



Case Study

New Cultural Colonialism: How Social Media Algorithms and Platform Capitalism Practice Soft Power in the Global South

Bishal Bhattacharya

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Madhav University, Pindwara (Sirohi), Abu Road, Rajasthan, India
bishal.nayan2018@gmail.com

Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 18th April 2026, revised 16th May 2026, accepted 18th June 2026

Abstract

The study's main focus has been on contemporary cultural colonialism, which has shown that power disparity cannot be eradicated in the digital age. It has instead restructured them via the exercise of soft power and platform capitalism. Digital entities like Netflix have demonstrated through their strategic expansion into the Global south that international brands often use an algorithmic gaze to standardize content. In this study, a case study approach was used, and a comparison between Brazil and Nigeria revealed an increasing conflict between sovereign nations and extraterritorial impact. To restore digital sovereignty and safeguard data principles, the DPDP Act 2023 has been mentioned. A lack of clear algorithmic responsibility and a continuing regulatory ambiguity around AI point to a continued struggle is seen against colonialism.

Keywords: New Cultural Colonialism, Social media algorithms, Platform capitalism, Global South, Colonialism gaze, DPDP Act.

Introduction

The notion of new cultural colonialism refers to the digital-age shift in global influence, where “Platform Capitalism” replaces the traditional territorial conquest. It can be considered a framework in which dominant tech conglomerates from the Global North, mainly the giants from Silicon Valley, exert “soft power” by monitoring the digital infrastructure of the Global South¹. This influence is highly visible, unlike historical colonialism, and it is encoded within the “social media algorithms”. It also prioritizes the Western linguistic norms, consumerist values, and political discourses. These platforms tend to develop dependencies by monopolizing attention and data extraction, eroding indigenous digital economies and local cultural nuances. Through this algorithmic curation of international trends, the Western worldview is effectively re-centred by platform capitalism as the universal standard². Hence, it ensures that the Global South remains more connected and its digital landscape is governed by corporate interests that shape its identity, economic behaviour, and public opinion.

Research Aim: The research aims to critically analyse new cultural colonialism on social media algorithms and different practices of platform capitalism in the global south.

Objectives of the research: RO1: To understand the role of platform algorithms in the global south as a tool of cultural hegemony. RO2: To analyse how decolonization can be attained by state regulation in the absence of public digital infrastructure. RO3: To discuss the notion of soft power and its relevance when algorithms create attraction.

Research questions: RQ1: What role do platform algorithms play in the global south as an instrument of cultural hegemony?. RQ2: Can decolonization be achieved by state regulation in the absence of public digital infrastructure?. RQ3: Is the concept of “soft power” still relevant when attraction is created by algorithms?

Literature Review

From soft power to engineered attraction: According to the classical definition of soft power by Joseph Nye, this concept has the ability to impact others through persuasion and attraction, rather than coercion. In the platform capitalism era, scholars often argue that this attraction might not be “natural” or purely cultural. Figure-1 expresses that the soft power resources come from culture, political values, and foreign policies³. However, soft power is often engineered, and algorithms can often reflect existing preferences and can actively shape them by prioritizing content from Western countries. Hence, a digital environment is created for the “attractiveness” of Western lifestyles imbued with neoliberal values.

The algorithmic gaze and digital erasure: Frantz Fanon's concept of colonialism gaze can be drawn in this context to comprehend contemporary discourse that revolves around the algorithmic gaze. Fanon has described the “zone of non-being” as a space that strips the colonized of humanity and identifies a modern equivalent in the practice of algorithmic suppression and shadow-banning. The concept of colonial gaze can be applied in today's generative AI algorithms. However, the

indigenous cultural expressions and local political movements do not always align in the Global South⁴. The misalignment is the primary result of engagement metrics and safety guidelines defined by Silicon Valley, as they are relegated to digital invisibility.

