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**DOI**

[10.1177/20570473241256256](https://doi.org/10.1177/20570473241256256)

**Publication date**

2024

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Communication and the Public

**License**

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[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Mattelart, T., Hong, Y., Milan, S., Thussu, D. K., & Wasserman, H. (2024). International communication: On the significance of borders in the digital borderless world. *Communication and the Public*, 9(2), 131-142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20570473241256256>

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# International communication: On the significance of borders in the digital borderless world

Communication and the Public  
2024, Vol. 9(2) 131–142  
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DOI: 10.1177/20570473241256256  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/ctp](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ctp)



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### Abstract

In this Dialogue, we reproduce the discussions held during a plenary session that took place during the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) conference organized in Lyon in July 2023. Hosted by Tristan Mattelart, this session brought together four distinguished speakers who have all worked extensively, with different perspectives, on the processes of international communication: Yu Hong, Stefania Milan, Daya K Thusu, and Herman Wasserman. It addressed some of the most pressing issues in the field of international communication: the key role played by some global digital corporations in the building of the so-called digital “borderless” world, the latter’s growing multipolarity, the ambivalent nature of the transnational digital flows crossing it, and the continuing importance of borders and States.

### Keywords

Borders, digital corporations, digital imperialism, disinformation, empowerment, international communication, marginalized groups, social media, States

Tristan Mattelart: *This panel aims to question a seemingly simple argument: the idea that, with the advent of new technologies, we*

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would have entered a new era, we would now be living in a digital borderless world. This idea is not new. Just think of Marshall McLuhan's (1962) writings on the "global village" in the early 1960s. But this idea has been revived by the writings on cultural globalization in the 1990s. In a famous essay, Arjun Appadurai (1990) described, for example, in the early 1990s, the "global cultural economy" as a space of highly decontextualized transnational flows of people, goods, media, images, and imaginaries. In this context, the world has been increasingly described as a borderless world connected by seemingly disembodied online transnational flows.

*These are the kinds of assumptions that will be questioned here. We will not celebrate the virtues of decontextualized and disembodied transnational flows. On the contrary, in this panel, we will speak about the actors and forces that are behind these transnational flows, about the power relations within which these flows are embedded, and we will see that, in this supposedly borderless world, borders and States still matter.*

*Daya Thussu, you are Professor of International Communication at the Hong Kong Baptist University. You have been studying the processes of global communication since at least the early 1990s and you have been analyzing the concrete actors and forces that are behind these processes. Indeed, as you point in your books and articles, the borderless world is not given, it is a social, political, economic, and geopolitical construction.*

Daya K  
Thussu:

Yes, in a supposedly "borderless" world, global digital corporations, primarily based in the United States, control the borders of cyberspace. In a

rebranded version of the "free flow of information" doctrine, which emerged during the 1970s debates about a New World Information and Communication Order, a digital capitalism is being implanted across the globe by the US government and corporations using their predominance in hardware and software. With 4.8 billion users every day, social media is an integral part of our world and the main way we stay connected. The global "core" platforms: Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, Meta, and X (formerly Twitter) are all, without exception, American digital giants. In 2022, according to the industry data, Meta had cumulative users of nearly 8 billion—more than the population of the planet (Facebook: 2.96 billion; WhatsApp and Instagram: 2 billion each, and Facebook messenger: 931 million). Alphabet-owned YouTube had 2.56 billion users. Such an overwhelming presence in global communication creates a form of what I call "digital imperialism."

This enterprise is extremely lucrative: in 2020, the United States was the largest global exporter and importer of what United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) calls "digitally-deliverable services," exporting US\$533 billion and importing US\$317.6 billion, registering a US\$213.6 billion trade surplus. Defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as "digitally enabled transactions in goods and services," digital capitalism has grown phenomenally over the past two decades and has transformed global power structures. In such transactions, data have become the new currency, circulating globally through digital communication channels, in the latest incarnation

of capitalism morphing into a form of “digital imperialism,” albeit a subtler and “softer” version, distinctive from its earlier political, economic, cultural, and media imperialisms.

