

Digital Imperialism, Capital Accumulation, and Technological Dependence: An Interview with Lloyd G. Adu Amoah

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1. Digital imperialism is a nascent conceptual framework that you have employed in your research. However, as you observe, it remains an emergent analytical approach within the literature. How would you define this concept?

Digital imperialism (DI) as a concept was initially explicitly named and elaborated on by Gajjala and Birzescu (2011). Their work pointed out in a timely fashion the power hierarchies and dynamics embedded in the otherwise euphoric global digitalization process. They drew critical attention to how imperialism was/is being (re)fashioned digitally and in the process provided some useful definitional clues and cues on digital imperialism as an emergent analytical approach and condition but stopped short of defining it. I offered the first most explicit working definition yet of digital imperialism ([Amoah, 2024] drawing on the literature on the digital political economy in particular and imperialism generally). Here I offer an updated working definition of DI as follows (this updates the Amoah, 2024 one slightly) : digital imperialism is a critical aspect of the contemporary instantiation of imperialism afforded by the internet and wider globe spanning telecommunications infrastructure which are increasingly unchallengeably employed by powerful states and corporations—on account of their inventing them and holding the intellectual proprietary rights—in the Global North(core) and richer parts of Asia(semi-periphery) as the critical instruments of production, distribution, consumption, control, power, hegemony and domination for the leakage of capital from the periphery to the core through and with the semi-periphery.

2. What are the principal characteristics of digital imperialism, and in what ways does this concept contribute to the analysis of contemporary informational asymmetries?

DI as an empirical-analytical lens concerns itself fundamentally with drawing attention to the ways in which late capitalism has taken on increasingly (i)ntangible aspects embodied and embedded in algorithmic bits and bytes for the sole and express purpose of more efficient exploitative capital drainage from the periphery to the semi-periphery and core. DI highlights as well how digital technology has become the critical if not the sole means of mediating the central driving antinomies of capitalism (the dynamics and contradictions of which keep it functioning): economy/polity, capital/labour, supply/demand and subject/object. In DI, the *longue durée* of changing global capitalism in its constant spatio-temporal turns exemplified currently in digital capitalism (Schiller, 1999) is twinned with imperialism's constant shifts or better transformations (Marini, 1972; Nkrumah, 2004; Wallerstein, 1991) in what Addo captures brilliantly as "Imperialism: the permanent state of capitalism" (Addo, 1995) for a fuller, nuanced, and richer grasp of the articulation of imperialism and global capitalism in a digitalized world. It is useful to quote Addo (1995) on the synonymity between global capitalism and imperialism which DI points up in the digitalized phase of late capitalism:

imperialism is itself a process that derives its dynamism and changing forms from the development of capitalism, which has always been "world scale." The connection between imperialism and world capitalism is so close, imperialism is so much an intimate part of world capitalism that capitalism cannot exist without imperialism. We may in fact see the two phenomena as synonymous. (14)

For DI, information and digital technology asymmetries need to be read as salient, polarizing and dynamic expressions of global capitalism's imperialist and imperializing tendencies directed expressly at capital accumulation for the centre and semi-periphery (for their states and Transnational Technology and Telecommunications Corporations [TTTCs) at the expense of

the periphery. In the sense just expounded, DI is presented and must be understood as an oppositional discursive tool for a trenchant focus on information and digital technology asymmetries as arguably one of the most important life impacting phenomena in late capitalism and for cutting through the contested claims that digital technologies are benign harmless tools for the promotion of economic growth, social welfare enhancement and the entrenchment of the putative politically normatively superior liberal values across the globe.

3. The literature has advanced related concepts of imperialism, including Jin's notions of platform imperialism and blockchain imperialism. In what respects does digital imperialism differ from these conceptualizations?

I have really pondered long and hard over this in my work try to address this. I look at the related concepts of block chain imperialism and platform imperialism and their relation to DI in terms of species and genus. DI should serve as the genus under which the species of block chain imperialism and platform imperialism subsist. The relationship is logical and empirical. DI is a necessary condition for the related concepts under discussion and reflects as well DI's specific instantiations (empirical) of algorithmic organization and tendencies for the efficient accumulation of capital in the centre and semi-periphery away from the periphery.

