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AI: Socio-Cultural Perspectives from the Global South

Guest Editor's Introduction

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Introduction

In recent times, the ethical/morality concerns of AI (Arkin, 2009; Bello, Bringsjord, 2013) are no longer limited to its technical-industrial operationalities but even permeates the broader concerns (read imaginations) of politics and policy making (Brayne, 2017; Coeckelbergh, 2022; Joshi, 2024), society (Radhakrishnan, 2021; Gill, 2023; Pflanzer et al., 2023), economics (Vyshnevskyi et al., 2019; Qin et al., 2023; Capraro et al., 2024), and culture (Barron, 2023; Foka, Griffin, 2024; Barnes et al., 2024). The intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and socio-cultural-economic contexts is a dynamic and evolving field of study (Feher, Katona, 2021). As AI technologies continue to advance, it is crucial to critically examine their impact on diverse societies, particularly those in the Global South — a segment of society that is not only economically and structurally less privileged but even socio-culturally less represented, racially discriminated, and historically subjugated and underdeveloped. AI development is highly concentrated in the techno-progressive Global North, and the research around AI and its associated social impact has primarily focused on more resource-unhindered Euro-American communities. Agencies, including the *World Economic Forum* (Yu et al., 2023), have highlighted this "AI divide between the Global North and the Global South." Although most early AI research and implementation took place in the West, the Global South holds a high potential to gain a great advantage from the technology. However, it is important to acknowledge that these nations in the Global South region face unique challenges in developing and applying AI. These challenges are related to digital literacy, internet penetration, basic electrical connections, and low infrastructure availability.

Additionally, there are uncertainties about the potential drawbacks of AI, potential biases and opacities in its applications, and ethical issues surrounding it. The Global South's foray into adopting and leveraging AI for agriculture, healthcare, education, climate action, poverty alleviation, and a general GDP gain faces challenges from data infrastructure/ecosystem, data governance, AI-adoptability, AI-usability, and AI-accessibility. At the same time, interaction between AI algorithms and the Global South communities demands investigation as to how cultural perspectives shape the ethical guidelines, how cultural biases get perpetuated or exacerbated due to AI advancements and how to mitigate them, how the new posthuman-ness impacts the socio-cultural matrix of the Global South, how AI in the Global South is reshaping and influencing the cultural production and economy, how AI is perpetuating neoliberal colonialism and capitalism in the Global South, and how the same is being negotiated/resisted by the subjects.

This Focus Issue acknowledges the transformative potential of AI, which has significantly impacted industry, politics, governance, economy, social interaction, and cultural dynamics in the Global South. However, many of these exuberant discourses of achievement and prognostications of potential success do not go without cautious neglect of the Global South's unique socio-cultural challenges and implications. This Focus Issue explores the multifaceted and complex relationship between AI and the socio-cultural-economic issues in the Global South, examining areas such as economic disparity, cultural hegemony, data logocentricity, and ethical governance. This Special Issue recognizes the need for intensive and sustainable research on the socio-cultural-politico-economic perspectives of AI in the Global South. This special issue sheds much-needed light on this topic: socio-cultural responses to AI adoption, AI inequalities, and how AI changes social-cultural life in the Global South region.

However, before we customarily introduce the articles and discussion in this collection, it would be much called for the readers to understand the significant critical themes/concerns that largely govern AI's interaction in the Global South's socio-economic-politico-cultural sphere.

AI and the Issues of Economic Disparities: Inequality Catalyst or Straddling Divide?

From a Global South perspective, the deployment and consecutive adoption of Global-North-ed AI have often caused an economic schism between the two socio-political halves of the globe. Indeed, AI has the capacity to polarise further the always-already existence of an unequal society (Lee, 2018; Dyer-Witheford et al., 2019; Crawford, 2021). Policy analysts and think tanks have often critiqued the Global North AI approaches for the Global South, predicting a scenario of greater economic divide that will exacerbate "global inequalities in the near term."

> The world of artificial intelligence (AI) is heavily lopsided. One American firm — Nvidia, the world's most valuable company — holds as much as 95% of the AI chip

> market. The $335 billion in private capital invested in American AI companies from 2013-2023 was three times more than in China, 11 times more than in the UK, and 30 times more than in India. And of the 109 most important machine learning models, 101 were made in the US, Western Europe, or China. Only two were made in a global South country (Egypt) (Laforge, 2024: n.pg.).

