

The Ethics of Surveillance AI: Framing Data as a Socio-Collective Good in Mitigating Data Colonialism

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Abstract

I examine how facial recognition technology (FRT) in the Global South operates within a system of data colonialism, where powerful organizations extract and exploit data from marginalized populations without meaningful consent, oversight, or benefit to those being surveilled.

Introduction

Data colonialism is not merely an extension of commercial profit-seeking; it is a system of domination that reproduces imperial hierarchies through control of digital infrastructures, the enclosure of data, and the imposition of foreign epistemologies. I argue that data colonialism in the Global South rests on three interlocking foundations. First, the economic foundation, where the logic of colonial extraction persists as human experience is turned into data capital without reciprocity (Ugar 2023; Oubibi et al. 2022; Couldry and Mejias 2019). Classical colonialism appropriated land and labor; today, digital colonialism appropriates personal data under the guise of technological development. Second, the cultural-normative foundation, where data is treated as ownerless and subjected to extraction without consent, mirroring colonial ideologies of dispossession (Gray 2023; Zuboff 2019). People have a moral right to govern their data, deciding who extracts it, how, and for what purpose. Third, I add a reductionist foundation, rooted in phenomenological ethics: data colonialism converts irreducible first-person lived experience into abstract metrics, stripping life of its interpretive depth and weakening the ethical space necessary for dignity, recognition, and agency.

Objectives

I pursue two key objectives. First, I demonstrate that while the harms of data colonialism are most visible and acute in the Global South, the problem is global. Second, I show how data colonialism thrives more deeply in the Global South due to institutional fragility, legal asymmetries, and historical trauma.

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Discussion

The ethical failure of data collection, storage, and usage in the context of FRT stems from a deeper conceptual failure: data is wrongly framed as capital rather than as a socio-collective good. Based on existing literature on the ethics of FRT and ethical methods for data governance, I make a moral argument grounded in this conceptual shift. Framing data is not a neutral or technical choice—it reflects how we understand identity, power, and social relations. Treating data as capital enables extractive and coercive practices that undermine dignity, autonomy, and justice, especially in contexts where communities lack the institutional means to challenge how their data is used. In the Global North, data harms extend beyond privacy, reflecting data colonialism: as Couldry and Mejias note, and (Taylor and Broeders 2015) explain, people are made legible and visible for economic exploitation and cultural misrecognition. These processes reproduce inequalities shaped by class, race, and geography, showing that the underlying logic of data extraction is global.

By contrast, reframing data as a socio-collective good—embedded in community, shaped by social relations, and subject to collective governance—exposes the moral structure of FRT deployment and clarifies the ethical duties owed to those whose data is captured, stored, and used. This framing compels a shift from individual consent and technical accuracy toward relational autonomy, contextual integrity, and shared accountability. In contexts like Zimbabwe, examined through the CloudWalk case, FRT systems are introduced through agreements with foreign corporations that benefit elites while excluding communities from meaningful participation in how their data is governed. These practices reproduce colonial dynamics of foreign control, epistemic asymmetry, and moral exclusion (Gwagwa et al. 2020; Arakpogun et al. 2021). In most literature, the lack of institutional safeguards, allows the extraction of biometric data under the pretense of modernization and national security, perpetuating surveillance and epistemic marginalization (Ugar 2023). This thesis adopts a qualitative, textual analysis method grounded in ethical and philosophical inquiry. It examines how FRT interacts with local socio-cultural norms, political conditions, and historical legacies in low-income economies. My chapters explore four dimensions of ethical harm: data extraction and privacy; data usage

and autonomy; data storage and security; and data exploitation and human dignity.

Conclusion

I argue that these harms are not accidental but arise from the prevailing capital-based framing of data. Reframing data as a socio-collective good introduces new moral obligations: duties of reciprocity, transparency, contextual accountability, and respect for collective dignity. Ultimately, my thesis proposes that resisting data colonialism requires reimagining the foundational assumptions of digital governance. This means moving from extraction to recognition, from commodification to care, and from colonial asymmetry to ethical responsibility rooted in relational justice and collective agency.

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