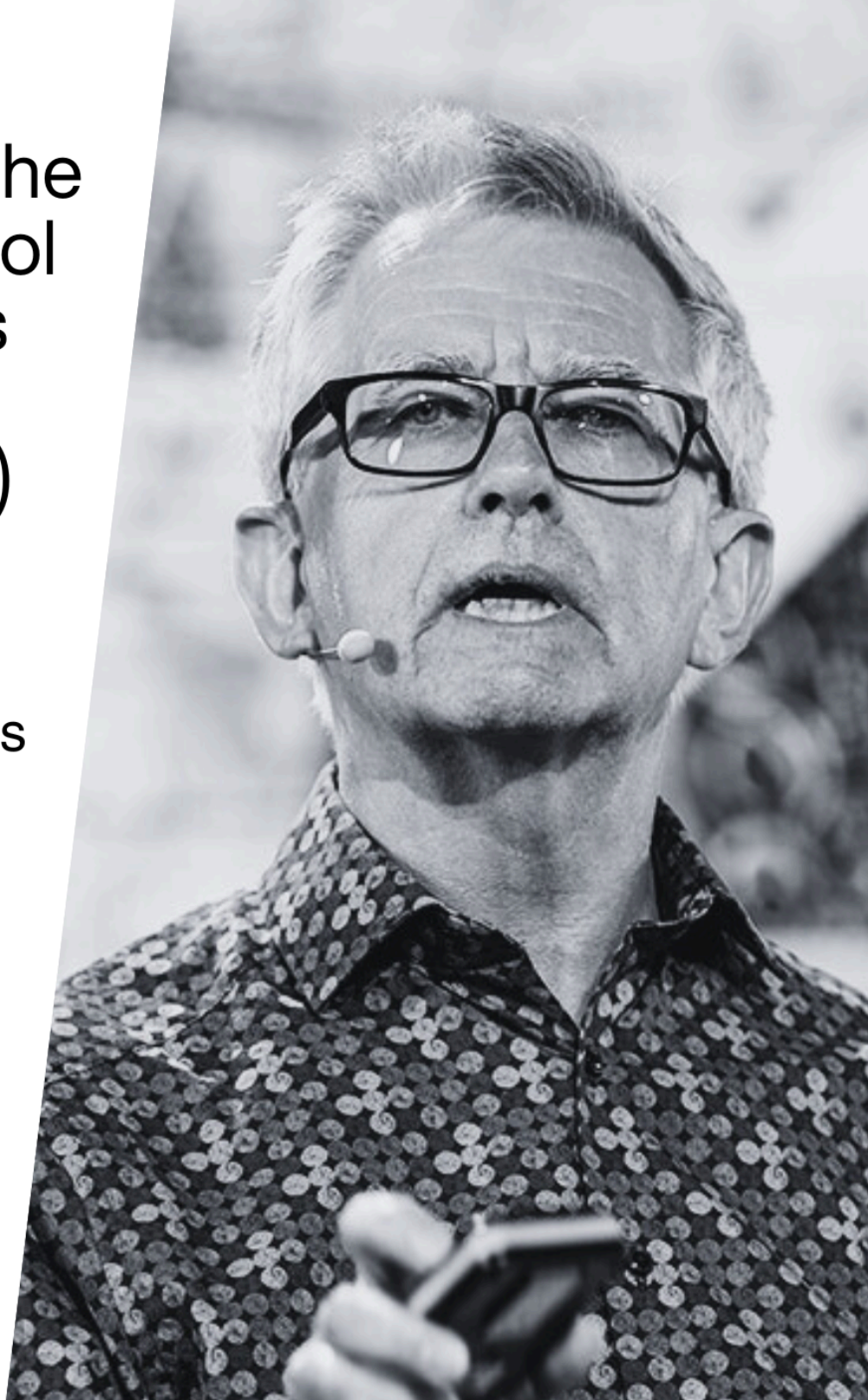INTERVIEW

NICK COULDRY

Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

Interviewers:

