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Beyond the Multitude: State–Society Alliances as a Strategy Against Big Tech's Digital Hegemony

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Abstract: This article critically examines the limitations of prevailing Western critiques of American Big Tech's digital hegemony, particularly those influenced by the theoretical framework of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. While the Negrian emphasis on the "multitude" and identity-based struggles has contributed to recognizing the multiple contradictions—racial, gendered, and class-based—that are reproduced and amplified in digital spaces, its categorical rejection of the sovereign state as a counter-hegemonic actor has led to a persistent strategic impasse. Through an extensive review of critical literature and empirical cases, the study analyses various forms of spontaneous, bottom-up resistance—including platform cooperativism, peer-to-peer networks, blockchain-based initiatives, algorithm audits, and public education campaigns—and demonstrates their inability to meaningfully challenge Big Tech's monopolistic control. Using Robert Cox's tripartite model of global power (Empire, sovereign state, and civil society), the article argues that effective resistance to digital hegemony requires alliances between the state and non-co-opted segments of civil society. The analysis extends to the Global South, where the combination of Big Tech dominance and NGO-mediated civil society often undermines state-led digital sovereignty efforts. The case of China is presented as a noteworthy counterexample: since 2016, the Chinese government has placed political limits on domestic Big Tech, implemented people-centered regulatory policies, and maintained sovereign control over its digital space. While not without its contradictions, this model demonstrates that a state–society alliance can achieve tangible results in countering the Empire's digital power.

The article concludes that overcoming digital hegemony requires moving beyond spontaneity-based paradigms toward structured, state-supported strategies—particularly in the Global South—capable of addressing the political-economic foundations of Big Tech's global dominance.

Keywords: Digital Hegemony; Negrian Framework; State–Civil Society Alliance; Global South; Digital Sovereignty

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In recent years, the digital hegemony dominated by American Big Tech has emerged as a formidable global challenge. A substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that these corporations have not only established economic monopolies but have also, at a socio-cultural level, perpetuated and deepened inequalities and systems of oppression along multiple axes, including race, class, and gender. In response, numerous strands of critical scholarship and resistance movements have arisen in the West. Among them, a particularly influential intellectual current is rooted in the thought of the Italian philosopher Antonio Negri and his long-time collaborator Michael Hardt. This context gives rise to a pressing set of questions: despite being underpinned by a sophisticated leftist theoretical framework, why do these resistance practices—centred on the spontaneous struggles of the "multitude"—consistently prove ineffective in confronting entrenched digital hegemony? And what might constitute a more viable path of resistance?

Critical research on digital hegemony has produced valuable insights. Zuboff (2020) has articulated its underlying economic logic as "surveillance capitalism," while scholars such as Noble (2018), Eubanks (2019), and Benjamin (2020) have empirically revealed how algorithms and big data perpetuate and entrench social injustice. Building on this foundation, authors including Scholz (2013) and Fuchs (2013) have analysed the structural exploitation of "digital labour" embedded within the capitalist system that sustains this hegemony. Yet, with regard to strategies of resistance, much of the prevailing critical discourse has been shaped by the theoretical contributions of Hardt and Negri (2001, 2011), which place their hopes in the capacity of the multitude to reclaim control over the digital commons through decentralised, self-organising struggles—exemplified by initiatives such as platform cooperativism.

This article contends that a significant gap persists in the literature. While these alternative strategies are widely discussed, they have repeatedly failed in practice, and academic debate has not sufficiently interrogated the structural reasons for this recurring failure. More crucially, because Negrian theory rejects the state apparatus a priori, this line of critique systematically neglects the potential role of the state in constructing counter-hegemonic alliances. As a result, the "struggle of the multitude" remains mired in a real-world impasse.

To address this gap, the present study employs a critical literature review. Its aim is not merely to catalogue existing scholarship, but to systematically analyse how the Negrian intellectual tradition—particularly its conceptualisations of strategies of struggle, forms of organisation, and the role of the state—has profoundly shaped Western critiques of digital hegemony. This analysis argues that such influence has ultimately led to a dual impasse, both theoretical and practical. To facilitate this critique, the article draws on the political theory of Cox (2007), especially his framework describing the dynamic interplay between "Empire," sovereign states, and civil society. This perspective serves as a lens through which to expose the structural power asymmetries confronting Negrian-style resistance.

The central argument of this article is that overcoming Big Tech's digital hegemony requires moving beyond the spontaneist paradigm of the "multitude" as conceived in Negrian theory. While this framework has illuminated important dimensions of inequality and oppression in digital spaces, its reliance on isolated civil society action renders it structurally incapable of confronting the formidable "Empire" coalition formed by the United States state apparatus in alliance with transnational technology corporations. A more viable counter-hegemonic strategy, this article contends, lies in forging robust state–civil society alliances capable of mobilising political, economic, and technological resources at a scale commensurate with the challenge. The analysis concludes by suggesting that, while the European Union's experience provides a useful preliminary reference, China's model of digital governance offers a more compelling example of the successful construction and operation of such an alliance—one that warrants closer scholarly attention and critical evaluation.

The Problem's Roots: The Negrian Framework and Digital Hegemony Critiques

Since 2010, numerous Western scholars have criticised the digital hegemony of Big Tech — almost all of which are American—whose economic scale rivals that of nation-states and whose global influence is profound. These critiques underscore that the digital sphere monopolised by Big Tech reproduces and amplifies entrenched forms of discrimination and oppression within Western, and particularly American, society. Vulnerable groups are disadvantaged across multiple dimensions, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, and income. Such findings have drawn sustained attention from progressive Western scholars and social movements.

The intellectual influence of the contemporary leftist philosopher Antonio Negri, in collaboration with Michael Hardt, is particularly evident in this critical discourse. Their theory of Empire is especially instructive for analysing "capitalist activities that operate directly on a global plane" (Mezzadra & Neilson 2019: 100–101) — a description that aptly captures the operational logic of today's Big Tech. Ross (2013) observed that the work of "commentators of the Italian school" (principally Negri and his associates) on capitalism's control over immaterial labour offers valuable insights into "the new model of capital accumulation represented by Facebook" from a Marxist perspective. Similarly, in his review of Shoshana Zuboff's The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, Morozov characterised Zuboff as "the American heir to Italian Autonomist Marxism" and wryly remarked that "if Negri taught at Harvard Business School, he would sound just like Zuboff"[1]. This quip is revealing in its recognition that information technology enables the "Great Other" to exercise pervasive control over the biopolitical production of the "multitude".

[1] Capitalism's New Clothes: Evgeny Morozov. 2019. *The Baffler.* URL: https://thebaffler.com/latest/capitalisms-new-clothes-morozov (accessed 10.08.2025).

Beyond its insights into Empire's totalising control over immaterial labour, several other aspects of the Negrian theoretical tradition have exerted a marked influence on contemporary critiques of digital hegemony.

