

Media and Digital Imperialism: Historical Materialism in the Analysis of International Asymmetries in Technology and Communications

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Introduction

Although imperialism displays important specificities in the phase of digitalisation, it does not constitute an essentially new phenomenon. The general determinations of the capitalist mode of production do not disappear but manifest themselves in new forms, through which the contradictions of the system itself are deepened. These specificities, however, do not justify understanding the phenomenon as a simple transposition of the historical forms of colonialism into the digital sphere, as suggested, albeit in different ways, by some formulations associated with the notions of digital colonialism and data colonialism.

Regarding the role of data in this configuration, it is necessary to distinguish between use value and value, avoiding both subjectivist conceptions of value and interpretations that attribute value to data on the basis of the activities performed by internet users. From the standpoint of the critique of political economy, raw data must be distinguished from information socially produced through labour. This does not mean that all information production amounts to value production, since the labour involved may be productive or unproductive for capital (Bolaño and Zangheli, 2025).

One of the most striking features of the current configuration of imperialism is the growing concentration of infrastructure, technologies, data, and computational capacities under the control of transnational corporations closely intertwined with their home states, especially those based in the United States. This concentration reorganises the international division of labour, intensifies the mechanisms of value transfer, and heightens the risks to the sovereignty of peripheral countries.

In this process, digital platforms both reproduce and reconfigure media imperialism, historically manifested in sectors such as film, music, television, and advertising. They retain control over communicative and cultural mediations while extending this control to other spheres of economic and social life.

To understand this reconfiguration, in this introductory article to the Special Issue “Imperialism, Information, Communication, and Culture in the Phase of Digitalisation”, we begin, albeit briefly, with the economic-formal genesis of imperialism, linked to large-scale industry, the capitalist world market, and the law of value, and examine its more concrete historical determinations, which were consolidated in the late nineteenth century. We then provide an overview of some of the main theoretical approaches employed to analyse the forms assumed by imperialism under contemporary capitalism, without claiming to exhaust the controversies surrounding this debate. Finally, we present the original contributions gathered in this Special Issue and situate them within the broader debate. We hope you enjoy the issue!

The Genesis of Imperialism: From Large-Scale Industry to Monopoly Capitalism

The tendency toward worldwide expansion has been present in capitalist sociality since its origins, as its dynamics are tied to the generalized production and circulation of commodities. However, it is with large-scale industry that the world market acquires properly capitalist content. Both advances in transportation—including steam navigation, railways, and the opening of the Suez Canal—and the expansion of communication networks, especially the electric telegraph, were decisive in this process. The development of these productive forces shortened the turnover time of capital, a reduction that became increasingly necessary as foreign markets expanded (Leite and Carcanholo, 2021). Thus, through the supersession of antediluvian forms of commodity circulation, the capitalist world market is “posited by large-scale industry, which means that its historical genesis is the period of the Industrial Revolution” (*ibid.*, p. 73).

This process must be articulated with the transition from the formal subsumption to the real subsumption of labour under capital. As Hirano observes, “when the worker is only formally subsumed under capital, he still embodies within himself most of society’s productive forces, in the form of the greater part of the ‘social knowledge’ produced within that society” (Hirano, 2001, p. 15). It is with large-scale industry that real subsumption, present as a potentiality within manufacture, is fully actualized. By radically transforming the very nature of the production process, capital establishes a technical basis adequate to its logic of valorization and expanded reproduction. Under these conditions, “the practical knowledge of the artisan worker is codified and, consequently, the tool is transferred from the human hand to a mechanism, such that the subjective factor becomes subordinated to the objective one” (Zanghelini and Bolaño, 2026, p. 3). This transformation brings about a leap in labour productivity and creates the material conditions for the generalization of the specifically capitalist mode of production.

As Leite and Carcanholo (2021, p. 77) recall, Marx explains in the “Unpublished Chapter VI” that, with real subsumption, “capitalist production tends to conquer all branches of industry that it had not yet seized, where only formal subsumption still takes place” (Marx, 2022, p. 105). This tendency takes decisive form when real subsumption extends to the machinery-producing sector itself, which was still organised according to the principles of manufacture. In this process, machinery comes to be produced by means of machinery, enabling capital to overcome new technical and productive barriers. This development paves the way for what Bolaño (2002) characterises as the Second Industrial Revolution.

With the rise of large-scale industry and the consolidation of the world market as a specifically capitalist social and historical form, “a division of labour in (world) society is progressively established, organised by the structural unevenness of productivity” (Leite and Carcanholo, 2021, p. 78). On the one hand, at the centre of the system, there are nations characterised by large-scale mechanised production, in which the real subsumption of labour under capital predominates. On the other hand, in the periphery, less mechanised or even artisanal forms of production predominate, associated with a subordinate insertion into the international division of labour marked by a tendency toward the production and export of primary commodities. These different levels of productivity, linked to different organic compositions of capital, constitute an essential determination of the process of international transfer of value among capitals located in formally independent nations. At this level of abstraction, these structural relations constitute the economic basis from which imperialism emerges (*ibid.*).

At a more concrete level of analysis, however, it is useful to distinguish between two moments of the nineteenth century. The first, extending approximately until 1870, and particularly evident between 1850 and 1870, was marked by the expansion of competitive capitalism, British hegemony, and the ideology of free trade. The second, inaugurated by the crisis of 1873, corresponds to an important reconfiguration of capitalist accumulation, characterised by years of economic depression, the expansion of the concentration and centralisation of capital, the strengthening of the banking system, the advance of protectionism, and the developments of the Second Industrial Revolution.

It is in this second moment that stronger firms begin to absorb or eliminate smaller competitors, joint-stock companies expand, the credit system broadens, and national states begin to support their large firms more directly, both in protecting the domestic market and in expanding their participation in external markets. As a result, competition intensifies among individual capitals and among nations in the international market. In Lenin’s terms (1987, p. 17), the “transformation of competition into monopoly is one of the most important phenomena – if not the most important – in the economy of modern capitalism.”

