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The New Frontier of Colonialism



*Clare Dunne*

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degree of Master of Science Interactive  
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Clare Dunne

9 May 2017

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I dedicate this research paper to my uncle Joe who I am certain would have had some thought-provoking reflections on matters discussed in the subsequent chapters.

## Summary

This paper seeks to better understand the efforts being made by prominent “vectoralists”, primarily Facebook Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg to close the digital divide. It does so by reviewing colonial, imperial and postcolonial theories, Occidental led “Otherising” strategies and exploring today’s new modes of capitalism, namely cognitive and communicative, and its emergent “vectoral” bourgeois. It similarly comments on the imbalanced distribution of the means of information production worldwide and the previously unknown breadth of power afforded to those who own such means and control their profit flows.

The paper progresses to critically probe the “rough plan” of Mark Zuckerberg, released in 2013 in a pre-clickbait era, which outlined his vision on how the digital divide may be narrowed and details his pet passion project – internet.org – which is tasked with fulfilling this manifesto. It critically analyses the methods and metaphors of internet.org to expose and vindicate accusations of net-neutrality violations levelled against the platform and of digital colonialism resemblances addressed against Zuckerberg personally.

This paper does not deny the importance of closing chasms of connectedness nor recalibrating longitudinally entrenched global information production asymmetries. Rather, it takes a post-colonial stance against Zuckerberg and internet.org to argue that such top-down, “globalised access logic” initiatives obfuscate his obvious vested interests, continue to suffocate the subaltern, albeit in a different, even more subtle and hence more potent form, and threaten the fundamental nature of the internet for all currently connected and unconnected users.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

This paper seeks to understand the efforts being made by prominent “vectoralists”, primarily Facebook Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg to close the digital divide. Internet access is an important enabler of development and this paper explores the oft unexplored, implicit colonial cost of bulldozing broadband to the unconnected billions. It seeks to address questions of “digital colonialism” and prompt discussion of whether the Internet represents the next frontier of exploitative global power relations between the Global North and South.

### *The Digital Divide*

Information communication technologies (ICTs) have radically expanded the information base, lowered information and transaction costs and created intangible information goods that are fundamental prerequisites to the “knowledge economy”. In just under fifty years, the internet<sup>1</sup> has become the defining technology of our time, much like how the steam engine and telegram defined previous eras of modernisation and disrupted prevailing norms. Its infrastructure has changed how we earn, learn, live and remember. For your every whim, there is an app for that. The seemingly boundless potential of being connected is seductive and its allure prompts many to dispel with science, reason and perspective to proclaim cyber utopian ideals of a “flat” “global village”. Italian Wired claimed the internet was the “first weapon of mass construction” and even nominated it for the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize (Morozov, 2011). Alas, its charm is akin to a highly disorientating drug and blinds many to the politicised chronic chasm of connectedness, both domestic and global. The internet is a pastime for a privileged 3.2billion despite there being over 11billion smart devices in circulation (Radicati Group, 2015). Broadband cables and digital literacy mirror the longitudinally conditioned trails of inequality between the West and Rest. Unsurprisingly, the unconnected primarily reside in Lesser Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) of the Global South, particularly South Asia and Sub-Sahara Africa. Despite how over 80% in the developing world have a mobile phone - including nearly 70% of the poorest fifth - internet adoption lags considerably: just 31% of LEDC populations

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<sup>1</sup> The Web and Internet are not synonymous. The Internet is the “tracks and signalling technology of the [railway] system”, the basic infrastructure upon which all kinds of traffic flow. Internet enabled traffic includes webpages, peer-to-peer networking, email and streaming multimedia (Naughton, 2012)

had access in 2014 versus 80% in developed countries. For every person connected to high-speed broadband, five are not (World Bank, 2016). In LEDCs, just 10% of the 900million population are online (internet.org, 2015); and of those 10% they are most likely to be urban-based and male. The divide, like poverty, is sexist.

The OECD defines the divide as “gaps in access to ICTs” and formally recognises it as a “threat” to the unconnected individuals, groups or nations that is aggravated by a paucity of infrastructure, affordability and skills. The World Bank *Digital Dividends Report* (2016) concedes:

As more essential services and information migrate to the web, anyone without access almost becomes a second-class citizen.

Being on the wrong side of wi-fi structurally inhibits participation in the new global order and from leveraging the internet’s catalytic potential for development through access to the digital dividends of growth, jobs, services and its vast intangible library of information. In further institutional recognition of connectivity’s importance, the United Nations (UN) declared internet access a basic human right in July 2016, a right that Zuckerberg personally lobbied the UN to achieve (Hempel, 2016). The non-binding resolution right to broadband condemns countries who deliberately disrupt citizens’ internet access and strengthen its resolve that offline rights “must also be protected online.” Access is deemed critical in enabling citizens execute and fulfil their rights to freedom of speech, assembly and development, and is considerably “sexier” than other basic rights like clean water. Illustratively, when asked whether the internet was more important than curing malaria, Bill Gates retorted:

As a priority? It’s a joke... If you think connectivity is the key thing, that’s great. I don’t... the world is not flat and PCs should not be, in the hierarchy of human needs, in the first five rungs (Waters, 2013)<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, connectivity’s impact on and pervasiveness in everyday life is undeniable. The 2014 World Economic Forum estimated that each additional 10% internet penetration may beget a 1.2% increase in GDP per capita in emerging economies. The ebullient statistician Hans Rosling assures us that the “bottom billion” will migrate out of extreme poverty by 2100. As and when they do, connectivity will become increasingly salient for socioeconomic development, civic assembly and personal emancipation. Beyond its declaration as a human right, ambitious targets to bolster

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<sup>2</sup> Zuckerberg broached the subject with Gates following the *Financial Times* interview publication. Gates asserts he was misquoted and that connectivity is “critical”. However, the *FT* never ran a correction (Grossman, 2014).



broadband have been set across policy levels including the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite their laudability, the reality of realising such targets is soberingly complex. Without a step change, 3billion will remain offline by 2020 (internet.org, 2015). Even after connecting those offline, challenges of preserving the freedom of learning and connection, and of fostering value-adding digital literacy endure. Moreover, fundamental rights like healthcare remain unanimously illusive despite the concert of attempts by various actors that have spawned the immensely bureaucratic aid and development industries, and countless similarly lofty targets. How and why should internet access be different when 767million people lived on less than \$1.90 a day in 2013? (World Bank, 2016a).

### ***Closing the Divide***

In the *White Man's Burden*, William Easterly explores why Western efforts to aid the Rest have done more harm than good and outlines two archetype agents in development agencies: Planners and Searchers. Planners - as incarnated by institutions and armies – are wedded to grand multi-year plans that declare wars on poverty and propound to be everything to everyone but make precious sustainable difference in the lives of those they purport to serve. Illustratively, there are nine SDGs each with their own sub-goals. Such paternalistic targets are rarely explicit. It is hence unsurprising that the Millennium Development Goals became the SDGs for no Member State or agent was made accountable for any outcome. Searchers meanwhile, thrive on specifics, seek out on-the-ground (rather than donor) realities and respond to market-based incentives. They typically shun ideology in favour of pragmatism and work with available resources to trial and tweak offerings intended for actual end users. Innovative and agile, Searchers get things done. Their entry into the development discourse thus offers hope for the realisation of human rights. Bill Gates, the world's richest person, has poured his wealth into the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which is committed to curing the most insidious, "not-sexy" tropical diseases and advancing education in the US. Its success impressed the world's third richest person, Warren Buffet, to the extent that he pledged \$30billion to it rather than to his own charity (Richardson, 2006). The latest wave of altruistically inclined tech-titans however, are preoccupied with "creating whole new industries capable of changing the world" (Waters, 2013). The world's sixth richest person, Mark Zuckerberg, has assumed the humanitarian mantle of broadening connectivity, which he believes is one of our generation's greatest challenges.

In thirteen years, Facebook has rapaciously grown from a geeky dorm-room side project to a global political and cultural force that embodies the new agora, the full implications of which have only begun to materialise. Rather than the traditional Habermas interpretation of the public sphere as a "society engaged in critical public debate" and a space devoid of economic and political control

wherein all citizens have access, general rules of governance are negotiated and public opinion is harvested (Habermas, 1989), Facebook is a carefully curated, profit-orientated realm that solidifies the cognitive and communicative capitalist strength of its vectoralist poster boy, Mark Zuckerberg and profits at the increasingly kneejerk instinct of users to document their lives online. Notably, Zuckerberg's original manifesto "*The Hacker Way*", released ahead of its IPO sketched how "Facebook was not originally created to be a company... [but] built to accomplish a social mission: to make the world more open and connected". Indeed, he has been successful. Menlo Park – Facebook's HQ – lays claim to a netizen population of 1.86 billion increasingly mobile-based, monthly active users (Facebook, 2016) which is over half of today's online population and the approximate world population of 1920AD. Five years after its IPO, it is one of the world's highest market-capitalised companies and has engulfed emergent networks, WhatsApp (over 1 billion users) and Instagram (roughly 700 million users) to insulate its social graph.