4. Critical scholarship in communication and the social sciences has examined earlier forms of imperialism, including cultural imperialism and media imperialism. How do you conceptualize the specificity of digital imperialism, as well as its continuities with and departures from these preceding forms?

As already indicated in my responses above both imperialism, and its sustenance, capitalism, undergo spatio-temporal change over time as the *longue durée* amply demonstrates. As a corollary my view is that cultural imperialism and media imperialism reflect specific expressions of imperialism in capitalist historiography. If we properly understand capitalism as the technology of efficiency of imperialism for its defining and permanent accumulation drive and logic then when capitalism undergoes changes to deal with its crises, imperialism responds perforce in step. Again, if history informs theory, then it is only to be expected that theory building would move in step with especially significant historical events. As is clear with all the nomenclatures for the forms of imperialism under discussion, "imperialism" is the constant ideational presence because it is the *explanandum*. The *explanans* changes in cultural "imperialism", media "imperialism" and digital "imperialism" depicting the shifts and therefore fresh empirical emphasis (this does not mean that the earlier emphases or expressions vanish or cease to be any more salient than before) in capitalism as the technology of imperialism over and through time. Clearly then the point of departure between DI regarding specificity vis-à-vis the earlier forms of imperialism under discussion lies in digitalization as the present technology of capitalism: digital imperialism seeks to make sense of imperialism in the digitalo-algorithmic, or better still, digital capitalism age.

5. Digital colonialism has become an increasingly prominent framework for analyzing the role of Big Tech and the asymmetries between core and peripheral nations. How do you assess the relevance of digital imperialism in relation to the framework of digital colonialism?

What I see is a fit problem between DI as the parent concept and its derivative, digital colonialism.

Without a doubt digital colonialism has been notably employed and deployed in digital political economy analysis. While digital colonialism as a conceptual framework is useful, my sense is that it detracts (to the point of misleading) from a steady and full focus on the workings of imperialism in the digital age. To be sure, digital colonialism exposes the otherwise (in)visible territorial and spatial reach and control of Big Tech; the challenge is its articulation with the higher order (and therefore parent) conceptual and theoretical vision of DI for clearer and more potent explanatory power. Here again I invoke the genus-species schema already alluded to.

6. How would you characterize the relationship between transnational digital corporations and imperial states in the constitution and reproduction of digital imperialism?

Transnational Technology and Telecommunications Corporation (TTTC) are central vectors of imperialism in this digitalo-algorithmic age. Created, supported, facilitated, and protected (via legal, military, financial, diplomatic and other means) by imperialistic states in their various guises, they have become the core means of efficient value transfer across the globe from periphery to the core and semi-periphery by means of algorithmic bites and bytes. This is how digital imperialism perpetuates and reproduces itself. The tie between imperialist states and these TTTCs is necessary and logical for the constitution and reproductive survival of digital imperialism. Both imperial and sub-imperial states (even though these are also sources of capital extraction for the centre) uphold, maintain and defend global capitalism in its current neoliberal expression because this has allowed the unprecedented normalisation of ostensibly “free” markets (and with this the unimpeded movement of capital and repatriation of profits too) across the globe allowing in the process the TTTCs to insert themselves monopolistically directly and indirectly into especially the Global South thereby turning the peoples of the periphery into hapless and helpless mere consumers of technological products. There is a well oiled rhetorical side to all this by which the imperialist states-TTTCs combine profess as axiomatic truth (the irony is this putative axiomatic truth is one that the combine built and is building by crafting this “truth” to allow the global spanning digital system to be built; an obvious self refuting “truth”) : the inevitability of a global artificial intelligence anchored life and living tied to economic growth and prosperity for all. All this is very reminiscent of earlier imperialism in which the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* [VOC]) and its ilk such as the English East India Company, the French East India Company, the Danish East India Company, the Swedish East India Company, and the Royal African Company were all buoyed by monopoly and state power to make empire building possible.

7. In your work, you examine the ways in which Africa and African countries are subjected to digital imperialism. What insights can be drawn from the African context regarding the dynamics through which digital imperialism unfolds and its implications for regions of the Global South?