The formation of finance capital, resulting from the articulation between banking capital and industrial capital, constitutes another decisive element of this process (Hilferding, 1973; Lenin,

1987). Banks came to hold equity stakes in industrial firms and to influence productive decisions, including through the presence of their representatives on boards of directors. This articulation became crucial to the dynamics of capitalist accumulation – both in contexts of economic expansion and in moments of crisis – reinforcing the concentration and centralisation of capital and, consequently, the formation of oligopolistic or monopolistic structures (Arrizabalo Montoro, 2023).

With the predominance of monopolies and finance capital, the global expansion of capital takes on a new historical form (Lenin, 1987; Arrizabalo Montoro, 2023; Harvey, 2004). Under what is commonly termed competitive capitalism, commodity exports still constituted the principal form of economic linkage among countries. With this shift, commodity exports remain important, but the export of capital comes to play a decisive role. Capital accumulated in the capitalist powers thus seeks various avenues for valorisation in peripheral regions, and the profits obtained there are “drained and reinvested in the major corporations of the core countries” (Furno, 2026, p. 24).

This process of capital’s global expansion brings the different functional forms of capital into a more complex articulation: commodity capital, money capital, and productive capital. It is in this sense that large multinational corporations may be considered “the fullest expression of the process of centralisation of capital, operating internationally in all its dimensions (by integrating productive, commercial, and financial activities)” (Arrizabalo Montoro, 2023, p. 184).

Imperialism thus assumes its classical form from the final decades of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. This configuration should be understood as a particular historical stage of the capitalist mode of production, arising from the tendential laws inherent in its development. In Lenin’s analysis (1987), it is characterised by the concentration and centralisation of capital and the consequent formation of monopolies; the formation of finance capital; the growing importance of the export of capital; the international expansion of cartels, trusts, and other monopolist associations; and the completion of the territorial division of the world among the major capitalist powers. Under these conditions, accumulation on a world scale assumes increasingly hierarchical, contradictory, and uneven characteristics.

It is also important to emphasise that this substantial reconfiguration of the capitalist system does not invalidate the law of value. On the contrary, imperialism must be understood within the framework of the law of value, which now operates under more complex historical determinations. Under these conditions, economic and political asymmetries among nations reinforce the mechanisms of value transfer between capitals located in different countries, thereby deepening international inequalities. Thus, the law of value, the establishment of large-scale industry, and the formation of the capitalist world market account for the economic-formal genesis of imperialism, whereas the classical theories of imperialism elucidate its more concrete determinations, consolidated around the turn of the twentieth century with the formation of monopolies, the predominance of finance capital, the export of capital, and the deepening of the international division of labour.

Media imperialism

Imperialism has also been theorised and analysed in relation to specific sectors. Sulehria characterises media imperialism in some detail and contextualises this thesis (for extended discussions, see inter alia Sulehria, 2018, pp. 5-34). This section, instead, begins by mapping media imperialism as a field of study. Next, we argue that newfangled digital platforms are only reinforcing and reproducing the condition of media imperialism. Lastly, it demonstrates the USA’s imperial dominance of the global media despite its relative decline in other spheres and China’s rise as an imperial rival.

Media imperialism as an area of study

Boyd-Barrett (2015: 1-2) views media imperialism as 'an area of study...that deals with the range of relationships and interconnections between "imperialism" and "media", an area that is available for empirical investigation'. Elsewhere, Boyd-Barrett and Mirrlees (2020, p. 2) identify the following sources of media imperialism: "the corporations that own the news, telecommunications, film and TV, advertising and public relations, music, interactive games, and internet platforms and social media sites"¹. Building on Boyd-Barrett (2015) and Boyd-Barrett & Mirrlees (2020), we argue media imperialism expresses itself in three forms: economic, political and ideological-cultural. Moreover, for the purpose of research, media imperialism can be categorised into concrete branches such as press, news agencies, television, advertising, division of cultural labour, policy-making, advertising, technology, theory and scholarship on media (the list is not exhaustive).

These forms and categories, together, help establish both the metropolitan domination of the periphery and the dependency of the periphery on metropolitan centres. Arguably, these two dynamics are among the defining features of media imperialism. By implication, media imperialism is also about the unequal relations of power between imperial and dependent media.

Founded by Schiller in the 1960s, the media imperialism school initially investigated the metropolitan media from the viewpoint of cultural imperialism (see inter alia Schiller, 1969). The debate has since expanded to investigate media imperialism from the perspectives of domination (Boyd-Barrett, 1977; Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Tunstall, 1977), content and discourse (Matelart, 1979) division of cultural labour (Miller, 1989; 1990), cultural and ideological hegemony (Artz and Kamalipour, 2004), entertainment industry (Mirrlees, 2013), digitality (Jin, 2015), political economy (Sulehria, 2018). This list is not exhaustive (see inter alia Boyd-Barrett, 2020, pp. 11-21). In fact, a repertoire of liberal and postmodern scholarship on media, dismissive of the media imperialism thesis, as well as discourses on global media (see Sulehria, 2018, pp. 11-27) should also be taken into account while mapping the area of media imperialism studies.

Before moving on, it will also be important to flag an important gap in the research on media imperialism. Scholars, in general, have ignored the question of climate and environment. Although the media-imperialism thesis has largely been developed by scholars with a Marxist orientation, Marxism has itself been criticised, both from within and outside the tradition, for giving short shrift to climate imperialism². According to Carvalhaes, 'Capitalism ...creates "sacrifice zones" in non-core semi-colonial countries: territories where imperialist corporations and governments impose mining, oil and gas projects, eucalyptus plantations for the pulp

¹ Boyd-Barrett and Mirrlees (2020: 2) argue, the "[p]oints of focus when studying media imperialism may include media financing, media ownership, and intellectual property control; media-corporate business models (including advertising, subscription, sponsorship... data aggregation); the organization and management of particular internationalizing media products, including cross-border media production, distribution, and exhibition; the integration of new hardware and software technologies with older media models and forms; the characteristics of specific media products (the form) cultural stories the complexities of cross-border media reception, interpretation, and use" besides paying attention to the political economy of media corporations with the geopolitics of states.