This geographic skew in AI production and governance (including computation and data storage and supply chain governance) and the high concentration of AI development in the Global North had created a higher demand for job reshoring, negatively impacting the "digital sectors in global South countries of foreign capital and income. There is evidence that this may already be occurring in Global South countries' IT sectors. Specifically, many of the areas of comparative advantage global South countries have developed in IT services are those that are highly exposed to AI-enabled automation. Many countries, such as India, have begun investing heavily in IT skills, but it is unclear if this will be sufficient to stem the potential outflow of capital and employment to the global North" (Jacobs, Tasin, 2024: n.p.g.). Indeed, the Global North's dominion of AI innovation (including high funding in research and development) through *big techs* like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft by extracting and leveraging data from the Global South ("without meaningful consent and fair compensation for the producers and sources of data" (Sadowski, 2019: 9)), and yet not extending equitable distribution benefits to the latter, had surely deepened the economic divide between the two. Here, one is reminded of *Facebook's* data extraction-appropriation forays through AI in Kenya with a total disregard for the African nation's data indigeneity and agency:

> A communiqué concerning Facebook, released on 1 September 2016, is a case in point, as it reflects, more broadly, the interests of US ICT companies in making business in Kenya and likely their willingness to contend the market to the Chinese influence. The document states that 'Zuckerberg said part of Facebook's overall strategy for Africa and Kenya is to understand what is happening on the continent and establish an entry point into the African economies for development. He said Facebook is committed to investing in connectivity.' This very general statement betrays the extent to which even a tech giant like Facebook seems to have long overlooked (for almost a decade) the potential of the whole SSA region, and Kenya's ICTs in particular. At the same time, it also shows Facebook's intention of making Kenya an entry point into the continent for its business, similar in manner to what Amazon recently announced (following the DPA approval) (Calzati, 2022: 279).

The extractive policy of data amassing from the Global South, whereby the latter is relegated to the role of agency-less suppliers rather than investors or beneficiaries, and commodifying the same to produce informational goods and services, can be termed AI colonialism/capitalism. Here, one is rightly reminded of the perspective extended by Engster and Moore about AI being a "specific capitalist mediation" (2020: 203, 212), contributing to the overarching agenda of capital accumulation. This lopsided dynamics between the Global North and the Global South sustain a cycle of reliance on AI, with the Global South merely serving as a repository for AI and its unavoidable consumption

rather than acting as an active creator of technology. Further, the neocolonial paradigm of various nation-states of the Global South is almost AI-washed in their "progressive" techno-modern agenda — unsuccessfully aping the Global North — to implement AI in labour-intensive sectors (viz., manufacturing and agriculture) only to further exacerbate unemployment and poverty.

Despite the discourses surrounding AI and its corresponding techno-capitalism, it is important to recognize the emerging yet powerful potential that the Global South's economic structure has been able to harness. The Global South has and is showing resilience in positively negotiating with AI. Leveraging AI for economic advancements, the Global South nations have utilized AI for more inclusive economic growth, addressing poverty and hunger. The Global South is all braced up to seize its moment of AI sovereignty from AI hegemony/colonialism. Remodelling global AI for local specificity needs and strategically aligning it with the developmental agendas of the nation and the Global South has shown reconcilable successes in particular cases. An ag-tech platform in Kenya, the "Hello Tractor," is revolutionizing the nation's agriscape for smallholder farmers. An AI-powered platform, it uses an IoT digital solution (dubbed "Uber for tractors") to connect tractor owners with farmers. This AI-enabled tractor-sharing service has been proven economically inclusive in fostering productivity by increasing the participation of marginalized and underserved farmers. Further, besides being financially inclusive, this AI-enabled model has proven sustainable and climate-smart (UNSGSA, 2023). Another case in point could be *Kuda* banking and AI-enabled fintech services in Nigeria that have helped millions of the country's "unbanked and underbanked" population. This AI-enabled banking platform has helped the underprivileged by giving access to financial rights and assisting the populace in economic activity. Kuda has helped reduce poverty by fostering financial inclusion (Empower Africa, 2023). Considering the progress of AI in the Global South, we understand that the agrarian economies are perhaps the most to benefit from harnessing AI power. Drone-equipped farming, optimized crop productivity, and intelligent energy consumption are all smart features that make agriculture more efficient (Wall et al., 2021). Despite these promises, the integration of AI is fraught with challenges in every single sector of the Global South. For instance, Wall et al. (2021) also warn about the ecological effects of AI usage, such as the potential harm to external wildlife, toxic emissions, and encroachment in external land due to rigid algorithms.