The systematic and pervasive commodification of data is leading to claims of “data empires” and “data cartels.” The extensive extraction, monopolization, and monetization of data by a very few corporations have been labeled “data colonialism.” These corporations have also extended worldwide by acquiring successful digital start-ups and potential competitors. In addition, the world’s two largest digital distributors—Google Play and Apple’s App Store—have created a duopoly in the global digital marketplace, giving them the power to regulate all app activities. Such phenomena have been labeled “platform imperialism.” Most beneficiaries of this have been big US-based digital conglomerates. According to the *Bloomberg Billionaires Index*, in 2022, 8 of the world’s 12 richest individuals were technology entrepreneurs, including Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and former CEO Steve Ballmer, and Facebook/Meta co-founder Mark Zuckerberg.

The “epistemic communities”—think tanks, information non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and universities—play a crucial role in legitimizing and naturalizing the process of digital imperialism. With 2200 registered think tanks in 2020, the United States is the “market leader” in this marketplace of ideas: of the top 10 foreign policy and international affairs think tanks, 6 were based in that country. Corporate-funded lobbying groups strongly support “free flows of data,”

predominantly motivated by economic and trade arguments. One of the oldest, the Council on Foreign Relations, established in 1921, and its journal *Foreign Affairs*, arguably the world’s most influential policy journal, have helped shape the global agenda for a century, with the active support of such media outlets as the *New York Times*. Foundations such as Knight Foundation International Center for Journalism, MacArthur Foundation, and Open Society Foundations also contribute to legitimize certain versions of capitalism.

Tristan Mattelart: *When you use the term of “digital imperialism,” you refer to the expression coined by Herbert Schiller (1976) in the 1970s, who chronicled the existence of a “cultural imperialism.” The focus was then on US imperialism. But in your books and articles, you describe the rise of new nodes of power, as illustrated by the title of your coming book, Changing Geopolitics of Global Communication (Thussu, 2024).*

Daya K Thussu: The biggest challenge to Western digital hegemony has emerged from China’s success in exporting its own, state-controlled model of digital capitalism to other parts of the world. As well as exporting its cyber properties abroad—particularly in the domain of mobile communication—China is also exporting its communication hardware. This process—though almost invariably covered in a skeptical if not hostile manner in mainstream Western media—is transforming a large section of the global South, especially since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. China’s “Internet Plus” strategy, unveiled in 2015, provides government support for the globalization strategies of Chinese internet corporations. Chinese internet

connectivity can help to reduce the existing digital divides in the global South: according to the International Telecommunication Union, in 2022, some 2.7 billion people worldwide were still offline. In the world's poorest countries, for an average consumer, the cheapest mobile broadband still costs over 6 times the global average.

Outside the Western orbit, Chinese achievements in this regard are routinely acknowledged, as is the case within some multilateral organizations. If the California digital elite represents a new version of imperialism, are the Chinese digital conglomerates different or will they bring an "authoritarian" character to their form of digital capitalism, as they increasingly go global? Unlike the US-based digital corporations, the Chinese companies Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, and Sina (referred to by the BATS acronym) are routinely described as representing authoritarian or state-centric digital capitalism.

Tristan Mattelart: *Yu Hong, you are Professor of Communication at the College of Media and International Culture, at Zhejiang University, in China. You work on internet, media policy, and digital capitalism, with a focus on China. You published various books, among others Networking China (Hong, 2017) and China's Globalizing Internet (Hong & Harwit, 2022). In your work, you also underline the power relations and the hierarchies that structure the so-called borderless cyberspace.*

Yu Hong: Yes, accompanying globalization is the formation of what I and my co-author Tom Goodnight (Hong & Goodnight, 2020) call the cybersphere. As a conceptual construct, this is a gigantic networking of media assemblages. The shape and structure of the cybersphere are constituted by

networking actors differentially positioned in the power spheres. The power of actors matters in constituting and reconstituting the cybersphere. Rich countries, global cities, transnational platforms, and network operators, for example, clearly have more say over networking decisions than ordinary citizens, not to mention those in Global South. Having said that, I want to note that the agency of actors matters, too. My research on digital China and, by extension, the shifting global communication order, for example, reveals that while structural hybridity and unevenness enable and constrain networking opportunities, agentic power manifests through networking practices, continuing dialogue, and resource sharing across clusters and branches. To some extent, agentic power of actors explains "the rise of the rest" in terms of innovating communicative practices and re-directing networking structures, although on restricted terms.

As the internet has developed for nearly 55 years, the cybersphere takes up nearly 90% of human expression and communication. The cybersphere becomes a relatively independent power sphere and enables expression and communication in particular patterns, which is intertwined with, and is even driving, the structure of authority and resources in political, economic, and cultural terms. That is to say, through the prism of the temporal-spatial characteristics of such a totality, we can see multidimensional communicative power of the cybersphere.