Consciousness of Contradiction

Negri contends that class contradiction is neither the sole nor the primary contradiction, instead emphasising the multiplicity of social antagonisms. He argues that "no one domain or social organization takes priority over the others… It is no longer possible to lead or even conceive of revolutionary action in a single domain", by which he specifically means that contradictions relating to race, gender, and sexual orientation should be addressed on an equal footing with class and economic contradictions. This position is far from universally accepted among leftist thinkers. Miliband (1985), for example, maintained that "in capitalist society, no other groups, movements or forces are remotely capable of mounting as effective and formidable a challenge to the existing structures of power and privilege as organised labour". Yet he immediately qualified this by noting, "this is not to say… that the women's movement, the black movement, the peace campaigners, the ecologists, the gay movement and others are of no importance".

Guided by this sensitivity to multiple contradictions, Western — particularly American — critics have been alert to the ways in which the injustices experienced by groups such as Black people and women are exacerbated and reinforced by digital technologies. This perspective has not only drawn considerable interest from Western audiences but has also underpinned a wide-ranging and multidimensional critique of digital hegemony.

Struggle Strategy

Negri consistently champions the spontaneist struggles of the "multitude" and rejects organised forms of conflict. He maintains that "democracy is understood only through democratic action. We must… proceed democratically toward democracy". He also praises Gramsci's concept of the "passive revolution," identifying "peaceful street demonstrations, exodus, media mobilisations, strikes, transgressing gender norms, silence, irony, and the like" as legitimate modes of struggle for the multitude (Hardt & Negri 2011: 363–368). Guided by this philosophy of resistance, Western critics have proposed a diverse array of methods.

Yet, as Amin has observed in his critique of Negri, "all the rebellions of the subaltern—or the multitude—have failed". In a manner almost resembling a self-fulfilling prophecy, the various strategies of struggle advocated by these critics have yielded negligible results: a handful of American Big Tech firms have continued to expand their near-monopoly over the global — excluding China — digital sphere, while the structural injustices identified by their critics show little sign of abating. Struggles conducted without the intervention of powerful institutional actors have, in practice, exerted minimal influence on the entrenched dominance of Big Tech.

Organisational Method

The core reason for Negri's opposition to organised conflict lies in his categorical rejection of all forms of the state apparatus. In his view, "the multitude does not see the state as a realm of freedom but as a den of domination" (Hardt & Negri 2011: 355). He goes so far as to claim that socialists are "nothing but scoundrels" and that leftist leaders "want to be bosses, and since they cannot be bosses in a private capacity, they become bosses in the public capacity of the state" (Negri & Valvola Scelsi 2006: 32–43). Negri further insists that "the objective that Lenin and the soviets posed for an elite, vanguard, insurrectional activity must today be expressed by the desire of all" (Negri & Hardt 2014).

Yet Negri remains notably vague on how this "desire of all" should be organised and translated into concrete political action. Some critics of digital hegemony have sought to employ technological innovations — such as peer-to-peer networks and blockchain systems — as direct instruments for articulating this collective will. However, these initiatives have without exception reached an impasse, failing to mount any substantial challenge to the entrenched digital dominance of Big Tech.

State Participation

Ultimately, Negri adopts a passive and ambiguous stance toward transitional arrangements preceding the achievement of communism. He rejects the common transitional solutions that emerged from the anti-imperialist struggles and national independence movements of the twentieth century — such as socialist and nationalist states—regarding socialism as merely a vehicle for left-wing leaders to "be the boss" under the aegis of the state, without offering any genuine democratic improvement over capitalist society. He characterises the Soviet socialist experience as "a bad memory" (Negri & Valvola Scelsi 2006: 26). In his conceptualization, globalization has reached a stateless stage: imperialism has evolved into a centerless yet omnipresent Empire, rendering obsolete the transitional strategies of confronting imperialism through socialist or nationalist states. Accordingly, the multitude, he argues, should advance "democratically" and directly toward a communist society.

However, as Amin incisively observes, Negri denies that imperialism has a center, yet "the powers that be in Washington are perfectly clear about where that center is".[2] As forty-nine countries in the Global North are increasingly integrated into a unified imperialist bloc under U.S. leadership, for states in the Global South to abandon the option of state-led strategies is effectively to forgo the possibility of development and even the defense of sovereignty — thereby exposing themselves to renewed forms of re-colonization[3]. In the context of efforts by Global South countries to resist the digital

[2] Capitalism's New Clothes: Evgeny Morozov. 2019. *The Baffler.* URL: https://thebaffler.com/latest/capitalisms-new-clothes-morozov (accessed 10.08.2025).

[3] Cernadas G., Erskog M.N., Moreno T., et al. 2024. Hyper-Imperialism: A Dangerous Decadent New Stage. *Tricontinental*. URL: https://thetricontinental.org/studies-on-contemporary-dilemmas-4-hyper-imperialism/ (accessed 10.08.2025).

hegemony of American Big Tech, the challenge of constructing state capacities capable of countering digital colonialism and reclaiming control over digital technologies from Global North capital has become particularly acute.

This article argues that progressive Western scholars and social movements critiquing contemporary digital hegemony are demonstrably influenced by the Negrian intellectual tradition. This influence equips them to recognize and critique digital hegemony through the lenses of race and gender, but also leads them to avoid, often deliberately, engaging with the role of the state — especially the socialist state — in digital governance. As a result, they fail to meaningfully explore pathways toward dismantling digital hegemony. The predicament of the "struggle of the multitude" with regard to digital hegemony thus serves as a microcosm of the broader dilemma faced by a segment of Western leftist intellectuals, represented by Negri, whose practical strategies of resistance are weak and whose proposals for viable alternatives remain absent.

Consciousness of Contradiction: Comprehending Digital Hegemony Through Multiple Contradictions

In the United States — where political discourse places strong emphasis on identity politics and social diversity — beginning with widely recognised social prejudices relating to race, gender, and other factors can be an effective way to raise awareness of the negative impacts of digital hegemony within American society. Data scientist O'Neil (2016: 23) draws a direct link between racism and digital technology, observing that "racism is the sloppiest of predictive models, driven by messy data collection and spurious correlations, reinforced by institutional inequality, and contaminated by confirmation bias." Given the cognitive limitations of the human brain in acquiring and processing information, "labelling" or stereotyping is a common behavioural pattern. As digital technologies have become deeply embedded in daily life, with data collection and correlation analysis increasingly automated through algorithms and software systems, a critical question arises: has this "sloppy predictive model" been eliminated in the digital age?