This paper does not question the merit of quenching the acutely asymmetric distribution of ICT access and skill, and means of information production; connectivity is an increasingly intrinsic prerequisite to participation in the new social order. Instead, it seeks to better understand efforts being made by Zuckerberg and his pet passion project *internet.org* to bridge digital apartheid. To do so, it explores the top-down "globalised access logic" that seeks to steamroll Facebook wi-fi to billions and prompt discussion of whether the internet embodies the next frontier of colonially-inspired global relations between the West and Rest. In Chapter Two, the argument's theoretical foundation is laid. Chapter Three considers Zuckerberg's "rough plan" which outlines his intentions for strengthening connectivity. Chapter Four cross-examines *internet.org*'s methods, metaphors and motivations while Chapter Five investigates the potential consequences of a colonial connectivity crusade. Chapter Six summarises this paper's conclusions and outlines potential avenues of academic and social exploration.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter outlines the theoretical grounding for this paper's exploration of a digital colonial crusade led by Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook and internet.org, terms I use interchangeably.

### ***Colonialism***

Colonialism has forever been a potent preoccupation of human interest. At its heart, it is an exercise in attaining and maintaining geopolitical or economic dominance over a subjugated domestic or foreign "Other"; a practice echoed in its etymology which stems from the Latin *colere* and literally translates as 'to cultivate' or 'design' (Mudimbe, 1988). Horvath, 1972 reminds us how inextricably entwined colonialism was with caste and of its venomous effect on social stratification. Colonialism deliberately constructed the Other as inferior than the colonial Self and so created an ethnocentric hierarchy from which status, power and wealth were allocated to benefit colonial settlers who unashamedly plundered the colonialisers' typically plentiful resources. Colonialists were not just of the West. For instance, the Buganda pursued colonialism before (and during) British rule in Uganda. However, the Occidental colonial obsession was by far the most organised and its toxic legacy still permeates international and individual West Rest relations.

Colonial DNA as summarised by post-colonial professor Deepika Bahri involves six core traits: "riding in like the saviour"; over (and mis)using moralistic terms like equality and democracy; masking long-term profit agendas; justifying partial dissemination as better than nothing; partnering with local elites and vested interests; and finally, accusing critics of ingratitude (LaFrance, 2016). Such DNA is innately "epistemically violent" and has longitudinally banished the heterogeneous subaltern Other to the periphery of the geopolitical machine and butchered their subjectivity. Othering's simplistic reductions harvest generalisations that fuel racialized regimes of representation and mould polarised Self-serving worlds of "imagined geographies" of the hegemonic West, Oriental East and black Rest. Here, colonial cultural phenomena are "ruled in" and normalised while the subalterns' are ruled out and actively subjugated (Said, 2004). Falsified us-versus-them dichotomies of colonialists' powerful strength and subaltern weakness were largely resolved through racism's 'noblesse oblige' (moral responsibility) propaganda that vindicated the colonialist crusade to convert and assimilate the Other into the Empire as it was for the "greater good" or some similarly moral laden sentiment (Said, 1994).

### ***Imperialism***

The dissolution of colonial empires after World War Two (WW2) and groundswell of colony independence did not suspend colonialism's chokehold. Rather, it reformed as imperialism. Horvath

distinguishes imperialism as the subtler execution of a colonial-inspired power campaign. Whereas the British were colonialists par excellence, relatively mindful of arbitrary borders and whose control was coupled with a white man's presence, Americans assumed the imperialist mantle with gusto after WW2 and bulldozed boundaries from afar. American empire-building was chiefly economic, though cognisant of cultural ideas and ideologies about itself (Said, 1994). Governing from New York, Washington and Los Angeles, its Americano cocktail of neo-liberalist dogma, global brands and multimedia sought to homogenise global tastes by enveloping them within the American Dream. The Mad Men-styled mass media arsenal, twined with entrepreneurial Searchers engineered this leap by beaming American ideals, products and attitudes into the hearts and minds of would-be consumers worldwide. The white-washed global narrative was underpinned by American commercialism and eradicated tangible possibilities of subaltern emancipation. Like the colonial noblesse oblige, American leadership, per Said, is "couched in world responsibility"; American exceptionalism obliges Uncle Sam to "organise the peace" and promote "international interest" through military and/or economic interference. Said, 1994 recalls Richard Barnet's observation of how the US forcefully intervened in the "Third World" annually between 1945 and 1967 (when he stopped counting). Moreover, countless states, particularly LEDCs, have been coerced by American-dominated institutions<sup>3</sup> to undergo "The Washington Consensus" – a torturous economic triage of privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation that massacred contextually congruent ways of doing business, politics and society (Klein, 2007). To Easterly, imperialism was development economics long before it became a discipline. The marriage of powerful direct domination and cultural legitimacy characterises classical imperial hegemony (Said, 1994). However, the American difference lies in its "quantum leap" in cultural authority courtesy of the accelerated growth in and sophistication of the information diffusion and control apparatus. A leap that continues to vault today.

### ***Post-Colonialism***

Following decolonialisation, academics sought to reclaim the suffocated subaltern's voice through *post-colonial* studies. Anchored in an acute appreciation of the inextricable bind between power, knowledge, discourse and identity, post-colonialism prioritises unequal West/Rest, North/South, imperial/colonised relations and seeks to force the oppressive classes to self-reflexively assess their

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<sup>3</sup> Namely the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, US Treasury Department and US AID

past (and current) socioeconomic methods and geopolitical motivations. Post-colonialism is hyperconnected with the shifting, modern global order and exposes Western discourse and spatial metaphors of the Rest as complicated instruments of domination that entrench “Third World difference”. Edward Said, 1977 seminally analysed the design, development and deployment of intellectual traditions to demonstrate how Western institutions and cultural artefacts referring to the Orient fostered re-presentations of the East as an infantilised, feminised and homogenised Other; relations that were moulded by colonialism and continue to be nurtured by imperialism. Knowledge of the Orient is hence generated from a Eurocentric, imperial strength that constructs yet simultaneously displaces the Orient for “in discussions of the Orient, the Orient is all absence”. Like Africanism, Orientalism is a “projection” that delivers a “re-presence” of knowledge wherein Westerners fears and fantasies are cast and negotiated to reaffirm Western supremacy. V.Y. Mudimbe, 1988 echoes and applies such sentiments to an African context. He equates colonial rule in Africa as an “ideological model of conversion” which sought to transform the indigenous African from a “naked child, through education, to a civilized adult” through subjugating powers. Orientalism and Africanism have deservedly been heralded as “whistle-blowers” against Otherising ideology (vanSchagen, 2015).

Post-colonialist theories largely stem from Michael Foucault’s insights which deem power as a form of subjection that:

categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him.

Foucauldian power theories are acutely bound to knowledge and the production of truth and rationality. Knowledge breeds power by objectifying and categorising subjects, and guiding people’s attention to steer interpretation. As Said, 2004 explains, objects of knowledge are “inherently held to scrutiny”. To have knowledge of things “is to dominate it”, an authority which enables “‘us’ to deny autonomy to ‘it’... since we know them and they exist as we know it”. Foucauldian readings of power equate Western colonialism (and imperialism) to a “hegemonic zone” of knowledge production that is made manifest in discourse; the constructed landscape that affords a language for talking about and re-presenting knowledge at historical junctions. Discourse hence enables power and knowledge relations to become normalised as acceptable ways of behaving within certain codified constraints thereby formalising discrimination (Said, 2004).

Escobar, 1991 asserts that despite its “benign face”, the development discourse has a “bloodily exploitative nature” that is purposely positioned by the West to enable its continual exercise of the colonial whip over the homogenised Rest. Performed discourses of development are intimately affected by Western non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and philanthropic re-presentations of

the Other. Set within hegemonic contexts, charitable campaigns risk creating Foucauldian “voids of representation” wherein the Self is portrayed as heroic saviours while discursive subjects are essentialised and re-presented as eternally dirty, destitute and dependent (vanSchagen, 2015). Traditionally, apolitical motifs of suffering, childhood, motherhood and “poverty pornography” have been exploited to capture wallets and consciousness (Manzo, 2008) and to tattoo images of the subaltern's poverty in the Western psyche. Despite re-presentational strategy shifts in the 2000s towards unity and empowerment, the re-production of knowledge of the Other remains largely bound by the top-down *White Man's Burden* and *Industrial Saviour Complex* which victimises a supposedly passive Other and reinforces the Band Aid narrative of an (African) Other “where nothing ever grows”. The *Complex* is the “fastest growing” American industry that concurrently supports brutality, founds charities, accepts awards. It is not ground by justice but rather “about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege” insofar as “the world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm” and “exists simply to satisfy the [sentimental] needs... of white people and Oprah” (Cole, 2012). Fisher, 2012 adds that traditional Western advocacy have normalised the Burden's mantra and treat Africans as objects who only matter to the extent that Westerners care about their problems; problems which can only ever be fixed by the white man.