Marco Antônio Alves
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INTERVIEW WITH NICK COULDRY

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Presentation

Native of London, Nick Couldry is a Professor of Media, Communication, and Social Theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), where he researches media, technology, and power. He graduated from the University of Cambridge and earned his PhD at LSE, becoming an international reference in debates on technology. Author of works such as *The Costs of Connection* (with Ulises Mejias, 2019), *The Space of the World* (2024), and *Data Grab* (with Ulises Mejias, 2024), he co-founded, alongside professors Mejías and Paola Ricaurte, the network ***Tierra Común***, dedicated to producing knowledge and mobilization against data colonialism. Recognized for articulating complex analyses in an accessible way, he actively participates in discussions on platform regulation, artificial intelligence (AI), and data justice. In this exclusive interview for *A&S*, Couldry reflects on how technology shapes the present and challenges the future of democracies.

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1. In a lecture at the *Brazilian Academy of Sciences*, you stated that [“artificial intelligence is neither intelligent nor artificial”](), warning against the risk of confusing computational efficiency with knowledge. What is really at stake when we uncritically accept this dominant narrative about AI, and why do you believe the social sciences must intervene in this debate?

I am not the first writer to say this. The fundamental point that AI is probabilistic prediction based on patterns found across vast datasets is common ground across data scientists (from Emily Bender and Timnit Gebru's famous 'Stochastic Parrots' paper to the recent work of Princeton data scientists, Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor), while the role of *human* work in labelling and checking inputs to AI's datasets is empirically well established (for example the work of Antonio Casilli, Milagros Miceli, Julian Posada, Karen Hao and many others). So, it is clear that

'artificial intelligence' (AI) is a marketing term, as its inventor, John McCarthy, in effect admitted many decades ago.

So the issue is what happens if in society, and particularly the social sciences, we don't contest this. What happens is that we start to redefine, in a forceful and highly consequential way, what we call intelligence, what we call knowledge, in society. Indeed in a way that from more than one direction discounts the value of human intelligence, and gives excessive value to what probabilistic prediction can achieve when engineered on a vast – indeed vastly more than human - scale. None of this is to dispute the usefulness of AI-based prediction as a supplement to or support for many areas of human knowledge.

But unless we keep clear on our terms, and the boundaries they imply, we risk importing new definitions of intelligence and knowledge that are designed to benefit a certain type of knowledge

actor, and the vast business infrastructure that underlies them. We risk moving towards in the book I am currently working on call 'the corporatization of the mind' (Couldry, *Corporatizing the Mind,* 2026/2027, Polity Books, forthcoming).

2. In recent works, you engage with authors such as Aníbal Quijano and Enrique Dussel. Why is it crucial to understand datafication as a continuation of the modern colonial project, and what role can non-Western epistemologies play in the decolonization of research on technology and communication?

Let me first emphasise that this argument is very much joint work with my co-author Ulises Mejias, and more broadly with friends and colleagues such as Paola Ricaurte within the *Tierra Común* community.

'Datafication' – that is, transforming the flux of everyday life with all its messiness into categories that can be assembled in vast databases – is a form of abstraction, and it is not just a mechanical phenomenon. It comes with a world view: the idea, as Jose Van Dijck first put it, that the world *must* be datafied, *so that* more data can be gathered, and new forms of knowledge produced from it. Datafication, in other words is a way of *managing* the world from the perspective of very particular centres of economic, social and sometimes political power. But in this respect, datafication is very much continuous with how knowledge worked under colonialism: developing science, often out of already existing knowledges in colonized territories, as an abstract framework for governing knowledge production on a global scale and, so, ruling societies and economies. Some modern sciences, such as botany, literally emerged from those colonial dynamics.

Latin American writers such as Quijano and Dussel were very clear in diagnosing this *knowledge* aspect of colonialism and they are

therefore essential guides today in identifying the power grab that is involved in business's apparently innocent ambition to turn everything into data, and increasingly into fuel for AI's predictive machines. And, in a similar way, many decolonial writers, not just from Latin America but also for example from Africa, such as Achille Mbembe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, are essential guides to how we should think about what is going on with data and AI in all societies today.