Research by American scholars in recent years suggests otherwise. The large-scale application—and frequent abuse—of data and predictive algorithms has not only failed to reduce racial prejudice but has, in fact, reinforced and intensified pre-existing social injustices. For example, in the United States, Black individuals are more likely to be algorithmically classified as potential criminals, charged higher insurance premiums, and denied coverage more frequently (Benjamin 2020). In another instance, a researcher who searched for "black girls" on Google received results dominated by pornographic content (Noble 2018). Comparable patterns affect other ethnic minorities and vulnerable groups: Asian students are more likely to be recommended expensive test-preparation courses, and job advertisements directed toward men display higher salaries than those shown to women. Moreover, studies reveal that low-income groups in the United States—many of whom are people of colour—are subjected to automat-

ed, systemic discrimination through "big data policing," facing heightened barriers to accessing social welfare programmes such as housing and healthcare, experiencing restrictions on mobility, and even seeing their children's credit scores negatively affected (Eubanks 2019).

These examples demonstrate that entrenched societal prejudices become deeply embedded within algorithmic systems through the selection and training of data, and subsequently manifest in a variety of ways in digital environments. Without overt malice or the use of derogatory language, and simply by failing to address the biases embedded in historical datasets, it becomes possible to construct a covert, algorithmic analogue of the Jim Crow laws—one that operates seamlessly within the architecture of the digital sphere.

Guided by Negri's emphasis on the multiplicity of contradictions, one can approach the critique of digital hegemony—conceived as an extension of capitalist hegemony—through the lens of identity politics. Marx had long demonstrated that racial antagonism in the Western world has been inextricably bound to the capitalist system from its inception:

Direct slavery is the pivot of bourgeois industry, in the same way that machinery, credits, etc., are. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Thus, slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance. (Marx 1976: 167)

Marx (1977: 414) further insisted that the struggle against racism must be understood within the broader struggle of the proletariat: "Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded." In contemporary society, digital technologies profoundly shape both the productive forces and the relations of production. When the global digital space — excluding China — is effectively monopolised by a small number of American Big Tech corporations, the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist system, that between labour and capital, inevitably manifests in this arena.

As Scholz (2013) notes in the foreword to Digital Labour, the internet "is increasingly turning people into resources for the economic benefit of a few oligarchic owners." The crowdsourcing model of work — later reframed as the "gig economy" — has dismantled full-time employment relationships, fragmenting them into discrete, distributed tasks. This compels workers to compete for lower pay per task, erodes working conditions, and undermines the protection of labour rights (Ross 2013). Platforms such as Uber and Amazon Mechanical Turk separate workers from both the purchasers of their services and from one another, thereby accelerating the decline of traditional forms of unionisation (Srnicek 2021). While workers in some less-developed regions may initially benefit from the new income opportunities such platforms provide, these piece-rate jobs, unprotected by labour legislation, quickly revert to subsistence-level remuneration (Casilli 2017).

As core instruments of Empire's rule, American Big Tech firms go beyond the traditional capitalist exploitation of labour's surplus value. By extracting data value, they turn billions of internet users worldwide into objects of exploitation. Scholars have argued that when users access digital services for "free," their usage behaviour generates vast quantities of data, which constitute a key component of the platform's market value. In this sense, free use is not a gift from the platform but an instance of unpaid labour for it. Users who participate in online discussions (Terranova 2013), fans who create content for their idols (Kosnik 2013), and bloggers who produce regular posts (Dean 2013) all serve as unpaid digital labourers in distinct ways. Even the largest group—users who produce no content but remain addicted to games and social media—are, as Jack Linchuan Qiu (2016) terms them, "iSlaves," trapped by "digital addictive substances" while providing uncompensated labour to platforms. Fuchs (2013) calls this "an extreme form of exploitation," arguing that consumers on digital platforms work entirely without pay, rendering their rate of exploitation effectively infinite. Through their monopoly over digital platforms, Big Tech corporations convert user-generated data from across the globe into proprietary assets.

The value of data lies primarily in its predictive capacity. At the core of machine learning technology is the use of Bayesian statistical methods to predict a user's future behaviour based on historical data. This capability enables digital platforms both to guide and intervene in user behaviour and to employ computer programs that imitate or replace human actions — forming the basis of what is commonly termed "artificial intelligence". The performance of artificial intelligence depends on multiple factors, including algorithmic sophistication and hardware capacity. However, the most decisive factor is the volume of data: the larger the dataset used to "train" an artificial intelligence system, the higher its demonstrated level of "intelligence" and the greater its efficiency and accuracy in performing information-processing tasks traditionally carried out by humans. This relationship is the principal reason data has come to be described as "the new oil".

Operating on the premise that "data is a valuable resource", researchers have emphasised the intrinsic connection between Big Tech's data extraction practices and the capitalist mode of production. Thatcher et al. (2016) argue that the essence of big data lies in dispossessing data from its creators, transforming it into quantifiable user information that can be packaged and sold, and deploying it for the Taylorist disciplining of users—where citizens equipped with smart devices become de facto sensors in the capitalist production apparatus. While mass surveillance was initially justified in the name of counter-terrorism and national security, Big Tech soon discovered that the "behavioural surplus" extracted from such data could generate enormous profits, giving rise to what Zuboff (2020) terms "surveillance capitalism".

In sum, guided by the theory of multiple contradictions advanced by Negri and other Western leftist philosophers, critics have successfully identified the conflicts between Big Tech and a range of social groups, thereby mapping the contours of digital

hegemony under capitalism. In this respect, Negri's thought has offered valuable guidance in constructing the critical problem consciousness necessary for the study of digital hegemony.

Struggle Strategy: The Ineffectiveness of the Spontaneous Struggles of the Multitude

After recognizing that multiple contradictions—including those of ethnicity, gender, and class — were being entrenched and exacerbated in the digital sphere, a range of American scholars and social movements sought to connect these dynamics with the now-mainstream identity politics struggles in the United States and with broader popular protests such as the Black Lives Matter movement. Their aim was, in McIlwain's (2021) words, to "take IT to the streets, and in doing so foment a revolution that would drastically disrupt, shake, or even tear down America's racial order". Notably, these struggles share a defining characteristic: they emphasize peaceful, non-confrontational methods and mobilize civil, non-political forces for spontaneous forms of resistance.

One major category of such efforts focuses on public education to raise awareness about digital technologies and the Big Tech corporations that control them. The Detroit Digital Justice Coalition's DiscoTech ("discovering technology") events, for instance, seek to demystify technology and mobilize communities to question and reshape the "data-driven" decisions that affect their lives. Similarly, the "Our Data Bodies" (ODB) project documents experiences of data-based discrimination from the perspective of marginalized communities. The online magazine *The New Inquiry* developed an application called *White Collar Crime Risk Zones,* which ostensibly "uses machine learning to predict where financial crimes are most likely to occur across the US" — a satirical inversion of the algorithmic discrimination routinely targeting people of color and low-income populations (Benjamin 2020).

Other initiatives have targeted specific problems revealed by the deployment of digital technologies. The "Stop LAPD Spying Coalition" is a grassroots campaign opposing the Los Angeles Police Department's use of digital tools to discriminate against and surveil people of color and low-income communities (Eubanks 2019). "Black Girls Code" seeks to equip young African American girls with programming skills, aiming to challenge the exclusion of Black women from Silicon Valley (Noble 2018).