### ***New Rules and Rulers of Capitalism***

Today, intangible goods like software, ICTs and information are prime commodities that are heralded as ushers to innovation, untold opportunity and participating in the knowledge economy. The internet, per the World Bank (2016), is a non-rivalrous, private good with strong positive externalities: the more connected, the greater the gain to all (online). Similarly, in fluent technocrat-ese Zuckerberg's plan asserts that:

The knowledge economy is the future. By bringing everyone online, we'll not only improve billions of lives, but we'll also improve our own as we benefit from the ideas and productivity they contribute

The knowledge economy and “network society” in which it is embedded have changed the rules of the game. Previous modes of merchant and industrial capitalism have been overthrown in favour of cognitive and communicative modes ruled by a new bourgeois. Thanks to ICTs and the Washington Consensus, the market is instantly global and those who enable borderless connection and commerce, like Zuckerberg and Gates, are primed to enjoy massive scale and profit-making potential. Of the world's richest people, the majority earned their fortune in media tech sectors. Shunning suits, the new owners of productive means – the Searcher “vectoral class” - choose converse and jeans. These hi-tech libertarians produce wealth by creating intangible goods and controlling their profit-flows through the subordination of physical production in deference to information circulation (Wark,

2004; Barbook and Cameron, 1996) and their poster-boy is Mark Zuckerberg. Data has replaced oil as the feedstock of the global economy. Its flows have conceived new infrastructure, businesses, monopolies, politics and —critically — new economics. Illustratively, tech companies are the largest platforms that trade goods and services without owning physical products<sup>4</sup>. Wark's *Hacker Manifesto* like Barbook and Cameron's *Californian Ideology* outlines how the world is increasingly enslaved to the interests of those profit who from information scarcity. The "hacker class" proletariat are producers and importantly, products, of abstraction who are forced to sell their abstraction capacity (e.g., coding skills) to vectoralists, thereby surrendering ownership of their products. Cognitive capitalism appears free but are implicitly funded by users' attention and data. In the words of Apple CEO Tim Cook:

when an online service is free, you're not the customer. You're the product. (Grossman, 2014).

Elsewhere, communicative capitalism holds the contemporary communication apparatus as a framework that entraps users in intensive and extensive webs of "enjoyment, production, and surveillance". Jodi Dean argues it is the "economic-ideological form" wherein communicative acts become tradable commodities and where reflexivity co-opts creativity and resistance to benefit the few (i.e. vectoralists); a reflexivity-as-profit power that has cast a blinding cyber utopian spell on the masses. For instance, hyper-communication sites of Newsfeeds are algorithmically engineered to deliver connective, entertaining experiences (and targeted ads) that strategically distract from more serious issues like net neutrality, data-mining and digital apartheid (Morozov, 2011). Dean suggests that reflexivity has morphed into an inescapable desire to communicate despite how those ways do not benefit communicators' interests as the more they communicate, the less "authentic" such acts become. Its feedback loop is positively reinforcing, thereby realising Huxleyan<sup>5</sup> insights that such conditioning offers a more productive way of controlling people (Naughton, 2012). Increasingly, curating an enviable social media presence is prioritised over cultivating real relationships, a pervasive pull on everyday life that MIT psychology professor Sherry Turkle laments, believing that we are

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<sup>4</sup> Uber is the world's largest vehicle rental company; AirBnB the largest accommodation provider; Alibaba the largest retailer

<sup>5</sup> Aldous Huxley's nightmare feared we would be undone by the things we enjoy (as opposed to Orwell's wherein fear would destroy us). His most celebrated novel, *Brace New World*, written in 1931 is based on such ideas and features a totalitarian society, dominated by an allegedly compassionate dictatorship whose subjects have been wired by conditioning and narcotics (albeit less harmful and more enjoyable than any modern equivalent) to enjoy their suppression. The rulers have sedated their subjects to love their servitude (Naughton, 2012).

“sacrificing conversation for mere connection” (Grossman, 2014). Social networks are emblematic of this regime and resemble a modern “share-cropping” scheme wherein the masses can access the tools of production but whose rewards are corralled into the hands of the few. Despite this unequal exchange, sharecroppers are generally content with it for their interest lies in self-expression or socialising, not money-making and their individual contributions are trivial. However, the aggregate contributions are massively lucrative for vectoralists (Naughton, 2012).

This chapter has laid the theoretical foundation for subsequent chapters. It explored colonial and imperial power struggles that continue to infiltrate West/Rest relations today, and post-colonial theorists’ attempts to reclaim the subaltern’s voice. It detailed today’s new communicative and cognitive capitalist forces and its ruling vectoral class. The following chapter shall put theory aside and focus on Zuckerberg’s “rough plan” to increase connectivity.



## Chapter 3: Zuckerberg's "Rough Plan" and internet.org

This chapter examines Zuckerberg's "rough plan" that outlines his musings on how to bridge the digital divide. Released in August 2013, three years ahead of internet access' declaration as a human right, the plan makes the case for connectivity and leverages Zuckerberg's brilliant ability to break down "messy, wonky problems into manageable chunks". Its publication coincided with the launch of *internet.org*, a Facebook-led cohort that identifies as a:

global partnership between technology leaders, non-profits, local communities and experts... working together to bring the Internet to the two-thirds of the world that doesn't have it (Grossman, 2014).

Facebook is not the only company working to bridge the digital divide; Google runs Project Loon while Microsoft operates Affordable Access Initiatives. However, Facebook is the most moralistic in its rhetoric. Zuckerberg's ten-page essay is littered with idealism and begins by asserting Zuckerberg's altruistic motivations for championing connectivity to obfuscate his obvious vested interests. Universal connectivity is "one of the greatest challenges of our generation" and "a human right" whose achievement is contingent upon us working together. Zuckerberg digresses from his PR-filtered, moral-laden sentiment to surmise the state of connectivity, make a data-backed case for its expansion and outline the basic economics that underpin high mobile phone yet low internet penetration rates. The internet is the "foundation of the global knowledge economy" that "encourages worldwide prosperity" and differs dramatically to previously agricultural and industrial economic models. The knowledge economy, as a proxy for the internet, is our "future" and broader access will "improve billions of lives", including our already connected selves. To further impress the internet's importance, he cites a McKinsey study that demonstrates how the internet has driven 21% of GDP growth in developing countries in the past five years and created 2.6 new jobs for every one lost to gained efficiencies. There is a lightbulb moment to Zuckerberg's lobbying. The internet is so ingrained in the Western psyche that statistics to prove its worth are almost redundant; the connected just "get" its importance. However, awareness of the divide is less instinctive and so becomes evocative when spoken of from the pulpit of Zuckerberg's profile page.

The plan takes a more sombre, practical tone in outlining four cornerstone connective challenges: affordability (depressed LEDC disposable incomes), availability (imbalanced ICT infrastructure), relevance (the internet as alien to many) and readiness (literacy and access). Despite its intricate complexity, Zuckerberg is ebullient that with "organized effort", it is not unlikely to expect cumulative data delivery efficiencies to rise "by 100x in the next 5-10 years". The gains are predicted to stem

from two avenues: reducing underlying data delivery costs and increasing app data efficiency. Should industry achieve a tenfold improvement in both, Zuckerberg proclaims it will be economically viable:

To offer free basic services to those who cannot afford them and start to sustainably deliver on the promise of connectivity as a human right.

Providing basic services is a linchpin of Zuckerberg's strategy. Characterised as "non-data intensive" and how by being free, they enable people to discover more content and use:

meaningfully more data than they would have if they didn't have access to these basic services.

Messaging, social networks, search engines and Wikipedia-style services are offered as examples but Zuckerberg refrains from "prescribing any specific set", a self-indulgent contradiction as Facebook satiates most of these elements. Almost surprisingly, the plan does not focus on "wi-fi in the blue-Sahara-sky" elements; that is the brief of Facebook's Google-X<sup>6</sup> styled Connectivity Lab which focuses on bleeding edge, internet enabling technologies like drones, lasers and satellites. internet.org discovered, through a triangulation of maps and data from Ericsson, NASA and Facebook, that 85% of the world live within range of a 2G data network connection. Ergo, much of the unconnected are offline for sociocultural rather than structural reasons (Grossman, 2014). This cohort is the divide's "low-hanging fruits" and the true frontier of the connectedness chasm; making real headway here will be a major, meaningful step to achieving universal connectivity. Zuckerberg's plan is hence bound by:

1. Making data affordable;
2. Simplifying content/services to endure "typical" low-end bandwidth and hardware;
3. Offering sufficiently compelling content to make consumers care about being online.

