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## **CONTESTING TECHNOCOLONIALISM? THE 'ORDINARY TRANSCRIPTS' OF EVERYDAY RESISTANCE**

Mirca Madianou  
Goldsmiths, University of London

This paper investigates the extent to which marginalized communities resist practices of datafication and technological experimentation which are becoming increasingly ubiquitous in the aid sector. Drawing on seven years of research in the humanitarian and development sectors, the paper explores forms of resistance to digital aid practices. The paper is divided into two parts. In the first section I briefly discuss how datafication and digital innovation in the aid sector rework colonial legacies before theorizing resistance in situations of asymmetrical power. The second section discusses practices of everyday contestation. Understanding the 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1985) of resistance requires an ethnographic approach to research. The paper concludes that an argument about digital power and colonial legacies does not preclude the acknowledgement of human agency. However, practices of contestation do not equal decolonization which requires a radical restructuring of power relations.

### **Technocolonialism and resistance**

The datafication and digitalization of the aid sector rework the colonial genealogies of humanitarianism and digital technology. Contemporary practices like biometrics and artificial intelligence are part of larger genealogies of enumeration, measurement and classification that were originally developed by imperial powers (Appadurai, 1993). Such practices have been theorized as technocolonialism, a term used to refer to the convergence of digital developments with the structures of the aid sector and market forces and the extent to which they reinvigorate and rework colonial relationships of dependency (Madianou, 2019).

The story of colonialism is also a story of resistance (Said, 1994; Robinson, 2021). Gopal has examined how anticolonial struggle in the periphery was key for the emergence of dissent in the metropole (Gopal, 2019). However, resistance need not only be armed or political; it is also symbolic. According to Said, novels became 'the method colonized people use to assert their identity and the existence of their own

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history' (1994: xv). In very asymmetrical settings such as slavery where acts of outright defiance are not possible, resistance has often taken passive forms including the refusal to go to work, deliberate evasion or satire (Patterson, 2022; Robinson, 2021). Scott (1985) drew from Patterson (2022) when developing the notion of the 'weapons of the weak' to describe how everyday forms of resistance among marginalized people operate 'below the radar', including practices such as foot dragging, feigned ignorance, boycotts as well as sabotage. In order to unearth these 'below the radar' practices, Scott develops the notion of the 'hidden transcripts': the opportunity to hear the accounts of marginalized people (Scott, 1985). The notion of the 'hidden transcripts' contains a critique of power and is particularly apposite for the asymmetrical relations such as those we encounter in humanitarian settings. The following section explores the hidden transcripts of everyday resistance to digital aid projects among marginalized communities.

### **'Ordinary transcripts' of resistance**

One example comes from the ethnography of the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, which remains the most powerful storm ever to make landfall. Digitized and quantified forms of feedback which were prioritized in aid operations by humanitarian agencies did not reveal the degree to which local communities were dissatisfied with the response. In fact, the take-up of such digital initiatives was low as was further evidenced in the 2022 response to Typhoon Rai in the Philippines. However, informal conversations with research participants – an example of a 'hidden transcript' – revealed their grievances relating to digital humanitarianism projects and aid operations more broadly.

Resistance is also evident in the oppositional appropriation of digital humanitarianism projects. One such example is the case of humanitarian radio which was used in conjunction with an open-source messaging platform in the areas most affected by Typhoon Haiyan. Local communities resisted the informational and instrumental aims of these platforms and prioritized instead their use for music and song dedications, which aimed to restore the community bonds fractured by the storm's devastation and loss of life. In her ethnography of the Mae La refugee camp along the Thai-Myanmar border, Hill observed how Karen youth express protest and articulate their identity through rap music videos uploaded on YouTube (Hill, 2021). The Typhoon Haiyan fieldwork revealed some instances when messaging platforms were openly used for protest as in the case of a group of urban poor activists. More common are stories of non-compliance with, or non-participation in digital aid platforms. Overall, the examples discussed here reveal the importance of the ordinary, everyday uses of digital technologies and platforms. These 'ordinary transcripts' of everyday life offer modest critiques of power. They take place 'offstage' and can only be captured via an ethnographic lens which entails long term immersion in a community.

However inspiring, ordinary resistance is limited. When the Rohingya people in the refugee camps of Bangladesh went on strike in November 2018 to protest about their biometric registrations and digital identity cards, their struggle was met with police

violence.<sup>1</sup> Biometric registrations continued apace the following day without addressing the concerns expressed by refugees. Humanitarian settings are securitized spaces that are subject to state violence – a clear reminder that the colonial genealogies of humanitarianism are reactivated and articulated in the present moment.

## Conclusion

This paper has investigated the contestation of practices of datafication and technological experimentation which are becoming increasingly ubiquitous in the aid sector. Drawing on scholars in the radical black tradition (Patterson, 2022; Robinson, 2021) and the notion of the ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott, 1985), I have developed the term ‘ordinary transcripts’ to illustrate the modest critique of digital power through everyday life practices. The argument about the importance of listening to the ‘ordinary transcripts’ is partly a methodological one as it is only through ethnographic encounters that these small acts of contestation can be noticed. The field of media research was once described as series of oscillations between approaches that either favoured powerful media, or powerful audiences. In this juncture of internet research, the pendulum is firmly on the side of technological and data power. This article argues that such stark choices can be false: technologies are powerful and rework colonial genealogies; at the same time, people have agency and power, however limited, to contest structures of oppression and to articulate their own identities. It is important to stress the limits of everyday resistance in asymmetrical settings such as those encountered in the humanitarian sector. The ordinary transcripts of everyday resistance do not equal decolonization which requires a radical restructuring of power relations (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). Still, ordinary resistance needs to be acknowledged for it may contain the seeds of the decolonial struggle to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Refugees expressed their concerns about the potential function creep of biometric registrations, which were jointly carried out by the United Nations refugee agency and the government of Bangladesh. The refugees’ suspicions that sensitive biometric datasets would be shared with Myanmar were later confirmed as correct in a report by the Human Rights Watch  
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