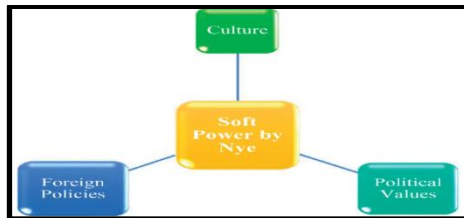


Figure-1: Soft power resources³.

Digital orientalism in the attention economy: The concept of Orientalism by Edward Said offers a lens to understand how platforms like Instagram and YouTube “discover” the Global South. Algorithms often commodify the “exotic” through Digital Orientalism, and short-form video content might reduce complex Southern identities into aestheticized and bite-sized spectacles for Northern consumption⁵. Old colonialism tropes are reinforced by this “algorithmic discovery” that frames the Global South as a source for content extraction. Hence, it primarily works as a digital playground that works to meet the engagement needs of international platforms, instead of the authentic representation of living people there.

Standardization and the platform industry: Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the “Culture Industry” often resonates deeply within the Platform Industry. Yet, it has been argued that mass media often standardize culture to ensure passivity, and in this digital era, codes help in achieving standardization⁶. There are universal UX/UI designs along with algorithmic rewards for particular content formats, such as the 15-second vertical video. It forces global creators to apply homogeneous aesthetics and such “standardization via code” that flattens cultural diversity. Consequently, it ensures that local content adheres to the logic of Western platforms to achieve “virality”.

Surveillance capitalism and data colonialism: Data Colonialism can be considered as the structural backbone of Platform Capitalism, as defined by Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias. Figure-2 demonstrates the link between digital colonialism, digital sovereignty, and digital development in the Global South. In this context, digital colonialism and data colonialism are deeply rooted, describing how tech companies in the Global North exploit infrastructure and user data to develop a new form of power and dependency⁷. However, it has also been argued that data colonialism through platform capitalism appropriates human life via data extraction. Therefore, in the context of new cultural colonialism, it has a deeper cultural layer of economic extraction as the Global South offers raw material (data) and the Global North has the processing power (algorithms). As a result, it creates a feedback loop to reinforce the North-South power imbalance.

Methodology

The research process has applied a case study analysis method to understand the complex phenomenon of new cultural colonialism. The practice of soft power by platform capitalism and social media algorithms in the Global South has been critically discussed, using this particular method⁸. The case study analysis method is particularly suitable for this research as it has allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth investigation of this contemporary phenomenon in the real-life context. The case studies have tried to bridge the gap between lived experience and high-level theory while studying the impacts of abstract algorithms on specific societies.

The case study method has been applied in this research regarding new cultural colonialism through platform-specific analysis, comparative case studies, and event-driven analysis. For instance, case study analysis on the OTT wave, such as Netflix, shaping pan-Indian cinema to global algorithmic taste, comes under the platform-specific analysis⁹. Besides, a case study analysis on the Twitter ban in Nigeria in 2021 and the X ban in Brazil has been done for comparative analysis. Similarly, event-specific analysis has been done by analysing social events like the evolution of Indian laws regarding consumer data protection to illustrate the “algorithmic gaze” action. Case studies have been collected from authentic journals, articles, and newspaper articles to maintain the quality of data discussed.

The primary importance of the case study analysis method lies in its ability to discuss contextual variables that quantitative data might miss. Case studies have revealed how social media platforms alter political discourses or local social structures, while broader statistical reviews only project high social media penetration in the Global South¹⁰. Case study analysis is important in this research to offer a granular insight into user behaviour by moving beyond “big data”. It has tried to capture nuances like local culture, cultural resistance, and particular regional harms through social media content. Therefore, this method has allowed for a holistic view of the phenomenon by analysing information from various sources to create a cohesive narrative.

