

THE ALGORITHMIC EMPIRE: ALPHABET INC. AND THE INFRASTRUCTURAL HEGEMONY OF PLATFORM CAPITALISM

DOI: 10.5937/EMC26171A

Nurdan Akiner

Akdeniz University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Radio-Television & Cinema,
Antalya, Türkiye

E-mail: nurdanakiner@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The research investigates how digital colonialism operates through the technological authority that platform capitalism provides. It analyzes how power operates through digital systems, moving away from media imperialism models that focused on ownership and content control. Using Alphabet Inc. as a case study, the research examines how integrated platform ecosystems create and capture data-driven value through a critical political economy framework. It investigates how Google, YouTube, and Android work together to transform user data into commercial products that feed algorithmic control systems. The study asserts that platform capitalism functions as an advanced form of digital colonialism, using infrastructural systems to maintain control over access, visibility, and user engagement. The framework shows how Global South countries generate data that Global North corporations force into their centralized systems, creating ongoing extractive relationships. The platform operates as "infrastructural hegemony" in that it establishes itself as a financial intermediary while controlling users' political agency and knowledge production. It introduces the concept of the "algorithmic empire" to describe power embedded in code, data flows, and platform architectures. The research connects digital colonialism with platform capitalism to create a theoretical framework that presents digital infrastructures as imperial outposts while showing how global inequalities continue to expand.

Keywords: Digital Colonialism, Algorithmic Empire, Infrastructural Hegemony, Global South, Alphabet Inc.

INTRODUCTION

Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2014) presents the concept of "media imperialism" as a more focused analytical framework for discussions of cultural imperialism. This approach considers media systems as an extension of Western-centered power relations, evaluating the media not only as a content carrier but as an ideological and economic device that reproduces global inequalities. However, the media imperialism approach limits its analysis to content flows and nation-state-centered power relations. In today's digital landscape, power is rebuilt through data collection, algorithmic sequencing, and platform infrastructures. This transformation narrows the existing frameworks and highlights new conceptualization. The "global village" narrative of digital technologies serves as an ideological veil that hides the unequal nature of digitalization. While global inequalities in internet access and digital literacy persist, even users with access are not equal within these systems. Especially as US-based technology companies have risen to a decisive position in the system through their orchestrating role in global data flows. In this context, Alphabet Inc. dominates core digital infrastructures through search engines, mobile operating systems, cloud services, and video-sharing platforms. The companies in question are not only commercial subjects competing in the market. They are structural power centers that regulate access to information, determine visibility, and govern digital circulation. Postcolonial theory highlights the digital divide and cultural representation (Jandrić & Kuzmanić, 2015) but focuses too heavily on representation, marginalizing the infrastructural and economic dimensions of digital systems. Based on these theoretical limitations, this study proposes the concept of "algorithmic empire" to explain power relations in the digital age. It is established directly but through data infrastructures, algorithmic management, and platform architectures. Algorithmic empire defines a sovereignty regime that collects all kinds of user interactions in digital environments as data and processes them in centralized systems, deriving economic, political, and cultural value. Alphabet Inc. provides a revealing case for analyzing platform capitalism. Data produced especially in the Global South

is collected and processed by Global North-based platforms and converted into economic value. Alphabet's search algorithms, recommendation systems, and mobile ecosystems dominate access to information, establishing not only economic but also cognitive and cultural hegemony.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study brings together three main theoretical lines to analyze: (1) the literature on imperialism and media imperialism; (2) discussions of platform capitalism, attention economy, and digital labor; (3) data colonialism and digital colonialism. At the intersection of these three axes, the "algorithmic empire" serves as the study's original conceptual contribution.

Digital Continuity of Imperial Power Relations

The cultural imperialism literature reveals that this relationship is also reproduced on symbolic and ideological planes (Schiller, 1976; Mirrlees, 2020). According to Boyd-Barrett (2015), media systems are not only information-carrying tools, but also structural mechanisms that reproduce global power relations. Today, these imperial power relations increasingly operate through infrastructural and algorithmic forms of control.

Platform Capitalism, Attention Economy, and Digital Labor

Platform capitalism is a new accumulation regime in the digital economy, in which production and circulation processes are organized around platforms. According to Srnicek (2017), platforms are digital infrastructures that bring together different user groups and derive large-scale data from these interactions. Goldhaber (1997) argues that attention has become the scarce resource in an age of information abundance. In the age of information abundance, the scarce resource is attention itself. Platforms blur the distinction between consumption and labor. According to Smythe (2009), the main commodity in mass communication systems is not the content but the audience's attention. Fuchs (2014) explains this process through the concept of "prosumer": Users both consume content and produce unpaid labor, which feeds into the capital accumulation processes of platforms. In this structure, which Zuboff (2019) calls "surveillance capitalism", user behaviors are systematically monitored, analyzed, and linked to predictable behavior models. As a result, digital platforms operate as structures that establish a new capitalist accumulation regime rising on the trivet of attention, data, and labor.

