Decolonising digitals: 0-1 for Africa

Digitalisation and decolonisation from an Africanistic perspective – an analysis

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List of acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
BLM	Black Lives Matter
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IT	Information Technology
PAD	People of African Descent
TNC	Transnational Corporation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
WB	World Bank
WEF	World Economic Forum
WWW	World Wide Web

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research questions and delineation of the study

Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The trouble makers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently… Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do: Think Different. (Apple Inc., 1997)

Technology company Apple launches its major advertising campaign 'Think Different' at the dawn of the twenty-first century. A low masculine voice-over accompanies a string of documentary images of twentieth-century innovators of different cultures and places, although predominantly from the United States. The advertisement shows the past while envisioning the future, thus recycling the myth of renewal and rebirth. It puts forward a universal faith in the power of technology and the human potential, as embodied by Apple. Buying Apple's products holds a promise for empowerment, through the use of revolutionary technology (Shields, 2001).

The underlying ideology can be recognised in the general postmodern narrative surrounding digitalisation in all its varying forms. The process of converting text, image, and sound into digits to be processed by computer systems is associated with exploration, innovation, and progress while enabling global connectivity between people.

Certain characteristics of this digitalisation discourse remind of the aspirations of decolonisation as it is promoted by contemporary activists, scholars, and artists among others. The two multifaceted and ongoing processes of digitalisation and decolonisation envision a progressive and inclusive future. A future that builds on the past but requires a change of mind, an attitude switch that diverges from the traditional view on structures and institutions that shape our daily life. Decolonisation efforts crosscut geographical and temporal boundaries and so does digitalisation, by focusing on connectivity, collective experiences, and shared legacies.

Does this mean that both processes, digitalisation and decolonisation, are aligned? Are they jointly "pushing the human race forward"? The following dissertation nuances these suggestions through an analysis of digitalisation in relation to decolonisation in society today.

Two main questions guide the analysis. Firstly, how do digitalisation and decolonisation relate? Secondly, how can the in-between discrepancies be solved?

This dissertation claims that possible mismatches between the two processes work contra-productively for successful decolonisation. Therefore, the key objective of this work is to raise awareness of the current challenges and obstacles and to explore multiple possibilities in order to decolonise the digital sphere. By doing so, this study wants to provide global citizens with constructive insights on their role and responsibilities as digital consumers in society at large.

Digitalisation as a topic requires by default a contemporary focus. After all, we are currently living in the 'Digital Age', which was initiated during the second half of the twentieth century and continues in an ever more rapid and intense way. However, decolonisation and associated subjects such as imperialism and (neo-)colonialism extent over a longer period of time. For this reason, it is essential to consider the long-term historical context of the past centuries as well.

Digitalisation and decolonisation affect everyone in a globalised world, either directly or indirectly. Yet, Africa and people of African descent (PAD) in other continents are primary stakeholders in both processes. In addition, for the sake of conciseness and because of my personal background in African Studies at Ghent University (Belgium), the African continent and its diaspora delineate the geographical scope of this study.

The analysis of this dissertation is mainly based on secondary data, derived from literature and online sources, including both scholarly and popular work in the form of articles, blog posts, books, video material, documentaries, op-eds, and podcasts.

1.2. Rationale of the study

Africa and people of African descent are primary stakeholders regarding the potential opportunities of digitalisation and the deconstruction of discrimination by decolonisation for the following reasons.

Firstly, according to a recent report of the World Bank (2019), global poverty will become increasingly African if circumstances remain the same. The concerned report predicts that 90 per cent of the people living in extreme poverty in 2030 would be in Africa (Beegle & Christiaensen, 2019). Due to COVID-19, the circumstances will probably even worsen as a report from the UN Secretary General suggests a rise in the global poverty rate for the first time in thirty years and Africa will experience a first economic recession in twenty-five years (Reiter, 2020).

At the same time, UNDP Africa Director Ms. Ahunna Eziakonwa promotes digitalisation as an instrument to fight poverty. She calls upon African countries to deploy digital technologies in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are set for 2030 (Eziakonwa, 2019). Also, the African Union Commissioner Amani Abou-Zeid sees the crisis created by COVID-19 as the single biggest catalyst for the digital transformation and the mass adoption of digital technology (Reiter, 2020). A prerequisite for using digitalisation as a geopolitical and economic tool should be the decolonisation of existing and future technologies.

Secondly, the African diaspora experiences discriminatory and racist continuities of the colonial past both offline and online. For instance, in Belgium, a UN Working Group of experts on racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, Afrophobia, and related intolerances concluded in 2019 that Belgium's "lack of recognition of the true scope of violence and injustice of colonisation" (OHCHR, 2019) keeps structural barriers in place with regard to education, employment, and opportunity for PAD. Moreover, European media tends to portray PAD negatively and general social discourse in the European Union member states often revolves around 'othering' PAD. Such processes of othering create a hostile environment that normalises exclusion and violence

towards PAD (CEJI, 2019). Recent studies show that online media contribute to hate speech, sexism, and racism which have harmful consequences for people's mental health and safety (Graham, 2020). As the influence of digital technology on European societies increases, so is the need to decolonise in order to come to an inclusive, peaceful, and democratic environment.

