose mission is “to incorporate billions of marginalized people into the global economy and alleviate poverty at scale” (“Samasource Our Mission,” n.d.). Its founder, Leila Janah, graduated from Harvard with a

degree in African Development Studies and worked for the World Bank before founding the company. As a humanitarian organization, Samasource believes in the “dignity of work” to help people living in poverty “build confidence, gain skills in the new economy and inject much-needed capital into their communities.” By 2012, Samasource had established 16 work centers in Africa, Haiti, and South Asia and had also paid its over 3,000 workers with more than \$2 million (Gino & Staats, 2012).

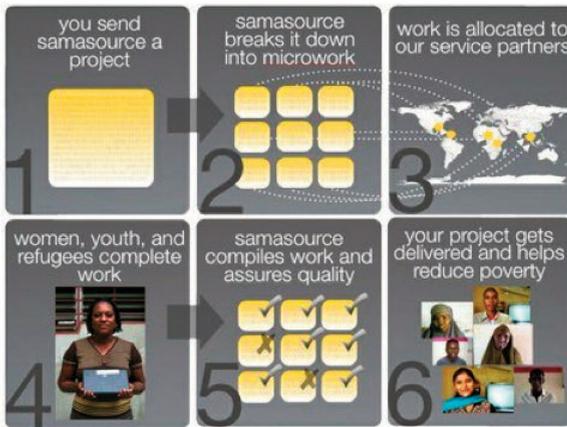


Figure 2: Virtual assembly line, courtesy of Samasource.com

Samasource and Janah have received numerous accolades in the past few years. In 2012, Samasource received the Secretary's Innovation Award for the Empowerment of Women and Girls from then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and the TechFellows Award for Disruptive Innovation (Constine, 2012). In 2012 *Wired* magazine named Janah as one of the 50 people who will change the world (“The Smart List 2012,” 2012) and *Fast Company* named her one of the 100 most creative people in business (“79. Leila Chirayath Janah,” 2011). Samasource keeps careful track of the people who work as micro-laborers from the firms by performing longitudinal studies and interviewing workers after they leave, conducting household surveys, and performing wage audits. In 2013, Samasource's internal studies found that workers had collectively experienced an income increase of 114% and that 76% of their workers reported improvement in overall physical health (Chow, 2013).

Despite third-party evidence that Samasource has improved the lives of many

people living in poverty, (Madon & Sharanappa, 2013) it is appropriate to wonder why a humanitarian company working to bring the dignity of work to the “other” 4 billion people not currently digitally connected would advertise their services on the front page of their website as “a unique microwork model that harnesses the untapped potential of poor women and youth.” Samasource's focus on sharing the “dignity of work” using digital tools obscures the complexities of poverty and privilege. We should question exactly what is dignified about performing repetitive tasks, for minimal pay, people in wealthy countries find unworthy, too tedious or expensive to do themselves? Christian Fuchs and Eva Horak have pointed out that solutions to the “digital divide” based primarily on increasing access to technology or the Internet are “reductionistic and one-dimensional, they do not see the interconnectedness of technology access, social factors, uneven development, human rights, and global capitalism...Modern society is so rich and productive that it could easily afford a modest income, social security, literacy, and free access to computers and the Internet for all humans”(Fuchs & Horak, 2008, p. 114).

Given this complexity, it is hard not to be skeptical of quasi-humanitarian initiatives like those recently launched by Microsoft and Huawei to spread Internet access across Africa with Microsoft's “White spaces project” and Huawei's cheap smartphone handset “4Afrika.” The collaborative projects launched by these tech giants hope to expand Internet access in Africa by opening “white spaces” in television broadcast transmissions to digital communications networks and by spreading cheap wireless Internet devices across the continent. Microsoft's initiative demonstrates not only the latent racism of colonial attitudes toward black Africans (opening “white spaces” in Africa for white geeks and their technology companies), but also establishes Microsoft as the hub through which future technology innovation in Africa must flow. Toward this end, Microsoft has established “AppFactories” in South Africa and Egypt “to accelerate the development of highly relevant Windows 8 and Windows Phone apps – by Africans, for Africa” (“Microsoft - 4Afrika,” n.d.) and the company has launched a “SMEs (Small and medium enterprises) Initiative” online portal to aggregate Africa-based technology services (Koutonin, 2013). In Kenya especially, where the Whitespaces project will start first, Microsoft has a long history of preventing potential competition in African markets. Most recently, Microsoft threatened to pull financial support from a \$2 billion initiative to provide Kenyan schoolchildren with free laptops if Microsoft software was not pre-installed on the machines

instead of open source freeware alternatives or software made by local startups based in “Silicon Savannah” in the west of Nairobi (Wanjiku, 2013). Microsoft and Huawei’s 4Afrika projects encourage African entrepreneurs to decide which apps or services will address African needs, but only so long as they use a Huawei device or build their futures using Microsoft software. In this context, bridging the “digital divide” may be more about global capital and labor markets using digital technologies to access the rural poor, putting the poor to work, and regulating their futures than it is about sharing the benefits of easy access to knowledge or recognizing the agency of “others” as members of global communications networks.

### **Knocking Over the Game Board**

At a Princeton Colloquium on Public and International Affairs, Eric Schmidt told his audience that the one thing he learned from Google is that “people are the same everywhere...it would be the simplest way to run the world, to recognize that the other people, other races, other cultures, people who don't speak the same language have roughly the same things that they care about as you do. We know this because we can prove it”(Princeton Colloquium, 2009). If Schmidt and other Internet development predictors are correct, in the next decade 4-6 billion new people (adjusting for population growth) will be joining the global Internet. Most of these people will come from poorer regions, won't speak English as their primary language, won't be white, and almost certainly will not care about “roughly the same things” that his Princeton audience care about.

The focus on how companies, governments or particular services are taking over the Internet obscures how they are also using the Internet to extend their control over people or deny them the agency to shape their own futures. The “other people” Schmidt mentions have their own, competing and diverse, ideas about what telecommunications and to what purposes digital technologies should be used. Focusing on how companies or governments are “colonizing the Internet” obscures the complex ways in which digital communications technology, even deployed for the best of reasons, can facilitate colonial control over people and places. The “uncharted territory” Mark Zuckerberg imagined in his 2010 Web 2.0 Summit address is only imaginable if we forget that people are already there with their own social and communications networks, sometimes digital and sometimes not, which ought not simply be optimized or replaced by technology firms. The Internet itself, which is perhaps the most

constructed and continually changing network in human history, may someday be replaced by another network or technology. Yet as the Internet-scholar Evgeny Morozov has recently put it, “there’s something odd about how the geeks can simultaneously claim that the Internet is fixed and permanent and work extremely hard in the background to keep it that way” (Morozov, 2013, p. 19). The Internet is the result of, and very rarely the cause, of the world we inhabit. We do not have to reject digital technologies, hopes for a better cyberspace, or humanitarian ideals outright to question whether Silicon Valley, the U.S. Department of State, or the Communist Party of China should be allowed to organize the world, decide how best to put its people to use, or shape the futures of the Internet.

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