Several organizations have also explored third-party "black box" audits of Big Tech's algorithms. The "Auditing Algorithms" project aimed to cultivate a technically capable community to investigate and evaluate these systems (Benjamin 2020), while the "Non-Aligned Technologies Movement" (NATM) advanced the concept of an "Algorithm Observatory" to identify and expose the harms embedded in Big Tech's algorithmic designs[4]. However, the websites for both initiatives are no longer maintained.

[4] Mejias U.A. 2020. To Fight Data Colonialism, We Need a Non-Aligned Tech Movement. *Al Jazeera*. URL: https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/9/8/to-fight-data-colonialism-we-need-a-non-aligned-tech-movement (accessed 10.08.2025).

The most recent development in this field is the Algorithmic Impact Methods Lab (AIMLab), launched by the Data & Society organization in May 2023. AIMLab's objective is to develop the auditing methodologies necessary to assess the societal impacts of increasingly ubiquitous automated decision-making systems, thereby enabling greater algorithmic accountability. The effectiveness of this initiative remains to be seen[5].

Some organisations have sought to extend trade unionism into the digital sphere, aiming to organise dispersed gig workers into collective entities capable of defending labour rights against platform-based exploitation. Europe's largest trade union, IG Metall, has pursued this objective through its "Fair Crowd Work" platform, which educates workers about the exploitative conditions in the gig economy. These "digital unions" have achieved occasional successes, such as a 2015 ruling requiring the U.S.-based platform Homejoy to classify its workers as employees, and a 2016 UK court decision obliging the food delivery company Deliveroo to pay the minimum wage (Casilli 2017). However, these victories have been limited in scope, and the overall conditions of gig workers have seen little substantial improvement. In particular, "digitalised" unions have struggled to mount effective challenges against major platforms such as Uber and Amazon. For example, Dynamo — a "quasi-union" spontaneously formed by workers on Amazon's Mechanical Turk — never amassed more than a few hundred members at its peak and has been inactive since 2020, with its website now defunct.

According to Negri's theoretical framework, the vulnerable groups subjected to oppression across multiple dimensions — race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, income, and others — collectively constitute the "multitude." The "communicative, collaborative, and affective labour" of the multitude, along with their social life more broadly, form what he terms "biopolitical production". In the postmodern global economy, biopolitical production, rather than industrial factory labour, has become the primary source of wealth creation (Hardt & Negri 2001). Because such production is not simple, repetitive, mechanical work but instead immaterial labour that demands emotional and intellectual engagement, as well as autonomous and responsible collaboration, it inherently fosters unity among the multitude. This unity, in Negri's vision, enables them to reclaim the "commons" through autonomous movements independent of representative systems or vanguard parties. In these movements, the instruments of resistance are not limited to armed struggle but also include "peaceful street demonstrations, exodus, media mobilisations, strikes, transgressing gender norms, silence, irony, and the like" (Hardt & Negri 2011: 363–368). Viewed through this theoretical lens, the struggles outlined above against systemic discrimination in the digital sphere closely align with Negri's conception of resistance.

[5] Chatterjee M. 2023. Algorithms Get a New Watchdog. *Politico*. URL: https://www.politico.com/newsletters/digital-future-daily/2023/07/12/algorithms-get-a-new-watchdog-00105939 (accessed 10.08.2025).

In practice, however, these non-confrontational, spontaneous struggles have had little substantive impact on the Big Tech corporations that exercise monopolistic control over the digital sphere. While public education campaigns can raise awareness among segments of the population, their influence on corporate behaviour remains minimal. Digital technologies and algorithms are overwhelmingly controlled by a small number of dominant firms, such as Alphabet (Google's parent company) and Meta (Facebook's parent company). The vast power disparity between these corporations and the "multitude" enables them to disregard civil society's demands with near-total impunity.

The fate of earlier initiatives illustrates this dynamic. The "Auditing Algorithms" and "Algorithm Observatory" projects, both designed to scrutinise and hold platforms accountable, received no engagement from Big Tech and ultimately lost momentum. In another case, Yeshimabeit Milner, founder of the "Data for Black Lives" organisation, addressed an open letter to Facebook calling for three specific commitments: anonymising user data and submitting it to a public data trust; collaborating with technical experts and ethicists to create a "Code of Data Ethics"; and hiring Black data scientists and research scientists. As anticipated, Facebook did not respond, and no evidence has emerged to suggest any implementation of Milner's proposals. Two years later, the platform's hate speech detection algorithm still displayed stark racial biases: while antisemitic content was reliably removed, defamatory and racist language directed at Black people and other people of colour frequently remained unpunished.

The persistent failure of such spontaneous, civil-society-led initiatives in the digital space raises a critical question: are these shortcomings the result of contingent factors, or do they reveal deeper, structural causes? This article contends that the latter is the case: these outcomes are rooted in the Negrian intellectual tradition's unrealistic overestimation of direct democracy and its categorical rejection of the role of the state in governance.

Organisational Method: The Dead End of Technology-Based Direct Democracy Attempts

Negri contends that organisational forms such as traditional trade unions and vanguard parties primarily serve the interests of a minority — typically unionised workers. In contrast, he argues, biopolitical production demands a new form of organisation, one that "can overcome all the divisions of the old trade unions and represent the commonality of labour in all its economic, political, and social dimensions," and one "capable of representing every single individual who contributes to the creation of social wealth" (Negri & Hardt 2014). Throughout his works, Negri consistently stresses the imperative of "proceeding democratically toward democracy," advocating that the multitude conduct its struggles through direct democracy rather than relying on any

vanguard organisation or state authority. Yet, under the technological conditions of his time, the mechanisms for realising this vision of direct democracy remained vague — one of the reasons his ideas have frequently been criticised as impractical.

The development of digital technology appeared to offer a potential means of operationalising Negri's vision. With the proliferation of software development tools, cloud computing, and, more recently, blockchain, the question arose: could the general public spontaneously organise to build digital platforms that genuinely served their collective interests? For years, scholars and practitioners have explored the possibility of creating an alternative ecosystem of digital technologies and economic models outside Big Tech's infrastructure, with the aim of fundamentally reshaping labour organisation within the capitalist framework.

More than a decade ago, Bauwens (2013) proposed the creation of "non-capitalist, community-supportive, and use-value-driven entities" to protect and strengthen the commons. His proposed solution was a peer-to-peer (P2P) economy that would connect producers and consumers directly via the internet, eliminating intermediaries such as distributors or employing firms. In Bauwens's view, P2P constituted a viable working model for the new era's labour force, particularly knowledge workers, who would no longer be tied to a fixed workplace but could pursue highly flexible career paths, transitioning "from being hired hands to independent free agents and then entrepreneurs". However, at the time, Uber was only in its infancy, and Bauwens could scarcely have foreseen that the path he envisioned for "using technology to remove the intermediary" would, within a few years, contribute to the emergence of pervasive "cybermediaries" (Jallat & Capek 2001), the "Uberisation" of multiple industries, and the widespread erosion of labour rights in the gig economy.