² Amin (2010) laments that Marxist analyses of imperialism have neglected the depletion of non-renewable resources. However, a diverse body of Marxist scholarship and work from related critical traditions has contributed to addressing this gap. Prominent scholars include John Bellamy Foster, Ian Angus, James O'Connor, Jason W. Moore, Ariel Salleh, Andreas Malm, Maristella Svampa, and Kohei Saito. In Brazil, the work of Eduardo Sá Barreto deserves particular attention.

industry (and pulp mills), and dump their waste' (Carvalhaes and Fuentes, 2026). These zones of sacrifice symbolise "unequal ecological exchange"³ expressed through "environmental racism"⁴.

Of course, there are honourable exceptions. For instance, *Greening the Media*, by Maxwell and Miller, explores the media industries from a perspective of sacrifice zones. However, the research on the Global South as zones of sacrifice for media and communication industries remains a gravely under-researched branch. In fact, studying media imperialism from the perspective of environmental racism and unequal ecological exchange may constitute the fourth form of media imperialism phenomenon.

Legacy media remains an imperial oligopoly

Earlier, in the 1990s, with the arrival of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), liberal scholarship on global media popularised the discourse that the emergence of new media giants in the Global South and the diffusion of television channels post-liberalisation have brought Western domination to an end. Of late, BRICS media are cited as an instance of dewesternization, US decline, and so on. The available evidence, however, does not support such sweeping claims.

When it comes to legacy media and entertainment, the US domination in media and cultural imperialism remains unchallenged. Consider, for instance, the following: The global combined theatrical and home entertainment, including pay TV, market is worth \$326 billion. The US share is \$133 billion i.e 40 per cent of the global market (Motion Picture Association, 2021: 3–5). According to "Forbes' Global 2000", ranking the largest public companies in the world in 2026, based on four metrics – sales, profits, assets and market value – included the media conglomerates (traditionally owning television and entertainment industries) shown in Table 1, among the top media and communication giants:

Table 1- Media giants on the 'Forbes Global 2000' (2026 edition).

	Slott on Global 2000	Location	Market value (\$ billion)
Walt Disney	56	USA	178
Comcast	64	USA	88
Warner Brother	591	USA	67
Fox	771	USA	27
Paramount	1125	USA	11

Source: Murphy and Hyatt, 2026.

In the film sector, Hollywood's traditional hold of the global market remains firm. Since the COVID-19 pandemic took its toll on the global film industry, in 2022 the film business was sluggish. Still, the US film market was worth \$7.5 billion. The Hollywood 5 (Disney, Universal, Paramount, Warner Bros, Sony) grossed \$16 billion (McClintock, 2023). According to the Motion Picture Association (2022; 2023), the USA earns \$14 billion from film exports and \$7 billion in trade surplus. If the US film industry was a country, its GDP would rank 46th in the world. Identifying Hollywood's oligopolistic grip over the global market, Mirrlees (2020, pp.

³ A capitalist-imperialist mechanism that "explains why biomes and biodiversity destruction, as well as water and air pollution, is far greater in countries exploited by core powers. These countries are viewed as exporters of agriculture, livestock, minerals and oil, or sites to dump polluting industries that imperialists do not want at home" (Carvalhaes and Fuentes, 2026).

⁴ A concept arguing that "the primary targets for pollution, toxic spills, noise and destruction being territories where Indigenous peoples, Afrodescendent peoples, and oppressed ethnic groups tend to live" (Carvalhaes and Fuentes, 2026).

311-312) writes, between 2000 and 2017, over 90% of the top ten highest-grossing films worldwide were Hollywood-Six productions. According to Mirrlees, in 2018, Hollywood was behind all but one of the twenty highest-grossing films worldwide (Chinese production, *Operation Red Sea* was the only exception). Notably, as Mirrlees points out, “[d]espite the Chinese state's limiting of Hollywood's presence in China to a maximum of thirty-four films each year, four of the top ten films at the Chinese box office were Hollywood properties...the Walt Disney-owned ...blockbuster *Avengers: Infinity War* placed among the top ten highest-grossing films across the BRICS” (Mirrlees, 2020, pp. 311-312).

Streaming platforms represent a merging of legacy media and digital platforms. Globally, the video streaming market was valued at an estimated \$674.25 billion in 2024. The global industrial leader in this realm is Netflix. In January 2025, Netflix reported passing 300 million subscribers worldwide (Glover, 2026). Between April 2022 and January 2024, Netflix saw 1.4 billion monthly visits, on average. The runner-up was Prime Video (Amazon) with 290 million average monthly visits. Among the top ten, the other eight platforms included Disney+ (Disney), Hulu (Disney), HBOMax (Warner Brothers), Hotstar (Disney), Paramount+ (Paramount), Peacock (Comcast), YouTube (Google) and ivi, a Russian concern (Statista, 2024).

In 2025, the global music market was a \$31 billion affair. The ten largest markets were the USA, Japan, the UK, China, Germany, France, South Korea, Brazil, Canada, and Mexico, respectively. The US share in global revenue was 31% (IFPI, 2026). Likewise, the US-based music companies Universal, Sony, and Warner are industry leaders. The fourth largest company is BMG, a Bertelsmann (Germany) subsidiary (Lauren and Muenster, 2026).

Advertising fuels the global and commercial media worldwide. Western dominance of the advertising sector remains strong, with the United States maintaining a clear lead. As in other branches of media imperialism, however, a visible BRICS presence has also emerged. Of the fifteen largest advertising and marketing services companies, six are based in the United States. Alongside the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Germany, China, South Korea, and India are represented. The six US-based companies generated a combined US\$67.6 billion in revenue, equivalent to approximately 48.4 per cent of the combined revenue of the fifteen companies (Agency Mania Solutions, 2025).

Table 2- Fifteen largest agency companies worldwide by 2024 revenue.