3. In your most recent book, [*The Space of the World (2024)*](), you reflect on how we have handed over to major digital platforms the power to organize our common social space, with decisive implications for human solidarity. Why is it urgent to rethink the ethical and political conditions of coexistence in digital networks today? Could we imagine a counter-production of the social based on

community-driven, slow, and non-quantifiable practices?

Social media platforms – that is, the commercial ones that are dominant today – represent one of the most consequential forms that data colonialism takes in contemporary life, but they can also be seen as a particular rabbit-hole that bad design choices and bad regulatory decisions led to. It is possible, in other words, to see the *social* problem with today's commercial social media even if you don't agree with Ulises Mejias and me about the thesis of data colonialism.

The core error out of which today's significantly toxic social media world emerged was allow businesses to take on the role of designing literally the space of almost all possible spaces in which we are social, what I call 'the space of the world'. This was a category error, a fundamental mistake for human beings to make. Business, legitimately and necessarily under our current system, exist to make profit, but no one should ever have

been allowed to make profit out of the constitution of the *social air* we breathe. Once we did so, then the way was opened for countless forms of exploitation. And nowhere have regulators managed to address the core problem underlying the specific ills of social media, which is the exploitative *business models* which aims to maximize profit from our very human 'engagement': even the best regulatory frameworks avoid outlawing those business models, which are one root of the problem.

The other root is allowing social media to grow to the scale of the planet, that is the scale form which maximum profit can be extracted. Social life has never been conducted on a global scale, nor has political life. No political theorist has ever imagined it could be. But we have allowed businesses to make profit out of designs that *impose* that scale on our social and political life.

The results of course are very complex, but my main argument in this book is that the greater political

solidarity we will need if we are ever to have a chance of effectively confronting and addressing the climate emergency is impossible in the social world made for us by today's commercial social media. But non-profit alternatives do exist – federated social media which don't operate for profit and are managed on scales closer to actual communities – and we need regulators who create the conditions where those alternative forms of connection can thrive.

4. In [*The Costs of Connection (2019)*](), you and Ulises Mejias argue that, unlike historical colonialism (based on the violent appropriation of bodies and territories), *data colonialism* **operates through other forms of force. What kind of force is this? Can we interpret the recent actions of Big Tech and the US government against countries in the Global South (working to block platform regulation, attacking courts, and encouraging coups, as has**

happened in Brazil) as a reactivation of a more violent, imperial and colonial mode of action?

Ulises and I are not saying there is *no* force in data colonialism. When, against the background of a hugely unequal global economy that is the legacy of colonialism more generally, workers in Africa or Latin America are 'offered' work at an extremely low daily rate to train AI or 'clean' social media platforms, even if it means spending all day every day looking at sexually obscene and violent images, then that *is* a form of violence on the bodies of those workers.

But we were keen to emphasise also that much of our dealings, everywhere, with digital platforms and data extraction are not violent. There's a good reason for that: that, over centuries, human beings have become trained in the work and contractual habits of capitalism, capitalism that itself was only fuelled in the first place by the vast landgrab of historical colonialism. For that reason a lot of force can be

enacted within the global economy without physical violence, just through the norms of 'this is how things are', or 'you won't have a job unless you accept this'.

You are right that, increasingly, such force is playing out on the scale of international relations, as one pole of colonialism, and particularly data colonialism today, the US is seeking to assert its political and economic power, in particularly in its attempt to seize global dominance of AI. Many other political factors are involved of course, but at its core, the US under President Trump wants to assure its continued dominance as a global hegemon that also has control over the main infrastructures of knowledge production within economy and society. It cannot therefore abide regulatory authorities, such as in the EU or Brazil, that seek to constrain the operations of US Big Tech. And it is increasingly prepared to use all possible means (including tariff threats) to police that. Which is why President Lula's current refusal to accept US

dominance on these matters is both inspiring and important.