I now explore each in greater depth.

## ***The "Low Hanging Fruits"***

### ***Making Internet Access More Affordable***

Data plans are a greater relative cost of owning and maintaining a phone. A bugbear in the West, they are showstoppers in "typical" (i.e. majority) households. Defending the right of networks to "build

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<sup>6</sup> GoogleX is Google's innovation hothouse that pioneered Google Glass and driverless cars and is an industry benchmark for innovation and R&D labs and incubators.

even more profitable models while offering data at significantly lower costs per megabyte”, Zuckerberg offers four avenues to lower underlying costs: network extension technology which internet.org partners have already developed to boost signal from inside buildings; openly sharing data centre designs and plans for which Facebook’s Open Commute Project is listed as an example; edge caching, a technology that internally caches data in operators’ data centres to make delivery quicker and cheaper; and using “white space spectrum” more efficiently to leverage a potential tenfold network efficiency gain over the coming “5-10 years while keeping costs relatively constant”.

### ***Using Less Data***

Naturally, using less data reduces costs. Thanks to usually unlimited Western data-plans, developers and consumers are not particularly data conscious. This is not typical however of the majority population where post-usage payment options are not customary. Zuckerberg offers four ways to drive data efficiency: implementing more sophisticated caching for which Facebook’s *Facebook for Every Phone* is exemplified; better deployment of compression technology; and most simply, building apps with a data-efficiency mindset. A speculative approach of enabling people to download some (Facebook) Newsfeed content from nearby phones over wi-fi is also suggested. Zuckerberg argues it is “reasonable to expect” basic services to be delivered with “at least 10x less data” than today over forthcoming years. Should this materialise, such services are set to become “at least 10x cheaper” for pre-paid data users in developing countries which would represent a major leap in bridging the divide.

### ***Helping Business Drive Access***

Zuckerberg is a social animal who strives to hold the world’s social graph. The former psychology major recognises that “the culture around things” is fundamental to any project (Grossman, 2014), of which eradicating digital apartheid is a gargantuan endeavour. The internet and data are alien concepts to those not born into cyber-utopian cocoons. Likewise, few want data in and of itself but rather the services it enables. To make connectivity relevant, Zuckerberg suggests a triad of: zero-rating, the practice wherein mobile network operators (MNOs) and Internet service providers (ISPs) do not charge end customers for data used by specific applications or services through their network; credit and identity infrastructure improvements to facilitate a post-use payment model and encourage MNOs to better invest in the infrastructure and better get to know their customers (for instance by linking bills to their Facebook profile); and lastly, aligning the incentives of people, MNOs, ISPs, technology providers and ultimately, humanity, because universal connectivity “is good for the world”.

## ***Making Connectivity Real: Free Basics***

Predictably, these three strategic pillars manifest in a meta app originally named internet.org but later rebranded *Free Basics* (FBs). FBs withstands “typical” infrastructure conditions to deliver primarily text-based basic services and a watered-down version of Facebook devoid of the data-intense multimedia that defines most Westerners’ web experience on internet.org partner MNOs. The cost of bandwidth is sponsored by Facebook to make FBs freely available. This zero-rating model is premised upon offering sufficiently compelling content that encourages the newly connected of the Global South to care about being online, tempt them to use “meaningfully more data” than is permissible on FBs and then “graduate” onto fully fledged data-plans offered by internet.org partners. Zuckerberg likens FBs to an online emergency helpline: call plans are unnecessary to ring 911. Similarly, FBs offers a way for the currently unconnected to access basic services irrespective of their ability to cover data costs but wholly contingent upon their ability to access ICTs, a fact which the plan overlooks entirely.

First launched in Zambia in July 2014, FBs content included AccuWeather, Wikipedia, Google (where users are charged as normal if they click through results), some job-listing sites, the Mobile Alliance for Maternal Action and Facebook, naturally. This is no mean feat. Stretching beyond the cyber-centricity of Silicon Valley and swaddling an alien country like Zambia with content demands a sensitive contextual nuance that Facebook, like most enormous companies, are not particularly well-known for. Before Zambia, Filipino MNO *Globe* ran a pilot that reported its registered mobile data-service users double in just three months; a proof of concept that generated momentum which made it easier to enlist subsequent providers. FBs’ model cannot just simply work; it needs to virally replicate across regions by self-serving, profit-seeking telcos. The more successful case studies and FBs’ moderated connections, the more data Facebook harvests and can monetise and the stronger its case for its connective style becomes. Since commencing, FBs has spread to 62 Global South countries (internet.org, 2017) and as of the 2016 Q3 earnings call, has connected 40million (Constine, 2016). However, its rollout has been tumultuous.

This chapter has explored Zuckerberg’s vision for closing chasms of connectivity and the connective style of internet.org that focuses on delivering “basic services” that enable “meaningfully more data” usage to the unconnected. The next chapter analyses FBs’ turbulent rollout which has been plagued by accusations of violating net-neutrality and representing a digital colonial advance.

## Chapter Four: Critique of internet.org

This chapter adopts an analytical lens through which Zuckerberg's connectivity crusade is examined.

### *The Free Basics' Controversy*

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, who is "better at soundbites than Zuckerberg", defines Facebook's first decade as "starting the process of connecting the world" and the next as about "helping connect the people who are not yet connected and watching what happens" (Grossman, 2014). As quaint as this sounds, there is another, more highly critical view of internet.org as a front for Facebook's ulterior, post-politics, world-dominating agenda. To sustain its size and maintain its communicative and cognitive capitalist and vectoralist power, Zuckerberg must take the long-game. It needs more users and ideally those whose internet experience has been exclusively stage-managed by Facebook. Grossman, 2014 recalls how when an even simpler version of Facebook was made freely available on WAP-enabled featurephones in 2010 through Facebook Zero, it was "not considered altruism; just good, aggressive marketing" (LaFrance, 2016). FBs is cushioned in a palpably more ideological rhetoric than Zero, yet both are cut from the same zero-rated cloth that seek to present Facebook products as viable means to close the connectedness chasm. It is a narrative swaddled in a self-serving, techno-colonial arrogance that reflects how private attempts to bridge the divide emphasise their advantages – of being an online 911 – and distract debate of their potential drawbacks.

The most basic criticisms leveraged against internet.org emanate from its name. "Internet" inappropriately suggests the platform offers full internet access rather than to just a handful of Facebook chosen sites. While ".org" incited ire as the domain is generally preserved for NGOs and civic bodies - not the ostensibly altruistic arm of a corporation (Anastácio, 2016). Beyond its nomenclature, Murthy, 2015 attacks the "charitable" intentions of the "cloaked proxy for the Facebook Economically Disadvantaged User Acquisition Department" by exposing its narcissistic, anti-competitive Indian content. He speculates that Bing (rather than Google) is included to appease Facebook's Microsoft shareholders, that small-time job listing site Babajob was featured instead of industry-leading Naukri to narrow opportunity for the poor and that the leading video content provider (and almighty education resource) YouTube was omitted to allow Facebook video dominate. FBs fails to afford the arguably most basic online service: email. Moreover, by including Facebook, internet.org implies that Facebook is fundamental which it is most certainly not.

Charges that FBs creates insecure, commercially interested walled gardens that violate the intrinsic unbiased nature of the internet (otherwise known as net-neutrality) are swiftly rebuked. Facebook & Co. contest that it is not about pushing a Facebook agenda because there is "negligible" money to be

made in advertising to FBs and/or Zero users. Sandberg muses that if Facebook were financially motivated, that they would “have to work pretty far down” its product list before reaching FBs (Grossman, 2014). These defences are undermined however by how Zero subscribers continually grew despite how 20% migrated monthly to the smartphone app from featurephones (Zuckerberg, 2013) and most importantly, by how 50% of FBs users graduate to paying for broader internet<sup>7</sup> within 30days (Zuckerberg, 2015c). Although neither pared-back version of Facebook carries ads, the newly connected are nevertheless groomed to progress onto more sophisticated (expensive) ICT services and to potentially even confuse Facebook for the internet (Mirani, 2015) during their fledgling “data-exposed” days. Zuckerberg typically redirects questions about the now preferring instead to look to tomorrow in true technologist style. Citing Coca Cola as a company who profitably played the long game, Zuckerberg concedes he can envision internet.org trailing a similar path, albeit in the future:

even though there’s no clear path that we can see to where this is going to be a very profitable thing for us, I generally think if you do good things for people in the world, that that comes back and you benefit from it (Grossman, 2014).

