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15-17 Mayıs/ May 2024

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DIGITAL INEQUALITY & DATA COLONIALISM SYMPOSIUM

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DECOLONIZATION OF DATA: AN ANALYSIS ON DATA PROTECTION PRACTICES IN TÜRKİYE

Bilge ŞENYÜZ*

Abstract

Colonialism, a practice rooted in domination, describes societies throughout history expanding their influence by absorbing neighboring territories and settling their populations in newly acquired lands. In a contemporary context, data colonialism has emerged, reflecting the historical patterns of subjugation. Powerful entities, often from the Global North, now extract, control, and exploit data from the Global South and marginalized communities, mirroring traditional colonial practices. This parallel between historical nation-state colonization and the digital age underscores data's role as a new form of resource colonization. In many cases, colonialism ends through a process of decolonization in which colonies gain independence from the imperial power. This process can be peaceful or involve significant struggles and conflicts. Similarly, data decolonization, which seeks to liberate digital domains, is linked to the decolonization movement of the mid-20th century. The objective of the study is to map the path of data decolonization in Türkiye. It does so through online in-depth interviews with experts from data-related NGOs and academia, framed within the context of data decolonization practices. The present research illuminates collective efforts to assert self-determination in the realm of data. The findings delineate the dynamics of data colonization and decolonization in Türkiye, shedding light on their trajectories. The outcomes of this research furnish valuable guidance for the pursuit of equitable, universal access, control, and benefits from digital resources.

Keywords: decolonization of data, data protection, data colonialism, data ethics.

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VERİLERİN SÖMÜRGESİZLEŞTİRİLMESİ: TÜRKİYE'DEKİ VERİ KORUMA UYGULAMALARI ÜZERİNE BİR İNCELEME

Bilge ŞENYÜZ*

Öz

Kökleri tahakküme dayanan bir uygulama olan sömürgecilik, tarih boyunca toplumların komşu bölgeleri yutarak ve nüfuslarını yeni elde ettikleri topraklara yerleştirerek nüfuzlarını genişletmelerini tanımlar. Çağdaş bağlamda ise, tarihsel boyun eğdirme modellerini yansıtan veri sömürgeciliği ortaya çıkmıştır. Genellikle Küresel Kuzey'den gelen güçlü varlıklar, geleneksel sömürge uygulamalarını yansıtacak şekilde Küresel Güney'den ve marjinalleştirilmiş topluluklardan veri çekmekte, kontrol etmekte ve sömürmektedir. Tarihsel ulus-devlet sömürgeciliği ile dijital çağ arasındaki bu paralellik, verinin yeni bir kaynak sömürgeciliği biçimi olarak rolünün altını çizmektedir. Pek çok durumda sömürgecilik, sömürgelerin emperyal güçten bağımsızlığını kazandığı bir dekolonizasyon süreciyle sona erer. Bu süreç barışçıl olabileceği gibi önemli mücadeleler ve çatışmalar da içerebilir. Benzer şekilde, dijital alanları özgürleştirmeyi amaçlayan veri dekolonizasyonu da 20. yüzyılın ortalarındaki dekolonizasyon hareketiyle bağlantılıdır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Türkiye'de veri dekolonizasyonunun haritasını çıkarmaktır. Bu amacı gerçekleştirmek için, çalışmada veri ile ilişkili sivil toplum kuruluşlarından uzmanlarla veri sömürgesizleştirme uygulamaları bağlamında çevrim içi yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Araştırma, Türkiye'de veri alanında kendi kaderini tayin etme yönündeki kolektif çabaları serimlemektedir. Bulgular, Türkiye'de veri kolonizasyonu ve dekolonizasyonunun dinamiklerini tartışmaya açmaktadır. Bu araştırmanın sonuçları, dijital kaynaklara eşitlikçi, evrensel erişim, kontrol ve fayda sağlama arayışları için bir rehber sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: veri dekolonizasyonu, veri koruma, veri sömürgeciliği, veri etiği.