Thirdly, but related to the above arguments, is the need to counter the contemporary effects of the problematic history of knowledge production on Africa (Krenčeyová, 2014). Digitalisation and decolonisation are opportune angles to approach this issue. The two concepts allow us to connect past, present, and future in a critical yet constructive and accessible manner. Decolonisation promotes the cultivation of digital knowledge. One of the recommendations of the UN Working Group urges Belgian universities to foster more research and dissemination of knowledge in African studies (OHCHR, 2019). This dissertation underwrites such effort.

1.3. Outline of the study

The outline of the dissertation is as follows: prior to the actual analysis, the 'State of the art and theoretical and methodological foundation' is presented, treating the topics of digitalisation and decolonisation separately. Firstly, the 'State of the art' provides insight into the popular and academic stances towards the two topics at this time. Secondly, the 'Theoretical and conceptual framework' clarifies the used theories, terminology, and concepts and situate them in a broader academic playfield. Thirdly, 'Research methods and data collection' informs the reader on the conduct of this study, *inter alia* with regard to my own positionality as a researcher.

The 'Analysis and discussion' starts with a look at the positive side of digitalisation, or better: what is commonly perceived as 'positive', to subsequently critically examine these arguments in relation to underlying discriminative dynamics and negative outcomes for people of African descent. In this discussion, 'The downside of digitalisation' is laid bare, including digital cultural imperialism and the (neo-)colonial aspects of digital technologies. Then, the following part proposes possible roads to

decolonise the digital sphere by using 'Digitalisation as a tool' for de-silencing, de-mythologizing, and anti-colonial decolonisation.

Lastly, the 'Conclusions' recap the basics of the study, highlight the main results of the analysis and discussion, and retell the overall vision on how digitalisation could be brought in line with decolonisation. Moreover, it informs how this dissertation can contribute to existing and future work on the topics under research.

2. State of the art and theoretical and methodological foundation

2.1 State of the art

Both digitalisation and decolonisation are hot topics in contemporary academic research. The literature on the two subjects can be traced back to the second half of the twentieth century and has been on the rise ever since. Whereas digitalisation overarches all scholarly disciplines, decolonisation is situated mostly in the field of social sciences. In a combined approach of the two subjects, the present study is concerned with the socio-cultural, political, and economic impacts of digitalisation.

2.1.1 Digitalisation: a multifaceted topic of inquiry

Studies on digitalisation count as a modern subbranch of studies on technologisation, which can largely be divided into two perspectives: negative or dystopian, and positive or utopian.

In line with the Frankfurter Schule of the 1920s and 1930s, more dystopian visions on (digital) technology focus on the disruptive impact on art, culture, and society. In this rather techno-deterministic perspective, the totalitarian character of technology is emphasised as an expansionist and conforming system that values fast consumption without authenticity (Conway & Siegelman, 2006; Valenduc & Vendramin, 2017; Kanobana, 2020).

Contrary to the pessimistic tone of some studies, more utopian writers and scholars see technology and its digital realisations as democratising and enabling the emancipation of culture, art, self-expression et cetera. The related belief in smooth, self-regulating systems, as was, for instance, prevalent during the 1990s, can be traced back to the "Self-Reproducing Automata" of John von Neumann, the foremost mathematician of his time (Varis & Cramer, 2020).

The economic dimension of digital technology, often associated with bold predictive statements about the impact on the labour market and profit creation, continues to be

a common inquiry on a global level. Usually, concerned studies are published by organisations such as the World Economic Forum (WEF), the World Bank (WB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Typical for this kind of reports, studies, and literature are new marketing terms such as "Cyber Resilience" (The Boston Consulting Group, 2017) "The Digital Enterprise" (WEF, 2018), and the "Digital Divide" (IMF, 2020). The latter is a popular term to highlight the gap between those who have access to digital technology and the internet, and those who have not.

Intertwined with digital technology studies, are communication and media theories. A key figure within the study of media discourse has been Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan introduced "the medium is the message" to express how technology impacts human relationships and attitudes, and how mass media has created a "global village" (De Breuker, 2020; McLuhan, Fiore, & Agel, 1968). In the last decades, communication and media theories, but also other disciplines, talk about "the Information Age" (Keniston & Kumar, 2003; Gálik & Modrzejewski, 2014; Lee, et al., 2018) to describe the temporary outcome of the techno-digital revolution in a large part of the world.

Recently, the role of online social media platforms has been critically assessed in relation to politics and voting. Illustrative is the documentary film *The Great Hack* (2019), which addresses the recent data scandal of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica. The documentary exposes how digital technology enabled voters' manipulation and political fraud in the context of the American presidential elections of 2016 and the Brexit Campaign in the United Kingdom that same year (Noujaim & Amer, 2019). Besides online media, other aspects of digitalisation have come under critical investigation as well, giving incentives for books such as *Technically wrong: Sexist apps, biased algorithms, and other threats of toxic tech* (Wachter-Boettcher, 2017), *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (Noble, 2018) and *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism* (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Characteristic for digitalisation is that the interest in the subject extends beyond academics. Digitalisation offers chances and challenges for entrepreneurs, politicians,

artists, and health workers. In other words, it is omnipresent in all corners of contemporary society and thus the subject of animated public debates and an inspiration for films, books, podcasts et cetera.

