E-Colonialism - The New Challenge of the 21ˢᵗ Century

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BACKGROUND

The concept of colonialism entails the exploitation of a weaker country by a stronger one and dates back from the Greek period (Ferro 1997). Colonizers sought resources unavailable at home and, in return, sent colonial administrators, immigrants, and a language, educational system, religion, culture, laws and lifestyle that were not traditional in the colonized country (McPhail 1987). Throughout history colonialism has assumed different forms and was imposed over a range of civilizations, most of which, eventually gained their freedom. But if colonialism, in its narrow definition, came to an end with the defeat of the French in Vietnam or Algeria, of the British in India, or the Dutch in Indonesia, colonial domination has nonetheless survived in one form or another (Fieldhouse 1999). One such manifestation of colonialism is 'electronic colonialism' or 'e-colonialism'.

The history of several Asian and African nations attests to the effects of industrial colonialism and highlights the potential for information to become a tool in spawning a new breed of colonialism. Many nations, despite having a high level of education and culture, did not recognise the growth of industrial colonialism. Likewise, the emergence of e-colonialism may not be initially perceivable thus making researchers in this area complacent (Shaw 2000).

Previous research on e-colonialism dealt with television and newspapers as media with potential to generate colonialism of the information age (McPhail 1987). The advent of computer-mediated communication technologies: Internet, World Wide Web etc., has added a new twist to past debates on e-colonialism.

E-colonialism goes beyond the existing debates on digital divide which concerns the socioeconomic issues emerging from uneven access to technology on a narrowly defined micro level. Extensive media coverage on digital divide may have caused the greater effects of the information revolution to be largely overlooked (Gruenwald 2001). The all-encompassing issue of e-colonialism brings such large-scale concerns to the forefront and throws light on the various implications of the technological revolution – implications that have so far been side stepped in the interest of 'development'.

INFORMATION REVOLUTION

With the onslaught of the information revolution, the influence of the Internet has grown far beyond the expectations of its originators (Rosenberg 1997). From its humble beginnings as a research oriented computer network, the Internet has become a worldwide phenomenon. The rapid growth of the Internet has brought with it a growing disparity between the technology haves and the technology have nots, and this forms the basic tenet of the concept of e-colonialism.

Such disparity has always existed but now, more than ever before; unequal adoption of technology excludes many from experiencing the benefits of the information revolution. The world has never before faced such a glaring contrast in the human condition – extravagant wealth and tremendous advances in science and technology alongside harsh poverty and suffering faced by a full third of humanity (Chanda 2000). Thus, although the Internet offers a wide range of options for communication and exchange of information, there may be a need to consider the impact of these technological developments on society (Salpini 1998).

Currently, developed countries appear to dominate the Internet with the developing world left in the sidelines (Norris 2001). This is revealed by a perfunctory search of the Internet – most websites are in English and usually sourced from the United States. If measures are not taken to locate sites in the developing world and establish them as information providers, most developing countries may become 'electronic colonies' that are force-fed information generated by the developed world.

IMPLICATIONS OF E-COLONIALISM

Macro Level

The large-scale effects of the information revolution are starkly obvious in the great divide between the developed and developing world. On one hand, there are many third world countries concerned about basic amenities such as access to radio and television. Conversely, there are other nations some of which have been industrialized for over a century and are, accordingly, in a much better position to reap the rewards of the information revolution. The disparity is visible in the different levels of Internet access available to countries in the developed and developing world (Table 1).

In India, where the population numbers over one billion, 7.6 million use the Internet. In comparison, among the 275 million inhabitants of the United States, 130 million use the Internet. Similar disparities are observed by comparing the figures for Australia to that of South Africa and other parts of Africa (Kowalczykowski 2002).

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As revealed in Table 2, in the United States, Canada and parts of Europe Internet access is available to larger segments of the population in comparison to nations in Africa and Asia. Such figures are glaring representations of the wide chasm that separates the developed and developing world.