Results and Discussion

Case study 1: The OTT wave in India and a strategic analysis of the challenges of adapting to Netflix: The strategic adoption of Netflix in India is a practical example of new cultural colonialism. Here, platform capitalism exerts soft power and restructures the local media landscape that suits global algorithmic preferences. The expansion of Netflix in the Global South necessitates a delicate balance between hyper-localization of its content and universalizing its standards, despite this platform’s “premium” international brand identity¹¹. In the context of algorithmic gaze, Machine Learning and advanced AI are used by Netflix to personalize the user experience. It is often marketed as a competitive advantage, yet standardizes the

Indian culture into an engagement cluster that this platform can monetize and track. This pan-Indian aesthetic is driven by high-production regional content in different languages like Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu. Thus, it is often engineered to meet data-powered expectations of its international audiences, instead of showcasing pure local artistic tradition. Figure-3 mentions that the market share of Netflix in India is only 13% among are the other local and global OTT platforms. In terms of digital orientalism, the soft power of this platform remains centralized in the Silicon Valley-led content logic, even with its investment in regional creators¹¹. The inbound logistics strategy

of this platform can also be held responsible for this challenge, as it involves securing rights to regional libraries and commissioning original Indian productions. Digital orientalism is reflected in the vast resources of the Global South, which is extracted and repackaged as exotic and premium content for the global subscription base. On the other hand, in the context of data colonialism, the “Jio effect” with the surge of cheap mobile data has transformed India into a huge laboratory of data colonialism¹². Thus, it shows that Indian users remain tethered to a Western platform, despite consuming “local” content that governs consumers' attention through algorithms.

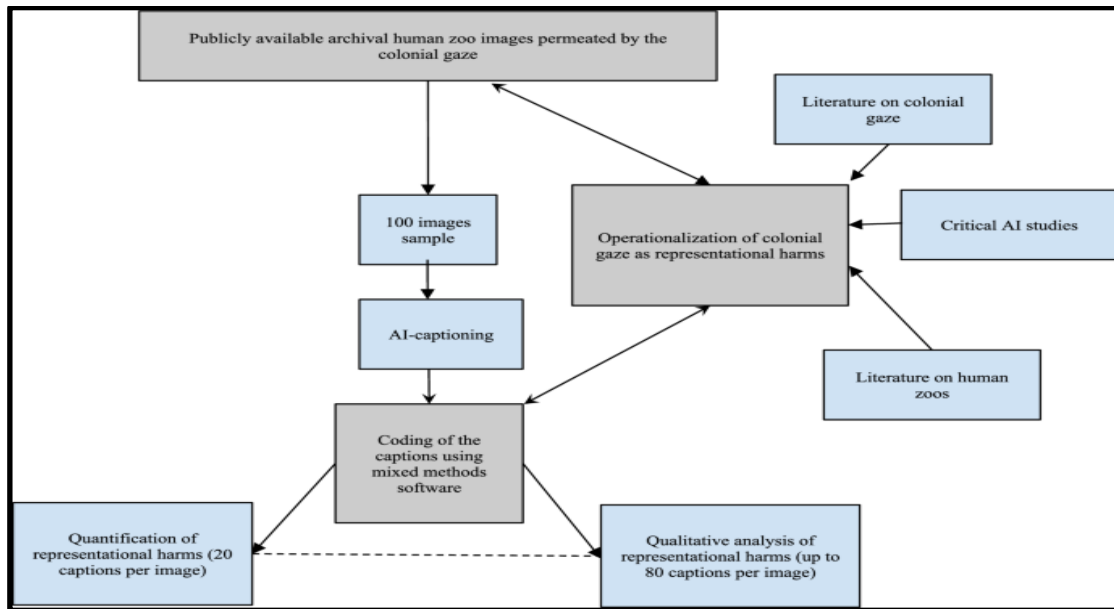


Figure-2: Colonial gaze in generative AI algorithms⁴.