2.1.2 Decolonisation: a controversial topic

In relation to decolonisation with regard to Africa, the early literature and lasting inspiration are the works of renowned post-colonial writers and ideologists. Particularly the works of Frantz Fanon (Peau noire, masques blancs, 1952; Les Damnés de la terre, 1961) continue to be highly influential, but also *Orientalism* (1978) of Edward Said, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and the books of African independence leaders such as Aime Césaire (1950), and Kwame Nkrumah (1965; 1970) have had lasting impact on decolonisation and related subjects.

Although the contemporary upsurge in the popularity of decolonisation as a topic might draw inspiration from the past, it shows some distinctive features as well. Within the wave of decolonisation of the last decade, there is a lot of attention for intersectionality (Rutazibwa, 2018). Decolonial studies have incorporated Black feminist theories and have cross-cut national or continental boundaries. Renowned names in this aspect are Afro-American civil rights activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Angela Davis (Higashida, 2011). At the same time, there is an increased focus on the local context. For example, decolonisation of public space in former colonising nations is high on the agenda (Ryckbosch, 2020). Moreover, the current movement is ever more characterised by a largely bottom-up approach and participation by people from different backgrounds.

Not surprisingly and similar as with digitalisation, decolonisation goes beyond the boundaries of scholarship. It is touched upon by people from all professions, incorporated in their work and embodied by their life. An illustrative example is the work and figure of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, most notably her award-winning novel *Americanah* (2013), which is partly auto-biographic and is concerned with feminism and racism in Africa, America, and Europe.

Decolonisation, especially its bottom-up dimension relates to other societal issues such as (anti-)racism. In the Belgian context of the last years, influential voices in the public debate stem from Olivia U. Rutazibwa, Dalilla Hermans, Heleen Debeuckelaere, Nadia Nsayi, Melat G. Nigussie among others. Their work is presented in many forms, including published books such as *Het laatste wat ik nog wil zeggen over racisme* (Hermans, 2014)*, Zwart* (Sherif & Rouw, 2018)*, Dochter van de dekolonisatie* (Nsayi, 2020), and *Being (Imposed Upon)* (Debeuckelaere, et al., 2020). They are also regularly publishing in mainstream media such as the newspapers De Standaard and De Morgen, magazines such as Knack and Charlie, and the public Flemish broadcast VRT. However, most of their activity is self-published in the shape of Tweets, Instagram and other social media posts, op-eds, and blog posts.

Other recent Belgian work on decolonisation and anti-racism includes performative art such as Luk Parceval with the theatre play 'Black: The sorrows of Belgium' (Parceval, 2019), and music, for example, Roméo Elvis' song 'La Belgique d'Afrique' (Pandzou & Kandolo, 2019). Overall, these works clearly carry out an activist message or a call to decolonise, to be anti-racist or to raise awareness beyond a level of mere information transmission.

Debates on the colonial past and decolonisation often spark controversy and seem particularly sensitive for polarisation and political recuperation (Pandzou & Kandolo, 2019; Goddeeris, 2019). Globally, it led to books such as *Why I No Longer Talk To White People About Race* (Eddo-Lodge, 2018), *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018), *Reverse Racism* (Ekezie, 2019), and *Witte onschuld* (Wekker, 2017). On the one hand, many of these books are bestsellers, especially in the context of the recent wave of anti-racist and Black Life Matter protests. On the other hand, opposing voices accuse them of being "leftist" (Reinhardt, 2016), "politically correct" (Kornelsen, 2017), "moralising" (Witte, 2018), and supporting a "call-out culture" (Beeckman, 2020) or creating a "cancel culture" (Ellison & Izadi, 2020).

Because decolonisation strikes an emotional chord by many people, it has a high resonance on online media (van der Laan, 2018; Corbu & Negrea-Busuioc, 2020;

Jacobs, 2020). The transnational character of these platforms leads to global networks and movement revolving around these issues (Hemer & Tufte, 2005). Due to its large scale on a geographical and temporal level, decolonisation has been criticized as too much of a "container concept", leaving it meaningless (Black Speaks Back, 2019; Mpoma & Amponsah, 2020).

2.2   Theoretical and conceptual framework

Key to a fruitful analysis of digitalisation and decolonisation is a clear framing of the applied theories and the used terminology and concepts. When researching the two terms, it becomes clear that they have been appropriated through time by many people with diverging agendas. Consequently, to pinpoint their meaning can pose a challenge.

In this thesis, both digitalisation and decolonisation are conceptualised as social issues which got politicised by situating them in historical and cultural contexts. This dynamic contextualisation also implicates them in the process of data collecting and analysing. In this way, the meanings of these rather abstract concepts are constructed in such a manner that the findings can be placed in a relative perspective and thus finally be aligned. This approach is an adaptation of the postmodern critical theory. Thereby, meaning is seen as unstable because of the rapid transformation in social structures (Henrickson & McKelvey, 2002; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). As substantiated by critical theory, language and communication, social construction, power relations, and symbolism are the focal points of analysis within social structures (Van Dijk, 1993; 2001; Fairclough, 2013).

Fundamental to a thorough understanding of this theory are local manifestations of digitalisation and decolonisation. For this reason, concrete examples and illustrative cases are applied throughout the analysis and discussion. Nonetheless, certain general features and leading interpretations are defined for both concepts in the following paragraphs.

