



Faculty of Humanities  
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
Lefapha la Bomotho



# The Politics (Ethics) of AI: AI Narratives and Global Power Balances

Emma Ruttkamp-Bloem  
SACAIR 2024 Tutorial  
3 December 2024



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



World Commission on  
the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge  
and Technology (COMEST)



# Outline

Current AI / ethics narratives

AI business model as  
algorithmic colonisation

Who does the AI domain belong  
to?



## Reflection

What are examples of current AI narratives?

Is AI a registry of power?

What is the AI business model?

Why care?



# AI narratives

Existential risk

- Global catastrophe & value alignment

False promises & hype

Tech solutionism

Africans as mere AI consumers with their hands out for the benefits that the North will bestow on them

Safety & risk vs. ethics & harm

Global governance vs. cultural diversity

Innovation vs. regulation



# The myth of AI

"AI is neither artificial nor intelligent.

Rather, AI is both embodied and material, made from natural resources, fuel, human labor, infrastructures, logistics, histories, and classifications. ...

... AI as we know it depends entirely on a much wider set of political and social structures.

And due to the capital required to build AI at scale and the ways of seeing that it optimizes, AI systems are ultimately designed to serve existing dominant interests.

In this sense, AI is a registry of power" (Crawford 2022)



# Lost in AI

“Not only ‘Big Brother is watching you’ (a virtual Panopticon), and ‘Big Brother is selling your data and pitching you products’ (surveillance capitalism writ large), but also

‘Big Brother’s model permeates the texts that you read and write; inscribes your thought process; monitors your keystrokes; and predicts your every utterance by making your patterns its patterns and its pattern yours’.

... Big Brother is you”.

- Goodlad & Baker (2023)



# The AI business model

Commodification of data for profit & geo-political power

Surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019)

- Process of 'digital dispossession': humans rendered understandable and profitable

Unlike industrial capitalism, which profits from exploiting natural resources and labour, surveillance capitalism profits from the capture, rendering and analysis of behavioural data through "instrumentarian" methods that are designed to cultivate 'radical indifference [...] a form of observation without witness' (Zuboff 2019,379)

Untapped source of information that can be sold to advertisers and which renders humans mere cogs in a wheel of profit

A narrative of exceptionalism is used to mask this dispossession

Successful, because companies have monopolised how they are viewed



## **Reflection**

**How far should Africa buy into this business model?**

**What could an African AI business model be like?**

**Why care?**



# Algorithmic colonisation

Driver of business model: power & the monopolisation of power

In Africa, this business model is concretised as

- data colonisation or algorithmic colonisation
- exclusion fed by digital poverty
- intersectionality
- and geo-political realities that allow Big Tech to continue practices flying in the face of international law, such as their exploitation of gig workers in Africa

Algorithmic colonisation comes in the guise of technological solutionism

Fed by inequality

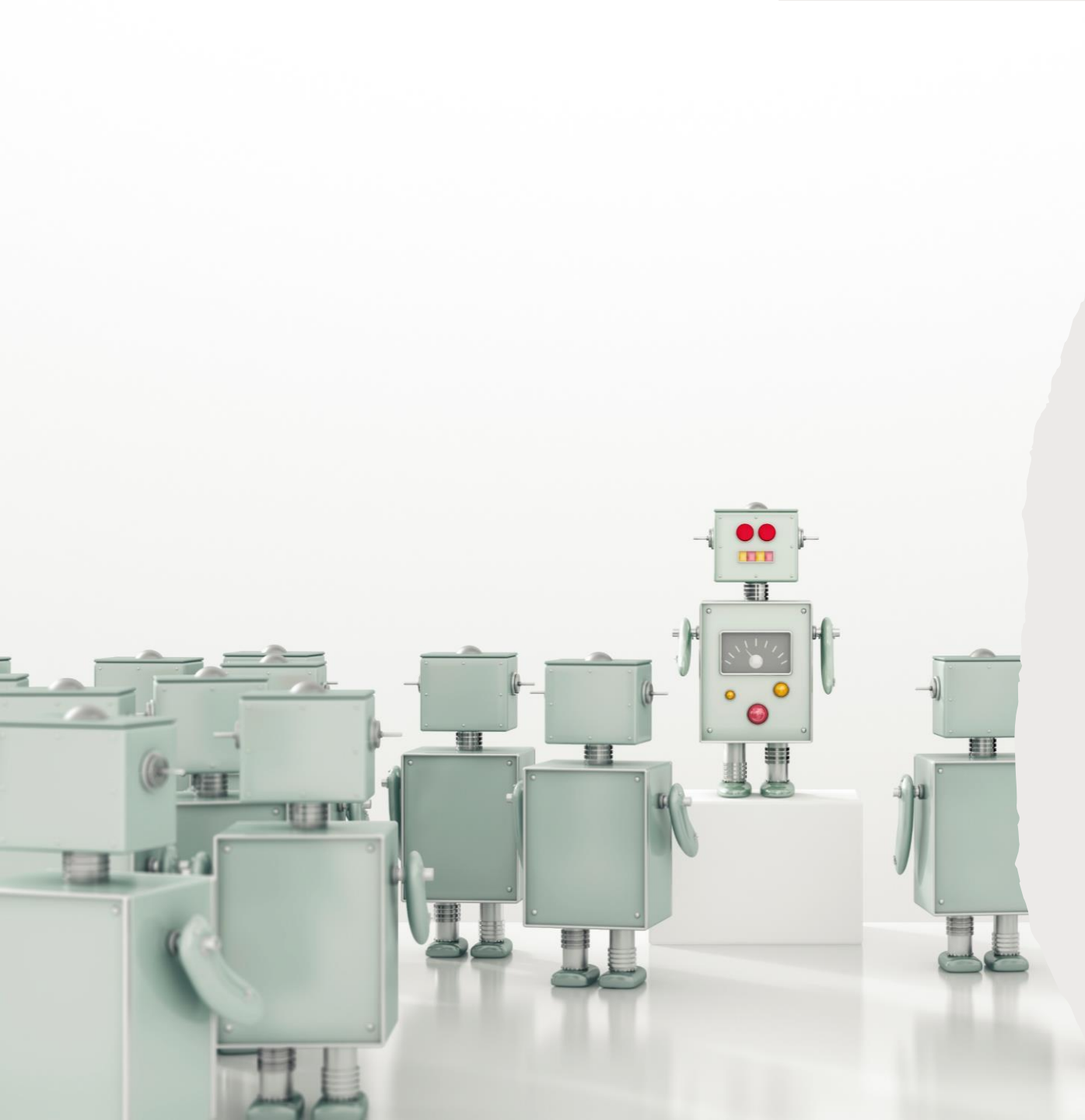
# The politics of data (Birhane 2020)