Developer and start-up founder Sumanth Raghavendra questions FBs’ true target audiences and its meaningfully new connections, arguing internet.org’s “entire narrative painting it as a choice between some connectivity and no connectivity is false and disingenuous”. Early Indian FBs campaign spots<sup>8</sup> are clearly not aimed at the poor but rather at upwardly mobile millennials who were easily lured by a free, limited trial just as many are seduced by Spotify Premium<sup>9</sup>. In October 2015, FBs claimed to have brought 1million Indians online – an abysmal amount compared to the 100million estimated to have come online in 2015/16 (ibid). Raghavendra reveals an even more troubling finding: just 20~% of Indian FBs subscribers were not already online before registering. This infers most Indian FBs users were not “denied” access but rather had hitherto been denied the privilege of idly scrolling through a Newsfeed (LaFrance, 2016). And of these “new” connections, 40% fled to the paid-for internet within a month while 55% “churned”; partial connectivity was evidently not worth it.

Hempel, 2016 describes how critique of internet.org caught Zuckerberg by surprise. Attempts to allay naysayers by opening the platform to allow any developer serve content on it, provided they meet

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<sup>7</sup> Paid-for data plans do not all guarantee access to the “full” internet. Many cover additional services not available with FBs, like multimedia services such as uploading or viewing photos/videos

<sup>8</sup> Accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s390lZ5UXc4>

<sup>9</sup> Spotify is a music, podcast, and video streaming “freemium” service. It offers free basic features, as interspersed by advertisements. Spotify Premium offers additional features like ad-free listening via monthly subscriptions.

certain criteria (ergo maintaining Facebook's gatekeeper role) did little to abate controversy. On 4 May 2015, a truculent Zuckerberg uploaded a video from a conspicuously empty Menlo Park in which wherein he goes on the defensive, lobbying for "reasonable" net-neutrality and posing a familiarly moral call to action:

We [ought] ask ourselves, what kind of community do we want to be? ...[one] that values people and improving people's lives above all else? Or... [one] that puts the intellectual purity of technology above people's needs?

The overture is reminiscent of the colonial DNA outlined in Chapter Two and affirms Ethan Zuckerman, MIT Center for Civic Media Director, belief that FBs is "colonialist and deceptive" (Lafrance, 2016). When challenged, Zuckerberg & Co. twist the narrative to accuse critics of being "elitist and inhumane" - the privileged ought not condemn initiatives whose mission is to connect those sentenced to a life without wi-fi. In a *Times of India* op-ed, Zuckerberg bemoaned "who could possibly be against this?". Partial access is better than nothing because connectivity is not an end in and of itself but one that gives "people a voice to shape their own future" (Zuckerberg, 2015c); an enthusiastic sentimentality that infers the White Industrial Saviour Complex, "Something is Being Done" Syndrome (Easterly, 2004) and noblesse oblige that propagated colonialism. Within days, 65 digital rights groups from 31 countries across the West and Rest penned an open letter-come-Facebook post avowing how internet.org "violates the principles of net-neutrality, threatening freedom of expression, equality of opportunity, security, privacy and innovation" through its approach that justifies "building a walled garden in which the world's poorest people will only be able to access a limited set of insecure" web services (Koebler, 2015). Internet.org reacted by enhancing security<sup>10</sup>, rechristening the app *Free Basics* to reaffirm its commitment to delivering basic services and accelerating Zuckerberg's statesman-ly activities of pounding international corridors and courting Governments to make the case for FBs as a viable mechanism to realise the notion of connectivity as a human right (Hempel, 2016). Regardless, links between net-neutrality abuses and internet.org were etched and were to become explosive in India.

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<sup>10</sup> The group cited recent technical updates that banned Transport Layer Security, Secure Socket Layer and HTTPS encryption which "inherently put users at risk" by making web traffic "vulnerable to malicious attacks and government eavesdropping".

## ***“Poor Internet for Poor People”***

Internet.org partner *Reliance Communications* launched FBs in India in February 2015 and was shortly joined by another aptly-named, zero-rated platform, Airtel Zero whose holding company, Bharti Airtel were refreshingly honest in their intentions for it; to make money (Murthy, 2015). Both honeymoons were short-lived - by April partners had withdrawn from each citing net-neutrality concerns (Flipkart from Airtel Zero and from FBs, Cleartrip and the Times Group who called on regional publications to follow when announcing their decision). Hempel, 2016 recounts Zuckerberg’s reaction – a Facebook post underscoring internet.org’s lack of ambition to “throttle” the internet, its noble mission to connect the world and how “universal connectivity and net neutrality — can and must coexist.” The zero-rated initiatives caused such a stir that the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) instigated a public consultation on sponsored data in early 2015 and again in November. Coincidentally, they refereed a similar process in 2006 but found little tangible results. Fast forward a decade and the environment was dramatically different. A coalition of “rag-tag professionals”, some of whom had never met, “put their heads together and decided to give Facebook a fight”. The resultant Save the Internet campaign rallied under the crisp slogan “poor internet for poor people” in defence of a strict interpretation of net-neutrality (Anastácio, 2016). Tech entrepreneur and campaign co-founder, Kiran Jonnalagadda took a year-long sabbatical to safeguard neutrality judging “it was important, else it was going to affect our business in the long run”. internet.org launched a counter-charm and “print media blitzkrieg” that saw Zuckerberg take time from paternity leave to defend FBs.

Things got nasty. Save the Internet cofounder, Narayana Murthy’s WhatsApp account was “inadvertently disconnected” before later being restored and claims that his and five others’ views on FBs were “collated regularly and sent to Facebook HQ” as if being digitally spied upon. Jonnalagadda contests that Zuckerberg & Co. were hearing but not listening (Subramani, 2016). Tellingly, in its Save Free Basics countercampaign letter to the TRAI – which was supported by Google - internet.org adopted its usually prophetic vernacular. FBs is a “first step” to connecting 1billion Indians and “achieving digital equality”; ideals that are ominously caveated for “without your support, it could be banned in a matter of weeks.” Rather than address the TRAI’s questions on zero-rating, internet.org encouraged the virtual demonstration of endorsement for FBs. The TRAI were noticeably scathing in their response that disputed claims that 16million people had emailed supporting FBs and decried the “tangential natures” of the received responses. Its Chairman explained that “consultations... are not



opinion polls... we are asking why you think it is 'yes' or 'no', because that helps us in formulating the guidelines" (Doctorow, 2016; Rai, 2016).

Ultimately, the TRAI held the upper hand. In December, all zero-rated programs were suspended pending the consultation's outcome. Then, in February it adopted the hard-line on net-neutrality and banned price discriminatory services, save where providers reduce tariffs for services during public emergencies. Egypt<sup>11</sup> soon issued a similar suspension (Hempel, 2016) and one of Indonesia's largest MNOs *XL Axiata* withdrew from FBs, citing the Indian controversy (TimKarr, 2015). In a stunning response to the TRAI's ban, controversial Facebook board member, Marc Andreessen, tweeted:

Anti-colonialism has been economically catastrophic for the Indian people for decades. Why stop now? The internet exploded. The tweet was deleted, an apology posted and a "deeply upset" Zuckerberg distanced himself from the white-privilege laden comments to refocus on internet.org's valiant "mission" of connecting people. In his redaction, Andreessen claimed to be "100% opposed to colonialism" and "100%" pro-independence. Yet this was not his first *Burden* inspired gaffe; he previously accused those seeking to inhibit FBs "as morally wrong" (Anastácio, 2016). There was little PR spin that could break the now publicly crystallised, and *Save the Internet* vindicated, link between (digital) colonialism and internet.org. Notably, inclusion initiatives like FBs widen the digital divide debate beyond whether banning zero-rating means denying (part) connectivity for ideological reasons and recognise the internet's place in the larger social stratification scheme that is anchored in global inequality. FBs' Indian controversy was fuelled not by a zealous distaste of Facebook but rather by a palpable alarm over who was – and is – being left behind amidst technological advancements and how the digital divide is being addressed. Internet.org's deliberately depoliticised narrative of FBs' ability to close the divide ignores the existence of digital winners and losers while capturing imagination and mobilising support. A postcolonial approach to the discussion is warranted as it exposes new capitalist methodologies that seek to foster top-down, self-serving internet models upon the unconnected.

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<sup>11</sup> Egypt was one of FBs' earliest, most successful markets; it reached 3million, 33% of whom had never been online. No official reason was given for the suspension but it is likely that Facebook's role in the Arab Spring and the authorities' crackdown on activists in 2016 conveniently complemented net-neutrality concerns.

