



Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:
The 23rd Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Dublin, Ireland / 2-5 Nov 2022

THE DATA CENTER CANNOT HOLD: DATA COLONIALISM AND THE “NIMBUS PROJECT”

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In her now classic paper, Susan Leigh Star (1999) called upon sociologists to study the “boring things” in life, such as bridges, sewer grates, classification schemes and many other infrastructural components that recede into the background – yet make modern life possible. This has led to the so-called infrastructural turn in media studies (Plantin et al., 2018; Hesmondhalgh, 2021; Edwards et al., 2009), focusing on both material and social invisible practices that underpin communicative technologies. Nothing epitomizes this turn more than the central object of our paper – *data centers* (Holt & Vonderau, 2015). These mundane structures are built to accommodate the computer servers, wires and accompanying equipment to route traffic, analyze data and serve content to internet companies and users. They are built in strategic locations to accommodate connection speeds (lag), safety concerns (redundancy and security), and environmental requirements. Once erected, they are largely nondescript as contemporary technology allows them to operate mostly autonomously with minimal personnel. To the outside view, they are profoundly boring.

This paper explores six of such boring data centers, built or repurposed these days in Israel. They are part of a \$1.2 billion tender offered by the Israeli government to move most of its computational infrastructure “to the cloud” and won by Amazon and Google with 70-30 percent, respectively. As part of the winning bid, each company is required to build or rent three data centers, set at least 25 kilometers apart (Ziv, 2021). This major project has drawn considerable attention globally, both due to its high costs and technical complexity; as well as the resulting backlash from the two companies’ workers attempting to curtail the tech giants’ involvement on moral grounds (Anonymous Google and Amazon workers, 2021). The employees emphasize the role of the data centers as crucial to the modern government and security apparatus (Amoore, 2011), and thus claim inherent complicity with Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories. Power differentials are also present within the Israeli society, as intimate governmental data

Suggested Citation (APA): Gekker, A., & Kotliar, D.. (2022, November). *The Data Center Cannot Hold: Data Colonialism and the “Nimbus Project”*. Paper presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Dublin, Ireland: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

will be processed and stored by foreign US companies. These nested questions of data sovereignty and extraction are particularly resonant with the rising theories of “data colonialism” (Thatcher et al., 2016), which ‘combines the predatory extractive practices of historical colonialism with the abstract quantification methods of computing.’ (Couldry & Mejias, 2018, p. 337).

Yet, as we show in our paper, the notion of data colonialism is complicated within project Nimbus, when lines blur in terms of *whose data is colonized by whom, whose lands are used (and colonized) by these centers, and whose resources (predominantly electricity and water) will be used for their functioning?* Specifically, three central aspects challenge this clear positioning: Israel’s geographic and economic proximity to the EU without being beholden to its data protection regime; the competing environmental vs. economic narratives surrounding the new construction; and the complicated data relations between US and Israel’s respective intelligence communities, which include both cooperation (Greenwald et al., 2013) and animosity (Harris & Mekhennet, 2021).

Thus, Data centers’ acute materiality offers a more nuanced understanding of data colonialism, and of the different actors and stakeholders involved in the creation and sustainment of this global regime. Accordingly, the centers’ concrete geopolitical location in a big data periphery (Cooper, 2021) that deems itself a global tech center, raises important questions around state vs. corporate sovereignty and power. Moreover, the fact that the Nimbus data centers are still on paper (or rather, in the cloud), and that they are currently half-built assemblages (Burrell, 2020), only highlights the socio-political drama around them, and make seen the oft-invisible ideational and political bolts and screws of such big-data infrastructure.

Thus, based on thematic analysis of local journalistic sources and public officials’ documents released by the state, local planning authorities and the tender winners themselves, we delineate the concrete materialization of cloud infrastructure to offer a more nuanced understanding of data colonialism.

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