Data Colonialism and Infrastructural Hegemony

The global spread of platform capitalism has given rise to a new form of accumulation: data colonialism. Thatcher, O'Sullivan, and Mahmoudi (2016) emphasize that this new form of exploitation functions through the commodification of everyday life. Couldry and Mejias (2019) define data colonialism as a new phase of capitalism: while classical colonialism appropriates land, resources, and labor, today life itself is confiscated in the form of data. While the countries of the Global South remain largely raw data suppliers, the authority to process and transform it into final value lies with companies based in the Global North (Bolaño & Zanghelini, 2025). Digital colonialism is not solely economic; it also operates through infrastructural and epistemological dimensions. Large technology companies dominate software, hardware, and network infrastructures, thereby shaping the fundamental rules of the digital ecosystem and centralizing information flows (Kwet, 2019). Lessig's (2000) "code is law" approach demonstrates that software architectures regulate user behavior in digital environments. Building on these discussions, algorithmic empire operates through three primary mechanisms: Data extraction, algorithmic management, and infrastructural dependency. Infrastructural hegemony is not only about platforms directing user behavior; it refers to the determination of the conditions of possibility of digital life. On this plane, Gramsci's concept of hegemony takes on a digital form: while consent is produced through user participation, enforcement is enacted through algorithmic visibility and access control. Alphabet Inc. represents one of the clearest examples of this structure.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative case study analyzes Alphabet Inc.'s corporate structure, platform integration strategies, data collection mechanisms, and algorithmic management practices through a critical political economy lens.

Alphabet's integration across search engines, video-sharing platforms, mobile operating systems, and cloud computing was a decisive factor in selecting the case. During the data collection process, Alphabet's annual reports from 2020 to 2025, publicly available API documentation, and texts on the company's platform policies were analyzed. This study does not claim to be a quantitative generalization; instead, it aims to provide a deep interpretation of the workings of platform power from a critical political economy perspective.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Alphabet Inc. originated from the Google search engine, developed by Larry Page and Sergey Brin at Stanford University in 1998, based on the PageRank algorithm. In its 2004 IPO, the company adopted a dual class share structure, establishing a corporate governance model that grants founders disproportionate voting rights. In 2015, it was restructured as a holding company with core platforms like Google, YouTube, and Android positioned as subsidiaries (The Verge, 2015). This institutional differentiation reflects a layered power architecture between infrastructural governance (Alphabet) and operational platform control (Google). Alphabet's growth strategy is based on expanding its ecosystem by acquiring critical data repositories (Srnicek, 2017) reinforcing the company's "winner-takes-all" dynamic. Table 1 summarizes Alphabet's strategic acquisitions and their contributions to the data ecosystem.

Table 1: Alphabet's Strategic Acquisitions and Data Ecosystem Expansion

Year	Company	Approximate Value	Strategic Data Contribution
2005	Android	~\$50 million	Uninterrupted data flow via the mobile operating system
2006	YouTube	\$1.65 billion	Control of the video attention economy
2007	DoubleClick	\$3.1 billion	Internet-wide advertising traffic and cookie infrastructure
2013	Waze	~\$1 billion	Real-time location and traffic data
2014	Nest Labs	\$3.2 billion	Domestic life data (thermostats, cameras)
2021	Fitbit	\$2.1 billion	Biometric health data (heart rate, sleep patterns)

Note: Compiled by the author based on Vise and Malseed (2017), Lunden (2013), Nancu and Barzecu (2024), and Lee (2019).

Alphabet's revenue composition reflects the scale of its platform-based business model. The company's annual revenues have reached hundreds of billions of dollars, with the primary revenue derived from linking users' digital traces to "predictable consumption patterns" for advertisers (Alphabet Inc., 2025a; 2025b).

Data Colonialism and Infrastructural Dependency

In this process, platforms have evolved into modern colonial apparatuses that transfer value to the Global North by harvesting and processing the raw data of the Global South. As shown in Table 2, platform infrastructures transform heterogeneous data types into different forms of economic and algorithmic value.