Costanza-Chock (2020) identifies several strategic approaches to resisting the "Uberisation of everything." Among these, the one that initially attracted the greatest attention was "platform cooperativism," a concept championed by media studies scholar and activist Trebor Scholz and others. This model calls for workers to own and operate their own digital labor platforms — "platform co-ops" — organized as cooperatives but functioning through digital network infrastructures. Since 2014, Scholz and his colleagues have convened an annual conference on platform cooperativism for nine consecutive years, the most recent of which was held in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala, India. Around this conference, a global community of practice has emerged; as of February 2024, the Platform Cooperativism Consortium's website listed 548 platform co-op projects across 51 countries.

However, Srnicek (2021) warns that "all the traditional problems of co-ops (e.g., the necessity of self-exploitation under capitalist social relations) become massively exacerbated" in the digital sphere, owing to the monopolistic nature of platforms, the dominance of network effects, and the immense financial and technological resources of incumbent companies. Even if all relevant software were open-source, a platform like Facebook would still be able to mobilize its existing data reserves, entrenched network effects, and substantial capital to repel any cooperative challenger. Put more

bluntly, even with the best intentions, emergent platform co-ops must first solve the problem of economic sustainability—a task rendered increasingly formidable by the pervasive dominance of Big Tech monopolies.

These concerns are far from theoretical; they have been borne out in practice. The Green Taxi Cooperative in Denver, Colorado — once the largest taxi company in the city and the second-largest worker cooperative in the United States — was unable to withstand competition from Uber and declared bankruptcy in 2022[6]. Another high-profile example, the music platform cooperative Resonate, has fallen largely silent and faces the likelihood of closure[7]. Although the ten cooperative principles promoted by platform cooperativism, such as "ownership by those who create the value" and "decent pay and income security"[8], remain normatively compelling, building a self-sustaining platform in the shadow of entrenched monopolies is an immense challenge. Without a solid economic foundation, even the most attractive vision risks becoming a castle in the air.

In 2017, the price of Bitcoin surged from just over $900 to nearly $20,000[9], fueling a speculative boom in digital cryptocurrencies and inspiring new possibilities for platform cooperatives struggling with chronic financial fragility. At the 2018 Platform Cooperativism conference in Hong Kong, the project *Musicoin* presented its model of paying musicians directly in a blockchain-based cryptocurrency, thereby circumventing exploitation by monopolistic platforms[10]. At its peak, the value of *Musicoin's* cryptocurrency rose to 119 times its initial issue price[11]. In the years that followed, more blockchain-based platform co-ops emerged. While the dominant narrative framed blockchain as a tool enabling Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAOs) and distributed cooperatives[12], a significant driver of this proliferation was the rapid appreciation of many cryptocurrencies—mirroring Bitcoin's trajectory — which brought substantial financial windfalls to their issuers. When the cryptocurrency bubble deflated, enthusiasm for "blockchain-based platform co-ops" similarly diminished.

A retrospective look at more than a decade of initiatives—from P2P networks to platform cooperativism — reveals a clear preference among advocates for "self-organization." Hardt and Negri argue that because biopolitical production has supplanted traditional industrial production as the dominant mode of production, the methods

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[6] Wingerter J. 2022. Taxi Co-Op Files for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy. *BusinessDen*. URL: https://businessden.com/2022/04/20/taxi-co-op-files-for-chapter-11-bankruptcy/ (accessed 10.08.2025).

[7] Related Discussions Can Be Found on Resonate's User Forum. URL: https://community.resonate.coop/t/delete-artist-account/3745/2 (accessed 10.08.2025).

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by which the multitude resists capital must also adapt. They emphasize the design of mechanisms and frameworks that can democratically resolve conflicts within the multitude, rather than relying on the leadership of a Leninist-style vanguard: "when the technical composition of labor has changed so profoundly, any proposal for a vanguardist political composition is, in the best of cases, anachronistic" (Hardt & Negri 2011: 350–352). Technological innovations such as P2P networks, mobile internet, cloud computing, and blockchain have made the creation of decentralized, self-organizing democratic structures theoretically possible.

In practice, however, multiple waves of attempts to build alternative digital systems for the multitude have failed to produce meaningful results. These democratically oriented, spontaneously organized movements — lacking secure political and economic foundations — face opposition from adversaries with state-level economic capacity and political influence. The experience of the past decade suggests that the former has yet to devise a viable strategy for challenging the entrenched monopolistic hegemony of the latter.

Continuing along this path of democratic, spontaneous innovation, Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, has sought to use decentralized technology to dismantle Big Tech's monopoly over data. His proposed solution, *Solid*, enables users to extract their personal data from web platforms and store it in software or devices called "Pods." Users may then grant platforms permission — potentially in exchange for payment — to access this data, thereby retaining control and benefiting directly from its use[13]. Mhlambi (2020) argues that this approach resonates with the African concept of *Ubuntu:* users voluntarily contribute data to train artificial intelligence for the benefit of the entire community, without transferring it directly to Big Tech. Yet *Solid* has encountered challenges similar to those faced by platform cooperativism. Big Tech has ignored Berners-Lee's vision entirely; no major monopolistic digital platform supports *Solid*, much less seeks users' permission to access data through it. As in the case of Facebook's response to potential competitors, a platform that can crush opposition through its monopoly has no incentive to cooperate — let alone to surrender its most valuable asset.

In sum, over the past two decades — ranging from P2P initiatives to blockchain projects, from platform cooperativism to *Solid* — a segment of technically skilled practitioners has conducted successive experiments in direct democracy, seeking to build alternative digital solutions capable of attracting large user bases and thereby challenging the dominance of Big Tech. Yet these initiatives have failed to exert any meaningful influence on monopolistic digital corporations; most have struggled simply to survive. It must be acknowledged that when Big Tech commands economic resources on a scale comparable to that of a nation-state and exercises enormous influence over public opinion—shaping, and in some cases even affecting, political

[13] Lohr S. 2021. He Created The Web. Now He's out to Remake the Digital World. *The New York Times.* URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/10/technology/tim-berners-lee-privacy-internet.html (accessed 10.08.2025).

processes—the spontaneous organization of the populace faces formidable structural obstacles in creating viable competing platforms. Regulating Big Tech, therefore, is highly likely to require the mobilization of state power.

In Cox's (2007) political theory, *Empire* — the singular hegemonic position of the United States and the hard and soft power that sustain it — alongside the sovereign state in the Westphalian sense and civil society together comprise the prevailing configuration of global power. These three forces are not independent entities; rather, they intersect, overlap, and at times merge. Alliances between any two—whether temporary or long-term—generate new power configurations that shape both the construction and governance of digital space. If one fails to grasp the dynamic interplay among these forces, and instead frames *Empire* and the "multitude" organized as civil society as fixed, opposing poles, one cannot adequately conceptualize a viable strategy for dismantling digital hegemony.

