Review of Digital Degrowth: Technology in the Age of Survival

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The degrowth movement has been having a bit of a cultural moment. Kohei Saito's *Slow Down: A Degrowth Manifesto* made a splash this past year with its uncompromising takedown of growth-oriented solutions to climate change. A group of scientists writing in *Nature*—a notoriously "apolitical" publication—came to a similar conclusion: "[w]ealthy countries can create prosperity while using less materials and energy if they abandon economic growth as an objective" (Hickel et al., 2022, para. 1). And while never exactly positive in its coverage, *The New York Times* has at least reported on the ubiquity of the movement (Dooley & Ueno, 2023; Livni, 2024; Szalai, 2024).

Digital Degrowth: Technology in the Age of Survival, by the South African scholar Michael Kwet, broadens the conversation by focusing on the technology people use every day—phones, computers, and the Internet. We have book length tracts on the ecological devastation caused by (among other things) factory farming and greenhouse gases, but what does the degrowth movement have to say about Big Tech and the sizeable role the manufacturing of its products plays in worsening the climate crisis?

Digital Degrowth makes apparent that Big Tech is just colonialism recast. As Kwet writes, "tech giants in the Global North monopolize the means of computation and knowledge while the poor countries perform the menial labor, like digging in the dirt for metal...labeling data to train artificial intelligence models, or cleansing social media networks of disturbing content" (p. 5). The colonial relationships that defined the 19th and 20th centuries have never really disappeared; the bloody corporatism of the East India Company has been replaced with the much less direct, but still equally bloody, corporatism of Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon.

There are eerie similarities in the justifications offered both historically and in the present day for these colonial enterprises: the East India Company had its "civilizing influence" and the corporations of today have "technological progress." Both are shorthand rationalizations for the exploitation of the Global South, whose populations—in all eras—suffer the bulk of the consequences of the North's overconsumption (Saito, 2024). This colonial relationship does not end at the point of purchase. In many cases, the products created in a lab in Palo Alto, sold to consumers for exorbitant amounts of money, and then unceremoniously trashed after a couple of years, are simply shipped back to the Global South. Where they will rot in landfills for the next two million years.

Libraries have the power to disrupt this corporate cycle. As public, community-centered spaces with a long history of fostering equitable access to knowledge and resources, libraries stand as a model for what a practical degrowth approach to technology can look like. They offer a radical alternative to the planned obsolescence and digital consumerism perpetuated by Big Tech. By emphasizing shared infrastructure and collective ownership, libraries cut through the corporatized layers of technological "progress" and prioritize sustainability and accessibility. In this sense, libraries could be at the heart of the technological degrowth movement. Their ethos—founded on free access, resource-sharing, and a rejection of profit motives—directly counters the extractive logic of digital colonialism. If we hope to create a technological landscape that aligns with the principles of degrowth, society would do well to look to libraries as a blueprint for building more sustainable, just systems of technology.

Of course, in the hyperconnected world of the present, Big Tech companies must be a little more discreet with their rampant exploitation than the colonial powers of the previous centuries. Enter their half-hearted gestures towards "combating" climate change, which provide PR cover for the worst of their atrocities. As Kwet puts it: "The tech giants make grand claims about being 'carbon-free,' but they do not advertise that they are relying on 'renewable energy credits' to 'offset' their carbon emissions. In other words, they are still burning fossil fuels" (p. 115). One could take this a step further and add that the infrastructure these companies rely on to design, manufacture, and ship their products is itself dependent on the expenditure of fossil fuels. Is a corporation really "carbon-free" if it is still reliant on these types of supply chains?

Libraries have their own history of replicating and reifying colonial-era injustices. I am reminded of the perennial conversation around Melvil Dewey and his racist classification system. Thankfully, attempts have been made to confront this dark past and the scholarship arising from these discussions are welcome additions to professional literature. One must wonder, though, if a similar reckoning needs to be had for the colonial structures that underpin the technology we use to service our patrons.

This is not to say that we need to be overly critical. Kwet offers an example of the hyperbole he seeks to avoid in his own writing: "[A] natural language processing (NLP) model emits over 78,000 pounds (35 metric tons) of carbon over the course of its development; a larger model (called a transformer) used over 600,000 pounds. (272 mt)" (p. 109). This is misleading, however, as he points out: "Saying that a transformer model emits 600,000 pounds of carbon is like saying I have 600,000 blades of grass in my backyard—the number sounds big and scary until you put it into context" (p.109). The point Kwet is making here is that we cannot be overwrought or intentionally deceptive when discussing the ways our profession might be contributing to climate change. While libraries don't produce carbon at the rate of a conglomerate like Amazon, we should be honest about our relationships with the third parties we have come to rely on—web service providers, shipping companies—who *do* significantly contribute to global warming.

In the second to last chapter of his book, Kwet outlines ten steps individuals and society should take to create a more just (and environmentally friendly) digital ecosystem. Exempt, for the most part, from the ruthless science of profit, I would like to imagine that the library profession can provide a substantial amount of input on at least some of these proposals:

3. Phase out intellectual property

I can think of no other institution within contemporary society that is as diametrically opposed to intellectual property as the library. The entire ethos of our profession—multiple users, shared resources—stands against the often ruthlessly consumerist excesses that underpin intellectual property rights—especially as they have been weaponized by Big Tech. This ethos should be amplified as much as possible.

8. End digital consumerism

Along similar lines, librarians, by definition, foster a digitally eco-coconscious environment. The

hardware we provide, free of cost, is meant to be used communally over extended periods of time. This is not the lifecycle preferred by Big Tech, which stresses speedy obsolescence. We might also become more critical of our own existing practices. Does the LMS [Library management software] we have purchased for our library system sell data to major corporations? Can we use openly sourced alternatives instead? When we do eventually dispose of old hardware, are we doing it in a sustainable manner?

10. End the digital divide

Kwet spends much of this section arguing against the typical solution offered for the digital divide, at least in the Global North: spend huge amounts of money to give technology to those who can't afford it. The main issue with this approach is that it's not ecologically sound; we would still be lining the pockets of major corporations, who would, in turn, continue to exploit the Global South. Suffice it to say, we already have infrastructure in place, that, if funded properly, could help fuel a transition to a more digitally equitable society while avoiding the problem of overconsumption. It's called a library.

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