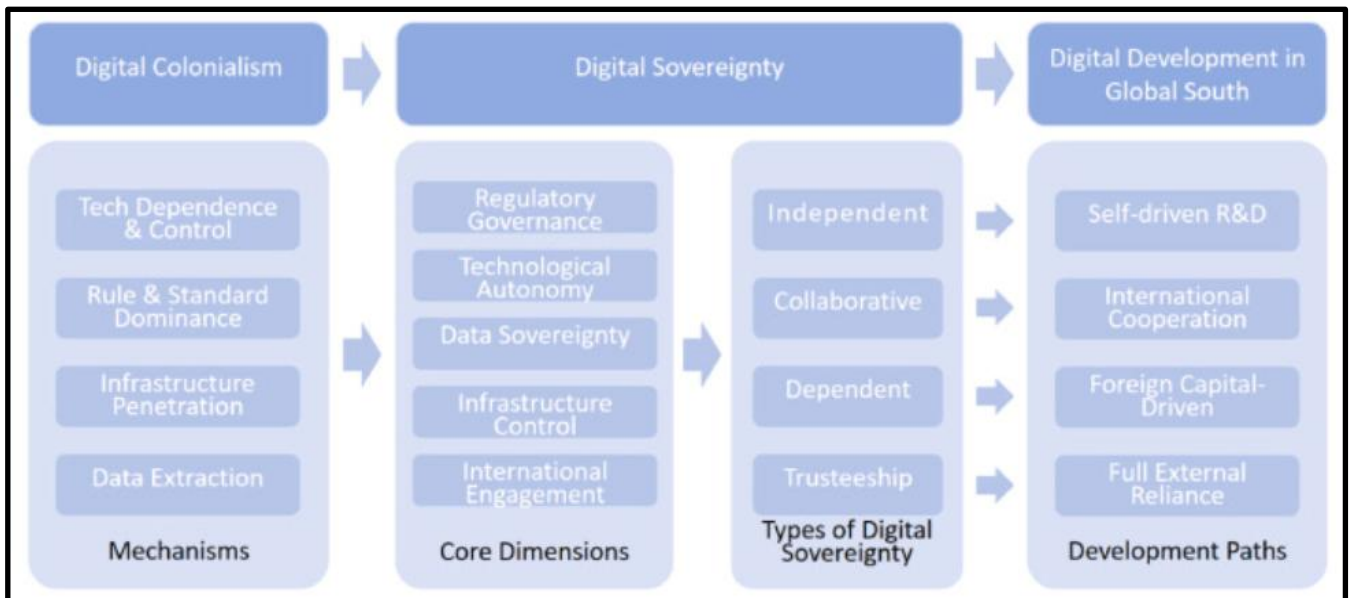


Figure-3: Navigating digital colonialism models through sovereign models⁷.

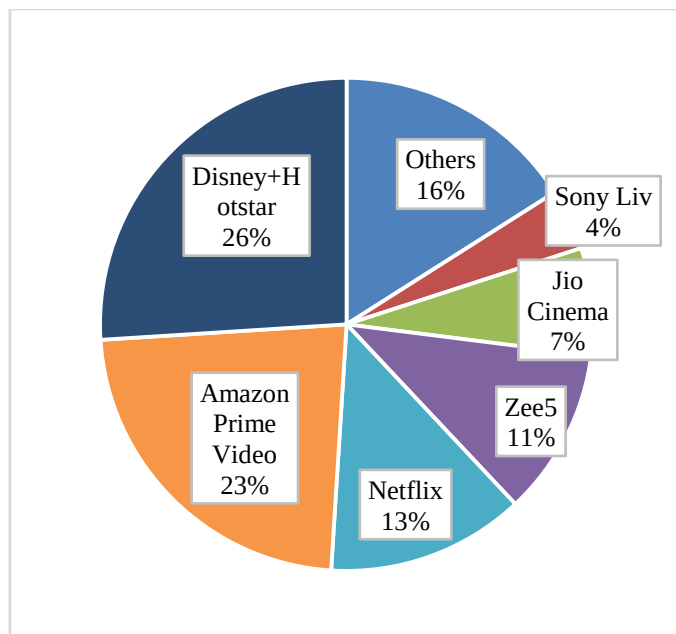


Figure-4: Market share of streaming platforms in India¹¹.