## Algorithmic colonialism

- disempowers Africans to effectively participate in global AI technology life cycle
- targets and exploits vulnerable groups
- amplifies inequality & structural and epistemic injustice
- creates dependency on Western software & infrastructure

Traditional colonialism shaped by political forces – algorithmic colonialism shaped by corporate agendas

- “[a]lgorithmic colonialism ... assumes that the human soul, behaviour, and action is raw material free for the taking. Knowledge, authority, and power to sort, categorize, and order human activity rests with the technologist, for which we are merely data producing ‘human natural resources’”.





# Data sovereignty & power

DS = recognition of the rights of nation states to develop and use the policy instruments necessary to govern AI technology within their legal territory

Right of African people “to govern the collection, ownership, and application of data about [their] communities, peoples, lands, and resources” (Rainie et al., 2019, 301)

Safeguarding data sovereignty is core to ensuring African states remain in the digital running

Dangers: nationalism & data localization

- 700+ new data centers in Africa in next decade
- Data capitalism



## Reflection

Who does the AI domain belong to?

What are counters to algorithmic colonisation?

Why care?



# Who does the AI domain belong to?

All AI actors have a role in the governance of AI

- AI systems threaten harm in each stage of their life cycle
- Every person should be able to live a life of wellbeing at any stage of the AI system lifecycle

Collective responsibility

Collective ownership



# Relational ethics (Birhane 2021)

## Rethinking of ethics & justice

- Relational ethics puts the needs and welfare of the most impacted and marginalized at the centre
- Rethinking ethics must be driven by concrete knowledge of the lived experience of marginalized communities – because this knowledge is their only epistemic privilege

A shift from asking ‘how can we make a certain dataset representative?’ to examining ‘what is the product or tool being used for? Who benefits? Who is harmed?’



# Data Justice (Dencik and Sanchez-Monedero 2022)

Framework for dealing with inequality issues in AI domain by focusing on social justice concerns

Implies a shift in understanding of what is at stake with datafication beyond digital rights

- This shift is a focus on *how* algorithms determine benefit or harm to communities impacted by AI-driven decisions and predictions through their classification mechanisms, rather than exclusively on the outcome of these decisions themselves

Data-centric systems as 'sorting mechanisms'

- Need to understand relationship of datacentric systems to historical contexts, social structures and dominant agendas as one of justice
- Need to recognise that datafication is enabled by particular forms of political and economic organisation that advance a normative vision of how social issues should be understood and resolved
- Data is both a matter in and of justice



# Design justice (Costanza-Chock 2020)

Design justice focuses on “community-led practices to build the worlds we need” (Costanza-Chock 2020)

- the relationship between the design of social technologies and mechanisms and social oppression
- collective liberation and ecological sustainability
- understanding of design, technology, and social change is based on the daily practices of activists and community organizers

Principle 3: We prioritize design’s impact on the community over the intentions of the designer

Mohanty (1993): “interpreting the world accurately requires knowing what it would take to change it”



# Reflection

What is the way forward?

What are questions we should be asking?