The key insight that the African context provides when it comes to digital imperialism is the sore absence of “creative pessimism” (Addo, 1995:125) regarding national transformation and the many paths and fads to this thrown at the Global South including the current digitalization path which DI embodies. Creative pessimism is concerned with

autocritical appraisals for the proclamations of self-confident optimisms... retreating to assess the efficacy/nonefficacy/inefficacy of accepted doctrines, dogmas, premises, tactics, strategies, and the ends themselves. A certain courage and honesty is needed to be pessimistic in this sense when the order of the day is that to be "acceptable" and "highly regarded." It is this kind of critical stance borne of praxis and theoretical experience that yields the creativity that is needed to redefine the goals, tactics, and strategies of the humanization project. (Addo, 1995:125-126)

One gets the sense in Africa that there is a well cultivated and rewarded comprador class in politics, business, media and academia that has simply accepted the digitalization and artificial intelligence spiel without the slightest trace of any sustained questioning or critique. The origins of all this can be traced in Africa to the neoliberalization process which started in the 1980s. Latin America provided the model of neoliberalization to be sure for the Global South ironically. Without going into the details because of the economy of space, my view is that in the final analysis, societies in the Global South were remade into individualistic consumerist ones in which affective solidarity has all but been lost. To add to all this is the kind of subject formation this has engendered in Africa and indeed the whole of the Global South; I have just recently theorized the Ghana neoliberal subject as the Ghanaian *Homo Neoliberalus* (Amoah, 2026). In effect, Africa and African countries have largely accepted their elaborate construction as permanent consumers of digital technology. In the final analysis, the radical self determination vision for another more just world for all its people for which the Global South fought and struggled for has been almost vanquished and on its ashes digital imperialism has been mounted without a whimper in Africa and the Global South. In fine what the African experience offers is drawing attention to the dangers of uncritical adoption (and therefore the need for push back) of digitalization which facilitates the constitution and reproduction of DI; a process driven saliently as well by a particular permanent consumerist subject construction.

8. How has the transnational rise of far-right politics reshaped the dynamics of digital imperialism in recent years?

Clearly far-right politics as a phenomenon is set to impact Europe and the world. I have had cause to wonder whether the (re)emergence of the far-right is not simply an expression of the real nature of European politics in particular if one thinks of imperialism in Africa and indeed across the Global South going back to the long sixteen century. Fascism has become fashionable again and the US's latest round of horrors (clearly aided and abetted if not directly supported by far-right political formations in Europe and elsewhere) in Iran, Gaza, and Venezuela for example, give away tell tale signs that the Empire is striking back with the assistance of digital technology (drone warfare has now become *de rigueur* in the latest wars including the Russo-Ukrainian one; electrical power in Caracas was shut down remotely by the invading US as President Maduro and wife were abducted by American forces) without the grotesque mask its has long worn under a putative liberal face/farce of make believe. Recent political events in Germany, for example, are intriguing. The Christian Democratic Union, the Christian Social Union and the Social Democratic Party have entered into an alliance to keep the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) from control of government. But what is interesting is that the alliance is cutting back on welfare spending so Germany can re-arm. If imperialism and its technology, capitalism, emerged in the 16th century because Europe was trying to fix its feudal crises-what is described in the literature as the European world-economy-, one shudders to think how the current political conjecture with the power and reach of digital imperialism will mean for the world; the signs are very much on

the wall already.

9. In what ways has China's growing prominence in digital markets influenced the configuration and trajectory of digital imperialism?

A useful way to address this question is how to characterize China ideologically. The answer pretty much provides the basis for making sense of China as key actor in DI. I, like other scholars (a minority to be sure), have argued that China is basically capitalist (see Amoah, 2026) in spite of appearances and claims to the contrary. Once this argument holds, China must be considered as fully invested in the imperialist project of efficient accumulation of capital for itself and core away from the periphery. The important point to note is that China has come to the imperialism game in late capitalism at the behest of the established core states which makes it a second fiddle imperialist state and therefore technically a sub-imperialist state. Schiller (1999: xiv) argues that "the internet comprises nothing less than the **central production** and **control apparatus** of an increasingly supranational market system" (emphasis added). China's metamorphosis into a capitalist state and society happened apace and converged with the emergence and consolidation of the digital and algorithmic age. Given that even in the Mao era, it grasped well the importance of technology expressed in the Four Modernizations, the capital accumulation value of digital technology has been grasped as well and it has ridden the wave quite vigorously especially in the Global South. Chinese TTTCs have built the digital technological infrastructure across the Global South (through Huawei for example) and dominate the mobile handsets market as well (through Xiaomei and Transsion). In a sense then China must be understood with respect to digital imperialism as an auxiliary central actor (with a focus in the Global South) acting on its own behalf as a sub-imperialist state and with other core actors to deepen, maintain and reproduce the imperialist project at this current juncture in world-system history.