This chapter has critically assessed internet.org's methods, motivations and metaphors of addressing the divide and sets the context for the following chapter's discussion of a Silicon - rather than a Rift or Araku - Valley connective mission that poses complex issues for cultural and economic autonomy and suggests the dawn of digital colonialism.

## Chapter Five: The New Colonial Frontier

This chapter explores and contextualises how private attempts to broaden access represent an advance towards digital colonialism.

### *Internet's Founding Premise*

Post-colonialism is inextricably entwined with modernity, a modernity that has extended knowledge, compressed distance and overseen massive strides in poverty eradication. It is in this context that the internet was conceived and offered an infinitely more connected, speedier and transnational environment for global ICT and socioeconomic development. As described, post-colonialists expose the colonial and imperial binary that cements Western politics, economics, technology and culture as the par-universal standard, forces the suffocated subaltern onto the periphery of the global socioeconomic consciousness. They unveil the shrewd apparatus employed by the colonial Self to dominate and subjugate the Other. Spivak, 1999 offers a nuanced understanding of the North-South divide by interpreting the "Third World difference" as a transposition of former colonies in ways that mirror colonialism's displacement as post-colonialism; an imperial enterprise that is not territorial but primarily cultural. Digital colonialism hence describes the efforts of the Occidental centre to shape the Rest's online experience and control their digital relations (Anastácio, 2016). Digital production imbalances ergo pose profound questions for cultural expression, meaning-making, language and identity in the Rest; challenges that will endure irrespective of universal connectivity.

Today's defining infrastructure, the internet, is ideological and built upon previous networks – waterways mapped the railroads onto which the telegraph, telephone, internet and web were overlaid – and has massively intensified the disruptive potential and complexity of our techno-media ecosystem; the true impacts of its tacit cultural, geopolitical and socioeconomic consequences are only just emerging. As described by Software Freedom Law Centre Executive Director, Mishi Choudhary, the internet is a "dumb pipe" diligently delivering bytes to and from users irrespective of its content or contributors (Quartz, 2016). This inherently decentralised, non-application specific optimisation and anti-data discriminative nature was structurally engineered into the internet's fabric (Naughton, 2012). However, its open ideals have faltered to reveal crevices replete with colonial residues. Considering the internet's distributive principles, steadfast blurring of international borders and global integration, a broader interpretation of post-colonialism beyond traditional geopolitical imperialism is required to develop understanding of the internet's inequitable mechanics that re-produce knowledge, wealth and power. To do this, I look at internet.org in the context of net-

neutrality and the “globalised access logic” that seeks to impose a predefined connectivity model upon those offline.

### ***Preserving Net Neutrality***

US Government research in the 1970s conceived the internet which soon became co-opted by the “network effect”; a phenomenon that explains the concentration of users around more popular nodes (like Google) despite the network’s seemingly infinite choice. Legal scholar Tim Wu observes how network openness is finite and how its closure is triggered by charismatic *Searchers* who respond to consumer fatigue of its novelty and appetite for quality. He cautions that originally freely accessible communication technologies, which are typically flanked by utopian promises of connective, informatic possibility, near-uniformly evolve into channels controlled by corporates or cartels (Naughton, 2012). The internet is no different. Private control of a once public, non-zero sum good has reframed the tech industry’s role in information production, notably regarding the kinds of information created, by (and for) whom, how and when. Smith, 1978 counsels that information, when treated as a resource, automatically stokes questions of social allocation and control; information does not flow in a vacuum but rather a socio-political space (Morozov, 2011). Recall how cognitive and communicative capitalism trade in the circulation of information at the expense of traditional merchant capitalism. Those who control network bulges are afforded the luxury of cultivating considerable economic and political monopolies per capitalism’s new rules that embolden vectoralists and intimately shape discourse through re-presentations of knowledge that naturalise their special status, ergo reflecting the colonial power struggle to thoroughly co-opt receiving cultures. The more who use a nodule, like Facebook, the more essential it appears, thereby initiating a feedback loop that begets a “winner takes all outcome” (Naughton, 2012). The more people on - and time spent in - Facebook, the more resources policymakers, culturemakers, businesses, institutions and individuals must spend playing by its rules which will consequentially affect the modern hegemonic economic, social and political zone; a sinister resource shift that earnestly emerged in 2016 as news outlets increasingly asked “how will this work for Facebook?”. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the “unFacebooked” resemble a new digital subaltern as the network progressively becomes Facebook or a Facebook subsidiary.

The potency of the network effect demonstrates the elapse of the internet’s romance and makes preserving net-neutrality urgent, for at its core, lies an anti-colonial mandate that prioritises a tier-free internet. To see net-neutrality and colonialism - a link solidified by Marc Andreessen - as distinct dislocates neutrality from the epistemically violent socio-political project and overlooks contemporary capitalism’s polarising undertones. FBs offers zero-rated connectivity and thereby meddling with the

“weirdly level playing field” internet whose founding principles of unbiased optimisation permit personal side projects challenge seemingly infallible incumbents. This interference in user choice and competition leads Stanford Law Professor Barbara vanSchewick to appoint zero-rating as the “next big threat to innovation and free speech online” (Grossman, 2014) and is why Chile, Holland, Slovenia and Canada have outlawed zero-rating while German, Austrian and Norwegian regulators recognise its net-neutrality violations (Pahwa, 2015). Petitioning former President Rousseff’s government partnership with internet.org, Brazilian digital rights activists expressed concerns that it:

could jeopardize the future of Brazil’s information society, the digital economy and the rights of users on the network, such as privacy, freedom of expression and Net-Neutrality (TimKarr, 2015).

Yet Western users, fuelled by communicative capitalism’s cyber utopia and sharecropping’s Huxleyan-inspired control of the consciousness, are largely apathetic to issues of net-neutrality, the “only two words promising more boredom than *‘featuring Sting’*” per John Oliver (2014). Such implicit endorsement sentences us to a life – and legacy - of servitude as a Zuckerbergian data minion. A non-neutral internet of “Usain Bolt and Usain Bolted-to-an-anchor” access naturally benefits vectoral interests like MNOs, ISPs and tech titans by locking in their first-mover strategic advantage. It accelerates stratification by enabling vectoralists further line their coffers<sup>12</sup> and quash the competition without having to improve their offering and, crucially, before it has been invented. This imbalance reinforces the asymmetric distribution of information production means and exacerbates cleavages between digital haves and have-nots, just as unfettered access to colonies’ resources benefited settlers by securing their power while stealing opportunity from the colonised. In reviewing his decision to withdraw from FBs, payment company founder, Vijay Shekhar Sharma, warns how PayTM exists because of the free internet. “How can we support something that kills the neutrality of the internet now?”, he asks calling upon his compatriots to formally protest (FBs) to the TRAI:

either choose this and do a jihaad for independent Internet later or pick #NetNeutrality today (Punit, 2015).

Paradoxically, efforts by telco lobbyists to carve a dual-lane American internet were greeted with anger from industry. Google and Twitter have advocated for net-neutrality despite clandestinely backing Airtel Zero (Murthy, 2015). Zuckerberg protests Chinese firewalls yet spearheads data-

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<sup>12</sup> When negotiating streaming speeds with Netflix, Comcast “throttled” the network until Netflix had little choice but to pay higher premiums (Oliver, 2014).

discrimination across the Global South (Punit, 2015). Silicon Valley sings hosannas to net-neutrality in the West while doing the exact opposite in the Rest's "imagined geographies". In his May video, Zuckerberg claimed "net-neutrality should not prevent access", a comment bathed in the imperial noblesse oblige that convinced empires to "stride in like the saviour" and the *White Saviour Industrial Complex* double standard that endorses Western preservation of net-neutrality but permits its sidestepping elsewhere. Internet.org propound a deplorably moralistic rhetoric and "global access logic" wherein "access for impoverished people is construed as justification for [net-neutrality] violations" (Koebler, 2015). To contest that affording a closeted internet to those in poverty is better than being left destitute offline infers that public policy protections are irrelevant to, and beyond, such people (TimKarr, 2015). It breeds an anti-competitive, anti-innovation, anti-opportunity stance that denies the next generation of subaltern start-ups and digital infrastructures and infers that Others' problems matter only to the extent that whites care about them; problems that can only be fixed by whites. As Indian political party *Aam Aadmi* describe:

if some websites, applications or services are offered free or at faster speeds, the balance tips towards established players... which kills the innovative young start-ups that will emanate from this ecosystem (Anastácio, 2016).

Writing in 1978, Anthony Smith lectured that divisions between the information-rich and information-poor may become "almost inexorable" as they accelerate intangible, self-replicating gaps in wealth and status. He cautioned that the-then nascent "information society" offered opportunity to redress global imbalances. Should net-neutrality be disbanded, Smith's prophecy shall hang heavy in the annals of humanity.