State Participation: Rejecting State Involvement in Building Digital Space

As summarized in the preceding section, the solution advocated by many critics of digital hegemony is to mobilize the power of the "multitude" to effect change through bottom-up action. In practice, such initiatives have succeeded in raising public awareness — particularly in the West — about the nature and harms of digital hegemony. However, they have largely failed to alter the underlying structures of power. Faced with the dual challenge that Big Tech has little incentive for self-reform and that alternative technological solutions struggle to survive in market competition, some scholars have emphasized the importance of involving the state and government in addressing this issue.

State participation in shaping the digital sphere can take various forms, differing in their depth of intervention. A more limited form involves legislating and regulating the conduct of businesses operating in digital markets. A more expansive approach entails formulating industrial policies to guide the development of the digital sector or even engaging directly in digital infrastructure through state-owned assets and enterprises. The former model aligns with the liberal conception of the state as a "night-watchman" and is generally preferred by Western countries. The latter is more frequently criticized — often labelled "socialism" or described as "the state advancing as the private sector retreats" — and continues to be viewed with suspicion by a segment of Western left-wing scholars, notably Negri. In practice, however, Western states acting as "night-watchmen" in their regulation of Big Tech have not achieved notable success. For countries in the Global South, which are latecomers and structurally disadvantaged in the fields of information and digital technology, domestic digital spaces are already dominated by a handful of American Big Tech firms; in such circumstances, legislation alone is manifestly insufficient to counter entrenched digital hegemony.

Madden et al. (2017) note that consumer privacy protections in the United States remain markedly weaker than those under the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of 2016, and legislative progress has been sluggish. The primary reason lies in the United States' stronger "emphasis on individual liberty and corporate innovation." In other words, in the legislative calculus, the "personal dignity" of consumers ranks below the protection of corporate interests—especially those of Big Tech. This situation persists to the present. The prospects for the American Data Privacy and Protection Act (ADPPA), intended to rival the GDPR as a global de facto standard, remain uncertain[14]. At the state level, efforts such as those by Maine State Representative Maggie O'Neil — who sought to enact stricter data privacy legislation — have been blocked by private sector opposition. Her criticism that Big Tech firms "write their own laws" in order to "use our data as they please"[15] encapsulates the structural legislative impasse that characterizes U.S. data privacy policy.

Paradoxically, a 2011 McKinsey research report on the era of big data also recommended legislation to protect user privacy—on the grounds that such regulation would strengthen user confidence and thereby enable companies to collect even more data[16]. In other words, even if the United States were to pass the ADPPA, as Madden et al. (2017) have advocated, the monopolistic hold of Big Tech over data would remain largely unchallenged. Zuboff (2020) likewise observes that despite Europe's more advanced privacy and data protection legislation, and its comparatively stronger anti-monopoly stance, companies such as Facebook and Google operate with equal impunity there. Given the structural reality that Europe lacks internet firms capable of competing with American Big Tech, this outcome is unsurprising.

Srnicek (2021: 70) further acknowledges that even if the state were to regulate Big Tech's monopolistic practices, labor exploitation, and privacy violations, such measures would be "unimaginative and would have very little effect" unless they addressed the underlying structural conditions. He therefore proposes that the state invest resources in building publicly owned and controlled internet platforms, treating them as a public utility. Yet a review of global critical scholarship on digital hegemony reveals that proposals for "state-led digitalization" are rare; and where they do appear, they are often mentioned only briefly and without substantive elaboration. The dominant tendency in this body of work is to emphasize the agency of the "multitude" while largely neglecting the role of the state—an omission that is analytically significant.

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[14] Parks G.T. and Del Sesto R.W. 2023. US Data Privacy Legislation: Could a Federal Law Be on The Horizon? *Morgan Lewis*. URL: https://www.morganlewis.com/pubs/2023/07/us-data-privacy-legislation-could-a-federal-law-be-on-the-horizon (accessed 10.08.2025).

[15] Quinlan K. 2024. Maine Could Have Strongest Data Privacy Law in Nation IF Bill Passes. *StateScoop*. URL: https://statescoop.com/maine-strongest-data-privacy-law-2024/ (accessed 10.08.2025).

[16] Manyika J., Chui M., Brown B., et al. 2011. Big Data: The Next Frontier for Innovation, Competition, and Productivity. *McKinsey & Company*. URL: https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/big-data-the-next-frontier-for-innovation (accessed 10.08.2025).

Couldry and Mejias (2019) contend that the state's interest in digitalization stems solely from its desire to "exercise surveillance powers to intimidate its citizens or to damage their interests in more subtle ways." This deep-seated suspicion of all forms of state power aligns with the position of Hardt and Negri (2011: x, 164–165), who argue that the state operates by constructing and reinforcing the national identity of "the people," thereby undermining the commonality of the multitude. Within the capitalist social systems of Europe and the United States, such concerns about the state's coercive and ideological functions are not without merit. Yet, when confronted with Big Tech — an industry deeply embedded in the core of the capitalist state's power — reform movements that cannot secure state support inevitably reach an impasse.

According to Lenin's analysis, imperialism represents the "highest stage of capitalism," in which monopoly organisations mature within Western capitalist states and expand globally, competing for markets through colonialism. This expansionary logic is now being replayed in the digital domain. In their critique of ubiquitous computing, Dourish and Mainwaring (2012) note that the development and dissemination of digital technology reproduces a Wallersteinian "core–periphery" structure: technologies created in industrialised Western countries—particularly the United States—are uncritically transplanted into the developing states of the Global South. In this context, "development" for the Global South entails replicating Western technological applications wholesale, effectively opening domestic digital spaces to Big Tech and enabling the unilateral extraction of data resources.

Facebook's *Free Basics* initiative in the Global South, especially in Africa, illustrates this dynamic. While presented as a means of providing free internet access, it has been shown to function as a large-scale system for data extraction and digital experimentation (Nothias 2020) — akin to the railways constructed by former colonial powers in their territories for the purpose of transporting mineral resources. It is no coincidence that much of the infrastructure linking the digital space of the Global South—servers, data centres, and submarine cables—follows the same colonial routes established centuries ago, creating vertical connections between periphery and imperial core. Within this infrastructural framework, data exchanges between Asia and Africa must pass through the United States, delivering the "behavioural surplus" to American Big Tech firms (Couldry & Mejias 2019).