The issue of Internet access naturally relates to the issue of Internet sourcing. Many third-world countries do not have the resources or the expertise to provide access to the Internet for their citizens, let alone relay information by way of the Internet. Therefore, information that is published on the Internet about most developing countries is likely to be generated by third party groups purporting to be the authority on that country. This may result in such groups dominating the information about a country's cultural, economic and political status and placing an interpretation on the information that suits their own needs.

Table 1: Comparison of Telecommunication statistics for USA, South Africa, Australia and India

Country	Total Population Estimate ('000)	Internet Usership in 2001	Number of internet hosts (2001)
USA	275,306.41	130,114,957.00	104,482,787.59
South Africa	43,949.10	4,019,968.00	295,830.12
Australia	19,182.75	7,630,484.00	1,699,995.54
India	1,026,877.60	7,638,233.00	49,732.77

Source: (Euromonitor 2002)

Table 2: Number of Internet users worldwide as of September 2002

	Users in millions	Users as percent of total world users	Users as percent of population
World total	605.60	100.0	9.7
Africa	6.31	1.0	0.7
Asia/Pacific	187.24	30.9	5.3
Europe	190.91	31.5	26.2
Middle East	5.12	0.8	2.9
Canada & USA	182.67	30.2	57.2
Latin America	33.35	5.5	6.2

On a macro level, the power of the Internet to bring down borders is irrefutable. This can, however, cause a blurring of national identities and enable large economies to dominate smaller cultures and define the 'global culture' (1999). Research in various developed and developing countries reveal the price of a globally shared media perspective (White 2001). That price is homogenization. There is undoubtedly evidence to suggest such a trend with children from developing countries idolizing American celebrities and discarding their local beverages for Coca Cola and Coffee.

The nationality of the major providers of news and information globally is another reflection of the domination of the Internet by developed countries. Presently, there are four main news agencies, and each one represents the main colonial forces in our history. The 'Associated Press' and 'United Press International' are American agencies, 'Reuters' is English and the 'Agence-France Presse' is French. The end result is a possibly unbalanced, biased flow of information that ignores the rights of the developing world to be heard.

Implications on a Micro Level

On a micro level, cost factors in the provision of hardware and software may exclude many from the possibility of even possessing and using many information technologies (Lamb 2000; Sittenfeld 2002). Those without access to the Internet may face the prospect of being further isolated politically, economically and culturally from the rest of the world (Jordan 1999). Within most developing countries, the political parties and other corporate/government bodies that control the network and the media content could significantly influence the message to the masses. Given the poor level of education and the religious and sociopolitical scenario in many such countries, this could have a significant impact on the population (Robinson and Kaye 2000).

Rapid technological developments can potentially disadvantage developing countries, where average household income levels do not allow for the purchase of a computer. Since external communications networks are owned by multinational companies, communication charges can also contribute to the foreign debt of the nations, thus impeding the development of government-funded networks hooked up to the Web (Spennemann, Birckhead et al. 1996).

On a corporate level, some companies gain an upper hand over smaller commercial concerns through technological resources that enable them to advertise over the Internet. Such a divide is known to exist in developed economies, even in the absence of monetary constraints (Lieberman 2000; Venkatesan and Robinson 2002). The recent antitrust suit against Microsoft provided an opportunity to view the great potential for power that lies within the Internet (Lohr 2002). With its lucrative hold on the software market Microsoft is one of many such large corporate concerns that wield enormous influence over the computer industry and, in turn, the Information Technology industry worldwide.

CONCLUSION

The twenty first century promises to be one in which the full significance of global automation of information will be felt and with this will come the various effects of e-colonialism. While the Internet facilitates the sharing of information globally, it also threatens cultural diversity, the loss of local culture and the manipulation of the less developed. The impact of e-colonialism can potentially be just as devastating as that of mercantile colonialism in the nineteenth century.

The solution does not lie in restricting the spread of information technology. The information revolution has brought numerous benefits to society and any attempts to eradicate the Internet would be counterproductive. What is required are strategies to confront the issues presented by e-colonialism by bridging the technological divide created by the information revolution through improved technological access to the developing world. The 'colonization' of the technologically poor must be impeded by improving the accessibility of the Internet across and between nations to ensure that no one is left behind in the global movement towards technological advancement.

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