



CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Virtual Roundtable on “Decolonial Computing”¹

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Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are inseparable from the emergence and expansion of modern capitalism, colonialism, and racial regimes of militarized power, yet they have remained peripheral to decolonial critique.² Computer networks, digital media, and automated industrial systems underpin the economic imperialism of the United States. In the late nineteenth century, the first telecommunications firms, such as Western Union, not only aided mass production and global distribution for other industries, they instituted what business historian Alfred Chandler called managerial capitalism and the “modern multiunit business enterprise.”³ Moreover, modern information technologies have long been deployed to rule over and govern colonial subjects through

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surveillance, military interventions, and counterinsurgencies at “home” and abroad. As the US solidified its political economic hegemony in the long twentieth century, telecommunications and electricity were leading growth industries; they drove the American myth of progress-through-innovation even though the upswing they participated in was enabled by social factors as much as technical ones.⁴ During the Cold War, the US and its Western allies promoted private and commercial media and information technologies of modernization at all costs, often in support of brutally authoritarian regimes across much of the Third World.⁵

Today, academic as well as popular accounts of electronics, telecommunications, and computing continue to reinforce the narrative of technological determinism and US exceptionalism. As we enter what many see as an era of US imperial decline, and the future of both democracy and unequal globalization seem uncertain if not in clear states of crises, what does it mean to decolonize this field of study? If computing technology is the embodiment of rational calculation and a driver of twenty-first century capitalism, can it indeed be “decolonized”—overhauled or appropriated for other ends? What alternatives exist to the dominant narratives of neutrality and progress, and how might we move beyond the developmentalist and entrepreneurial romance with technology as solution? The scholars in this virtual roundtable take on these questions through the perspective of decolonial theory and tactics from South America and India, and through critical approaches to English-language ICT dominance. They expand on feminist, postcolonial and critical race studies that have challenged colonial knowledge economies, broadened our understanding of political technologies, and re-centered extant histories and practices from the vantage point of the global South. In response to the political moment in which we write, it seems wise to return to the praxis of the oppressed in order to, at the minimum, “decolonize our habits of explanation.”⁶

Notes

¹ This virtual roundtable on “[Decolonial Computing](#)” emerges from a workshop convened on November 4, 2016, in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, featuring scholars Simone Browne, Anita Say Chan, Lilly Irani, Lawrence Liang, and Jack Qiu.

² While “postcolonial computing” has received a great deal of attention over the last decade, spurred by the work of roundtable authors Lilly Irani and Kavita Philip, fewer scholars have raised the question of what decolonial theory might add to such analyses. See Kristina Lyons, Juno Salazar Parrenas, and Noah Tamarkin, “Roundtable: Engaging Decoloniality and Decolonization in STS,” *Catalyst* 3, 1 (2017) and [Ali, Syed Mustafa](#), “A Brief Introduction to Decolonial Computing,” *XRDS: Crossroads, The ACM Magazine for Students*, 22, 4 (2016): 16–21.

³ Chandler was more laudatory than critical of managerial “efficiency” in the history of US capitalism. Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 6.

⁴ Frederik Nebeker, *Dawn of the Electronic Age: Electrical Technologies in the Shaping of the Modern World, 1914 to 1945* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 221-228.

⁵ Amin Alhassan and Paula Chakravartty, “Postcolonial Media Policy and the Long Shadow of Empire,” Robin Mansell and Marc Raboy (Eds.) *The Handbook of Global Media and Communication Policy* (Chichester, GB: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 366-382.

⁶ Sharad Chari, “From Exploitation to Expropriation: Geographies of Racialization in Historic Capitalism,” *Economic Geography*, 94 (1) 2018: 18-22.

Roundtable Authors

Paula Chakravartty, “Decolonizing Infrastructures of Empire”

Mara Mills, “The Hard Disciplines”

Hannah Alpert-Abrams, “Colonial Copying in an Imperial Age”

Anita Say Chan, “Decolonial Computing and Networking Beyond Digital Universalism”

Lilly Irani and Kavita Phillip, “Negotiating Engines of Difference”