2.2.1 The concept of digitalisation

Digitalisation describes the process of converting text, pictures, and sound into digits, expressed in the common binary numerical system (0-1), to be processed by computer systems (OED, 2020). The internet is known as one of the most innovative and influential outcomes of this process. It dates back to 1969 when the American military application ARPANET served as the first packet switching computer network (Abbate, 2000). In the 1980s, personal computers came on the market. Consecutively, the 1990s brought computers that were more customer friendly, in particular Windows 95 (De Breuker, 2020).

Digitalisation and especially information and communications technology (ICT) underlie the wave of contemporary globalisation, characterised by widening, deepening and accelerating processes of interconnectedness between societies as well as individuals (Faulconbridge & Beaverstock, 2009). Processing and access speeds of computers and information devices keep on increasing and memory capacity keeps growing. Moreover, the expansion of wireless connection made digital consumption more mobile. Consequently, the 'Digital Revolution' or 'Fourth Revolution' progressed radically and has a far-reaching impact, compared to the foregoing industrial revolutions (Tella, 2020).

The internet and also other products of digitalisation, including mobile applications, have engendered a common culture, 'culture' in the sense of "the collecting programming of the mind" (Hofstede & Usunier, 2003, p. 160). Communication and language, values, and rules are structured through digitalisation and play important roles in people's ways of life. Digital culture can be further divided into subcultures, which stand in interaction with offline cultures and are centred around shared interests, experiences, or other features that people have in common (Recabarren, Nussbaum, & Leiva, 2008).

2.2.2 The concept of decolonisation

In order to define decolonisation, we first need to demarcate colonisation. This is a difficult task when considering Cooper's (2005) comment on colonial studies that often

"the tools of analysis we use emerged from the history we are trying to examine" (p. 4).

Broadly stated, European colonisation in Africa leaned on three main pillars: religion, economy, and administration. The infiltration, occupation, incorporation, separation, and classification of African societies through these power corridors were coercive, violent, exploitative, disruptive, invidious, and highly consequential for the further development of African nations (Mamdani, 2018).

However, it is far from sufficient to limit the effects of colonisation to the African continent. The principal meaning of colonisation centres people rather than the foreign occupation of land. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) laid bare how colonisation touched upon the core of European culture, and cannot be seen simply as something from far away, in 'exotic' places (Cooper, 2005). It is essential to look at Europe itself as well, beyond the practical action of colonisation, and include the ideological attitudes and policies of colonialism that were – and are – embedded in Western societies. Colonialism motivated and framed Eurocentric productions and representations emphasizing or creating differences, power relationships, and hierarchies, on the base of self-proclaimed progress in the sense of evolution and civilisation (Mahanty, 1984). Colonialism relates to what decolonial scholar and professor Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls "coloniality", namely "an invisible power structure that sustains colonial relations of exploitation and domination long after the end of direct colonialism" (2012, p. 48). As a form of imperial power, it is important to understand that coloniality entails both a general condition and specific forms (Cooper, 2005).

Coloniality builds on prior power structures that enabled slavery, and relates to later forms of modern slavery, and neo-colonial practices. Neo-colonialism in its turn denotes a critique of a global system exploiting those who are economically fragile to the benefit of the financially wealthy, the latter including former colonising powers, capitalist companies or multi-nationals (Pillay, 2003). These powers influence not only the economy in the fragile and thus dependant states but also the politics and socio-cultural values through tight constraints imposed by financial institutions, multilateral

organisations, and development cooperation (Tandon, 2016; AJ+, 2020). A possible constraint with neo-colonialism is that the concept might be too simplistic and consequently not well-fitted to analyse precisely what has changed and what has not, since the end of formal colonisation (Cooper, 2005).

Investigations in patterns and transformations of colonialism through time and across space have also given rise to concepts such as "textual colonisation" or "metaphoric colonisation". Hereby, colonisation as a term is stripped from its specific historical characteristics and misused to denote *any* power imbalance. Due to the bandwagon effect in colonial studies producing repetitiveness, distortion, and an essentialised trope of otherness or alterity, the risk implicated by such terminologies is that colonialism seemingly appears everywhere and hence nowhere (Cooper, 2005, p. 6). Therefore, this dissertation gives attention to specific contexts and takes the long-term history of colonisation into account. Moreover, such contextual embeddedness allows for the roles of all actors involved to be addressed in a non-dualistic, pluralistic way. To go beyond one-dimensional and reductive notions of the colonised, as if they were/are passive victims, is a necessity for every critical analysis.

Decolonisation today is a process framing debates and discussions that aim to dismantle (neo-)colonial structures and that envision an anti-colonial society. Yet, this vision has no pre-conceived or teleological ending point because its course is not linear nor singular (Cooper, 2005; Eddo-Lodge, 2018). After all, social change itself is best described as "lumpy, uneven, unpredictable, and discontinuous" (Sewell, 2005). Both in history and contemporary, decolonisation is closely connected to movements such as anti-slavery, anti-colonialism, anti-apartheid, and anti-racism. These international links to a long-lasting struggle for freedom and equality burden the mission of current activists because the previous efforts of these movements did not "fully overthrow the inequalities they challenged" nor did they entirely "escape the frameworks of social order that imperial expansion produced" (Cooper, 2005, p. 31).

