



Who Owns Your Data? Media Platforms and Digital Colonialism

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Introduction

In the digital age, data has become one of the most valuable resources on the planet. Every click, like, share, and search generates information that media platforms collect, analyze, and often monetize. While users provide this data through everyday interactions, questions about ownership, control, and rights remain murky. Behind the convenience of personalized feeds and free services lies a complex web of data governance that increasingly mirrors historical patterns of exploitation—what many scholars now refer to as digital colonialism.

This article examines the architecture of data ownership in major media platforms, explores how power imbalances in data control resemble colonial dynamics, and considers the implications for privacy, autonomy, and global equity. As digital technologies continue to shape socio-economic and political realities [1], understanding who truly owns and benefits from user data is essential for building fairer digital societies.

The Illusion of Free Services and the Reality of Data Extraction

Media platforms such as social networks, search engines, and streaming services often advertise themselves as “free.” Users can sign up, connect with others, and access entertainment without direct monetary cost. However, these services are funded by a different currency: personal data.

Every interaction on these platforms generates data points that companies collect to build detailed user profiles. These profiles power targeted advertising, inform algorithmic recommendations, and drive revenue streams worth billions of dollars. In this economic model:

Users provide data as a condition of access.

Platforms aggregate and analyze that data.

Advertisers pay for the ability to reach specific audiences.

Thus, the “price” paid by users is often invisible but significant—the surrender of behavioral, demographic, and sometimes sensitive personal information. While individuals may retain

nominal rights over their accounts, the broader system of data ownership heavily favors corporations whose terms of service grant them expansive rights to harvest and exploit data [2].

Data Ownership: Legal Frameworks vs. Corporate Control

In many jurisdictions, including the European Union with its General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), legal frameworks have begun to recognize data rights, such as the right to access, rectify, or delete personal information. However, these protections often fall short in practice:

Complex Terms of Service: Users rarely read or fully understand lengthy and legally dense terms, which often grant companies sweeping permissions [3].

Opaque Algorithms: Data processing mechanisms are proprietary and proprietary, making it difficult for users to know how their data is used.

Jurisdictional Gaps: Global platforms operate across borders, complicating enforcement of localized privacy laws.

While some countries are pioneering robust data protection regimes, many parts of the world lack comprehensive legal safeguards. This uneven regulatory landscape enables powerful tech companies—often headquartered in the Global North—to exert dominance over data generated worldwide, raising concerns about digital sovereignty.

Digital Colonialism: A Modern Parallel

The term digital colonialism describes the extraction and control of data by dominant global platforms in ways that mirror historical

colonial relationships. Just as colonial powers extracted natural resources and wealth from colonized regions, digital platforms extract data from users around the world, often with little local benefit or control.

Key features of digital colonialism include:

Concentration of Power: A handful of multinational tech firms capture vast amounts of user data, control essential infrastructure, and influence digital governance standards.

Asymmetric Benefits: Revenue and technological value accrue to platform owners, while many users—particularly in the Global South—remain data providers without commensurate economic return.

Cultural Influence: Algorithms prioritize certain types of content, shaping cultural tastes, political narratives, and public discourse in ways that reflect corporate priorities rather than local autonomy.

This dynamic can exacerbate global inequalities. Countries and communities with limited technological infrastructure or regulatory capacity become dependent on foreign platforms, reinforcing patterns of dependency and extraction [4].

The Implications for Privacy and Autonomy

The concentration of data control has significant implications:

Privacy Erosion

As platforms collect increasingly granular data—location histories, biometric identifiers, network connections—users face diminishing privacy. Data breaches and unauthorized data sharing amplify these risks.

Behavioral Influence

Data-driven algorithms shape what users see and engage with. Personalized feeds can create filter bubbles and influence behaviors, preferences, and even political attitudes, raising ethical questions about manipulation and autonomy.

Economic Disparities

While data fuels profitable digital markets, creators and users often see limited financial reward for contributing value. Data labor—every action generating data—is largely unpaid and unrecognized.

Sovereignty and Governance

When foreign tech companies store and process data outside local

jurisdictions, national control over citizens' digital information weakens [5]. This raises concerns about state surveillance, foreign influence, and digital rights.

Towards Equitable Data Governance

Addressing digital colonialism and reclaiming data ownership requires multi-faceted strategies:

Strengthening Legal Protections

Comprehensive data protection laws that emphasize transparency, consent, portability, and user control can shift the balance of power. Effective enforcement and penalties for misuse are critical.

Promoting Data Literacy

Empowering users to understand data practices, privacy settings, and digital rights can reduce passive data surrender and promote informed engagement with platforms.

Supporting Local Platforms

Investing in regional and community-owned digital platforms can diversify the ecosystem and offer alternatives to dominant global players.

Collective Data Stewardship

Emerging models such as data trusts or cooperatives allow communities to pool and govern data collectively, ensuring that benefits are shared and aligned with local priorities.

International Cooperation

Global digital governance requires collaborative frameworks that protect data rights across borders, prevent platform monopolies, and promote equitable standards.

Conclusion

In an era where digital interactions permeate every aspect of life, understanding who owns and controls data is essential. While media platforms have created unprecedented connectivity and innovation, they have also concentrated data power in ways that resemble colonial patterns of extraction and control. Users generate immense value for platforms, yet often lack meaningful rights over their own information.

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