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Introduction

British mathematician and data science entrepreneur Clive Humby's 2006 quote, "Data is the new oil!" marked a significant breakthrough in social life and the digital economy. Besides, The Economist magazine reinforced this transformation in its 2017 article, "The world's most valuable resource is no longer oil, it's data" (The Economist, 2017). Consequently, this analogy between data and oil has frequently appeared in both academic and popular literature.

The world is swiftly moving towards complete dataization. The days of casual internet browsing are behind us, as Lovink (2023) observes in his discussion on the evolving nature of internet use (pp. 15-18). Data colonialism, a crucial concept that has emerged in this historical transformation, is not a recent phenomenon. It represents a form of postcolonialism and neocolonialism with roots in traditional colonialism, evolving through industrial capitalism, and now taking on a new, global form (Mumford, 2022, pp. 1511-1512).

Lovink (2023) critiques the notion that "critical scholarship has produced nothing but delayed revelations of no consequence; the fate of internet theory is to be late," recalling Hegel's statement that "Minerva's owl flies only after dark" (p. 20). This study aims to examine whether this critique holds true in the context of Türkiye, particularly regarding data colonialism and decolonization practices.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how data colonialism manifests in Türkiye and the strategies employed by local NGOs to counteract its effects. By conducting online in-depth interviews with members of data-related NGOs, this research seeks to uncover the challenges and successes in their efforts to promote data decolonization. The methodology includes purposive sampling to select participants who are actively involved in these initiatives, ensuring a rich and relevant data set.

Through this study, I aim to contribute to the broader discourse on decolonization by highlighting the specific experiences and insights from the Turkish context. This research not only provides valuable information for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners engaged in similar efforts globally but also identifies best practices and potential areas for improvement in the ongoing decolonization initiatives within the NGO sector.

Data Colonization: Definition and History

Data colonization, an essential concept in an era when data has become central to social life, refers to the extraction of large amounts of data from individuals, communities, and regions, often without their informed consent. The data can include personal information, user-generated content, and digital footprints. In other words, data colonialism is one of the concepts circulated by contemporary researchers who are critical of data collection and processing processes (Couldry & Mejinas, 2019; Couldry & Mejinas, 2020). It underlines

the determinism and biases of power structures in data collection and evaluation processes.

Persistent social and political inequalities affect the collection and analysis of data. Data from disadvantaged countries worldwide is either not considered or only used as a commodity in market research. Beyond this gross inequality, data from minority groups and the economically disadvantaged within the same country/region is also collected against their will or ignored.

Moreover, data colonialism is becoming a phenomenon that can be observed in all areas of social hierarchy and inequality. For example, in the context of educational technology, a recent study criticizes the use of learning data to generate value and promote personalized learning experiences, often but not always in the form of direct monetization for institutions, and how data mining has become the "new normal" in this field (Kohnke & Foung, 2024, p. 1). At the same time, as giant technology companies are increasing their revenues, profits, and power in unprecedented ways, states are tightening their digital grip on health and freedom of movement (Lovink, 2023, p. 7).

People's lives are constantly monitored and spied on, and data is obtained in this way. Thus, human life is now appropriated instead of natural resources and labor by turning it into data. In the contemporary world, human life is devalued by being made a direct input of capitalist production. In other words, data colonialism is an emergent order of appropriation of social resources through data, implemented through data relations, to make profits. Unlike historical colonialism, which helped create the preconditions for what we know today as industrial capitalism with massive profits, data colonialism emerges against the intertwined history of colonialism and capitalism. It means that this fundamental colonialist movement to appropriate the data of human life works hand in hand with social arrangements and technological infrastructures, some of which emerged during earlier capitalism and some of which are new, that enable the transformation of this data into a commodity, or even a direct input into contemporary capitalist production (Couldry & Mejias, 2020: p. XIX).