Socio-Cultural Implications of AI in the Global South: Imperialism and Beyond

The socio-cultural implications of AI in the Global South raise apprehensions about cultural imperialism. Within the historical technomodernity of Western imaginaries, the AI paradigm can be perceived to be "located within the colonial matrix of power," whether through its supply-chain model that reifies power imbalance between the West and its rest or "through an *international division of digital labor* that extracts value from the labour of workers in the majority world, generating profits for Western technology companies" (Muldoon, Wu, 2023: 3). Such imperialistic design of AI, informed by Western

value systems, in its production and supply process, fails to align with the cultural context of the Global South and is rather a hegemonic imposition of an episteme meant for acculturation and obeying in the labour market of the othered geography (Adas, 1989). Such ideological apparatus that produces knowledge/power and is deployed within the socio-technological sphere of the Global South leads to algorithmic governmentalities (Beer, 2016). The design and operation of AI systems are often informed by Western values, culture, languages, and norms that generally fail to align with the diverse cultural contexts of the Global South. For example, facial recognition systems that AI-identifies individuals based on the image of their facial features (gender, colour, age, race, emotion) have been disparaged for their racial and ethnic biases, performing poorly on darker-skinned individuals due to training and conditioning datasets predominantly composed of lighter-skinned individuals (Waelen, 2023). Such technological biases reinforce systemic discrimination and marginalization.

> Since recognition is considered to be constitutive of a person's ability to develop as an authentic and autonomous being and a condition for a just society, misrecognition should be seen as a threat to autonomy and a violation of justice. Alternatively, misrecognition could be perceived as a threat to well-being, since it hampers a person's flourishing. Hence, misrecognition is an ethical concern, because the psychological implications of misrecognition touch upon fundamental moral values and principles (Waelen, 2023: 218).

The production and deployment of *AI empires* through a Westernized system generates a computational power infrastructure that solidifies a Big-Tech structure of domination, essentially imperialistic in nature. A further extension of such imperialistic techno-hegemony and cultural domination is the integration of surveillance apparatus and unethical extortion of data. With the desire to sustain a cultural (Western) homogeneity through a digital panopticon, surveillance becomes systemic and integral to any AI-enabled industry (Das, Chanda, 2023: 192) where labour forces of the industry become "objects of information, never … subjects in communication" (Foucault, 1978: 108). An indigenous/tribal rights advocate and media professional, Nina Sangma (Garo), asserts the need for indigenizing emerging technologies and vents concern about AI surveillance in the lives of marginal indigenous communities: "One of the biggest concerns is the use of surveillance tech like Pegasus, which is being used to subvert democratic rights of citizens and free speech, including the targeting of journalists to curb freedom of the Press and citizens' right to information under the guise of national security. This, coupled with draconian laws like India's Armed Forces Special Powers Act, gives unbridled powers to the Army in so-called "disturbed areas" to maintain the status quo. These areas coincide with Indigenous lands where there is an Indigenous population, such as in Northeast India" (Sangma, 2024: n.pg.).

Furthermore, the widespread adoption of AI systems, promoted/justified globally based on the universal discourse of modernity, rationality, and objectivity, risks cultural homogenization. AI-driven content recommendation algorithms — such as those

employed by social media platforms — tend to prioritize popular or mainstream content, often originating from the Global North, at the expense of indigenous knowledge and local cultures. This erodes cultural diversity and undermines efforts to preserve languages, traditions, and practices unique to the Global South. As AI increasingly mediates communication and access to information, the preservation of cultural heritage becomes a critical concern. The creation of deterministic deepfakes by Generative AI may challenge the authenticity of indigenous cultural heritage, especially the intangible segment.