Why care?



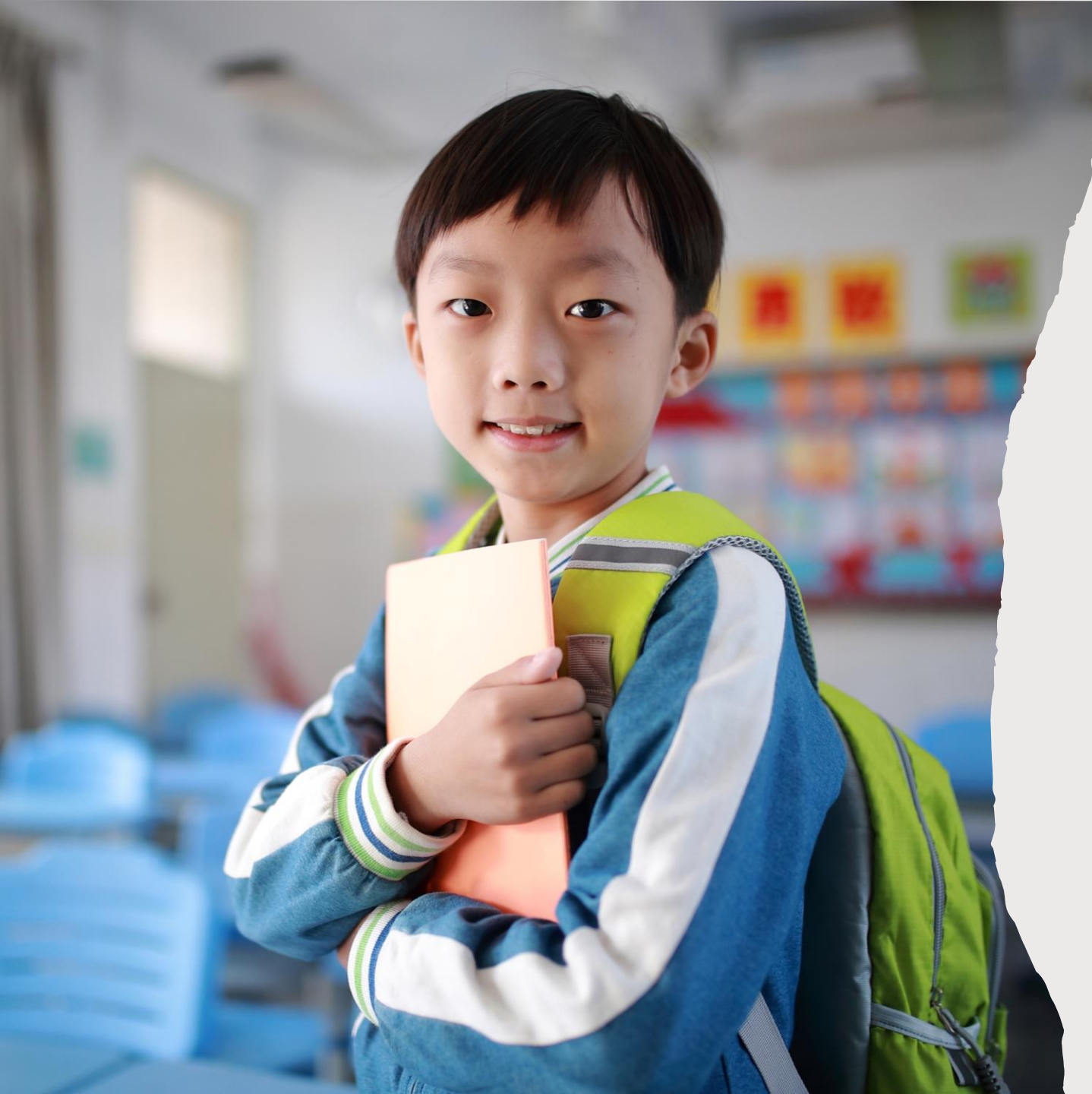
# Africans: digital refugees?

Might be, given

- Digital poverty & limited protection of data of vulnerable groups
- Digital marginalisation as result of dependence on Western infrastructure and software
- Exclusion from global AI governance conversations



- Whose needs?
- Whose solutions?
- Whose capabilities?
- Whose culture?
- Who is being given power over whom?
- Who benefits?
- WHO decides??
- Why?
- What is owed to future generations?



## The erosion of being human & diversity

Understand that the human world is co-shaped by humans *and* technology

Who is being given power over whom?

Is human-centered AI still an option in a dystopian world where 'knowledge' is controlled by big tech and based on dominant online worldviews?

What does 'human control' mean in this context?



# Way forward

Do not see AI technology only as either

- a mechanism to leap-frog solutions to core socio-economic problems, or
- as a way into the global digital economy

Combat hype and change narratives

Build an African business model for AI

- Sustainable AI innovation combined with social resilience



Have the courage to think for yourself

Thank you