In sum, data colonialism draws parallels between the historical colonization of nations and the contemporary digital environment, highlighting how data has become a new form of resource colonization. However, data colonialism, defined as the normalization of human exploitation through data, is used neither as a mere metaphor nor as an echo or a simple continuation of historical forms of territorial colonialism, but to refer to a new form of colonialism specific to the twenty-first century (Couldry & Mejias, 2018, pp. 1-2). It is, therefore, pertinent to examine the similarities and differences between data colonialism and historical colonialism in more detail.

Data Colonialism in the Context of Similarities to Historical Colonialism

In the preface to The Nomos of the Earth (1950), Schmitt wrote that colonialism is "a historical event without repetition." Only in fantastic parallels can one imagine a repetition of the modern phenomenon of colonialism, such as when men on the moon discover a new and hitherto unknown

planet that they can freely exploit to alleviate their struggles on Earth. What if such a planet is closer than we think? In this context, Couldry & Mejias (2020) argue that the price of connectivity forces people to ask whether, despite Schmitt's prediction, colonialism has renewed itself, or whether today's data colonialism is appropriating the ripe, raw material of the "planet of human experience." Like historical colonialism, data colonialism operates through the acquisition of "large-scale resources from which economic value can be extracted" (Van der Spuy, 2020). On this basis, there are similarities between historical colonialism and data colonialism. These similarities can be analyzed in terms of power imbalance, unequal resource use, cultural erosion, territorial expansion, infrastructure development, and dependency. These similarities are discussed in more detail below.

First, like oil, data can rarely be used in its raw form. Oil cannot be used unless it is refined. Oil must be extracted, refined, and distributed to be useful. The same is valid for data. We do not use data as soon as it is extracted; we have to process it before it is ready for analysis. Power imbalances are also common grounds for data colonialism and historical colonialism. As with traditional colonialism, data colonialism has a significant power imbalance. Large multinational corporations, technology companies, and governments from economically dominant regions have significant control over data resources. Power imbalances can also be considered common grounds of data colonialism and historical colonialism. As with traditional colonialism, data colonialism has a significant power imbalance. Large multinational corporations, technology companies, and governments from economically dominant regions have significant control over data resources.

Unequal benefits from the resource are also inherent to data and classic historical colonialism. Data from marginalized communities is often used to benefit those in power. This can include economic gains, improved services, and technological advances, but the benefits often do not trickle down adequately to the communities from which the data originates. Data exploitation involves the monetization of data. Companies profit by selling access to that data to advertisers, researchers, and other organizations, while the individuals or communities that provide the data often receive little or no compensation. It is clear that AI will not affect us all equally and, like other major technological disruptions, will serve to widen income inequality. In the words of thinker Sylvia Wynter, those who have been strategically labeled "subhuman" by colonialism for centuries will undoubtedly be the hardest hit (O'Gorman, 2023).

Cultural erosion, one of the main features of classical colonialism, is also present in data colonialism. Colonial powers often impose their own culture, language, and institutions on their colonies. This can lead to the displacement or suppression of local cultures and traditions. Similarly, data colonialism can lead to the erosion of local cultures, identities, and languages as global platforms and algorithms prioritize content from dominant cultures, marginalizing indigenous and local voices.

Classical historical colonialism involves a nation extending territorial control beyond its own borders, often through the establishment of colonies in distant lands. In data colonialism, this manifests itself as expansion into the virtual environment. Besides, just as historical colonial

powers-built roads, railroads, and ports to facilitate resource extraction and transportation, in data colonialism, colonial powers similarly have invested in developing infrastructure in colonies for their own economic interests.

Theories of development and dependency also share similarities with traditional colonialism and data colonialism. As in the past, developing countries and marginalized communities became economically dependent on powerful states (Dietz, 1980; Mahoney & Rodríguez-Franco, 2018); today, they have become dependent on data extraction, potentially perpetuating global inequalities.