The struggle for decolonisation emphasises inclusivity, which requires an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 2017; Eddo-Lodge, 2018). Such an approach incorporates the

theories from *inter alia* gender, black, subaltern, and ableism studies. Furthermore, decolonisation in the way it is interpreted in this thesis primarily targets European societies who were involved in the formal colonisation overseas and carry out the implications and consequences of this history, both spatially and mentally. However, it is important to keep in mind that Europe cannot and should not be interpreted as a monolithic unit nor without change. So, not all that is labelled or perceived as 'Eurocentric', 'Western' or 'Global North' is true for all European countries today (Cooper, 2005; Rosling, Rosling, & Rönnlund, 2018). On a secondary level, decolonisation relates to issues of racism, colourism, inequality, and discrimination on a global scale.

For this dissertation, the political scientist Olivia U. Rutazibwa's strategic framework for decolonisation is adopted. Inspired by Dr. Meera Sabaratnam's work on Eurocentrism in international relations (2013), the aim of Rutazibwa's three-fold framework is to see white hegemony, which became ingrained in global society through Western-led imperialism and colonialism, ended. The three legs are de-silencing, de-mythologising, and anti-colonial decolonisation. Respectively, they address issues of epistemology, ontology, and normativity. They comprise simultaneously the deconstruction of systemic injustices and the reconstruction of a more equal, inclusive, and fair society. The framework incorporates both small scale change and global transformations, bridging the gaps between theory and practice on the one hand and representation and materiality on the other (Rutazibwa, 2018).

2.3   Research methods and data collection

In order to investigate the relationship between digitalisation and decolonisation in a wholesome yet demarcated manner, I chose an Africanistic approach. With a focus on Africa, the diaspora, and Afro-European relations, it allowed for flexibility across the disciplines of all major social sciences, including literature, anthropology, sociology, economic and political science, psychology, and history.

I opted for a qualitative research method to analyse the existing secondary data, predominantly from online sources. However, in a broad interpretation of participatory

observation, I can be considered as a digital consumer that is part of the research process as well, given the fact that digitalisation and decolonisation both have a large online dimension (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Because of the high popularity of the subjects of digitalisation and decolonisation online and the abundance of related information and literature that was easily accessible through the internet, these methods sufficed to answer the research questions thoroughly and appropriately in a format fitted for a master's dissertation.

My corpus for analysis consisted of data derived from published books, the internet, Google, social media, particularly Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, YouTube, Netflix, newspapers and other websites, including blogs such as *Africa Is A Country* and *Okay Africa*. The choice to make use of many daily (re)sources, next to scholarly literature, stemmed from the aim to connect to a broad public, to stay close to my own experience and to incorporate knowledge and expertise produced outside of academia.

The added value of this study consists of the combination of various forms of knowledge production and situating different and often diverging information into the bigger picture. In this way, I wanted to tackle both theoretical issues, on a more abstract level, and practical ones, on a more daily basis. The issues of concern here regard the ones produced by a mismatch between the process of digitalisation in relation to decolonisation.

I looked for diversification in sources based on the professional, educational, and socio-cultural background of the authors (speakers, interviewees, directors, activists…) and the orientation, geographical and political, of the publishers (websites, newspapers, magazines, organisations…). Yet, much of the collected corpus was the result of a snowball effect, engendered by following links and references that were proposed on social media, news sites, and within articles, both academic and journalistic.

Because the study was conducted in Belgium, there was relatively little censorship or other obstacles hampering full access to information. However, it is hard to fully

comprehend the impact of the selective mechanisms that online platforms apply as they are owned by private companies which are driven by capitalistic profit and subject to EU policy restrictions (European Commission, 2020; Google Scholar, 2020).

Another circumstantial criterium was language: all used material is either in English or in Dutch. Noting the rich linguistic landscape of the African continent (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2019), this is a big constraint, albeit acceptable because of the widespread use and application of English as a *lingua franca* (Schneider, 2020).

Furthermore, preference has been given to material of a recent date, especially considering that digitalisation and decolonisation are ongoing processes and thus constantly changing. Yet, the actuality of the topics creates a continuous flow of production about them, including many debates, policy changes, and studies, in addition to the large existing pool of information. This inevitably limited the present study in terms that the treatment of the subjects is far from conclusive.

As mentioned previously, most data material is collected on the internet (articles, blog posts, op-eds, documentaries…) and complemented by academic literature and published books in print. Each source was cross-checked with other sources, traced in terms of trustworthiness, and linked to scholarly publications.

The first step in the performed analysis of the selected sources was based on the specific content, revolving around relevant themes and ideas with regard to digitalisation and/or decolonisation. As a second step, the narrative was analysed to trace tropes, paradoxes, and other ambiguities. For the third step, a broader discourse analysis allowed for the communication carried within the sources to be related to their social and historical context. These combined analyses made room for discussing a proposal for decolonisation (Rutazibwa, 2018) by applying to the digital sphere the three key strategies, namely de-silencing, de-mythologising, and anti-colonial decolonisation.

The above description shows that qualitative research from an Africanistic perspective holds a high degree of subjectivity. After all, its methodology is relatively less controlled and more interpretive than methodologies of other disciplines or quantitative studies. Moreover, as the history and development of disciplines such as African studies have been complicit in colonial projects themselves, a critical self-reflection with attention to the ambiguity of the relationship was required (Assad, 1979). Consequently, my own positionality as a researcher had to be taken into account.