Rank	Agency	Country	Revenue (US\$ billion)
1	Accenture Song	USA	19
2	WPP	UK	18.8
3	Publicis Groupe	France	17.3
4	Omnicom	USA	15.6
5	Deloitte Digital	USA	12.6
6	Interpublic Group	USA	10.6
7	Dentsu	Japan	9.3
8	BlueFocus	China	8.4
9	IBM	USA	7
10	Hakuhodo	Japan	6.3
11	Cheil Worldwide	South Korea	3.1
12	Vivendi's Havas	France	3.09
13	TCS Interactive	India	3.04
14	Stagwell	USA	2.8
15	Serviceplan Group	Germany	2.6

Source: Agency Mania Solutions (2025).

Book publishing is often ignored in the debate on media and cultural imperialism. From the viewpoint of media imperialism, scholarship on media (and media training) and professional training in media constitute important mechanisms through which imperial relations are reproduced (see inter alia Sulehria, 2018, chapter 4). As Table 6 below illustrates, metropolitan countries dominate the book-publishing industry, with the United States serving as its principal global centre.

Table 3- Top five developed and developing economies by total publishing industry revenue in 2022 (US\$ million).

	Developed	Developing
1	USA (26,151)	India (9,132)
2	Germany (9,945)	Brazil (1,113)
3	Japan (9,316)	Turkey (638)
4	UK (5,024)	Philippines (381)
5	Italy (3,568)	Colombia (212)

Source: UNCTAD (2024, p. 12).

Imperialism in the XXI century, communications and digital technologies

Some of the literature on imperialism in the 21st century overlooks the role of communications, digital technologies, and Big Tech. One example is Foster (2015, p. 17), who acknowledges how communications and digital technologies have deepened and broadened “commodification throughout the globe.” However, this is noted only in passing, without incorporating these developments into his broader analysis of contemporary imperialism.

Other approaches acknowledge the role of technology, especially information and communication technologies (ICTs). In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, several authors began to discuss a “new imperialism.” Harvey (2004) develops this concept and recognises the role of communications and ICTs. He draws on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony to discuss how imperial powers exert this form of influence in the 21st century. Hegemony implies leadership based on a form of collective power grounded in, among other factors, new technologies and communication networks. At the same time, this infrastructure is central to capitalist expansion by facilitating and accelerating the circulation of commodities and money while expanding productive capacity.

In this new imperialism, centralisation is a fundamental characteristic, evident across multiple industries, including media and technology.

Amin (2014) argues that the new imperialism is structured around five distinct modes of monopoly concentration: 1) technological monopolies; 2) financial control of world markets; 3) access to natural resources; 4) media and communications; and 5) weapons of mass destruction. Carchedi and Roberts (2021) place technological development at the centre of a theory of imperialism, arguing that technology has become the new battlefield. According to the authors, the “economics of modern imperialism” is marked by the continuous appropriation of surplus value by technologically advanced imperialist nations from subservient countries with more limited technological resources.

Another strand of literature focuses on the role of technology and information in the productive restructuring and how this sector undergoes the centralisation process typical of imperialism, and the resulting formation of monopolies. Discussing imperialism in the twenty-first century, Petras and Veltmeyer (2013) state that technology was a key factor in expanding capitalism and integrating economies into a world system characterised by uneven development and substantive divides between a small group of rich countries, including China as a rising power, and the world periphery. The ICTs generated what the authors call the “third technological revolution,” facilitating the expansion of global production.

Smith (2016, p. 152) states that the ICTs “played a key role in facilitating the integration of markets and the fragmentation of production and its shift to various locations around the world”, enabling the international search for cheaper labour, and were at the forefront of outsourcing and international production in his thesis of global labour arbitrage. Engaging with Lenin’s theoretical framework, Smith argues that a key aspect of imperialism is monopoly power, constituted by control of markets, advanced technology, and state and military power. In the ICT industry itself, monopolistic control over technological sectors results in higher returns for market leaders and creates substantial barriers to entry, increasingly occurring on an international scale.

Following this line of thought, Ya’u (2004) highlighted how the World Trade Organisation (WTO), multinational corporations, and governments established economic agreements (such as those on telecommunications, intellectual property and other related fields) that broadened the digital divide. Alleged efforts “at bridging the digital divide are part of wider efforts to not only secure the virgin markets of developing countries, but also to configure the world in the interest of the new imperial powers” (Ya’u, 2004, p. 1). The “new imperialism” is directly linked to “globalisation and unequal access to ICTs in a world that is increasingly becoming knowledge mediated” (Ya’u, 2004, p. 2).

Digital colonialism and its limits

The increasing international dominance of Global North-based information, communication and technology companies (digital corporations) has also been theorised through the decolonial turn, which gained traction in recent decades in social sciences and humanities scholarship. This resulted in the growing debate around the concept of “digital colonialism” (Faustino e Lippold, 2023).

Ricaurte (2019, p. 351) argues that digital colonialism theorises processes of data capture and processing that lead “to new forms of colonisation through data, grounded in material infrastructures and symbolic constructions that reinforce these practices.” Drawing on decolonial thought (e.g., Quijano, 2000), the author states that big data entails data epistemologies, data rationalities, and infrastructure of knowledge production. These factors are rooted in colonisation practices, reproduce and reconfigure the colonality of power, capturing social activities and subjectivity at an international level.

Couldry and Mejias (2020, p. xix), in their renowned book on the subject, prefer the concept of data colonialism, defined as “the extension of a global process of extraction that started under colonialism and continued through industrial capitalism, culminating in today’s new form: instead of natural resources and labour, what is now being appropriated is human life through its conversion into data”. While expansion has been a feature of capitalism since its beginning, the current appropriation of data goes beyond the exploitation of labour to encompass multiple facets of daily life and social activities. The authors justify the use of colonialism in its “enduring function” as “enacting illegitimate appropriation and exploitation and as redefining human relations so that the resulting dispossession comes to seem natural” (Couldry and Mejias, 2020, xviii).