Historically, many colonial activities ended with decolonization, in which colonies gained independence from the imperial power. This process may be peaceful or involve significant struggle and conflict. Data decolonization is also related to the decolonization movement that emerged in the mid-20th century (Qato, 2022). Before examining the concept of data decolonization in detail, it is important to distinguish data colonialism from historical colonialism.

Data Colonialism in the Context of Differences from Historical Colonialism

While it shares many similarities with historical colonialism, data colonialism also has some differences. The first of these differences is its epicenter. The epicenter of data colonialism is different from that of historical colonialism. Data colonialism does not involve a single pole of colonial power ("the West"), but at least two poles: The United States and China. It renders inadequate the concept of the "geography of the Global South," which has helped locate resistance and de-identification in geographical divisions between former colonizers and the colonized. Instead, the new data colonialism works both from the outside - on a global scale - and from the inside - on domestic populations. The elites of data colonialism, such as Facebook, benefit from colonialism in both dimensions, and the North-South and East-West divisions no longer matter in the same way (Couldry & Mejias, 2018, p. 2). There is a common understanding of exploitation shared by multinational corporations, governments, and technology companies.

In classical colonialism, in some cases, colonizers from the imperial country might settle in colonies and displace or interact with the indigenous population. This could also lead to demographic changes. This is not necessary for data colonialism.

Moreover, there are also differences between classical and data colonialism regarding resistance and conflict. Traditional colonialism often leads to resistance and conflict as local populations resist foreign rule, exploitation, and cultural impositions. This leads to uprisings, rebellions, and, in some cases, wars of independence. Data colonialism, on the other hand, appears to be more voluntarily accepted. Therefore, it is essential to identify and discuss data decolonization movements that challenge this voluntary acceptance.

Data Decolonization

Data decolonization simply refers to the process of challenging and correcting historical and ongoing imbalances and biases in data collection, representation, and interpretation, particularly in the context of marginalized communities and indigenous peoples. Decolonizing data begins with acknowledging the historical injustices, exploitation, and violence that many indigenous and marginalized communities have experienced because of colonialism. It's not just about acknowledging, but also about critically thinking about and taking action to correct these injustices.

Indigenous peoples have historically been deprived of their consent and benefited from the exploitation of their resources, including knowledge and data, by colonial powers. This exploitation continues in the modern era through data collection and analysis processes that often exclude or distort underprivileged people (Lauchs, 2024). By ensuring that these communities have ownership over their data and how it is used, data decolonization has excellent potential to empower these communities. The method involves recognizing the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and incorporating them into data governance frameworks. It aims to address power inequalities and promote social justice (Ari, 2023).

Data decolonization emphasizes respecting ethical principles such as informed consent, privacy, and data sovereignty in the collecting and using data from marginalized communities. It seeks to prevent data from being exploited for profit or perpetuating colonial power dynamics.

Data decolonization aims to empower human communities to control and use their data for their own purposes. It aims to challenge and decentralize Western or Eurocentric perspectives on data collection and interpretation. This can include valuing indigenous knowledge systems and worldviews and respecting cultural and ethical principles of data ownership and use.

Data decolonization efforts seek to correct bias and inequality in data by promoting diversity in research teams, addressing issues of representation, and challenging stereotypes and assumptions embedded in data. In sum, data decolonization is a multidisciplinary approach that seeks to redress historical and ongoing injustices related to data and knowledge production. It seeks to empower marginalized communities, respect their perspectives and values, and address the biases and power imbalances in data collection, representation, and interpretation. However, data decolonization must overcome several obstacles, such as resistance from established institutions and the need for marginalized populations to develop their capacity. In addition, scholars and politicians need to be more aware of and knowledgeable about decolonizing activities (Glover, 2024). Therefore, data decolonization practices in different countries can be instructive. This study will examine data protection and data decolonization in Türkiye based on the views of representatives of data-related civil society organizations.