Table 2: Typology of Data Extraction and Transformation Mechanisms in Platform Capitalism

Data Type	Platform / Method	Transformation Mechanism
Search queries	Google Search	Intent extraction (user profiling and behavioral prediction) → targeted advertising systems
Viewing history	YouTube	Attention optimization (algorithmic curation and watch-time maximization) → recommendation loops
Location data	Google Maps / Android	Mobility profiling (spatial tracking and behavioral mapping) → predictive modeling systems
Health data	Fitbit / Google Health	Biometric extraction (physiological monitoring and datafication) → integration into data markets
Domestic data	Nest	Routine modeling (household behavior analysis and automation) → security and energy optimization systems
Emotional data	YouTube engagement	Affect analysis (sentiment tracking and emotional inference) → user segmentation and content targeting

Note: This table presents the author's analytical classification based on the literature on platform capitalism and digital colonialism (Fuchs, 2014; Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

All this data is processed on Alphabet's U.S. based servers and used to train artificial intelligence models (Naidu, 2026). The time users spend on the platform, along with their comments and likes, represents a

cost-free source of value for Alphabet (Mileros, 2025). The company has established infrastructure hegemony by controlling the infrastructure of digital life. This is a digital adaptation of Gramsci's theory, where sovereignty is constructed through consent and infrastructure dependency rather than direct force.

Alphabet's infrastructural hegemony is embodied in three key dimensions:

(1) Compulsory Use of Digital Infrastructures. Services such as Google Drive, Google Cloud, and Gmail are not only for individual users; they have also become a de facto digital platform for companies, public institutions, and non-governmental organizations in the Global South. Having a Google account, even without using an external cloud storage tool, creates a private "usage-history cloud."

(2) Dominance over Physical Infrastructure. Alphabet's control extends beyond the software layer to the internet's physical backbone. Nwankwo (2025) argues that big tech companies are redefining the industry and the digital economy with their investments in submarine cables, thus transforming Google into a telecommunications and media company. The company operates one of the world's largest private fiber optic cable networks to carry global data traffic. Gjesvik (2023) reveals that "hyperscalers" like Google have risen to become the new dominators of the submarine cable market and that this special infrastructure control has narrowed states' sovereignty. As of 2022, content providers like Alphabet own or lease 71% of global undersea bandwidth capacity; this rate was below 10% in 2012 (Nwankwo, 2025).

(3) Algorithmic Governance and Visibility Regime. YouTube's recommendation algorithms operate to maximize user attention, establishing a distribution regime that determines which content is likely to gain visibility. As Goldhaber (1997) points out, in the information age, the scarce resource is not information but attention, and content that does not gain visibility is marginalized economically and culturally. Foucault (2007) shows that power is not only exercised through the means of oppression; it becomes functional through knowledge production, visibility regimes, and the determination of norms. Algorithms become micro-power devices that shape individuals' perception of the universe by ruling over what counts as "information", "importance," and "remarkability" (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). Platforms do not force users; they elicit consent in a discourse that presents participation as a "natural" and "free" choice. However, this consent is preconfigured by the infrastructural dependency created by the platforms (Fuchs, 2021). Algorithmic systems assume a double function: disciplinary visibility and hegemonic consent

Digital Poverty: The Intersection of Access, Cost, and Data Appropriateness

Lack of internet connection is only one aspect of digital poverty; other factors include vulnerability to data ownership, a lack of digital literacy, and access charges.

(1) Access and Cost Barrier. The digital divide varies sharply across regions. Falowo and Falowo (2026) report that Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has the lowest mobile internet penetration globally: as of 2024, only 29% of the population has access, compared to the global average of 58%. Reasons include limited internet infrastructure, low affordability of mobile devices and data services, insufficient digital capabilities, government regulations, and lack of physical network facilities. These factors exacerbate the spiral of digital poverty in the Global South, making it challenging for users to establish a sustainable and meaningful connection, even when they breach the barrier. This cost pressure shapes the nature of users' interaction with platforms. Low-income users avoid video content to save data, turn to text-based media, or are forced to use services touted as "free" but that exposes them to much more data-intensive extraction. This creates a vicious circle where cost pressure deepens data appropriation.