The “decolonial turn” has also attracted criticism, especially from Latin American scholars. Although this nuanced debate cannot be examined in detail here, it is pertinent to mention critiques aligned with historical materialist approaches that utilise the theoretical framework of imperialism. This literature makes an important contribution by recognising the persistence of colonial experiences in the 21st century – such as in Gaza, French Guiana, Puerto Rico, Curaçao, and Northern Ireland – as well as the strong contemporary reverberations of colonialism. Some authors also examine the historical relationship between colonialism and imperialism, as highlighted by Amin (2023).

This debate is pertinent here because research frequently links digital colonialism with digital imperialism, as discussed in the following section. It is therefore useful to briefly indicate how the gaps and limits of postcolonial and decolonial theoretical approaches can be addressed through an imperialism-grounded framework. This framework allows for a more robust analysis of the international information asymmetries produced by transnational digital corporations and imperial powers.

Ribeiro (2011) states that colonialism has indeed impacted how societies were constituted. However, it should not be viewed as a structural force that overrides different forms of globality and the colonality of power. “An overemphasis on colonialism and on colonality can curiously (re)generate precisely what needs to be criticised and surpassed: an explanation that accepts subalternity as a destiny of former colonies” (Ribeiro, 2011, p. 290). The author proposes the concept of “post-imperialism” to define imperialism in the 21st century, in which technology plays a growing role in facilitating more flexible forms of capitalist expansion.

Ballestrin (2017) highlights how historically, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, colonialism and imperialism were integral parts of capitalist expansion. After the long wave of liberation struggles in the 20th century, different post-colonial streams arose, which the author categorises as “anticolonial” (e.g., Cabral, Guevara, Fanon), “post-structuralist” (e.g., Amin, Hall, Spivak), and “decolonial” (e.g., Quijano, Mignolo, Walsh). While colonality would be an enduring consequence of colonialism as a historical phenomenon, the author questions whether decolonial scholarship overlooks imperialism. Ballestrin argues that, because colonialism results from imperialism, colonality should be understood as the result of an “imperiality” in contemporary analyses of global capitalism.

Le Ludec (in Brevini et al., 2020) argues that “data extractivism” or “digital colonality” would be more appropriate than “data colonialism.” Marques (2026) provides a critical account of Couldry and Mejias (2020), focusing on three aspects: 1) the alleged weakening of the role of human labour in creating and extracting value in favour of a broader account of the exploitation of human life; 2) the lack of distinction between the spheres of production and circulation; and 3) the location of decolonisation primarily in epistemological realms as a means of contesting and overcoming digital colonialism, which fails to consider resistance through power struggles in social, economic, and political spheres.

Valente and Grohmann (2024) suggest that Latin American social thought can enrich a critique of international asymmetries associated with digitalisation beyond the data colonialism framework (such as Latin American intersectionality, dependency theory, and philosophy of liberation). They highlight Dussel’s (2018) project of a transmodern pluriverse, which “represents a strategy for the growth and creativity of a renovated culture, which is not merely decolonised, but is moreover entirely new” (Dussel, 2018, p. 59).

Literature on digital imperialism

Digital imperialism is a less explored theoretical and conceptual framework, with a nascent literature. One strand of the literature has contributed to its conceptual development, presenting definitions of the phenomenon. In one of the first pieces on the topic, Gajjala and Birzescu (2011) introduced the concept. This phenomenon intertwines socioeconomic and cultural factors and consists of the control of social and cultural practices mediated by digital technologies, eliminating skills, communities, and cultures. The authors relate digital imperialism to neocolonialist practices (Spivak, 1999) that focus more on economic than territorial domination. Digital imperialism shapes how connectedness and online participation take place, reconfiguring subaltern roles and relations through the supposed inclusion of subaltern groups into an unequal structure dominated by transnational corporations.

"Cyberspaces have become the nodes at which various locals connect and disconnect in the production of the global. Thus those of us who inhabit online networks are also networked into processes of globalisation through the interplay of online global audiences and offline located/situated producers. Moreover, no matter where we live in the world, we are both global audiences and located/situated producers to varying degrees. Reflecting on how we might be complicit in and contribute to the digital imperialism that 'produces' the subaltern online might be a step towards imagining alternative modes of online inclusivity" (Gajjala and Birzescu, 2011, p. 9).

Another example of this stream is Amoah (2025, p. 93), who defines digital imperialism as follows: "critical aspect of the contemporary instantiation of imperialism afforded by the internet and wider globe spanning telecommunications infrastructure which are increasingly unchallengeable employed by powerful states and corporations – on account of their inventing them and holding the intellectual proprietary rights – in the Global North and richer parts of Asia as the core instruments of production, distribution, consumption, control, power, hegemony and domination".

The author argues that the literature on digital imperialism has been underdeveloped and marked by "analytical gestures" of the phenomenon in peripheral countries. He flags an "obfuscation" between the concepts of digital imperialism (DI) and digital colonialism (DC), with the literature privileging the latter. The author argues that DI is a more suitable concept than DC: "The conscious adoption of DI by scholars would cure a lot of conceptual confusion and slippages as is presently the case wherein attempts at describing imperialism in the digital age are made equivalent to colonisation properly understood as the imposition of the formal rule of a foreign government" (Amoah, 2025, p. 97).

In a widely cited article, Kwet (2019) uses the frameworks of both imperialism and colonialism to discuss how the US makes use of its dominance of digital technologies, architecture and infrastructures (including software, hardware and network connectivity) to exercise power over other countries, a phenomenon he calls "digital colonialism". This process manifests through different mechanisms. The author calls "imperial control" the power of big tech in political, economic, and cultural realms stemming from its ability to act as a gatekeeper of online interactions and experiences. Additionally, economic domination occurs via resource extraction through rent and surveillance. These domination strategies rely on big data, collecting vast amounts of data, in what he coins "global surveillance capitalism". By disseminating the digital models of US companies, the country exerts a "tech hegemony".