### ***Towards Digital Colonialism***

Corporate efforts to expand access demand critical assessment because threats to independence from electronics and technology far outstrip colonialism's menace (Smith, 1978); an omen that has grossly intensified with the proliferation of ICTs. Notably, digitised colonial manifestations are not new; in Super Mario Brothers, players stomp through a gameworld and raise their flag at the end while a 2014 Oxford Internet Institute report powerfully illustrates rising "spatial solipsism". Despite how 14% of the world live in Africa, less than 3% of Wikipedia geotagged articles originate there; the Middle East was also underrepresented (Lafrance, 2016). These imbalances reflect Foucauldian "voids of representation" insofar as the Other is spoken of but rarely speaks. Concerns of digital colonialism surfaced in earnest following *Cablegate*, the largest public release of classified US State Department documents by Edward Snowden through non-profit WikiLeaks (Anastácio, 2016). The scandal not only embarrassed America by unveiling its industrialised, techno-intelligentsia surveillance apparatus but

emphasised the discrepancies between who controls - and is controlled by - technology. Noam Chomsky postulated that the North-South divide would defy dissolution and that new domination modes would be generated to ensure privileged interests retained control over, and hence profit immensely, from global resources. The Western ideological system necessitates a “vast gulf” be erected between its civilised Self “with its traditional commitment to human dignity, liberty, and self-determination, and the barbaric brutality of those who for some reason, perhaps defective genes, fail to appreciate the depth of this historic commitment” (Said, 1994). This subjugating infrastructure has been copied and pasted onto the internet. The West, led by institutions and tech titans, have identified a problem – abysmal internet penetration – that is dramatically incongruent with its own reality<sup>13</sup> and develop solutions without fully understanding its nuances, just as Washington prescribes decontextualised economic triage across the Rest. Zuckerberg tellingly asked “who could possibly be against this?” and conceded that internet.org have yet to definitively prove the worth to telcos of providing free basic services indefinitely but that once they can, they will feel “ready to go around to all the other operators in the [Rest] world and say, “this is definitely a good model for you. You should do this.” (Grossman, 2014). Such top-down “globalised access logic” is inherently inequitable. The West sees only need - for connectivity, for Facebook, for billions of fresh data minions – but “not the need to reason out the need for need” in line with the *Saviour Complex* (Cole, 2012). Per colonialism, the Rest are an Occidental “pre-stage” to be nurtured by Western logic. Connectivity is digital colonialism’s pre-stage and when choreographed by ready-baked solution resembles an “ideological mode of conversion”, to quote Mudimbe, that moulds its subjects – Western and Restern - to hegemonic preferences through monetising algorithms (Anastácio, 2016).

FBs is not about honestly curing the world’s connective challenges. internet.org does not truly understand the divide’s intricacies and nor does it need to because it:

already knows the solution... [which] conveniently helps lock in Facebook as the dominant platform... at a moment when growth in developed markets is slowing (Zuckerman cited in Lafrance, 2016).

Cumulatively, the rough plan and internet.org’s rhetoric infer that all problems are solvable - by Zuckerberg - whether they be of access, curing the Newsfeed of clickbait or delivering “deep”, social experiences. To posit that FBs is a central weapon to close the divide seeks to position Facebook and more specifically, Zuckerberg himself – he enjoys absolute voting control of Facebook - as a “critical

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<sup>13</sup> Developed countries are not immune to connectivity issues but their context and extent is wholly different to LEDCs

enabler of the next generation of human society” (Manjoo, 2017). Internet.org strives to depoliticise FBs by obfuscating its obvious commercial interest by riding in like the saviour, partnering with local vectoral elites and reciting a prophetic narrative that emasculates critiques, champions partial penetration as preferable to nothing and moralistically undermines the complexity of digital cultural and economic autonomy; an approach that satiates Deepika Bahri’s colonial DNA checklist. By self-servingly propounding FBs as the solution, Zuckerberg appears more as a Planner than Searcher despite his undeniable entrepreneurial flair. Moreover, it resembles Thomas Jefferson’s paradoxical calls for democracy and liberty despite being a significant slave-owner (Barbook and Cameron, 1996).

Hempel, 2016 observes Zuckerberg’s infatuation with the “hypothetical” Indian kid who can go online and “learn all of math” courtesy of FBs. Yet FBs structurally inhibits Indian (and other Other) prodigies from creating the next big thing. By discouraging data-intensity, FBs fosters an alien internet experience to those exposed to the “free” internet that is not conducive to uploading videos exposing corruption, sharing photos with distant relatives or entrepreneurship - start-ups can ill-afford placement fees and are denied serendipitous discovery by consumers. Should the next connected billion be brought online into walled e-gardens like FBs by zero-rating, the consequences for everyone, although unpredictable, will be profound. For many already, Facebook is the internet: 11% of Indonesian and 9% of Nigerians claimed they were not online but on Facebook; a dangerous conflation that signals Zuckerberg’s neo-imperial, vectoral power (Mirani, 2015). Already-privileged corporations acting in countries struggling to deliver basic rights underestimate and oversimplify the people they purport to support when they diminish their private interests or label critiques as “morally” wrong, elitist or ungrateful (Anastácio, 2016). Making a difference is more complex than simply doing good. Cole, 2012 asserts it must “first do no harm” and seek contributions from those being served. Internet.org does little to heed such values. As Raghavendra, 2016 comments there is “absolutely no need to offer a condescending promise based on altruism to bring these folks online... will do so on their own time and... pace with or without any external help or artificial incentive”. The unconnected have no voice online yet it is their needs and futures that are most at stake. Attempting to speak on their behalf therefore risks replicating Foucauldian “voids of re-presentation” that choke their agency and affords the West an opportunity to mis-appropriate intangible goods – today’s global currency – and history to serve its vectoral interests completely unbeknownst to the Rest. As the Indian State Odisha Chief Minister wrote to the TRAI:

while the underprivileged deserve much more than is available, nobody should decide... their requirements. If you dictate what [they] should get, you take away their rights to choose what they think is best (Anastácio, 2016).



The rise of ICTs led Thomas Friedman to believe the world was “flat”. However, such flatness appears to only hold inside the world’s techno-centric focal zones. This chapter has probed and contextualised the parallels between Free Basics, net-neutrality and digital colonialism; an intangible, self-replicating and particularly potent suppression given the internet’s deep embedding in daily life.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Chapter One introduced the meta themes discussed in this paper and contextualised the analytical premise. Chapter Two proceeded to lay out the paper's theoretical grounding, namely colonialism, imperialism, post-colonialism and the new capitalist modes and breed of today's knowledge economy. Chapter Three described Zuckerberg's "rough plan" for bridging the digital divide and introduced internet.org, the organisation entrusted to execute his mandate. Chapter Four took aim at Zuckerberg's intentions for, and implementation of, Free Basics while Chapter Five sought to embed such critiques within a broader framework of modern, digital colonialism to assert why we should care about net-neutrality. This chapter summarises this paper's conclusions and points to potential areas of academic exploration and practical alternatives to Free Basics.

### ***Welcome to the ZuckerNet***

The fall of colonialism did not suspend colonial empires' reign nor reach. Instead, the power commanded by privileged, Western interests intensified as it recalibrated into a subtler form of cultural domination courtesy of imperialism (Said, 1994). Smith, 1978 was preeminent in his suspicions that decolonialisation and the rise of supranationalism represented a mere extension "of a geo-political web which has been spinning since the Renaissance" given new media's capacity:

to penetrate more deeply into a 'receiving' culture than any previous manifestation of Western technology. The results could be immense havoc, an intensification of the social contradictions within developing societies today.

Smith wrote during the infancy of the internet when its potential to inextricably engrain itself in societal foundations – let alone the information infrastructure – had not been realised. Twentieth century American domination, as complemented by new media, global brands, post WW2 prosperity and lack of competition in the production, dissemination and selection of news and cultural artefacts that are internalised by vast swathes of the world induce a "domestic American consistency" and moreover, "weaker, smaller cultures" that were consequentially and deliberately positioned as inferior Others (Said, 1994). The internet and its web offshoots deepen such penetrative powers by offering new means of wireless corporate control of the creative commons and consciousness. Social media is undoubtedly displacing television as the primary medium for civic communication. Data is our new oil and the data-backed knowledge economy sparks new challenges particularly of regulation, social distribution and inclusion, the latter of which is the focus of this paper. Whomever controls the internet and its nodular protrusions automatically inherits unparalleled power, the likes of which is not known heretofore. The internet is the new frontier of inequality and like the person, is innately political. To be offline is to be silenced, made peripheral and jars with the internet's founding

ideology of connecting people without bias, borders and gatekeepers. The digital divide is devastatingly complex and although it differs widely between and within nations, it nevertheless obstructs the optimal harvest of “digital dividends”. Closing connectivity chasms are as much physical infrastructure projects as they are social and demand robust, integrated cross-level leadership that keeps corporate interests in check (World Bank, 2016).