First, it enables hierarchical and vertical control, which hinges upon data collection and centralized data processing. Second, it also facilitates networked/lateral global flows between populations, economies, and

devices. Instead of claiming globalization as a universal movement and leading to a “flat” spatiality, the direction and density of flows can actually reveal the realistic nature of connectivity. Third, as the digital blends with the cultural, the cybersphere is enriched by new multiverses and, from online news to short videos to virtual reality, can warp across multiple realities.

Last but not least, the cybersphere is thrusting various techno-social gateways as roots and is planet eating in the sense that it sucks and consumes cultural, social, and economic life on the ground. Notably, the cybersphere is increasingly organized by platforms and smart cities. These nodal islands look like relational archipelago—there are hierarchical relations among aggregating nodal islands that rise above the sea. What is less noted, however, is what lies below the sea, that is, the thrusting of roots of these capitalist islands within the laboring masses and local communities. The local is responsible for producing sustainable goods, material or cultural, and struggles with naked exploitation of captured population segments.

Tristan Mattelart: *Herman Wasserman, you are Professor and chair of the Department of Journalism at Stellenbosch University, in South Africa. You have published extensively on media in Africa, journalism ethics, and, to quote the title of your latest book, on Disinformation in the Global South (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2022). As implied by the title of this book, the rise of digital media is far from having only positive dimensions in African contexts.*

Herman Wasserman: The optimistic view of digital media in African contexts is that it has created the opportunities for Africans to

become more independent of global media narratives, to reassert their agency in the global media landscape, to produce contraflows to Northern narratives and to counter stereotypical images of Africa. This is of course true to some extent, but we have to acknowledge that these increased flows and contraflows have also (a) created new borders and (b) are not always benign, democratic in nature, or empowering of citizens and societies.

As for the new borders, in African contexts, these include borders between those that have access and are connected and those that are not. These disparities are a reminder that “Africa” is not homogeneous. There are major differences between African countries and within African societies. The persisting digital divide amplifies inequalities between urban and rural populations, between rich and poor, and reinforces gender disparities. This relates not only to the availability and cost of equipment and data but also to basic requirements such as electricity which cannot be taken for granted in most African countries. These inequalities are internal within African societies, but they also further reinforce the disparities in knowledge production and participation in political discourses between Africa and the Global North.

As for digital flows and contraflows that are not necessarily in and of themselves benign, democratic, and empowering: digital technologies can also facilitate and amplify social polarization and online hate. We have seen time and again how disinformation campaigns and political propaganda exploit long-existing ethnic and racial tensions in African societies, which in most cases stem from the shared experience of

colonialism's divide-and-rule policies. Disinformation thrives on these polarizations, and in many cases demonstrate how local-global digital flows can have severely detrimental impacts on fragile democracies. A recent example of this was the "white monopoly capital" campaign in South Africa run by the British PR firm Bell Pottinger to exploit racial inequalities in an attempt to deflect journalistic attention away from a corrupt former president. Digital technologies have also made it much easier to target women journalists, foment xenophobia, surveil activists, and so on.

Tristan Mattelart: *And, in the context described by Daya Thussu of growing competition for hegemonies, disinformation flows have multiplied, in Africa as elsewhere.*

Herman Wasserman: Indeed, digital spaces have facilitated greater participation and empowerment of African media users, but these spaces are often also the terrain where global hegemonies compete for dominance. African digital spaces then become a proxy for geopolitical contests which are often not of their making and not necessarily in their interest. We can consider how the economic and political competition between the United States and China play out in the African media sphere, for example. This then often leads to unhelpful normative binaries between external actors representing the "West" or the "East," or "democracy" and "authoritarianism," instead of more nuanced thinking about the role of media in African democracies with particular political systems that defy such easy categorization or allegiances. More recently, African digital spaces have served as a terrain for proxy information warfare in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Often these geopolitical

contestations include the use of disinformation and contribute to domestic polarization.

Another point to consider critically is the discourse of "newness" which often is attributed to the digital. But when we look at social divides, for instance, the digital often amplifies long-standing inequalities in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, caste, and so on. Similarly, geopolitical contestation and disinformation often exploits long-standing social tensions, or historical loyalties such as Russia's "memory diplomacy" in Africa which draws on its support for liberation movements. This emphasizes the importance of understanding digital borders within particular contexts.