Data Protection and Decolonizing Practices in Türkiye

The primary purpose of the present study is to explore and understand the decolonization practices of data-related NGOs in Türkiye. By conducting semi-structured in-depth online interviews with key members of these organizations, this research aims to uncover the strategies, challenges, and impacts of their decolonization efforts. This study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on decolonization by highlighting the specific experiences and insights from the Turkish context, thereby providing valuable information for global policymakers, scholars, and practitioners engaged in similar efforts. Through this focused examination, the study also aims to identify best practices and potential areas for improvement in ongoing decolonization initiatives within the NGO sector.

Methodology

The data for this study was collected through online semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen for its flexibility and ability to facilitate in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives on decolonization practices within data-related NGOs in Türkiye. The semi-structured format allowed for a guided conversation using a predefined set of questions, ensuring that key topics were covered while also providing the flexibility to explore new themes that emerged during the interviews.

Conducting the interviews online enabled the inclusion of participants from various geographical locations, ensuring a diverse and representative sample. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, and participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses, providing rich, qualitative data for analysis.

Sample and research design

This study employs purposive sampling to select participants who are members of data-related NGOs involved in decolonization practices in Türkiye. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that the participants have relevant and extensive experience in the field, which is crucial for providing in-depth insights into the research topic. The sample consists of six interviewees, representing a diverse range of NGOs. Participants were selected based on their roles within their respective organizations, including directors, project managers, and field workers, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of decolonization practices from multiple perspectives.

The selected NGOs are actively engaged in projects related to decolonization and data management in Türkiye. The participants were chosen for their expertise and direct involvement in these initiatives, making them well-suited to provide detailed and relevant information for this study. The detailed information on the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent details

Participant	NGO
Koray Kaplıca	İzlemedeyiz (We Observe)
Ali Rıza Keleş	Alternatif Bilişim Derneği (Alternative Informatics Association)
Faruk Çayır	Alternatif Bilişim Derneği (Alternative Informatics Association)
Ahmet Sabancı	NewsLab Turkiye/Dijital Medya Araştırmaları Derneği (Digital Media Research Association)
Doruk Fişek	Linux Kullanıcıları Derneği (Linux Users Association)
Dr. Can Ünen	OpenStreetMap Türkiye Topluluğu (OpenStreetMap Turkiye Community)

Findings

The findings of this study will be analyzed and presented under three main sub-titles to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. The first section, "*Definitions of Data Decolonization and Colonization*", will focus on how the participants define these concepts. This section aims to capture the varied interpretations and understandings of data decolonization and colonization as articulated by members of data-related NGOs. The second section, "*Data Colonialism in the Context of Türkiye*", will delve into the concept of data colonialism and examine how it manifests within Türkiye. This part of the analysis will identify the ways in which external data practices and policies may perpetuate colonial power dynamics, affecting local data sovereignty and autonomy. Finally, the third section, "*Data Decolonization Efforts in Türkiye*", will focus on the actions and initiatives undertaken by Turkish NGOs to reclaim data sovereignty and promote fair and equitable data practices. This section will provide insights into the successes and challenges faced by these organizations in their quest to decolonize data practices within the country.

Definitions of data colonization and data decolonization

According to the participants, data colonization is characterized by the monopolization of data, which results in significant inequalities on digital platforms. They highlighted how the network is being destabilized to benefit large corporations and powerful states, leading to the emergence of certain supercenters and platforms as data giants. This concentration of data control not only skews the balance of power but also has profound economic and political ramifications. These entities, by virtue of their vast data reserves, can influence market dynamics, policymaking, and even societal norms, thereby perpetuating a cycle of dominance and dependency. The participants' perspectives underscore the critical need to address these imbalances through concerted decolonization efforts. One participant, Doruk Fişek, articulated the complexities of data colonialism by stating:

> States say, 'Let me keep the data under control,' while the private sector says, 'Let me make money from data.' Companies are now ahead of countries/states. Data colonialism is different from physical colonialism because it takes the data, but it does not seem to

> make the people completely dataless. It just seems to copy it. That is misleading because you cannot do anything unless you have complete control over the right to use the data.