I am a digital consumer. Born in Belgium in 1998, I grew up with the internet and digital technology is part of my daily life on multiple levels: socially (social media), educationally (internet, search engines, Wikipedia), and economically (mobile banking), just to mention a few. Although focusing on Africa and the African diaspora, a delineation of which I am an outsider as a white Belgian, I am part of the decolonisation process. After all, my maternal grandparents lived and worked in Belgian Congo during the 1950s. In this sense, it can be misleading to interpret the focus on Africa and people of African descent as if Europe and white Europeans are not concerned. Moreover, I grew up in a society that bears the consequences of its colonial history, both materially and ideologically.

3 Analysis and discussion

3.1 A 'positive' view on digitalisation

3.1.1 Digital Afropolitanism

Digitalisation goes hand in hand with the latest wave of globalisation. Digital innovations in communication and new ways of transport have reduced time and distance virtually to a single space (Faulconbridge & Beaverstock, 2009).

Anyone anywhere with internet access can effortlessly watch South-African comedian Trevor Noah in a video recorded in the United States of America, criticising the renovation of the Belgian Africa Museum in Tervuren, Brussels (The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 2018). By means of the internet, Noah joins the debate on repatriation of colonial collections, on subjects and places only virtually known to him, made real through digital technology. This example shows the far-reaching impact of digitalisation. The digital extension of the debate on Afro-European relations makes it inclusive not only for the involved European and African parties, but also for journalists, scholars, experts, and everyone else with an opinion.

The apparent egalitarian infrastructure of digital space opens room for viewpoints that break with national divisions or a split world in centre and periphery. As a communicative and organisational tool, digitalisation can enforce longer existing movements such as pan-Africanism. It seemingly surpasses logistical hurdles such as visa restrictions.

The online sphere can also help people to find a social 'place' by engendering a common culture through shared experiences. Illustrative is the blog post 'I am a Homosexual, Mum' written by Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina (2014), which sentiments found resonance with other black African homosexual men all over the world. Digitalisation can thus give rise to new identitarian – in the broadest interpretation of the term – concepts such as Afropolitanism (Pahl, 2016).

Although not limited to the digital sphere but undeniably facilitated by it, Afropolitanism is a way to establish a position in the world, characterised by mobility through education, work, and travelling, and mixing of cultures, nationalities, and experiences. Moreover, it is an expression of a certain disposition *towards* the world through a connection with 'Africa' (Pahl, 2016). It links people from, within, and to Africa, and can, for instance, serve as a literary network for African (diasporic) authors. In the words of professor Chielozona Eze, Afropolitanism includes "a revision of African identity in its abandonment of victimhood as a starting point of discourse and self-perception" (2015, p. 240).

The concept of Afropolitanism allows people of African descent to grasp the possibilities of globalisation, such as a wide reach of audience in a rather direct manner and a feeling of connectivity across the diaspora, and to criticise asymmetrical power dynamics and global injustices such as racism and Afrophobia (Pahl, 2016). Digital technology and online space provide the means to put Afropolitanism as a concept into action. Illustrative are the TED talks of the renowned Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Freely accessible on YouTube and the website TED.com, her inspiring speeches have been viewed millions of times across Africa and the world (TED, 2009; TEDGlobal, 2009; TEDxEuston, 2012; TEDxTalks, 2013).

3.1.2 Digital freedom

Cyberspace offers a way to avoid societal or institutional bottlenecks that are structurally biased towards non-conformists. In many Western white-dominated countries, such bottlenecks are felt mostly by black and other ethnic minority (BME) people, for instance in the publishing industry (Eddo-Lodge, 2018; Lepphaille, 2020). By self-publishing online, authors can circumvent traditional hierarchies. Simultaneously, they can widen their readership. The audience of blog posts or social media posts may be constituted by different people than those reached through publications that require paid subscriptions (Pahl, 2016). In this way, the internet can serve as a take-off for establishing a following.

Digital platforms provide the possibility for authors to directly communicate with their readers. This interactive dimension is what appeals Afropolitan creative centipede Teju Cole to use for his online projects. He aims inclusive social thinking and peaceful internationalism from an afro-centred perspective (Pahl, 2016). Next to literature and writing, other creative and artistic work is created by digital means or exhibited on online platforms. In this sense, digital technology can work democratising and liberating for the Arts (Kanobana, 2020).

Illustrative for this innovative form of artistic freedom is the work of Nigerian 'New Media' artist Alexis Tsegba. With a master's degree in Creative and Media Enterprise of the British University of Warwick, Tsegba explores Afrofuturism in an eclectic manner by digitally composing images that combine painting, sketching, photography, landscape, portraiture, and architecture. Afrofuturism in Tsegba's work embodies the complex relationship between African cultures and the use of technology, going against prejudices that depict closeness to nature as equalising backwardness (Lang, 2019).

3.1.3 Online anti-racist activism

These days, social media provide the platforms by excellence to drive and support socio-political movements across the world. Examples of such movements which use(d) social media platforms for mobilisation include the Arab Spring in the early 2010s (Lotan, et al., 2011; Eltanawy & Wiest, 2011) and more recently Black Lives Matter (BLM) (Choudhury, Jhaver, Sugar, & Weber, 2016; Maqbool, 2020).

The activist movement of BLM originates from the United States of America to address the (police) violence against black communities but broadened to fight all forms of racial injustice, discrimination, and inequality against people of African descent (PAD). The initial reason was the death of a black teenager, Trayvon Martin, in Florida after being shot by an American citizen, George Zimmerman, who was not black. The hashtag *#BlackLivesMatter* was launched on social media in 2013 by three black American community organisers. The initiators emphasized group-centred leadership

as a guiding principle, which has been facilitated through the use of social media (Bastos, Mercea, & Charpentier, 2015).