But, we also see resistance against disinformation being aided by digital technologies—collaborations between fact-checkers on the continent, sharing of OSINT, network analysis that uncover foreign influence operations, or domestic actors fomenting xenophobia. So, these new networks can also be empowering in resisting some of the ills of disinformation.

Tristan Mattelart: *This points to the fact that online technologies are highly ambivalent tools: they can be used alternatively as disinformation tools and as tools for waging transnational democratic struggles or transnational mobilizations. Stefania Milan, you are Professor of Critical Data Studies at the University of Amsterdam. In your work, you explore the interplay between digital technology, data, political participation, and governance (Pelizza et al., 2021), and you have headed or co-headed various important research programs, among others the projects "Big Data from the South," or "COVID 19 from the Margins." Within this framework, you*

*have extensively written both on digital technologies as instruments for waging transnational democratic struggles and on digital technologies as tools for enforcing borders.*

Stefania  
Milan:

Yes, to understand the future of invasive technology, we must look at poor communities, where expectations are lower than people's rights like privacy will be upheld (Eubanks, 2018). This argument provides a solid foundation to explore the role and inequity of borders and their enforcement within a seemingly borderless digital world. I here focus on data-centric technology—namely technology designed to generate, handle, and extract value from large volumes of data about human and societal activities—to understand how it reshapes borders, how people experience them, and how we think about them. I argue that data-centric technology actively reinforces borders and reshapes the geographical and socio-cultural landscape of civic communities, threatening individuals' freedoms while also providing them with opportunities to reclaim their political agency. To really grasp the impact of data-centric technology on the disadvantaged, it is crucial to uncover their experiences and prioritize their voices.

From the perspective of marginalized groups—especially migrants and refugees, subjected to invasive technology trials—we can identify diverse areas of concern. The first invests the role of data-centric technology in governing the polity as well as state functions and services, and the social costs these developments bear for the citizenry and especially the poor. We are indeed experiencing the latest evolution in the integration of digital technology in society: real-time, automated data production, and analysis,

powered by machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI), have taken a central position in the governance of the social. For example, facial recognition cameras are used for policing public spaces, and biometric databases such as Eurodac, which stores the fingerprints of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers entering the European Union, play a pivotal role in migration control. These “regulatory data infrastructures” have the capacity to produce data, leading to automated decision-making or people's monitoring. They delegate to algorithms the power of making determinations, absorbing functions that were once performed by humans. They are increasingly employed in the management of the civic community and the administration of the welfare state.

The implementation of data-driven solutions to enhance public safety, mobility, and the interaction between the state and its citizens is understandably met with enthusiasm because it simplifies people's lives. But regulatory data infrastructures can perpetuate or exacerbate existing bias and discrimination present in society; their functioning is opaque, and it can be challenging to assign accountability when something goes wrong. In the Netherlands, an algorithmic system known as “system risk indication” (SyRI), designed to identify fraud in welfare and child support, has been found to unlawfully target recipients based on factors such as having a foreign surname, dual citizenship, or residing in low-income neighborhood—actively enacting borders within the urban context. I argue that over time, governance by data infrastructure is likely to erode state sovereignty as private sector technology



vendors, such as Amazon Web Services and Palantir, play an ever-prominent role in the design, provision, and operation of data-centric technology, for example to track undocumented migrants. Second, this shift has implications for citizenship rights, potentially limiting our ability to participate fully in civic life. Consider the expected chilling effect on freedom of expression from AI-powered surveillance cameras at the 2024 Paris Olympics. Finally, governance by data infrastructure can exacerbate existing inequalities and discrimination, as shown by the SyRI controversy.

Tristan Mattelart: *Here, we are once again confronted with the very ambivalent nature of these online technologies: these can be used for tracking undocumented migrants, but they can also be tools for waging transnational democratic struggles.*

Stefania Milan: Today technology is as much part of the problem as it is of the solution. In reviewing the trajectory of social movements since the 2000s, it becomes apparent how data-centric technology functions also as a tool for people's empowerment. We can discern two favorable outcomes resulting from the advancement of data infrastructure. The first pertains to social media: besides profiling individuals, they provide unprecedented visibility and networking opportunities. "Global" mobilizations like #BlackLivesMatter (2013-) and #MeToo (2017-) emerged around hashtags linking individuals in disparate locations, enabling them to shape a unified normative discourse. *La Caminata del Migrante* mobilization ("The Migrant Walk," 2018) began with a social media post encouraging migrants to join forces, culminating in 5000 Hondurans marching toward the United States, advocating

for asylum and protesting against their government.