(2) Actual Price of a Free Service: Data Appropriation. Alphabet's "Next Billion Users" strategy uses a scalable expansion model to enhance digital inclusion in markets with limited internet access. Within this approach, services such as Google, YouTube, and Android are offered free to users, thereby integrating audiences in low-income areas into the platform ecosystem. However, the free access model corresponds to an accumulation regime in which user behavior is tied to data production without interruption which Zuboff (2019) calls "surveillance capitalism." Thus, the "Next Billion Users" strategy is not just digital inclusion policy but an extension of data-driven capitalism. Couldry and Mejias (2019) call this process "data colonialism" and emphasize that the Global South has become a structural reservoir of digital labor and data production. Srnicek (2017), however, argues that platform capitalism generates increasing returns as

user numbers grow through network effects and economies of scale, thereby reinforcing market dominance. Data extraction in the global platform economy presents asymmetrical patterns in different social contexts. Data from users in the Global South is collected and processed at much lower cost due to disparities in digital literacy levels and gaps in privacy awareness (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). Moreover, since access to the platforms is mostly granted through contractual "acceptance" mechanisms, user consent is effectively coerced consent. The fact that platforms such as Google and YouTube have become de facto infrastructure suppliers in many Global South countries restricts users' access to alternative digital ecosystems and establishes a structural dependency relationship (Srnicsek, 2017; Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Plantin et al., 2018). From this perspective, platform capitalism is not just a data-based accumulation regime. It is a global power structure that rises on the three pillars of unequal access, coercive consent, and infrastructural monopolization.

(3) Digital Literacy and Power Asymmetry. For billions of digitally illiterate people, access to the internet or a smartphone is not inherently meaningful (Boyd-Barrett, 2014). More critically, a lack of digital literacy leaves users completely unprotected against data appropriation. If a user cannot understand where their data flows, how it is processed, and which algorithms are used, this does not constitute informed consent, even if declared. Jandrić and Kuzmanić (2015) read this through a postcolonial lens: Colonial powers appropriating indigenous peoples while educating them under the pretext of "civilizing". Today, Alphabet creates new markets and fresh data sources behind the rhetoric of "increasing digital literacy" and "bringing the internet to everyone". Yet digital literacy projects mostly teach the use of Google's own tools (Gmail, Google Drive, YouTube), which further reinforces the existing dependency relationship.

(4) Digital Poverty Spiral and Infrastructural Domination. Digital poverty is a clear embodiment of infrastructural hegemony. As poor users become dependent on platforms, the cost of switching out of these ecosystems rises exponentially (Valente & Grohmann, 2024). If a user's entire email archive is in Gmail, all their photos are in Google Photos, and their job applications are handled through Google Drive, it becomes virtually impossible for that user to leave the Alphabet ecosystem. This creates infrastructural dependency (Whelan, 2021). Alphabet's "next billion users" strategy leverages this poverty to collect data from the most vulnerable at minimal cost and use this data to train US-based AI models (Nothias, 2025). This process is the clearest example of data colonialism: The data of the poor becomes the lifeblood of the algorithm of the rich (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Platform Labor Regimes and Precariousness

At the heart of Alphabet's business model is a surveillance regime that monitors user behavior. All interaction users have within the Google ecosystem (including search queries, YouTube viewing habits, and location information) contribute to data generation. These data are converted into prediction products and constitute the main economic input of platform capitalism. Recommendation algorithms are the front end of platform capitalism's surveillance regime. Fuchs (2014) argues, this modeling is not just surveillance control. It has simultaneously become the main means of surplus-value production. While users' participation on platforms seems voluntary, it entails consenting to data generation and algorithmic rules. Consent is built into the platform's architecture; not using the platform risks social and economic exclusion.

Free Digital Labor: From Prosumer to Data Mining

Fuchs's prosumer clarifies this dual role: each time a user consumes information on the platform, they also produce data that aids in the company's capital accumulation process. There is no cash equivalent for user labor on the platform. However, behind the scenes of this "free" interaction, as Srnicsek (2017) emphasizes, lies the marketing of the user's attention and data to advertisers. This is Marx's surplus-value in digital form that users cannot capture what they create; the platform confiscates it.

Algorithmic Management and the Precariousness of Content Creators. Alphabet's workforce structure is multi-layered, ranging from traditional corporate employment models to fragmented and precarious forms of labor created by digital platform capitalism. While the most visible component of this structure is content producers (YouTubers and influencers), the least visible segment consists of data labelers and

microtask workers. Content producers must not only create content but also perform for algorithmic visibility. Lee et al. (2015) show that algorithmic governance determines visibility and income. Rosenblat and Stark (2016) note that platforms create structural precariousness with non-transparent rules. Precariousness is also emotional. Hochschild's (2012) emotional labor becomes, on platforms, a requirement to bond with viewers. Baym (2018) calls this "relational labor," transforming audience loyalty into a measurable metric. Influencers build community, but platforms commodify this emotional labor and sell it to advertisers. Hochschild's (2012) concept of emotional labor gains a new dimension on digital platforms, turning audience relationships into economic value. Influencers foster community through constant interaction, but platforms commodify this emotional labor and market it to advertisers as loyal audiences. Duffy (2017) notes that although this process appears voluntary and creative, it is in fact a labor regime defined by deep precariousness and uncertainty.

