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Beyond Digital Solutionism: Examining the Colonial Continuities of Digital Humanitarianism

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English Abstract:

In *Technocolonialism: When Technology for Good is Harmful*, Mirca Madianou examines how digital technologies in humanitarian aid reinvigorate colonial structures. Drawing on a decade of research, she shows how AI, biometric systems, and big data in crisis settings produce new forms of violence and maintain Global North-South power imbalances. Combining ethnographic research with critical theory, the book shows how digitization normalizes value extraction and experimentation with people and calls for approaches that prioritize social justice over technological solutions.

Jenseits des digitalen Solutionismus. Kolonialen Kontinuitäten des digitalen Humanitarismus

Abstract:

In *Technocolonialism: When Technology for Good is Harmful* untersucht Mirca Madianou, wie digitale Technologien in der humanitären Hilfe koloniale Strukturen wiederbeleben. Basierend auf jahrzehntelanger Forschung zeigt sie, wie KI, biometrische Systeme und Big Data in Krisensituationen neue Formen der Gewalt hervorbringen und globale Nord-Süd Machtungleichgewichte aufrechterhalten. Das Buch verbindet ethnografische Forschung mit kritischer Theorie und zeigt auf, wie die Digitalisierung die Extraktion von Werten und das Experimentieren mit Menschen normalisiert und fordert Ansätze, die soziale Gerechtigkeit über technologische Lösungen stellen.

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Imagine your house was badly damaged by a cyclone a few months ago. Unlike your neighbors, who could build iron roofs and do other reconstruction work, your house still looks dire. They received 'livelihood assistance' from a relief program, but despite writing to the program's SMS hotline, you were not prioritized as a recipient because your family income is not from fishing but from public transportation, or perhaps because, as a single mother, you are not recognized as a household head. However, you do not know this; the only response you received to your message was an automated acknowledgment of receipt. Now imagine you were prioritized, and to receive the cash support, you were required to open a specific mobile banking account. You receive an SMS on the SIM card the program gave you, notifying you of the funds' transfer. But when you arrive at the nearest ATM, which is far from your home, your account is empty.

Through these examples and more, Mirca Madianou, professor of Media and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, explores in her book *Technocolonialism: When Technology for Good is Harmful* the "ways that the datafication and digitization of humanitarianism are reworking the coloniality of humanitarianism and technology" (p. 179). While digital innovations are frequently celebrated as transformative solutions to humanitarian challenges, Madianou's rigorous interdisciplinary analysis reveals their role in perpetuating and intensifying historical inequities. Drawing on postcolonial and decolonial theory, critical race studies, and the Black radical tradition, as well as infrastructure studies and critical algorithm and AI studies, her key argument is that the convergence of digital infrastructures (including datafication and AI practices), humanitarian bureaucracy, state power and market forces in crisis settings perpetuates and exacerbates colonial structures. This simultaneously creates multiple,

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interconnected forms of violence and extraction that disproportionately affect crisis-affected people in the so-called 'Global South' – a process Madianou conceptualizes as 'technocolonialism.'

Madianou examines the use of technologies in humanitarian settings, including biometrics, blockchain, mobile phones (like SMS texting and messaging apps), chatbots, automated decision-making, mental health applications, artificial intelligence, and live data. She studies the aftermath of Super Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, refugee camps in Greece, Jordan, and Bangladesh between 2016 and 2021, and humanitarian platforms, policy documents, webinars, blogs, and podcasts between 2021 and 2023. Her decade-long research, which involves participant observation, over 180 interviews, autoethnography and digital ethnography, results in a well-documented and argued showcase of the violence produced when life-altering decisions are automated, delegated, or even embedded in the infrastructures of humanitarianism in the aftermath of a crisis (and even permanently afterwards).

Infrastructure, Madianou argues, is the thread through which technocolonialism is built. What makes this book particularly remarkable is that it goes beyond describing biased algorithms or data privacy and consent issues to focus on the structures and infrastructures that enable and enact oppression. Through the analysis of what she terms "infrastructuring" (p. 190) – the process by which digital systems and computational practices have become ubiquitous in humanitarian operations – Madianou argues that a "humanitarian machine" (p. 137) emerges. This machine is the material reality that links these technological systems (which often rely on and are interoperable with private companies' and governments' infrastructures) with bureaucratic processes, power relations, and various 'stakeholders' with their own interests.