The concentration of data control not only skews the balance of power but also has profound economic and political ramifications. Reflecting on the evolution of the internet, Ahmet Sabancı noted:

> The breaking point in the Internet environment came in the late 2000s when digital advertising and automated advertising became easily applicable and evolving technologies. Thus, the days of innocent web surfing are literally over.

These reflections highlight the transformative impact of data monopolization and underscore the urgency of implementing effective decolonization strategies to counter these trends.

Data colonialism in the context of Türkiye

Participants highlighted several critical issues concerning data colonialism in Türkiye. They noted the absence of major technological companies within the country that manage and control data, resulting in a dependence on foreign entities. Additionally, they emphasized that technology literacy, IT literacy, and a culture of fact-checking need significant improvement to empower citizens in managing their data responsibly. Another concern raised was that citizens often willingly share their data to access digital platforms at a lower cost or for free, potentially compromising their privacy. Reflecting on this, Koray Kaplıca noted:

> Our country has a very high penetration of social media. Because we have a young and dynamic population, there is little awareness about data security, so everyone is very likely to share their data. Using free software is not very popular. Instead, we prefer to make our jobs easier. The question of how much data we give in return is not at the forefront.

Participants also pointed out that data misuse and violations disproportionately affect vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, and people with disabilities. These insights underscore the urgent need for improved digital literacy and robust data protection measures to safeguard these vulnerable populations.

Data decolonization efforts in Türkiye

Participants highlighted several important issues related to data decolonization efforts in Türkiye. While acknowledging existing shortcomings, they pointed to the Personal Data Protection Law and the establishment of local offices for digital platforms like Facebook as significant positive developments. The inclusion of civil society organizations' views in data-related legislation was emphasized as crucial for creating effective and inclusive policies. Reflecting on this, Dr. Can Ünen stated:

> We need to look at which information or data is critical. Retaining data for the sake of national security can also be a problem. Data that was once considered critical may no longer be critical. The definition of critical data needs to be redefined. It is crucial to open data for its beneficial use.

Furthermore, participants stressed the importance of alternative data sets provided by NGOs for ensuring transparency. They also underscored the need for proper definitions of critical and open data to facilitate their beneficial use, noting that full transparency builds trust rather than mistrust. In line with this, Faruk Çakır and Ali Rıza Keleş remarked:

> Both rights and responsibilities need to be defined in legal regulations. The responsibilities of citizens, the state, and companies should be defined and monitored. The opinions and suggestions of civil society organizations should be taken into consideration.

These insights highlight the collaborative and multifaceted approach required for effective data decolonization in Türkiye. Addressing these areas collectively will pave the way for more effective data governance and contribute to a more equitable digital environment in Türkiye.

Conclusion

Data colonialism is how powerful states and corporations claim ownership of and privatize data produced by their users and citizens. Data colonization is a phenomenon that often intersects with concepts and debates around digital ethics, human rights, and social justice. As data continues to play an increasingly central role in our lives, addressing issues related to data colonization is critical to ensuring fair and equitable access, control, and use of digital resources.

The present study underscores the significant role of Türkiye's robust civil society in advancing personal data protection and data decolonization initiatives. The active engagement of NGOs highlights the importance of incorporating their perspectives and demands prior to enacting legislation. Enhancing technology and digital literacy across all social segments is imperative for fostering a well-informed populace capable of navigating the complexities of the digital age. The evolution of laws to meet the demands of this era is crucial, emphasizing

their role in ensuring data protection and privacy. Moreover, there is a pressing need to redefine key concepts such as critical data, personal data, and open data to adapt to the rapidly changing technological landscape. Addressing these areas collectively will pave the way for more effective data governance and contribute to a more equitable digital environment in Türkiye.

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