Nevertheless, the question remains if the future landscape of the Global South's computational power will depend on these transformative Westernized technologies' innovative diffusion (read cultural hegemony) to overcome disparities in equity and inclusivity. Also, whether the narrative of AI in the Global South has the potency to shift from dependency to agency remains. Notwithstanding the possibilities of systemic hegemony through AI that condition the socio-cultural ontology of subjects of the Global South, especially their indigenous and marginalized populations, there have been considerable explorations and negotiations of AI from the vantage point of the "othered" nations/communities/populace. Rethinking the otherwise imperialistic cultural dominion of the production-consumption continuum of Global North(ed) or Westernized AI, there are success stories of AI being indigenized and interpreted from a more local perspective and episteme. One such example is the creation of "TZ'IJK" — a "mestizo" (even postcolonial and hybrid) autonomous robotic agent inspired by Mayan creationist mythology — by Paula Gaetano Adi and Gustavo Crembil. An electronic art installation at a symposium at Simon Frazer University in 2015. According to the "Artist Statement," "TZ'IJK" is a strong response to the need for an alternative indigenized AI system beyond the Western cultural ideology-conditioned AI:

> Far from the utopias of smart, anthropomorphic and responsive machines, and inspired by the Maya's creationist mythology, TZ'IJK is a blind, deaf, and speechless autonomous robotic agent made from mud. Drawn from the lessons of mestizaje and motivated by Latin America's anthropophagic, cannibalistic, and hybrid nature, TZ'IJK proposes an alternative and disruptive approach to the development of embodied artificial life forms and advocates for the integration of high and low technological materials, processes, and cultures. Consisting of a large mud-covered sphere with an internal robotic mechanism, TZ'IJK establishes a non-reactive and unpredictable bodily interaction with the viewers. This creates the emergence of a new kind of synthetic agent that allows contradictions and ambiguity, complicating the traditional dichotomies of craft/technology, western/indigenous, modern/traditional, global/local, and developed/undeveloped (Adi, Crembil, 2015: n.pg.).

A more practical application that dehegemonizes AI can be the case of the Indian queer Adivasi engineer Aindriya Barua's (they/them) *ShhorAI*, "an AI-powered bot built to combat hate speech on social media, with a special focus on marginalised community safety" (Chakrapani, 2024: n.pg.).

Focus Issue Articles: Multifaceted Perspectives on AI and Global South

Bringing in the concerns of AI to the realm of urban studies, Borhan Sepehri et al. analyses how the urban infrastructure of Saudi Arabia may be AI-optimized to effectively become more inclusivist in implementing and enhancing the SDGs (with special emphasis on SDG5 [Gender Equality], SDG11 [Cultural Preservation and Heritage Protection], SDG4 [Skill-based Futuristic Education for Youth], SDG8 [Decent Job and Economic Growth for Youth], SDG6 [Access to Safe Water, Water Management, and Sanitary Governance], SDGs7/13/14/15 ["Reducing Climate Change, Creating Sustainable Solutions, Forecasting Solar Photovoltaic Power, Improving Renewable Energy Efficiency, Increasing Climate Flexibility, Weather Forecasting, Water Resource Management, and Promoting Agricultural Practices Resistant to Climate and Food Security"]). This the authors achieve through a narrative review method and their research finally emphasizes AI for Saudi Arabia that must unfailingly "prioritize social, religious, and cultural characteristics and values" "highly compatible with Saudi society". This research is indeed a recognition of the transformative potential for AI in the Global South and no less an assertion for the decolonization of the same to suit the local agendas.

In the following article by Demirel et al., we counter the power imbalance in the socio-cultural representations and perceptions of generative AI (ChatGPT) between the Global North and Global South, as captured on Twitter. The text analysis employed in the research indicates that the Global North focuses "more on sectoral applications and technical aspects, while the Global South evaluates ChatGPT within local language and cultural contexts. The findings demonstrate that socio-cultural differences and technological development levels between regions are reflected in the social representations of ChatGPT." Based on the findings, the research further sheds light on the Global South's concerns about AI-related privacy issues, cybersecurity, fake news, and consequent culturally compatible solutions. The findings further indicate the Global South's perception of Gen-AI as a threat to employment, and this is to be ascribed to the disadvantageous socio-cultural-economic context of Third World nations like Turkey and India (two representational countries in the research). This "AI anxiety" (Li, Huang, 2020) of the Global South, vis-à-vis the relatively progressive and futuristic association of the Global North with AI, could no less be perceived from an ontological dimension. The Global South realities and its complex existential AI anxieties across demographics are an agenda that future researchers may probe through this article.