Big tech and US state intelligence agencies have become the "new imperialists". At the same time, the author argues that "Big Tech corporations are colonising digital technology. While colonial conquest was conducted through the dispossession of resources and control of infrastructure by colonial powers, digital colonialism entails shaping infrastructure in the Global South "for their own needs" (Kwet, 2019, p. 4). Control over software, hardware, and

connectivity entails “digital domination” and leads to “imperial control through architectural design”. The other two key streams of control operate through intellectual property and surveillance, led with the US empire “at the centre”.

Pascual (2014) states that digital imperialism is a new strategy deployed by capital to overcome structural obstacles and crises, opening new frontiers of expansionist accumulation and spreading its ideology through a “digital sublime”. Digital technosolutionism and the narratives trying to boost digital technologies as the new progress model enhance this “digital superstructure”.

Pal and Harris (2023) argue that digital infrastructure is a crucial element of “the general conditions of production” (in Marx’s terms) and is a fundamental contemporary factor of “geopolitical imperial rivalries”. The authors adopt the term “legal imperialism” to analyse the case of submarine cables as critical infrastructures for capitalist accumulation and disputes among imperial powers, with US-based Big Tech transnational corporations playing an especially prominent role.

Muller (2023) draws on Rosa Luxemburg’s reflections on the role of networks in her analysis of imperialism and capital accumulation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, communication infrastructures served as instruments of capitalist expansion while also constituting an investment-intensive sector. The author suggests that Luxemburg’s imperialism theory included the need for capitalist powers to expand advanced technologies (at that time) towards non-capitalist and peripheral regions. Against techno-optimists’ and other Marxists’ accounts of the potential of productive forces, Luxemburg has highlighted the limits and risks of technological change and the exploitative social relations of production underpinning it.

In certain other works, digital imperialism is employed for specific situations where Global North-based digital corporations and technologies shape how experiences are designed and reproduced in Global South regions. Ogden (2021, p. 1) is one example, adopting this terminology to describe how, in the visual representations created by Instagram in Cuba, “the broader profile of creators in this digital gaze further skews the asymmetry of the city’s visual representation, constituting a gaze from the outside in”. Ofosu-Asare (2025) employs the term “cognitive imperialism” to describe the dominance of Western epistemological paradigms, values, and perspectives in AI evolution, perpetuating biases and limiting the representation of minorities and indigenous epistemologies and perspectives.

Imperialism has also been used to explain the rise of digital platforms. Jin is the most well-known example, with his work on platform imperialism. Jin (2015a) defines platform imperialism as the American influence in cultural production mainly through digital platforms. The novelty is that these economic corporations can control the whole “value chain of cultural production” at scale, going beyond distribution and also encompassing production.

Unlike previous models where content was disseminated to national partners in different countries, digital platforms can now directly distribute their own and third-party content. Additionally, since they control vast amounts of data, they use this for their services and also monetise it, strengthening their economic power. In his book on the topic, Jin (2015b, p. 12) refines the definition: “the idea of platform imperialism... refers to an asymmetrical relationship of interdependence in platform technologies and political culture between the West, primarily the U.S., and many developing countries, including two great powers – both nation-states and transnational corporations—as Lenin analysed”.

Park et al. (2023) look at how platform imperialism manifests in Netflix operations in Korea. Steinberg (2016) calls attention to how platform imperialism also shapes the “platform studies” field, which has developed largely through the work and perspectives of Global North scholars and has focused on Global North platforms, thereby sidelining Global South case studies.

Other authors focus on specific digital technologies and services to develop theoretical

frameworks grounded in imperialism. Jutel (2021, p. 2) speaks about a “blockchain imperialism” as a form of platform imperialism “that extends both the cultural and economic power of Silicon Valley and American geopolitical interests”. Blockchain jeopardises states’ abilities to exert authority over their resources and territories and enables new ways of incorporating activities into proprietary networks. Instead of imperial coercion, blockchain capitalism is operated via international agencies, governments and platforms often hegemonised by U.S. transnational companies. Jutel (2021, p. 3) argues that blockchain “complements and extends techno-colonial practices of shaping social life for the extraction of data”.

Other scholars develop related approaches but adopt distinct concepts. Mannion (2020) coins the term “data imperialism”, but focuses on the influence of Europe’s data protection regulatory framework and obligations on African countries, distancing the approach from an imperialism-grounded theoretical framework. Mann and Daly (2019, p. 381) prefer the term “informational imperialism” as linked to digital colonialism: “technological advancements have catalyzed digital colonialism, whereby information – and in the case of the present article, highly classified surveillance – can be disseminated to and from remote destinations as a means of perpetuating traditional colonial practices via modern technologies”. These authors also employ the term “data colonialism”, using Thatcher et al.’s (2016) definition: “the commodification of data and its accumulation by dispossession”. However, they do not define or elaborate on the concept of “informational imperialism”.

These multiple perspectives theorise an ongoing process evident both in the spread of digital technologies and the integration of services across the economy and society. Global penetration rates have reached 97.5% for mobile devices, 73.2% for Internet use, and 68.7% for social media (We Are Social, 2026). However, connectivity remains uneven; for instance, penetration stands at 95.1% in Western Europe, compared to only 42.9% in Western Africa and 64.3% in Southern Asia (We Are Social, 2026).

Considering the role of infrastructure, one relevant indicator is investment in telecommunications. In 2023, global investment per capita was USD 51, with a notable divide between wealthy and poorer nations. The same indicator was at USD 185 for high-income countries and 5 for low-income countries (ITU, 2025). Data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNITED NATIONS, 2021) show asymmetries in the use of multiple digital services across countries and regions, according to economic and territorial indicators.