Figure-3 mentions that the market share of Netflix in India is only 13% among are the other local and global OTT platforms. In terms of digital orientalism, the soft power of this platform remains centralized in the Silicon Valley-led content logic, even with its investment in regional creators¹¹. The inbound logistics strategy of this platform can also be held responsible for this challenge, as it involves securing rights to regional libraries and commissioning original Indian productions. Digital orientalism is reflected in the vast resources of the Global South, which is extracted and repackaged as exotic and premium content for the global subscription base. On the other hand, in the context of data colonialism, the “Jio effect” with the surge of cheap mobile data has transformed India into a huge laboratory of data colonialism¹². Thus, it shows that Indian users remain tethered to a Western platform, despite consuming “local” content that governs consumers' attention through algorithms.

Case study 2: A comparative analysis of resistance to sovereignty through X ban in Nigeria and Brazil: The comparative analysis between the ban of X, formerly known as Twitter, in Nigeria and Brazil can reveal how new cultural colonialism can cause a friction point between the soft power of platform capitalism and sovereign state authority¹³. Both of these nations act prominently in the Global South, and their motivations, along with the platform's response, demonstrate different dimensions of digital hegemony. For instance, in Nigeria, the ban was a direct reaction to the human and algorithmic moderation of the platform¹⁴. X acted as a supra-national arbiter by deleting a tweet, which violated its “safety policies”. This exemplifies the algorithmic gaze, where “community standards” of foreign corporations supersede local political discourse.

On another note, in Brazil, the conflict was mainly judicial as the Supreme Court ordered account suspension to protect democratic institutions from disinformation. The refusal to comply with this platform and its subsequent reactivation of the accounts has represented an exercise of digital sovereignty by the platform¹⁵. It can also be effectively argued that in Brazil, the corporate logic was inspired by “free speech” ideology, which is central to Western soft power.

Table-1 shows the hurdles that anti-corruption campaigns on social media are facing in Nigeria. It projects that government restrictions, such as those on X or Twitter, are considered a challenge¹⁶. Both cases illustrate that X has become an essential “digital common” for the Global South. In Brazil, X is still a battleground for political identity, whereas in Nigeria, it was vital for the *EndSARS* movement. The ban has depicted a desperate attempt to link data colonialism, and with the ban of this platform, the governments have attempted to prevent the extraction of political sentiment and national attention by a Western entity that is challenging for them to control.

Case study 3: Countering data colonialism through regulations: The Digital legal framework of India has evolved, particularly the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP Act), 2023. It represents a state response to the hurdles of data colonialism and platform capitalism when the Global North is historically dictated to the digital economy¹⁷. The Global South has shifted towards a proactive and rights-based governance model, indicating a drive to reclaim digital sovereignty. Data colonialism is a potential theoretical framework that emphasizes human life extraction as a data source. The DPDP Act directly adheres to the introduction of a consent-based model to transform the connection between “data fiduciaries” (platforms) and “data principals” (users)¹⁸. It also mandates an explicit and informed consent to process data, and India has attempted to curb this data extraction process to fuel the soft power of international tech giants.

Table-2 depicts how Indian data protection laws have evolved over the past few decades to determine their significance in terms of data colonialism. For instance, the Information Technology Act was first developed in 2000, which is significant as a foundation of the cyber law of India¹⁹. Similarly, the DPDP Act was first enacted in 2023 as the first full-fledged data protection law, which was later notified in 2025 as the Operationalization of the Act. Algorithmic gaze can be considered a key element of new cultural colonialism, where local interactions are governed by foreign code. Hence, intermediary liability and content control are measured through the IT Rules, 2021-2026, and the DPDP Act²⁰.

In this way, the Global South is also moving towards a correct direction to bridge the gap of digital colonialism, as the rapid advancement of technological change requires a futuristic legal system.