Next, Sinha's article captures a more pronounced version of this AI anxiety. Sinha talks about the neocolonial surveillance model in India (through the nation-state's deploying of the system of *Aadhaar* — an AI-driven biometric identification initiative) that has led to data (neo)colonialism, which in turn conditions/normalizes through a disciplinary knowledge/power the individual and collective identities of the subjects of the nation-state. However, Sinha is not altogether pessimistic, for she projects possibilities of Bhabhaesque hybridity-resistance (Bhabha, 1984), whereby "Aadhaar could be reimagined as a tool for equitable governance."

Varghese and Rani's article continues with this trope of perceiving AI as a colonial construct and its functioning/mechanism as that of "digital orientalism." Through a systematic analysis of 270 AI-generated images, "this study investigates how contemporary artificial intelligence image generation systems interpret and reproduce Indian cultural elements." It concludes that such representations lack cultural sensitivity and are lopsided with an oriental bias. Visual stereotyping and algorithmic cultural reductionism of Indian society by the Western AI system perpetuates power imbalance whereby the latter almost engenders scopic violence and representational damage on the former.

Finally, Shomotova et al.'s article, "The Impact of Socio-Cultural and Demographic Factors on Gen AI Accessibility, Usability, and Applicability in the UAE," is a more practical concern about the feasibility of Westernized AI within a Global South scenario, given its multicultural/multiethnic composition and correspondingly nuanced issues of demography. The article's mixed-methods research design showed strong links between how Gen AI uses AI and demographic and educational factors. Since they appreciated real-time feedback and time-saving features of Gen AI tools, many students stated that accessibility was crucial. However, they ran into problems like prompt sensitivity and the need to verify output. Although the Gen AI Applicability results highlighted ChatGPT's assistance in content creation, language improvement, and academic material organization, they also noted that it struggles to adhere to assignment-specific guidelines. This study adds to the body of literature by examining the sociodemographic elements that affect the adoption of Gen AI in a culturally diverse environment such as the United Arab Emirates.

This Focus Issue culminates with a thought leader Roundtable, whereby the Editors of the Special Issue engage in "a critical dialogue between leading scholars in the fields of Sociology, Critical Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, Critical Management Studies, and Sustainability Studies to explore the challenges that Global South navigates in its adoption of AI." The conversation does not merely probe the concerns around power disparities in the AI paradigm of the Global South and the Global North. However, it even suggests decolonizing the AI system by prioritizing "human rights, ethics, equity, inclusivity, and resilience."

Conclusion

Thus, this Focus Issue either non-obliquely or tangentially projects an aspiration for decolonizing the AI of the Global North that is deeply entangled in the global dynamics of power, capital, and culture, perpetuating a cycle of neo-imperialism that mirrors historical patterns of colonial domination and reflects hegemonic structures that disproportionately benefit the Global North. By extracting data, exploiting labor, and imposing Western epistemologies, AI technologies have not only deepened global economic disparities but have also eroded cultural diversity and reinforced systemic biases against the Global South, especially their marginalized communities. Indeed, a strategic decolonial AI framework must prioritize the agency of the Global South in shaping technological

futures. This includes fostering equitable access to AI infrastructure, ensuring culturally sensitive design, and recognizing indigenous epistemologies as valid knowledge systems. Moreover, critical engagement with AI must interrogate its deployment's ethical, economic, and socio-political implications, aiming to dismantle the structures of power that perpetuate dependency and inequality. The future of AI in the Global South lies in crafting context-sensitive, culture-sensitive, inclusive, and equitable models of technological development — a deconstructed AI of its own. Decolonizing AI requires a fundamental shift — from a system that extracts and exploits to one that empowers and sustains by centering the Global South's voices, needs, and aspirations.

It has been our sincere honor to convene this diverse group of scholars and to play a role in curating its contributions. While AI remains a hot topic in scholarship and economic news, we note the inherent biases of the Global North and the West from its inception. Therein is the need and the justification for such investigations, as inequalities likely beget further inequalities, biases, and injustices. We are grateful to our contributors for entrusting us to shepherd their work through the review process. Similarly, we are grateful to peer reviewers whose selfless contributions remain anonymous despite playing a necessary and pivotal part in the process. Finally, we thank the Editors and Editorial Board of the *Russian Sociological Review* for advising us through this process and entrusting us with curating the content for this Special Issue.

Professor Arindam Das and Professor Glenn Muschert
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