From a Global South perspective, Kwet (2019) observes that American Big Tech monopolises the entire industrial chain of data collection, transmission, storage, analysis, and use—from hardware to software to so-called "cloud computing". "As with typical colonialism", he writes, "data is also exploited as a raw material by imperialist powers". Because there are no universally accepted accounting standards for valuing data assets, the precise economic value extracted from the Global South through the colonial appropriation of "data minerals" remains unknown. Nevertheless, the World Economic Forum estimates that, as of 2022, the digital economy accounts for over 15% of global GDP—more than USD 15 trillion. Even using this as a conservative baseline, the annual value of uncompensated data appropriated from the Global South

by American Big Tech could plausibly reach hundreds of billions, and potentially even one trillion U.S. dollars. This underscores the urgent need for rigorous, quantitative analysis of this economic phenomenon.

In 1979, Mustapha Masmoudi, then Tunisian Minister of Information and later a member of UNESCO's MacBride Commission, observed: "There is an appalling imbalance in the flow of news and information between the North and the South, an imbalance where the flow from the developed countries to the developing world is enormous, while the reverse flow is minuscule" (Masmoudi 1979). In the age of the internet and digitalisation, this imbalance has taken on new dimensions. News and information still flow predominantly from developed countries to the nations of the Global South, but now data — an increasingly valuable asset — flows in vast quantities from the Global South to developed countries, especially to a handful of data technology giants in the United States.

South Africa, one of the more developed states in the Global South, offers a telling example. It has 45.34 million active internet users (70.8% of the population) and 26 million active social media users (40.6%)[17]. Among the twenty most visited websites in South Africa, eleven belong to American Big Tech firms, accounting for 86.4% of total web traffic; South Africa's own websites account for only 5.4%[18]. Six of the ten most popular smartphone applications in the country are American, with only one — developed for Capitec Bank—originating locally[19]. Yet Capitec's information systems run on Microsoft Azure and Amazon AWS cloud services[20], meaning that its data is also stored and processed under the control of American Big Tech.

In reality, outside the United States — and particularly in the Global South—rejecting state involvement in the governance of digital space would amount to enacting a form of digital "shock therapy", delivering the vulnerable digital markets of these countries directly into the hands of American Big Tech, which already maintains a position of overwhelming monopoly. Unsurprisingly, this position aligns with the view of the World Economic Forum: "governments just need to be able to access company-owned data remotely; it does not matter where the data is stored"[21]. In practice, this prescription perpetuates the status quo in which the overwhelming majority of Global South states hand over control of their data to U.S. technology corporations.

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[19] Top Free Apps Ranking – Most Popular Apps in South Africa. 2022. *SimilarWeb*. URL: https://www.similarweb.com/apps/top/google/store-rank/za/all/top-free/ (accessed 10.08.2025).

[20] CAPITEC Careers: Derick Schmidt, Product Head. 2022. *Capitec*. URL: https://www.capitecbank.co.za/blog/articles/your-career/capitec-careers-derick-schmidt-product-head-client-data-platform/ (accessed 10.08.2025).

[21] Flanagan A.J., AlSaeed N. and Warren S. 2020. A Roadmap for Cross-Border Data Flows: Future-Proofing Readiness and Cooperation in the New Data Economy. *World Economic Forum*. URL: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_A_Roadmap_for_Cross_Border_Data_Flows_2020.pdf (accessed 10.08.2025).

As Schiller (1992) noted more than fifty years ago, in circumstances where the United States possesses absolute technological superiority, the doctrine of "free flow of information" — which denies weaker nations the right to regulate the movement of information — functions as "a channel for imposing a way of life and values on weaker nations". Yet, as previously noted, most Western researchers — working in the intellectual lineage of Negri — lack confidence in the state under capitalism (a category encompassing most Global South countries) and remain unwilling to envisage state power as a legitimate instrument for the governance of digital space.

As Harvey (2009) argues in his critique of *Commonwealth*, "[subverting the existing structures of capitalism and providing an alternative one] is too great a task for a flat, self-organising movement of autonomous beings to accomplish", and "their argument offers no concrete strategy for… the revolutionary transformation of the material basis of everyday life". This criticism aptly captures the predicament confronting the various spontaneous struggles of the multitude in the digital sphere. From denouncing Facebook's racial discrimination to attempting third-party audits of Big Tech algorithms; from exposing the extraction of data resources and appropriation of behavioral surplus to experimenting with technologies like *Solid* to return personal data to users; from P2P networks to platform cooperativism — none of these efforts have significantly dented Big Tech's hegemonic power.

Their repeated setbacks are not accidental but systemic and rooted in theory. The categorical rejection of any form of sovereign state participation in the construction and governance of digital space has left such movements structurally incapable of mounting a serious challenge. In this sense, a discourse and practice that excludes the state has, paradoxically, become complicit in sustaining Big Tech's dominance, reinforcing the perception — time and again — that the status quo is immutable.

As previously discussed, disregarding the role of the sovereign state within the current global configuration of political power—and expecting the "multitude" or civil society to confront the "Empire" single-handedly — constitutes a theoretical flaw that has left many Western researchers in a conceptual dead end when seeking strategies to dismantle American digital hegemony. A frequent phenomenon in the Global South is the convergence of American Big Tech — a key pillar of the U.S. tech–military–intelligence complex and thus a concrete embodiment of *Empire* — and segments of civil society (often NGOs) in jointly rejecting state involvement in the governance of digital space. A telling example is Google's $300 million "investment" in Latin America to "provide economic opportunities and digital skills training to NGOs", of which $250 million consisted of credits redeemable only for Google advertising. This is a classic case of *Empire* and civil society collaborating to obstruct sovereign state efforts to strengthen domestic digital infrastructure and governance capacity[22]. In such a con-

[22] Google.org Commits $300 Million for Digital Skills in Latin America. 2022. *PND*. URL: https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/google.org-commits-300-million-for-digital-skills-in-latin-america (accessed 10.08.2025).

text, the portion of civil society that has not been co-opted by *Empire* must form an alliance with the third vertex of the power configuration—the sovereign state—if there is to be any realistic prospect of jointly confronting imperial hegemony.

In this regard, Dean (2019) critiques Negri's vision as "a platform for demands with no vehicle, no substance — Then who is to make the demand?" She adds that "as we learned from Lenin… without the leadership of the Party, it is very difficult for the people to see the situation clearly… Their actions are co-opted and diverted, channeled and packaged to support the system they oppose." It is not difficult to envision that in non-socialist, non-communist-led countries—such as India or Brazil—a social-democratic government should assume the responsibility of allying with and guiding the "multitude". Kavada (2019) advances a complementary strategy of "appropriating the capitalist digital machine": imposing taxes on global internet giants and compensating the public for their unpaid digital labor on online platforms through a universal basic income. Such a policy could create a resource base for alternative digital solutions, including platform cooperatives and P2P production. Crucially, Kavada stresses that to realize such strategies, the Left can no longer "be afraid of… state power," as any alternative developed without the state's support will remain marginalized and economically unsustainable.