The book's empirical analysis is especially powerful in documenting the harms produced by the humanitarian machine. Each chapter begins with an example, such as what is described at the top of this review. This allows Mandianou to ground the concepts and arguments in the realities and lived experiences of those affected by the crises. The harms range from unjust algorithmic decisions of aid distribution, biased biometric classification systems of aid

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recipients and data extraction without their meaningful consent, to, more disturbingly, the exploitation of refugee camps as laboratories for technological experimentation.

This "surreptitious experimentation" (p. 124), which has no clear boundaries or accountability, exemplifies the multiple forms of extraction at play: of biometric data for nation-states' securitization strategies, feedback data to legitimize humanitarian projects and justify staff salaries and overhead costs, and data from untested technologies for private companies' activities. This is a grim vision where people in need are reduced to surveillance targets and data points. As Madianou states: "people affected by crises pay for aid with their data" (p. 100). However, the value extracted from these so-called 'technologies for good' goes beyond data to include the labor of refugees who test products and fill out feedback forms that leave audit trails, the visibility and publicity benefiting companies and organizations, and the profit generated. Colonial relations and structures are thus reproduced via these extractive practices and their South-North trajectory and obscured behind their technical nature, making it harder to identify and resist.

Mandianou follows the premise that power imbalances exist in the humanitarian field – between aid recipients, humanitarian officers, donors, vendors, governments, and all actors involved. The violence produced by the humanitarian machine is just another layer in an already unjust context, albeit an important one. Therefore, the book is a much-needed call to contest prevailing assumptions that technology inherently makes humanitarian response more efficient and accountable, benefiting crisis-affected people, and to problematize that refugee camps exist in the first place, or that already vulnerable populations are the most affected by climate change.

The book is not limited to presenting a grim diagnosis; it also documents resistance to technocolonialism. Madianou's careful ethnographic approach is evident in her description of resistance practices that go beyond open confrontation and protest to focus on the "mundane" (p. 167), highlighting the refusal to participate, the use of storytelling, and the appropriation of technologies designed for management and control to foster solidarity and community. The book concludes with a call to action, emphasizing that addressing technocolonialism's harms requires more than individual agency, technical fixes, improving

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algorithms, or further bureaucratizing the machine – it requires collective political action to change both technology and humanitarianism.

The main value of this book lies precisely there: Technocolonialism is not merely a critique – it is a powerful call to question and rethink how technology is integrated into 'for good' practices. While other authors have explored the link between technology and colonialism, proposing terms like data colonialism or Big Data from the South, Madianou's focus on systematically dismantling the 'technology for good' narrative offers a distinctive and crucial intervention applicable to areas beyond humanitarianism (e.g. international development, philanthropy and government). Her incisive analysis reveals how such moral claims obscure fundamental power relations and raises critical questions about the politics of defining what 'good' means.

Madianou moves away from an outright rejection of technology and vilification of humanitarian workers, offering instead a nuanced warning against the uncritical adoption and promotion of digital tools as solutions to social issues, which can deepen colonial-inherited inequalities and concentrate power. Her analysis compels us to ask: Who pays the price of innovation? Who profits or benefits? Who is excluded and why? When does help become harm? These are critical questions in our current landscape of continuing and intensifying humanitarian crises driven by climate change and multiple conflicts, alongside the reconfiguration of the global aid ecosystem following USAID's cutbacks and the rising influence of techno-billionaires in government affairs and social issues.

In this context, Madianou's work serves as both a warning and a guide. It shows us how crises can be exploited, whether by individual actors or infrastructures designed to extract value from affected populations. It also charts paths forward, emphasizing the necessity of placing vulnerable populations – not technology – at the center of 'for good' issues. The timing of this book's publication could not be more apt, making it an essential reading for scholars in critical technology studies, development studies, and postcolonial/decolonial studies, for practitioners in humanitarian and international development organizations, policymakers and civil servants, technology developers, funders and donors, and for anyone grappling with the ethics, governance, and impacts of technology.