Invisible Workforce and Global Labor Hierarchies. The training of Alphabet's algorithmic systems relies heavily on labeled data sets. Data labelers contribute to the learning processes of algorithmic systems through microtasks such as image classification, object recognition, audio transcription, and content moderation. This labor regime, which Gray and Suri (2019) call "ghost work", is invisible and fragmented. These workers mostly work for low hourly wages (approximately 1-3 dollars) and are deprived of job security, social rights, and long-term contracts. These workers are not the end users of the platforms, but workers who are directly integrated into the production process. Viewed in Marx's (1867/1990) concept of the "industrial reserve army", this regime is a flexible, temporary and constantly mobilized reservoir of labor on a global scale. For big tech companies, the Global South is not only a data production ground but also a reservoir of low-cost labor. This structure includes not only data labelers but also call center workers, content auditors, and other workers who prepare data for AI systems. These forms of labor reproduce global inequalities and maintain historical power relations by transforming them (Akiner, 2024). However, this relationship does not resemble classical colonialism; instead, it represents an asymmetrical dependency relationship re-established through digital production chains. Data production and labor processes construct not only an economic but also a political and epistemological regime of inequality. Digitalization does not change the nature of labor; it transforms how labor is exploited. Marx's labor-capital contradiction persists on digital platforms, but exploitation has become more covert, fragmented, and precarious (Rani et al., 2025). Chen (2026) argues that platform capital uses algorithmic technologies as "digital supervisors" to control labor more efficiently. Platforms confine labor to a task-based framework. The worker is not dependent on an employer, but this "freedom" means being unprotected (Büyükyavuz Deniz, 2024). Algorithmic governance poses new risks to workers' well-being, especially in emerging economies (Rani, Srivastava, Valodia, & Castel-Branco, 2025). Worldwide, 150–430 million data workers report poor conditions, exploitation, and psychological disorders (Du & Okolo, 2025). Alphabet's workforce strategy minimizes costs and maximizes profits by atomizing labor, making it precarious and invisible (a systemic feature of platform capitalism). The Global South pays the heaviest price (Table 3). Data workers toil in "digital sweatshops" (Du & Okolo, 2025); in Africa, labeling and moderation workers are rendered completely invisible to users while working under extremely precarious conditions (Pidoux et al., 2025).

Table 3: Labor Stratification and Forms of Precarity in Platform Capitalism

Labor Layer	Worker Group	Precarity Form
Core labor	Service and infrastructure workers (e.g., campus service workers, logistics staff)	Outsourcing (subcontracting structures), low wages, and limited labor protections
Platform-dependent labor	Content creators and digital producers	Algorithmic dependency (platform visibility and monetization control) and income volatility
Invisible data labor	Micro-task workers and crowd workers	Task fragmentation, labor invisibility, and extremely low compensation

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes Alphabet Inc. as a case of platform capitalism's infrastructural hegemony in the Global South. The findings show that digital capitalism is far beyond a mere economic model; it reveals a new form of sovereignty that operates through data, infrastructure, and algorithms. Alphabet's monopolization strategies have elevated the company to the position of an essential infrastructure for global digital life. Alphabet's business model is based on the principle of continuously collecting, processing, and capitalizing on user data. When this process is conceptualized as data colonialism, a structural value transfer becomes evident, in which data collected from the Global South is transferred to artificial intelligence and advertising economies centered around the Global North. Meanwhile, the digital labor regime is atomized

and precarious. The study proposes the concepts of "algorithmic empire" and "infrastructural hegemony". An algorithmic empire refers to a new regime of power in which sovereignty is exercised through data flows, algorithms, and digital infrastructures rather than direct territorial control. Infrastructural hegemony describes the transformation of platforms into building blocks that determine the conditions of possibility of social reality, going beyond being mere content distribution channels.

On this plane, the Gramscian concept of hegemony gains a digital identity: while consent is produced through user participation, it becomes operational through routing, algorithmic visibility, and infrastructural dependency. For the Global South, this structure entails three key risks: economic concentration and digital exclusion, the erosion of data sovereignty, and the ossification of technological dependence. These risks are not limited to the market level but also have structural consequences for sovereignty and development capacity. In the age of algorithmic empire, imperial power relations underwent a radical transformation. Sovereignty is no longer over physical geography; it rules data, infrastructure, and algorithms. But this structure is not static, increasing regulatory interventions and alternative digital infrastructure initiatives are constantly testing the limits of this new form of empire. The future of digital sovereignty is not based solely on analyzing existing structures, but also on the construction of alternative, public digital infrastructures.

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