The second beneficial outcome relates to the opportunities for advocacy and social change unlocked by data activism, that is, when citizens generate and analyze data independently to bolster alternative narratives of social reality. Here, data infrastructure such as sensors serve a tool for activating citizenship and "talking back" to the state, thereby reclaiming agency within a data-driven society. The "Left-to-Die Boat Case" by the research agency Forensic Architecture is a living proof of how data can be mobilized for social transformation. Gathering satellite imagery and sea-related data, researchers produced a report on the 2011 shipwreck of a migrant boat ignored by rescue services, which supported legal action.<sup>1</sup>

Tristan Mattelart: *Stefania Milan, in a way, you highlight that it is important to consider the issue of borders when analyzing the transnational flows of people and online technologies. The same could be said of the State. It is indeed important to consider the issue of the State when analyzing the transnational flows of people and online technologies. I remember a book co-edited in 2001 by Nancy Morris and Silvio Waisbord whose title was Media and Globalization: Why the state Matters. I think that 20 years after, despite the rise of the internet, we could still say that, yes, the State matters. If the State still matters, it is also because the rise of the Big Tech and the social media have led for a need for regulation at a world scale. The European Union's experience is interesting in this respect, don't you think so Daya Thussu?*

Daya K Thussu: The EU's General Data Protection Regulation is bringing its own version of digital borders in terms of

privacy-related regulation: a *bête noire* for the US digital empires. No wonder that a weaker EU, especially Germany at its core, is good news for the California elite as is the conflict in Ukraine, which undermines Europe's largest economy, apart from hosting over a million refugees, with its attendant socio-political implications.

Perhaps more interesting in the long run is the digital transformation of India over the past decade. With more than 900 million users, India is home to the world's second largest internet after China's and unlike its eastern neighbor, the Indian internet is "open," but also dependent on the platforms of the US digital empires. India is also the second largest market for smartphones in the world after China and has the highest number of registered users of both Facebook and WhatsApp, particularly important in a country where 70% of its population—which translates into 800 million people—are below the age of 35 years.

Since 2015, when it launched a "Digital India" program, the country has witnessed a transformation which is now being exported to other parts of the global South. In stark contrast to China, with its party-state monopoly on power and discourse, that a multi-party, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural democracy could achieve this is a testimony to the remarkable resilience of its polity. India's digital infrastructure is designed around *aadhaar* (Sanskrit for foundation), the unique identity number which, since its launch in 2010, has been provided to over 1.3 billion Indians—the world's largest IT project—almost unheard of in the Western media, or academic and policy discourses. This is the foundation of the instant

payment system, known as the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) offering services from banks and mobile payment apps, with no transaction fees. According to India's Ministry of Finance, UPI transactions are running at US\$1.7 trillion per annum. The value of instant digital transactions in India in 2022 was far more than the United States, Britain, Germany, and France put together: "Combine the four and multiply by four—it is more than that," an Indian cabinet minister told the World Economic Forum. In addition, the rapid expansion of mobile technology, including 5G, has enabled the creation of a system designed to ensure direct transfer of government benefits to the poorest. This "digital public infrastructure" has extended the reach of welfare measures through direct transfers to bank accounts: from just 17% of Indians having a bank account in 2008, the proportion is now over 80%. India wants to export this model of "digital for development" to other countries in the global South dealing with similar challenges. Will the digital transformations underway in the world's two largest populated countries—India and China—with the world's two largest and prosperous diasporas contribute to the "de-Americanization" of the internet, to reflect the complexity and diversity in a poly-centric world?

Tristan Mattelart: *Of course, in some countries, the State matters even more than in others. It would be difficult to envision the role of online technologies in China without considering the key role played by the State, isn't that right, Yu?*

Yu Hong: Yes, the state returns to the cybersphere for several reasons. One is along the line of governance. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the

cybersphere expanded through capital investment, neoliberal policies, and cosmopolitan ideologies. As a result, the cybersphere was mostly dominated by non-state actors, from transnational corporations to hacker communities to citizen journalism and to fan cultures. However, as fake news, internet-enabled theft and disruption, and cyber weapons have shaken the internet, it has led to state reactions by re-regulating transnational cyber activities.