The hashtag and overall infrastructure of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram provide tools to organise and exchange information for offline activities as well. Hashtags enable knowledge exchange, updates, and an up-to-date overview of the situation. Online mobilisation led to protests, rallies, and boycotts across the US and all over the world (Maqbool, 2020). This new online network distinguishes the BLM movement from previous efforts such as the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the Black Feminist movement. Online networks allow high geographical decentralisation while keeping a sense of coordination, albeit without formalised hierarchical structure (Choudhury, Jhaver, Sugar, & Weber, 2016).

The high decentralisation of cyberspace extends the participation in discussions on and advocacy for anti-racism beyond the official movement. Social media provides a platform for groups *and* individuals. Especially in countries where black and minority ethnic (BME) people are under-represented in formal or mainstream media and other institutions, as is the case in Belgium (OHCHR, 2019), online social media can fill a gap in order to put one's opinion out there (Ray & Fuentes, 2020). Other digital means also bridge voids with regard to BME people's interests; as Afro-American icon and actor Will Smith puts it "Racism is not getting worse, it's getting filmed" (2016). Testimonies and video images showing mistreatment on the base of race are a way to put public pressure and force a conversation. Most recently, on June 2nd, 2020, people from all over the world posted a black square on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook to express solidarity with the victims of police violence towards black people in the United States of America, and to address racism in general (Macnack, 2020). This kind of action is often initiated or backed up by celebrities, influencers, or other public figures. Many of them use their online media profiles to express social engagement.

Whereas formal media often hesitate to use strong language and instead prefer euphemisms such as "racially charged" or "racially insensitive", online activists are

rather the opposite, publishing under hashtags such as *#racist* and *#WhiteSupremacy* (Ray & Fuentes, 2020). Again, the directness that is characteristic of social media is very visible in this type of online practices and movements as they can circumvent traditional forms of publicity.

3.1.4 Digitalisation for economic development

One of the high hopes associated with the digital revolution is the creation of new economic opportunities. In 2019, Africa had 122 million active users of mobile financial services, which equalises more than half of the world total. Digital technologies enable innovative businesses to address massive unmet demand. An example is Jumia, a Nigerian e-commerce start-up that focuses on innovativeness, convenience, and affordable online goods and services in a sustainable way (Leke, 2019). Currently, Jumia has over four million customers in fourteen African countries and a net worth exceeding one billion dollars (Jumia, 2020).

In the agricultural sector, Internet and Communication Technology (ICT) can reduce rural isolation and facilitate the provision of and access to formal and informal education. It also reduces transaction costs immensely. As such, it leads to higher economic capacity and productivity with wider citizen participation in democratic processes (FAO, 2018). Agriculture currently counts for fifteen per cent of Africa's GDP and is the main source of employment for rural youth in least-developed countries (World Bank, 2019). Regarding sustainable development, ICT can be thus an accelerator and a lever for economic growth.

The future holds even more promise with the further evolution of what is commonly called the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" (Lee, et al., 2018). In line with the foregoing industrial revolutions of the past four centuries, it revolves around the development, innovation, and growing impact of science and technology. The Fourth Revolution specifically centres digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence. Within this context, the World Bank supports the African Union's "Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa". The strategy involves rapid economic growth, job creation, and access to basic services such as health care and education, but also e-commerce for instance (World

Bank, 2019). Digital technology can also serve as an instrument to fight poverty, as it has for some Asian countries that progressed from low to middle-income (UNCTAD, 2019).

3.2   The downside of digitalisation

3.2.1 Internet's illusions

In a return to the starting quote of this dissertation, the intellectual montage of Apple's 'Think Different' campaign is an early example of how digital technology can be strategically used to "erase time, level out class and bleach out race" (Shields, 2001, p. 208). The image gesturing the triumph of Muhammad Ali as an Afro-American Muslim athlete is followed by a similar gesture made by Ted Turner, a white businessman and media magnate. As these historical figures are visually connected, our mind is 'programmed' to make sense of this shared place, as if all these individuals contributed in equal ways to the betterment of all by thinking differently, going beyond crucial aspects of their lives such as economic power and social status (Shields, 2001).

The Apple advertisement's structure, namely the juxtaposition of the images with the brand, creates an amphigoric perspective. With this commercial strategy, the apparent meaning, namely that these innovators share a common vision with Apple, proves to be meaningless. After all, these figures have in reality no connection to each other nor to Apple (Shields, 2001). Such a perspective demonstrates how 'anything' is possible on the internet, as images get stripped of their material conditions and contexts.

Not only does anything seem possible on the internet, but there is also the illusion that 'everything' is on the internet, that it contains all there is to know. However, the archival function of digital media is limited and constrained by technical errors as it requires permanent updates (Varis & Cramer, 2020). Besides, digital technology is not only a way to store information or history, but it is also a tool for effacing or 'deleting' it (DuVernay, 2016). Software designer Sitati Kiyutu and graphic designer Dicky Hokie have pointed out the struggle to find anything else than stereotypical scenes while sourcing stock photos of 'Africa' (Lo, 2018). Moreover, digital programming and media content are mutually self-referential and reinforcing (Brants & De Haan, 2010).