Conclusion

It is perhaps no coincidence that among the dozens of scholars critically examined in this article, none could be described as Luddites advocating the abandonment of the internet and a return to a pre-digital era. Given that ceasing the large-scale use of smartphones and social networks is not a viable option, there are essentially only two conceivable paths forward: either to regulate existing (and future) Big Tech firms so that they serve, rather than harm, the broadest segments of the population; or to build alternative digital platforms and, from the standpoint of ownership, ensure that such platforms do not revert to the familiar capitalist trajectory.

After considering the unsuccessful experiences of platform cooperativism, the Non-Aligned Technologies Movement, *Solid*, and other attempts to create alternative digital platforms, Srnicek's concern about whether such initiatives can survive in a capitalist environment appears all the more prescient. Moreover, the vast majority of these alternative platforms have been organized as enterprises; if they were to grow to the scale of hundreds of millions of users, there is no structural mechanism within capitalism to guarantee that they would remain faithful to their founding principles rather than evolving into another iteration of Big Tech. As Fuchs has observed, digital hegemony is essentially the projection of the capitalist system into the digital realm, and any fundamental solution must therefore seek to transform the underlying social system. This raises a crucial question that deserves far greater scholarly attention: what would a socialist, publicly owned — or at least publicly beneficial — digital platform look like?

According to the "Digital Dependency Index" published by the University of Bonn, China is the only country other than the United States to possess a relatively independent information infrastructure. All other states must rely on foreign-owned platforms and related technologies for their digital activities, with most economies almost entirely dependent on foreign platforms — overwhelmingly those of U.S. origin (Mayer & Lu 2023). In contrast to the vision promoted by Big Tech, the Davos elite, and the authors of *Commonwealth* — who depict cyberspace as a "global common" existing beyond national sovereignty — the Chinese government has consistently treated cyberspace as a natural extension of its sovereign territory. In 2007, then-President Hu Jintao, during a collective study session of the CPC Central Committee Politburo, first introduced the expression "cyberspace" and proposed "to make the internet a new channel for disseminating advanced socialist culture, a new platform for public cultural services, and a new space for the healthy spiritual and cultural life of the people". This formulation clearly continued Deng Xiaoping's principle, articulated at the 14th National Congress of the CPC (1992), of "grasping with both hands, and keeping both hands firm" in the development of material and spiritual civilization: the online world is not an autonomous realm independent of the material world, but an extension of physical space, and thus falls firmly within the scope of state sovereign control. Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC (2012), the new generation of national leadership under Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasized that "the internet is not a lawless place," reaffirming this conceptual approach. Compared to the recommendations of the World Economic Forum, this conception of cyberspace more closely reflects the position and priorities of the Global South.

Against this backdrop, discussion among global critics of American Big Tech's digital hegemony regarding China's experience in building and governing its digital space is strikingly limited — if not entirely absent. This general silence is noteworthy. Mejias (2020) asserts that China — like the United States — is "another power center of data colonialism". Fuchs (2015) likewise contends that "commercial and profit-driven logic dominates the Chinese internet and Chinese social media, just as it dominates the American internet". Jack Linchuan Qiu (2016) describes how Foxconn in China and Apple in the United States form an alliance within the broader framework of the global capitalist system, transforming both workers and consumers into "iSlaves". Such perspectives — framing Chinese digitalization as essentially no different from that of the United States — may have contributed to the reluctance of many critics to consider the Chinese experience as a potential model for countering the digital hegemony of American Big Tech.

Lü Xinyu (2018) recalls that China's internet sphere in the 2000s was initially controlled and embedded within global hegemony — particularly through the persistence of Cold War discourse into the post–Cold War era. Following the strict containment of attempted Western-style "colour revolutions", the sphere evolved into one dominated by the market and by data monopolies established by domestic Big Tech firms such as Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (collectively known as BAT) — the same "commer-

cial and profit-driven logic" identified by Fuchs. However, a significant turning point came with the 2016 *Speech at the Symposium on Cybersecurity and Informatisation Work,* which set a political ceiling on the activities of Chinese internet enterprises. The government explicitly required that the development of the internet and informatization "must implement a people-centered development philosophy". In the years since, under this policy framework, the Chinese state has implemented a series of regulatory measures and policy guidelines directed at its Big Tech sector, addressing in concrete terms several of the harms of digital hegemony outlined earlier in this article.

Is China constructing the "alternative internet under an alternative model of social relations" that Fuchs envisions? Answering this question requires sustained theoretical and empirical investigation — far beyond the scope of this article. Yet at least phenomenologically, it is observable that over the past decade, the Chinese government (and the ruling party) has forged an alliance with its population — though not necessarily in the form of "civil society" as understood in the Western context — to counter the digital hegemony of the *Empire*, achieving notable results. These cases, and the theoretical insights they offer into the current configuration of global power, merit careful attention from researchers.

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Преодолевая ограничения «множества»: союз государства и общества против цифровой гегемонии техногигантов

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В статье рассматриваются ограничения преобладающих в западной науке подходов к анализу цифровой гегемонии американских технологических корпораций, сформированных под влиянием теоретического наследия Антонио Негри. Подчёркивается, что акцент Негри на «множестве» и борьбе, основанной на идентичности, способствовал выявлению и осмыслению целого ряда противоречий — расовых, гендерных и классовых, — воспроизводимых и усиливаемых в цифровом пространстве. Вместе с тем категорическое отрицание роли суверенного государства как субъекта борьбы с гегемонией привели эти подходы к устойчивому стратегическому тупику.

На основе обширного анализа критической литературы и эмпирических примеров исследуются различные формы стихийного сопротивления «снизу – вверх» — платформенные кооперативы, пиринговые сети, блокчейн-инициативы, аудит алгоритмов, просветительские кампании — и показывается их неспособность существенно поколебать монопольное положение Big Tech.

Опираясь на «акторный треугольник» глобального управления Роберта Кокса (*Империя*, суверенное государство, гражданское общество), автор обосновывает, что эффективное противодействие цифровой гегемонии возможно лишь при формировании альянса государства и некооптированных сегментов гражданского общества. Отдельное внимание уделено странам Глобального Юга, где сочетание доминирования Big Tech и опосредованного через НПО гражданского общества зачастую подрывает усилия государств по обеспечению цифрового суверенитета. В качестве контрпримера рассмотрен опыт Китая, где с 2016 г. государство установило политические ограничения для национальных Big Tech, реализовало ориентированную на народ регуляторную политику и сохранило суверенный контроль над цифровым пространством. Несмотря на некоторые внутренние противоречия, данный опыт демонстрирует, что альянс государства и общества способен приносить ощутимые результаты в противостоянии цифровой мощи *Империи*.

В заключение делается вывод, что преодоление цифровой гегемонии требует отхода от парадигм, ориентированных на спонтанность, в пользу стратегий, поддержанных государством, — особенно в странах Глобального Юга.

Ключевые слова: цифровая гегемония; Антонио Негри; коалиция государства и гражданского общества; Глобальный Юг; цифровой суверенитет

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