Table-1: Challenges hindering social media-powered anti-corruption campaigns in Nigeria¹⁶.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Mean	Standard Deviation
Government-imposed restrictions (e.g., Twitter ban) negatively impact online activism.	39 (7.8%)	35 (7.0%)	24 (4.8%)	207 (41.4%)	195 (39.0%)	500 (100%)	3.97	1.17
Algorithmic suppression (shadow banning, content de-prioritization) reduces the reach of anti-corruption campaigns.	32 (6.4%)	42 (8.4%)	24 (4.8%)	215 (43.0%)	187 (37.4%)	500 (100%)	3.97	1.14
Fake news and misinformation weaken the credibility of corruption allegations on social media.	40 (8.0%)	38 (7.6%)	19 (3.8%)	213 (42.6%)	190 (38.0%)	500 (100%)	3.95	1.18
Government-affiliated bots and influencers manipulate political narratives to suppress genuine activism.	38 (7.6%)	40 (8.0%)	21 (4.2%)	207 (41.4%)	194 (38.8%)	500 (100%)	3.95	1.17

Table-2: Evolution of Indian data protection laws in India¹⁹.

Year	Legal/Policy Development	Significance
2000	Information Technology Act	Foundation of cyber law in India
2011	IT Rules on Sensitive Personal Data	Limited data protection framework
2017	Puttaswamy Judgment	Privacy recognized as a fundamental right
2018	Srikrishna Committee Report	Proposed comprehensive data protection law
2023	DPDP Act enacted	First full-fledged data protection law
2025	DPDP Rules notified	Operationalization of the Act
2025–2027	Phased implementation	Gradual compliance mechanism

Conclusion

The study has primarily focused on exploring new cultural colonialism, which has revealed that the digital age is unable to eliminate power imbalance. It has instead restructured them via the exercise of soft power and platform capitalism. Digital entities like Netflix have demonstrated through their strategic expansion into the Global South that international brands often use an algorithmic gaze to standardize content. For instance, Netflix also utilizes it for local cultural outputs and to fit into pan-Indian and globally digestible aesthetics.

A case study analysis has been applied in this research, where a comparative analysis between Nigeria and Brazil has pointed out a growing friction between extra-territorial influence and sovereign states. These conflicts have also highlighted that social media algorithms can assert digital hegemony and bypass local judicial norms that challenge national corporate existence.

In response to new cultural colonialism, Global South nations like India have started establishing robust legal frameworks. The mention of the DPDP Act 2023 has been made to protect data principles and reclaim digital sovereignty. Conversely, a persistent regulatory ambiguity regarding AI and insufficient explicit algorithmic accountability indicate an ongoing struggle against data colonialism. Finally, a holistic and rights-based approach to digital governance is crucial to ensure technological progress. Hence, it can serve the social well-being of the Global South, instead of the mere interest of foreign capital.

Future Scope and Limitations

The study on new cultural colonialism in the context of the Global South faces particular limitations and provides expansive avenues for policy-driven and academic inquiry. In terms of limitations, the “black box” nature of proprietary algorithms serves as a primary limitation²¹. The platforms like Netflix and X prevent the disclosure of their source code, which compels researchers to rely on “output-based” observations. A direct analysis of the code cannot be done to standardize cultural tastes, and the rapid technological evolution particularly causes the rise of generative AI. It often exceeds the pace of regulatory action, creating a persistent gap between digital practice and legal theory²². Besides, the broad state exemptions in new laws like the DPDP Act of India limit the ability to assess privacy protections, while the state itself serves as a data fiduciary.

In terms of the future scope of this research, they can focus on creating a comprehensive AI regulatory framework that addresses ethical governance and algorithmic bias.