Second is the extension of geopolitics. Actually, the cybersphere is never immune from geopolitics. The early internet featured the unipolar power of the West, especially the United States. Into the 21st century, after non-Western countries participated in the political economy of communications, communicative actions and communication resources ramped up in these regions. This trend has modified power relations as materialized by the cybersphere. As a result, the cybersphere as we know it now is very different from the cybersphere, say, in the 1990s. But we also see delinking rhetoric and practices emerging in the West.

The third is developmental efforts. For developing countries and societies, development agencies make deliberate and even systematic efforts to tap into digital opportunities emanating from the cybersphere. Some of the leading practices include training communicative labor, managing communicative resources, and building otherwise missing channels and links. The ultimate goal is to re-spatialize communicative activities while extending inherited capacity of connectivity, collaboration, and visibility.

To return to the point made by Daya Thussu of the “‘de-Americanization’ of the internet,” China is

supporting multipolarism but not fragmentation. Unfortunately, geopolitical rhetoric dominates the global discourse about digital China. From the Bandung conference in the 1950s to the Non-Aligned Movement in the 60s and the struggle for a New World Information Order in the 1970s, the dissent of the Third World is geared toward changing the political culture that aims at sustaining hierarchy and exploitation, and toward obtaining equitable interdependence. Today, with the expansion of BRICS, it is time to promote, once again, solidarity amid diversity and independence amid equitable interdependence.

Tristan Mattelart: *The regulatory role of the State can be, however, highly ambiguous. Indeed, State regulations may be intended to protect citizens and consumers against a variety of online abuses, but they can also serve as a means for exerting different kinds of censorship, as illustrated in various countries of the world, including in Africa.*

Herman Wasserman: When it comes to disinformation and online hate, regulation is very important. We should absolutely hold big platforms to account (in addition to a variety of other measures such as media literacy campaigns, fact-checking, and so on, which could help stem the tide of disinformation).

But we should also consider the ambiguity of some of the calls for regulation which are based on the situation in established democracies in Europe. In the African context, for instance, there has been an increase in laws passed which ostensibly are aimed at protecting citizens against false information but in fact are intended to fortify the border between citizens and governments. These laws are often highly punitive and can carry long jail sentences. Coupled with actions such as internet

shutdowns in Africa, these laws are often used to reinforce pressure on independent journalism, activism, and civil society organizations.

In doing so, African governments (and governments elsewhere in the Global South) are borrowing from a transnational weaponized discourse—the idea of “fake news” is itself a notion which has blown over from former president Donald Trump’s United States—but is used to legitimize pressure on freedom of expression in very different contexts. So, this is the globalization of repression behind the smoke screen of regulation. This tendency is not new, however, but is part of democratic backsliding in fragile democracies in Africa. So, it is important to still focus our attention on state power in this context of a supposedly borderless digital world where agency is supposedly returned to individuals.

Of course, the glass is not only half empty but also half full—there have been inspiring examples of how civil society, activists, youth movements (e.g. #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall) have also used digital spaces to resist oppression by state and capital on the continent. In many cases, digital spaces have provided a refuge for safer exchange of information, for example, encrypted on WhatsApp. So, we should be mindful of always understanding the nuances of these processes within specific contexts.

Tristan Mattelart: *I very much liked your last point on the need to be mindful of understanding, with all their nuances, the specific ways in which digital technologies are used in specific contexts. And in this context, we should also certainly be mindful of not apprehending the role played by digital technologies through Western lenses.*

Stefania Milan: Yes, our understanding of the data-driven society is primarily shaped by research originating from Western centers of epistemic power. However, the Majority World leads in internet usage, with Asia alone boasting almost three billion users. This bias, known as “data universalism,” reflects the tendency to interpret datafication dynamics solely through a Western lens (Milan & Treré, 2019). Thinking from the margins, which involves amplifying the voices of the disempowered and supporting them in articulating their narratives, serves as a corrective measure against this form of epistemic injustice. Drawing inspiration from the decolonial notion of “border thinking” as an “epistemology of exteriority” necessitated by “recent immigration to the imperial sites of Europe and the USA” (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006, p. 206), thinking from the margins offers an alternative viewpoint on datafication from a subaltern perspective. But to fully realize the potential of adopting a perspective from the margins, we must reimagine research methodologies as well, toward actively involving people, including people on the move, in shaping the research design.

### Note

1. <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-left-to-die-boat>

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