Table 4- Internet activities undertaken by individuals, by level of development and region (Values expressed in percentage, %)

Internet Activity	Developed Economies	Transition Economies	Developing Economies - Africa	Developing Economies - Asia	Developing Economies - LAC
Internet banking	62.3	14.9	9.8	34.8	11.6
Sending or receiving email	84.9	44.8	46.6	59.7	52.4
Making calls (telephoning over the Internet/Voice over Internet Protocol, using Skype, iTalk, etc.)	56.9	71	47.6	63.2	73.4
Reading or downloading online newspapers or magazines, electronic books	76.4	41.5	38.6	46	30.3

Internet Activity	Developed Economies	Transition Economies	Developing Economies - Africa	Developing Economies - Asia	Developing Economies - LAC
Getting information about goods or services	83.9	50.9	30.6	68	51.8
Getting information from general government organisations	55.1	11.1	17.6	20.9	23.2
Interacting with general government organisations	54.5	5.7	12.1	25.6	10.7
Purchasing or ordering goods or services	53.9	18.2	14.6	29.1	13.1
Seeking health information (on injury, disease, nutrition, etc.)	62.4	37.5	24.3	47.1	41.1
Making an appointment with a health practitioner via a website	16.4	3.9	4	7.6	3.1
Participating in social networks	70.4	70.7	86.3	87.2	79
Accessing or posting opinions on chat sites, blogs, newsgroups or online discussions	13.9	11.6	45.1	26.5	26
Selling goods or services	16.8	7	3.5	6.4	9.3
Using services related to travel or travel-related accommodation	55	5.7	7.5	25.2	28.4
Doing a formal online course	8.1	4.5	17.5	15.9	28.5
Consulting wikis, online encyclopedias or other websites for formal learning purposes	23.8	14.6	17.2	13.2	31.4
Listening to web radio	61.2	17	13.3	20.9	11.2
Watching web television	41.1	8.8	30.2	33.1	18.1
Streaming or downloading images, movies, videos or music, playing or downloading games	57.4	52.9	64.2	66.4	50.8
Downloading software or applications	19	5.5	62.8	41	20.7
Looking for a job or sending/submitting a job application	17.4	9.8	14.3	19.9	16.6
Participating in professional networks	21	3.6	5.9	6.4	0.7
Uploading self/user-created content to a website to be shared	38.8	33.4	12.7	21.3	35.6

Internet Activity	Developed Economies	Transition Economies	Developing Economies - Africa	Developing Economies - Asia	Developing Economies - LAC
Taking part in online consultations or voting to define civic or political issues	9.8	3.5	5.5	8.1	N/A
Using storage space on the Internet to save documents, pictures, music, video or other files	38.7	15	17.5	20.8	21.7
Using software run over the Internet for editing text documents, spreadsheets or presentations	28	4.3	6.1	11.7	4.8

Source: United Nations (2021, p. 14).

The oligopolistic concentration in imperial powers is another highly relevant indicator of digital imperialism. Data on international markets confirm the power of US-based digital corporations in multiple markets and in the centralisation of global markets (in some cases, in an oligopolistic structure). Notably, US companies do not merely dominate among digital companies; US domination is increasing over time, as depicted in Table 5.

Table 5- Top 100 digital companies (USD trillion)

Year	Combined value	Americas	Asia Pacific	Europe	Africa
2025	22.7	86	11	2	1
2020	10.8	68 (64% in 2017)	27 (31% in 2017)	3	2

Source: MIT Initiative on Digital Economy, Worldwide Top 100 Companies Indices 2020 and 2025.

It is also important to note that the Top 10 digital companies had an 80 per cent share in 2025. There are only two Chinese companies among the Top 10 list, which is otherwise dominated by the USA (8 companies). For details, see Table 6 below. While two Chinese companies are listed among the Top 10 (slotted at no 7, no 10), their combined worth is less than Meta's, slotted at no 6.

Table 6- Top 10 digital companies worldwide.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Company	Apple	Nvidia	Microsoft	Alphabet (Google)	Amazon	Meta	Tencent	Netflix	Salesforce	ByteDance
Worth	3.7tr	3.2 tr	3.1tr	2.3tr	2.3tr	1.4tr	490b	381b	320b	300b
Origin	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	China	USA	USA	China

Source: MIT Initiative on Digital Economy, Worldwide Top 100 Companies Index 2025.

The largest companies by market capitalization are based in the United States: Nvidia (USD 4.8 trillion), Alphabet (USD 4.3 trillion), Apple (USD 4.24 trillion), Microsoft (USD 2.7 trillion), and Amazon (USD 2.5 trillion) (Statista, 2026a). Another list of the largest "digital companies" is led by Apple (United States), Microsoft (United States), Samsung (South Korea), Alphabet

(United States), AT&T (United States), Amazon (United States), Verizon (United States), China Mobile (Hong Kong), Disney (United States), and Meta (United States) (Forbes, n.d.).

One key market is social media, which U.S.-based corporations also dominate. The platforms with the most registered users in 2025 were Facebook (United States) (3.070 billion), WhatsApp (United States) (3 billion), Instagram (United States) (3 billion), YouTube (United States) (2.580 billion), TikTok (China) (1.999 billion), WeChat (China) (1.410 billion), Messenger (942 million), Snapchat (932 million), and Reddit (765 million) (Statista, 2026b). These figures also illustrate a crucial feature of imperialism: international centralization, as evident in Meta's dominance of the first three platforms in the ranking.

Another highly relevant market is cloud computing, the fundamental infrastructure on which the digital economy runs. This sector is also dominated by U.S.-based Big Tech, led by AWS (Amazon) (28%), Azure (Microsoft) (21%), Google Cloud (Google) (14%), and Oracle (4%) (Statista, 2026c). Although Oracle appears with only a 4% share, its owners, the Ellison family, have moved aggressively into media and social media markets through the acquisition of Paramount, Warner Bros., and TikTok. The latter acquisition is a clear example of the joint action of digital corporations and imperialist states. The U.S. government forced ByteDance, the Chinese company that owns the rising platform, to sell its U.S. operations to a U.S.-based buyer on alleged "national security" grounds. In practice, this move functioned as an effort to control a foreign competitor in a key market.