5. While acknowledging that *data colonialism* is embedded within capitalism, you identify profound changes in the mode of production that require an update to Marx. What structural changes does this involve, and how does the shift from the *appropriation of labor* to the *appropriation of social relations* redefine the role of labor? Does the *colonization of life* signal a rupture or a continuity of capitalism?

A great question.

Almost everything today is embedded within capitalism, even though, as I said, capitalism historically emerged from the conditions created by the huge land grab of early colonialism. But Ulises and I argue that, nonetheless, both colonialism and capitalism can still be developing.

Colonialism has evolved to a new stage which includes a new asset seizure – the data grab, which converts the whole of human life, and indeed natural systems too, into inputs to capital, as Ulises and I write in our most recent book, *Data Grab (2024).*

As regards capitalism, this point is a little more complicated. Of course, capitalism continues to develop in terms of new forms of exploitation and techniques. But in our 2019 book we felt the need to address a historical limitation of Marx's theory of capitalism, which is that it appears to regard labour relations as the only way that capitalism is socially reproduced. This won't fit however a world where our fata is extracted and exploited even when we definitely are *not* at work. But, drawing on the Marxist theorist Moishe Postone, we argue that, at the core of Marx's social theory is the idea of abstraction – commodities, such as commodified labour – is only possible through abstraction,

abstracting work processes into units of a particular duration and specification that can be sold on a market for a particular price. And what else is datafication but abstraction? An abstraction however that operates not necessarily in labour relations, but through a new type of social relation, distinctive to our age, that we call 'data relations'. In our recent book, *Data Grab*, we take this idea further by arguing that data relations unfolded in particular in spaces designed to ensure the optimal extraction of data, that we call 'data territories'. Most contemporary platforms, as I mentioned in relation to social media, are data territories.

This colonization of daily life through the continuous extraction of data is therefore *both* a continuity *and* a new development (I would not quite say 'rupture') within capitalism, and at the same time a significant new expansion of the toolkit of colonial extraction. For sure this is complex, and that

complexity has led to some misunderstandings of our work. But then the colonial/capitalist double helix that has been unfolding over the past five centuries or more really is complex, and it is this complexity that the world is living through today.

6. Looking ahead to the coming decades, how do you see the evolution of *data colonialism*: should we fear the deepening of inequalities and new forms of attacks on democracy, or is it possible to envision alternative paths to break away from this logic?

The last third of Ulises' and my latest book, *Data Grab,* and the long last chapter of my book *The Space of the World*, are devoted to resistance. It is our belief, along with many other scholars in the *Tierra Común* network that resistance to data colonialism in all its forms *is* possible. Otherwise, why would we write? – there is

already quite enough 'pessimism of the intellect' (as Gramsci put it) in the world, and the goal of our writings is not simply to add to this.

It is not easy to get a sense of future pathways, particularly with a new and very disruptive administration in the US White House. But, if I can speak personally, I do believe that resistance to data colonialism is building, and that understanding of its nature – and the fundamentally extractive and colonial core of tech power – is growing.

More and more young people are trying to find ways to live their lives with less dependence on extractive social media platforms. Clarity about what tech leaders like Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg or Sam Altman stand for is growing, and it is well known that this is not a well-functioning democracy, but rather an intensely concentrated oligarchy of profitable extraction with free rein to expand globally.

How practically to resist a social and economic order that has grown such deep roots in the habits of daily life is at this stage difficult to see clearly, but what *is* clear that it will involve human solidarity and collaboration on a large scale, and across national borders. Leadership from civil society, but also from particular national leaders, whether in Brazil or elsewhere, most likely among global majority countries, will be very important in providing some inspiration and hope towards this. And clear narratives of what has happened with data and AI, and what change might look like, are, I believe important in contributing to actual change. That is what keeps me writing, along with the inspiration of observing resistance as it goes on emerging around the world.

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