References

1. Díaz-Parra, I., & Hernández Cordero, A. (2024). Gentrification studies and cultural colonialism: Discussing connections between historic city centers of Mexico and

- Spain. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 46(6), 1110-1124.
2. Liang, Y., Aroles, J., & Brandl, B. (2022). Charting platform capitalism: Definitions, concepts and ideologies. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 37(2), 308-327.
3. Antwi-Boateng, O., & Alhashmi, A. A. (2022). The emergence of the United Arab Emirates as a global soft power: current strategies and future challenges. *Economic and Political Studies*, 10(2), 208-227.
4. Alenichev, A., Shaffer, J. D., Kingori, P., Grietens, K. P., Muldoon, J., & Rocher, L. (2026). We can see a savage': a case study of the colonial gaze in generative AI algorithms. *AI & society*, 41(4), 3413-3435.
5. Nguyen, D. (2025). Sociotechnical imaginaries and digital orientalism in social media discourses about Asian "tech nations": A critical exploration using computational methods. *Journal of Digital Social Research*, 7(2), 34-61.
6. Eisape, D. A. (2022). Transforming pipelines into digital platforms: An illustrative case study transforming a traditional pipeline business model in the standardization industry into a digital platform. *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, 8(4), 183.
7. Liu, Y., & Song, W. (2026). Navigating digital colonialism: Sovereignty models and development paths in the Global South. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 13, 102546.
8. Mcclunie-Trust, P., Jones, V., Winnington, R., Shannon, K., Donaldson, A. E., Macdiarmid, R., & Andersen, P. (2022). Doing case study research collaboratively: the benefits for researchers. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21, 16094069221096296.
9. Taherdoost, H. (2022). What are different research approaches? Comprehensive review of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method research, their applications, types, and limitations. *Journal of management science & engineering research*, 5(1), 53-63.
10. Oranga, J., & Matere, A. (2023). Qualitative research: Essence, types and advantages. *Open Access Library Journal*, 10(12), 1-9.
11. Barraza, C. (2025). Global Brand, Local Market: A Strategic Analysis of Netflix's Adaptation Challenges in India.
12. Brevini, B., Fubara-Manuel, I., Le Ludec, C., Jensen, J. L., Jimenez, A., & Bates, J. (2024). Critiques of data colonialism. *Dialogues in Data Power*, 120-137.
13. Borgogno, O., & Zangrandi, M. S. (2025). Chinese data governance and trade policy: from cyber sovereignty to the quest for digital hegemony?. In *The Making of China's Artificial Intelligence and Cyber Security Policy* (pp. 158-182). Routledge.
14. Xiong, J. (2025). Beyond the Multitude: State-Society Alliances as a Strategy against Big Tech's Digital Hegemony. *Вестник МГИМО Университета*, 18(4), 85-109.
15. Herbert, J. (2013). *Practising global journalism: Exploring reporting issues worldwide*. CRC Press.
16. Okocha, D. O., Karofi, H. A., Vendaga, J., & Faloseyi, M. (2025). Social Media And Political Accountability: Spotlighting the Roles Of X (Twitter) and Instagram in Anti-Corruption Activism in Nigeria. *Journal of Contemporary Local Politics*, 4(2), 159-178.
17. Ewang, A. (2021). Nigeria's Twitter Ban Follows Pattern of Repression. *Human Rights Watch*.
18. Hanspal, M. S. (2025). The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023: Key Provisions, Issues, and Future Directions. *DME Journal of Law*, 6(2), 12-23.
19. Rai, O. P. (2026). Artificial intelligence, data protection and digital governance in India: a contemporary legal analysis. *Journal of Social Review and Development*, 5(1), 76-81.
20. Khanna, V., & Kotwal, A. (2025). Examining the significance of the digital personal data protection act, 2023 in the context of the healthcare industry: a comprehensive analysis. *Discover Public Health*, 22(1), 381.
21. Arora, A., Barrett, M., Lee, E., Oborn, E., & Prince, K. (2023). Risk and the future of AI: Algorithmic bias, data colonialism, and marginalization. *Information and Organization*, 33(3), 100478.
22. Valente, J. C., & Grohmann, R. (2024). Critical data studies with Latin America: Theorizing beyond data colonialism. *Big Data & Society*, 11(1),