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has become a central topic in academia, media, and public debate. Although the recent rise of AI in the context of media imperialism remains underexplored, the United States currently holds a dominant position in the sector. According to the Stanford Index, total worldwide investment in AI reached USD 581 billion in 2025, while U.S. private-sector investment amounted to USD 285 billion. In China, by contrast, private-sector investment was USD 12 billion (Sajadieh et al., 2026, p. 178). Similarly, the United States, with 5,427 data centers, leads by a wide margin over Germany (529), the United Kingdom (523), and China (499) (Sajadieh, 2026, p. 32). In light of these figures, one may argue that media imperialism has incorporated what Jin (2015, p. 12) calls "platform imperialism," defined as "an asymmetrical relationship of interdependence between the West, primarily the US, and many developing countries."

The relevance of the digital imperialism approach

Communication, information, and imperialism are intertwined: communication and information technologies facilitate imperialism, while imperialism itself assumes specific forms within the media industry. This relationship has fostered a growing body of research that constitutes a field of study with multiple focuses, such as domination, content, cultural hegemony, digitality, and political economy. The legacy-media sector remains dominated by an imperial oligopoly, with a recent wave of centralization encompassing technology companies (as exemplified by the emerging Oracle-TikTok-Paramount-Warner conglomerate led by the Ellison family, or Jeff Bezos' acquisitions within the media sector).

Contemporary capitalism is no longer the age of news agencies, the press, television, and cinema. Social media now appears to dominate the communications landscape. Does this mean that new communication technologies have invalidated the media imperialism thesis? On the contrary, as Jin argues, "In a period in which a handful of Western countries are the world's dominant digital platform owners and operators and a large number of non-Western countries are digital platform users, it is important to examine how digital platforms intertwine with imperialism" (2020, p. 190).

The need to analyze this new reality has catalyzed the rise of new concepts, such as digital and data imperialism alongside digital and data colonialism. Digital imperialism has been employed in a nascent body of literature, while digital and data colonialism have been widely used in critical data and Internet studies in the last decade. The articles in this SI indicate how these two concepts are sometimes used interchangeably or intertwined, often linked with no clear differentiation (as in Kwet, 2019).

As pointed out above, colonialism was directly linked to imperialism through processes of aggressive and violent territorial and political dominations. Colonization was not eradicated, and it is still relevant to flag this concerning issue. This topic is increasingly important, especially considering the rise of wars and direct domination of nations and territories (such as the case of Israel against Gaza and Lebanon or the US against Iran).

Postcolonial perspectives are fruitful insofar as they emphasise the effects of colonialism across large parts of the globe in postcolonial phases. Liberation processes, however, differed across regions, occurring in Latin America in the early nineteenth century and in Asia and Africa largely in the mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, the literature reviewed above identifies important gaps, issues, and limitations in these approaches. Decolonial scholarship often ignores or only weakly incorporates the theoretical contributions of imperialism, although there are exceptions, such as Arturo Escobar.

The brief review of studies theorizing, defining, and employing the “digital imperialism” concept points to a variety of approaches. In the recent literature, digital imperialism can refer generally to three dimensions: 1) the role of digital technologies in imperialism today; 2) how transnational digital corporations (also known as big tech) and their states dominate international ICTs and digital markets, constituting monopolies and oligopolies in multiple areas; 3) how these companies and their respective states exert economic, technological, and political hegemony over states, information and communication sectors, and other social activities and shape digitally-mediated experiences.

Of the conceptual frameworks presented here, none captures all of these dimensions. Additionally, we could not find studies with a developed theoretical framework nor with a clear and structured link between theory and empirical analysis. One exception is the work of Jin (2015). However, the author's conceptual proposition focuses on platform imperialism, not digital imperialism. Digital imperialism should refer to the dialectical relationship between the provision of digital services – especially by transnational corporations and public bodies – and capitalist expansion in its multiple spheres (including economy, politics and culture), incorporating the three dimensions listed above.

Another limitation highlighted in this article is the limited examination of the conceptual overlaps and distinctions between digital imperialism and digital colonialism. Transposing the vocabulary of colonialism to the actions of transnational digital corporations (for instance, by comparing the physical domination of territories to the extraction of data) risks stretching the concept of colonialism beyond its analytical usefulness. On the other hand, acknowledging the legacies and impacts of colonialism is crucial for this discussion; however, applying the coloniality framework uncritically presents conceptual challenges, as flagged above.

Drawing on these reflections, the theoretical and conceptual framework of digital imperialism offers a promising means of examining the interplay between digital communications, digital technologies, and capitalism in the twenty-first century. While authors such as Amoah (2025) contribute to enriching discussions of digital corporations, contemporary capitalism, and international asymmetries, further work is needed to deepen this theoretical debate and analyze the concrete manifestations of digital imperialism across territories, communication and information fields, and wider social practices.

Special Issue overview

The Special Issue “Imperialism, Information, Communication, and Culture in the Age of Digitalization” presents an interesting group of research pieces discussing different aspects of how transnational digital corporations and imperial powers shape today’s culture, communications, information, and technology sectors by deepening international asymmetries and reconfiguring imperialist strategies in the 21st century.

Bragança et al. propose the concept of imperialist mirroring to discuss how antivax groups take advantage of digital platforms to question scientific authority and disseminate misinformation. Lino Netto et al. link imperialism with digital colonialism to critically analyze how big tech creates “sacrifice zones” in the Global South, especially in Abya Yala (an indigenous term to nominate what is known as Latin America). Seto proposes a military genealogy of platformization, examining war as a labouratory for the world of work. From Wiener’s cybernetics to DARPA’s networks, it shows how sociotechnical relations of command, control, and automation migrate from the battlefield to the algorithmic management of workers.

Gabry investigates how the use of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) technologies and parameters reproduces imperialist logics that shape publishers’ experiences on digital platforms and the Internet. Mazur et al. show how digital imperialism operates in another industry: streaming. The authors investigate how Netflix appropriates the originality of Korean cultural shows and movies. Sulheria highlights how the debate on media imperialism has been undergoing a revival. The author critically analyses audience theory as a key counterpoint to the media-imperialism thesis.

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