10. In your analysis, does the adjective "digital" refer to more concrete determinations of the general tendencies of imperialism, or does it indicate the emergence of a distinct form of imperialism? In this regard, how does your approach relate to classical and contemporary theories of imperialism?

I will answer this question by stressing that I follow the Addo's (1986) *continuity of imperialism thesis*. This thesis argues that capitalist imperialism is fundamentally *sui generis* and therefore fosters a particular kind of imperialism-an efficient one to be precise- in which the logic of draining of capital from the periphery to the semi-periphery and centre is sustained. As the forms of capitalism change so does that of imperialism with an unchangeable focus on its capital accumulation logic. Digital imperialism must be understood in this light as a veritable instantiation of capitalist imperialism on the back of algorithmic digitalization in the service of the established logic of capital accumulation. So yes, digital imperialism is thus very much a contemporary tangible or concrete determination of the general tendencies of capitalist imperialism; not a distinctive form at all(if distinctive at all of form not substance)

11. In the context of digital imperialism, what are the main mechanisms of capital accumulation and value transfer between countries? What roles do data, monopoly power, intellectual property, and the international division of labour play in this process?

I will say that the mechanics for capital accumulation and value transfer for digital imperialism are dynamic and are therefore a constantly evolving empirical matter. We need to study this more to better identify and frame them fully from various disciplinary foci and not just the economistic approach. One can argue though that documentary and experiential evidence exist for one to offer some tentative ideas on the nature of the mechanisms. As already pointed out above, the TTTCs need to be seen in a critical dual role in DI-as vectors (for DI's constitution, expression and reproduction) and the leading means of capital accumulation and surplus value transfer. Both roles are made possible due to the interlinkages in the global capitalist economy facilitated in an unprecedented fashion by neoliberalization. Neoliberalization with its hollowing out of the state has normalized contracting out of all kinds of services even strategic and critical ones to all stripes of firms preferably transnational ones when it comes to in particular advanced technology issues. In the Global South as already indicated above, the TTTCs have won lucrative contracts to build the digital infrastructure and to maintain same for many countries. My research, drawing on available data and data obtained from field work, shows that in West Africa for example the telecommunications sector now ranks third in terms of inflows of China's development finance. Development finance is not wholly free and in the form of loans that need to be paid back with the accrued interest reflect a clear mechanism of capital accumulation and value transfer. Indeed, for such undertakings involving development finance, China's financial institutions such as China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China play a major role in the mechanics of the financial packages and their terms. Such contracts tend to involve the purchase of advanced technological know-how and equipment from the TTTCs and their states-clear lock-in mechanism and DI reproduction processes-so long as the Global South cannot produce its own alternatives. What I am driving at is that the Global South has been effectively constructed as a permanent consumer of digital technology at both the most sophisticated (digital infrastructure) and mundane (use of handsets, social media platforms and all kinds of software and apps from the core) levels. This consumer status serves as the boon for data collection and amassing (usually by stealth) for the TTTCs further widening and reinforcing the digital technological gap as data informed digital products are made for the periphery markets thereby facilitating capital leaks to the centre and semi-periphery (which leaks too) in what is a clear vicious feedback loop. It must also be added that the capital accumulated is not only financial; it may also be construed in my understanding as **knowledge capital**. I construe **knowledge capital** as the utility (in the lexical and therefore broad sense beyond just the economistic understanding) information that accrues to the centre as well as the semi-periphery of the technological capabilities and vulnerabilities of the periphery through intimate access to its territory and society. Clearly, **knowledge capital** facilitates the other classic forms of capitals in terms of deployment, reach and returns. Monopoly power, intellectual property regimes and the international division of labour are the systemic sinews of digital imperialism that make possible the construction of the permanent periphery consumer (state, corporate and individual) for capital accumulation and value transfer. I admit that more work is needed to identify and specify in even more detail DI's causal mechanisms and systems beyond this preliminary attempt.

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