AI, digital colonialism & social mobilization in Africa

Conversations with Mophat Okinyi

SUMMARY

IDEA:
AI has introduced a form of "digital colonialism" in Africa.

CHALLENGE:
The challenge lies in ensuring that the benefits of AI are distributed equitably, rather than perpetuating existing inequalities.

APPROACH:
Raising awareness about the often invisible labor behind AI systems, educating workers about their rights, and the economic systems that exploit their contributions.

MOPHAT OKINYI
Mophat Okinyi is currently CEO of Techworker Community Africa (TCA), a community that represents more than 400 workers and advocates for better working conditions and the recognition of employee rights..

Mophat Okinyi, a former content moderator, actively participated in training ChatGPT by tagging toxic content for an OpenAI subcontractor, Sama. Because he experienced the harsh working conditions and low wages there, and after denouncing them, he co-founded the Content Moderators Union, the first union for data workers in artificial intelligence in Africa. He is currently CEO of Techworker Community Africa (TCA), a community that represents more than 400 workers and advocates for better working conditions and the recognition of employee rights.In this interview, he explains how AI is transforming the working conditions of tech employees for the worse and proposes solutions for mobilizing against this new form of legalized robbery of African populations and youth.

Who are you & what are your views or analysis on the evolution and adoption of new technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) in Africa?

I am the Founder and CEO of Techworker Community Africa (TCA). TCA is a 4000 plus strong community of support focused on bridging technology, advocacy, and social impact. I am also an advocate for the rights and well-being of tech and Business process outsourcing (BPO) workers. My views on the evolution of AI in Africa are twofold: it represents both opportunity and exploitation. On one hand, AI has the potential to drive innovation, improve access to services, and foster economic growth in Africa. However, the adoption of AI often comes with a darker side, exploitation of data workers, content moderators, and tech professionals, who power these systems under unsafe/poor conditions. The challenge lies in ensuring that the benefits of AI are distributed equitably, rather than perpetuating existing inequalities.

What is the typical day for data workers and content moderators in Africa?

A typical day for data workers and content moderators is tiring and mentally taxing.

Data Workers: These individuals label images, transcribe audio, curate datasets, and perform

repetitive tasks that are critical for training AI systems. They work under intense pressure to meet unrealistic daily quotas/targets with little room for error, often monitored by strict algorithmic oversight/cruel leaders.

Content Moderators: Moderators review and filter harmful or disturbing content to keep online platforms safe. This work involves repeatedly viewing graphic, violent, or otherwise distressing material, often without adequate mental health support. The exposure to such content leads to severe psychological effects, including PTSD.

How is AI changing the working conditions of the people for the worse in Africa?

AI has introduced a form of "digital colonialism" in Africa. Data workers and content moderators, critical to AI development, face dangerous work environments. They are often exposed to harmful content, work under immense pressure to meet tight deadlines, and earn wages that do not reflect the value they create.

For example, as a former content moderator for OpenAI's ChatGPT, I witnessed firsthand the toll this work takes on mental health, exacerbating issues like PTSD. AI is also eroding traditional job protections as more roles become freelance-based, leaving workers without job security, benefits, or recourse for grievances.

What do you refer to as "digital colonialism"?

For me, digital colonialism refers to the practices where large tech companies - often based in the Global North, especially, in Silicon Valley - exploit the labor, resources, and markets of the Global South without equitable returns.

These practices include:

Exploitation of Labor: Companies rely on underpaid data workers and content moderators from the Global South to power AI systems while offering little in terms of fair wages, job security, or mental health support.

Resource Extraction: The extraction of raw materials for tech production, often under exploitative conditions, disproportionately affects African communities.

Data Appropriation: African populations contribute massive amounts of data, which is harvested by

tech giants for profit, with little to no reinvestment in local economies or acknowledgment of data sovereignty.

Limited Representation: AI systems trained on data from the Global South often fail to reflect the cultural and social nuances of the regions they impact, perpetuating biases.

This can also be traced back to the transatlantic slave trade, where slave masters gifted African chiefs material goods to procure slaves. Today, we see a modern version of this, where big tech companies seek protection from senior government officials, often lobbying for favorable policies that shield them from accountability. These companies also leverage the global narrative that profiles Africans as poor and marginalized, not to uplift but to justify their exploitation under the illusion of «job creation.»

How does the rise of AI and the new economic order that goes with it jeopardize the fight against the climate crisis?

AI development is resource-intensive, with vast energy demands for training models, storing data, and maintaining servers. Many data centers are powered by non-renewable energy sources, contributing significantly to carbon emissions.

Moreover, the economic order tied to AI often prioritizes short-term profits over sustainability. For instance, the exploitation of African resources, such as the rare earth minerals needed for AI hardware, exacerbates environmental degradation and undermines efforts to combat the climate crisis.

How do you organize people in this context of value extraction outside the traditional workplace?

As the Chairperson of the African Content Moderators Union and someone actively working with the Communication Workers Union of Kenya in collaboration with UniGlobal Union, I have dedicated myself to organizing tech workers across Africa in this challenging context of value extraction beyond the traditional workplace.

My approach involves raising awareness about the often invisible labor behind AI systems, educating workers about their rights, and the economic systems that exploit their contributions. Through

unions and digital tools, I work to build solidarity among dispersed workers, creating virtual spaces for collective action, resource sharing, and advocacy.

By advancing partnerships with local and global organizations, I amplify workers' voices, challenge systemic injustices, and demand fair compensation and protections. These efforts aim to equip tech workers with the power to reclaim their agency and drive meaningful change in an economy that often prioritizes profit over people.

What are the ways or solutions to inspire mobilization against this new form of legalized robbery of African people and youth?

Education and Advocacy: Equip African youth with the knowledge to understand AI's economic impact and their role in the value chain.

Policy Engagement: Push for regulatory frameworks that protect workers and ensure fair compensation for their labor.

Community Building: Create platforms for workers to share experiences, organize collectively, and demand accountability from tech giants.
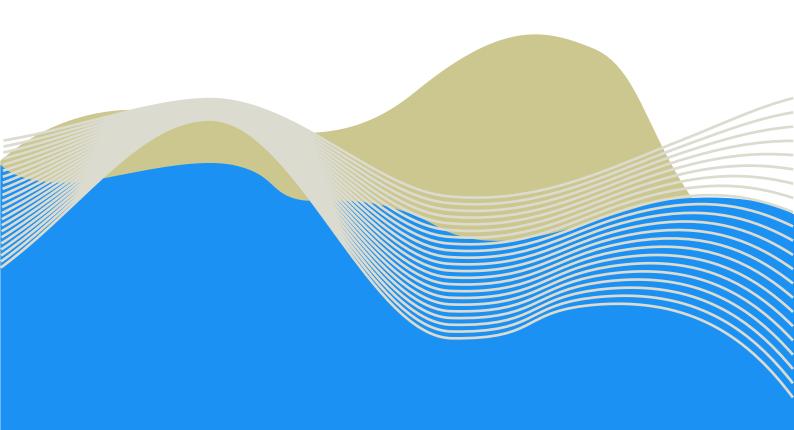
Global Solidarity: Advance partnerships with international organizations to amplify voices and pressure companies to adopt ethical practices.

Highlight Success Stories: Showcase examples of successful mobilization to inspire others and build momentum.

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