These intricacies defy cookie-cutter solutions devised by profit-orientated tech companies who inhibit “the zeroth world” of Silicon Valley (Grossman, 2014). To its credit, Free Basics has brought millions online, millions who otherwise may not have had the opportunity to access potentially life changing information. However, FBs is enabled by zero-rating, a practice that undermines the very nature of the internet and raises sincere questions of digital colonialism for internet.org autocratically decides who, how and what is served on the platform, thereby granting Zuckerberg an immense digitised invisible hand. The internet is ideological and so too is Zuckerberg. His plan pontificates how “everyone deserves to be connected” - and they do. But equally, everyone – especially the subjugated - deserves the opportunity to serendipitously discover and carve the internet experience they wish to create for themselves in their own circumstances and not those of the quarterly results schedule. In a thoughtful response to a Zuckerberg post defending FBs, Indian blogger Anil Dash emphasised how a:

colonialist ‘trust us, it’s for your own benefit’ pitch is a hard sell... Internet.org may be a fundamentally wrong structure for delivering these kinds of services because it doesn’t empower people to create solutions for themselves that are culturally and contextually appropriate (Anastácio, 2016).

In his latest *Building Global Community* manifesto, Zuckerberg is even more prophetic. He claims how:

**In times like these, the most important thing we at Facebook can do is develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us.** (original emphasis)

Petitioning for a global superstructure to advance humanity, a social infrastructure premised on connectivity resembles a “digital-era version of global institution building that the West engaged in after WW2” (Manjoo, 2017). There is something deeply terrifying about this proposition. He is not an elected official but an increasingly post-political<sup>14</sup> CEO who is positioning Facebook - of which he has absolute control - at the centre of defining and enabling future chapters of civilisation. Connectivity is therefore a crucial “pre-stage” to Zuckerberg’s social “technopoly” wherein internet.org’s ultimate

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<sup>14</sup> Zuckerberg resolved to visit every US State to “get out and talk to more people about how they’re living, working and thinking about the future” (Zuckerberg, 2017); a challenge widely interpreted as a pre-presidential campaign ploy.

focus is to envelope everyone within the vast homogenous cultural abyss that is the Facebook network. Undoubtedly, he is of the tech titans who, to borrow from Shelley, have usurped “poets as the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (Grossman, 2014).

### ***Free Basics is not the Only Way***

Rather than the “purist” ideological intentions of digital activists who decry Western attempts to build closeted e-gardens into which the unconnected are subsumed, the true ideology that inhibits the internet’s expansion and condones the digital divide is the money-making dogma of tech titans and telcos. Vectoralists’ pockets are deep enough to provide unconditional access to the internet, be that partial or full. Connectivity should be independent of the increasingly inescapable quicksand of Facebook and any other private content for that matter. This paper does not argue the potential of the internet to enable human rights nor contest the utter imperative of smashing global information asymmetries. Instead, it charges that connectivity’s co-option, just like traditional colonial enterprises, exacerbates the cleavages between the haves and have-nots and that those divergences structurally secure the West’s hegemony. Digital colonialism is in its academic infancy and is ripe for qualitative interrogation, particularly among sociological, anthropological, psychological and behavioural economic disciplines. Questions like how meaning is derived from the internet? what basic services are? Or whether users are aware (and care) about zero-rating’s contradictions offer a plethora of investigative possibilities both in developed countries and LEDCs. Moreover, the immaturity of the area is both a limitation and strength of this paper.

I do not suggest there is a panacea to the digital divide – it is far too nuanced, and the field too young, for a succinct Planner-like strategy - although making FBs available without Facebook while providing basic services would be a good start for internet.org. Taking Free Basics as a “fundamentally wrong structure”, it is prudent to suggest how else the divide may be bridged. Uruguay’s Plan Ceibal is a globally celebrated “One Laptop Per Child” initiative that gives every child and teacher, at every grade level a take-home laptop that can connect to any available, nearby network. Ceibal has focused primarily on the education system but has promoted digital literacy across communities (Rivoir, 2009). Brazil’s Coletivo Digital scheme seeks to develop 3,000 “digital inclusion telecenters” that are akin to internet cafés but run by government in tandem with civil society and offer free internet,

software and technical knowledge (TimKarr, 2015). Notably, internet.org does not operate in either country (internet.org).

PayTM CEO Vijay Shekhar Sharma suggests data usage could be refunded by governments through payment wallets<sup>15</sup> just as the Indian Government subsidises other utilities (Punit, 2015). Regardless of their neutral form, governments, civic society, digital activists, institutions, individuals and industry need to boldly go beyond seemingly convenient, imported zero-rated services. Kenya launched a Universal Service Fund in 2014 that mandates telcos to redirect funds – up to 1% of revenue - to a centrally administered program that promotes ICT infrastructural rollouts, capacity building and innovation in rural, remote and otherwise commercially unattractive areas, and facilitates creation and access to indigenous, relevant content (ibid; Communications Authority of Kenya). In 2010, [iHub](#), a dedicated innovation, hacker, incubator and co-working space opened in Nairobi, the African “Silicon Savannah”, that has grown to include *Gearbox*, a design and rapid prototyping facility. Some of iHub’s flagship outputs include *BRCK*, a rugged, self-powered, mobile Wi-Fi device designed for “typical” conditions (e.g., allowing users to continue working even in a blackout), and *Ushahdi*, an open-source software that leverages crowdsourcing to collect, visualise and interactively map data and whose “activist mapping” model has been successfully deployed worldwide (Rotich, 2013). iHub’s model has been replicated all over Africa and together, are changing how African innovation is viewed worldwide (Henry, 2014; Zuckerman, 2012). As distinguished professor Prahalad remarks:

The problem of poverty must force us to innovate, not claims rights to impose our solutions (cited in Easterly, 2004).

There remains the important fact that billions are offline, prevented from participating in the global order. Whomever - and however - brings they come online will deeply affect the internet’s development.

## ***Looking Ahead***

Universal connectivity, like Facebook, feels like the manifest of human destiny. Its threads are thread too deeply within the fabric of life to regress, we can only proceed with vectoralists as our commanders and Zuckerberg as “our new Caesar. [who] rules from the imperial capital of Palo Alto,

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<sup>15</sup> Sharma’s suggestion has merit, but must be caveated that PayTM is a mobile payment and commerce company

the Rome of our nascent millennium<sup>16</sup>” (Vanity Fair, 2010). Following Cablegate, Friedman reasoned that “globalisation, technological integration and the general flattening of the world” have super-empowered individuals to the extent that “they can actually challenge any hierarchy... as individuals” (Naughton, 2012). While Cablegate protagonists were widely seen as destructive, new capitalist modes and its cyber-utopian internet-centrism have blinded us to believe Zuckerberg & Co. are progressive forces despite their colonial tendencies; we are feudal serfs tilling the network for bits and bytes. The uncomfortable truth is that Zuckerberg has excelled in making the internet’s most fundamental capability - to connect – irresistible. Facebook’s intrigue is not its stunning demographics – although they are as frightening as they are mesmerising – but how it emerged as the dominant player in a long-established, crowded market. Zuckerberg’s genius is that his dorm-room project could be “embraced by half a billion people within six years... without [critically] asking permission” (Lessig quoted in Naughton, 2012). This is the power of the (neutral) internet and its web-enabled platforms: the market is, theoretically, level and instantly global. Claims that Free Basics (and Facebook Zero) are viable avenues to universal connectivity capture imagination but disguise its toxic contradiction. Despite connecting people to the internet so they can speak, internet.org thwarts what it means to be online. Likewise, colonialists “civilised” the subaltern but utterly renegotiated its meaning through their power-hungry crusades. Zuckerberg’s “rough plan” may be light on details but he remains “pretty confident we can do it... [and that] it’s going to be a good thing” (Grossman, 2014). The Rest have eternally served as a green screen for White egos to be projected upon, and the unconnected person is its next iteration.

Implicit global endorsement of zero-rating and top-down privatised plans to broaden internet access will sentence us to a life – and legacy - of servitude as a Zuckerbergian data minion. The sun never set on the British Empire. Much is true of the civilisation Zuckerberg seeks to program. His connectivity crusade must be held to the light and his freedom from scrutiny abandoned. In a post-truth era, a person of such power should not be allowed to become post-politics for the consequences of Facebook becoming *the* internet would be akin to history’s greatest colonialisation.

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<sup>16</sup> Zuckerberg topped VF’s “New Establishment” list in 2010 and has since lingered in the Top Five. In 2016, he came second (to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos) where the failure of FBs to capture Indian hearts, minds and smartphones was ironically cited as a “rare evidence of mortality”.

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