Consequently, a gap in the data or the abundance of one-sided imagery can lead to misrepresentation of an entire continent.

Looking at the language settings of digital technology, African languages are typically hugely under-represented. There are approximately 2100 endogenous African languages, which embodies thirty per cent of languages worldwide. In comparison, endogenous European languages equalise more or less 3.5 per cent (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2019). Yet, in Facebook's language settings, African languages are categorised together with those of the Middle East. The whole category includes only nineteen choices. At the same time, Facebook's European language settings are spread over two categories 'East' and 'West'. These categories provide fifty options, including regiolects such as Breton, which is spoken in one of the thirteen regions of France (Facebook, Inc., 2019).

The Facebook example illustrates the linguistic and consequently cultural bias of cyberspace that favours English and other Western languages. Cultural disparities characterised already the early days of the Internet. In the early 2000s, around sixty to eighty per cent of all websites in the world were written in English (Keniston & Kumar, 2003). In this way, a language barrier is imposed that relates in many countries to class and education as these often demand the knowledge of English or other 'dominant' languages such as French, Chinese, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Japanese that constitute the other twenty to thirty per cent (Keniston & Kumar, 2003).

The internet can also give the illusion of empowerment while hiding and naturalising the centralising technology that world-wide computer systems represent. In fact, these systems largely reproduce dominant power ideologies. Through the advertisement of 'Think Different' a utopian construction is projected whereby an Apple-dominated world is filled with consumers who, paradoxically, all "think different" (Shields, 2001). The apparent egalitarianism and democracy of digital space prove to be more of an illusion than a reality.

3.2.2 A colonial history of digitalisation

To understand that the gaps and distortions mentioned above are neither coincidences nor accidents, a historical account of digital technology is helpful. Numerical and algorithmic thinking which undergirds digital applications and online software can be traced back to the post-Enlightenment fixation on classification. A systematic ranking regulated the bureaucracy of European conduct in 'new' territories during the nineteenth century (Cooper, 2005). Africans got segregated and classified in different categories by standardised processes, designed by European scientists (Varis & Cramer, 2020). These 'sciences' took eurocentrism and white supremacy both as a starting and ending point in their studies in the pursuit of colonisation and as a way to legitimise it. The resulting categories, called 'tribes' regarding Africans and 'races' regarding all peoples, incorporated (pseudo)biological characteristics and cultural features.

Of course, reality did not conform to these rigid categories (Newbury, 2001), but the system allowed erasure and manipulation of facts in order to fulfil its goals, albeit far from perfectly (Spear, 2003; Mathys, 2017). Post-colonial scholar Frederick Cooper notes that "subordination was no longer fate to which anyone might be subject, but a status assigned to specific people" (2005, p. 28). The information gathered by scientists and administrators led to 'clean' tangible data, which later fitted the computer format. It also fitted in a long European tradition of writing to store and preserve knowledge at the expense of other traditions such as oral storytelling. The logistics of imperialism and colonialism required rigorously programmed systems, for instance, to organise forced labour and tax collection with only a relatively small number of colonial administrators (Stoler & Cooper, 1997).

As previously mentioned in the theoretical framework, the first packet switching computer network was ARPANET, a military application. It was a technology developed to arm the United States of America in the Vietnam War of 1955-1975 and the Cold War of 1947-1991 (Bates, 1995). In this way, digital technology was aggravating colonial tensions and solidifying colonial borders, although direct colonisation had ended. In 1971, only twenty-three computers with this 'prehistoric'

form of internet existed, and they were in the hands of the American Defence Department (Varis & Cramer, 2020).

The World Wide Web (WWW) saw the light in the early 1990s. The success of the American-invented Internet over other existing commercial network providers such as CompuServe or AOL and over public or national network systems that existed in Europe, resulted from its combination of using public money to develop a public system and upscaling it through commercial institutions (Crossman, 1997; Varis & Cramer, 2020). In other words, from the start, the internet was permeated by American society and private commercial companies.

The digital economy thrived on the racialised inequalities that came forth out of colonialism. These inequalities became embedded in geopolitical structures of the second half of the twentieth century (Amrute, 2020). During that time, the driving ideologies were capitalism and liberalism, which also facilitated the rise of the internet and shaped the digital technology industry (Varis & Cramer, 2020). According to anthropologist Sareeta Amrute, "historical racializations of casual labor in plantation economies illuminates how casualness marks laborers whose rights can be muted and allows corporations to deny their culpability in promoting discrimination within and outside of the tech industry" (2020, p. 1).

Up to today, tech industries in developed countries massively employ visa-dependent migrant workers from developing countries. Race is hereby used as a marker of productive diversity for firms. On the base of their origin, migrant workers are classified as casual and easily replaceable (Amrute, 2020).

At the dawn of digitalisation, political and economic leaders seemed to believe that the internet industry would regulate itself and they imposed little state regulation. It led to jurisdictional policies and measures lumping behind the self-invented rules and actions of commercial companies such as Microsoft, Apple, Google, Facebook, and Amazon (Varis & Cramer, 2020). Consequently, migrant workers are under the rule and control of tech firms, dependant on them for their visa and thus pressured to silently endure

exploitation. Yet, due to these workers' visibility, these migrants are often politically framed as alien job stealers (Amrute, 2020). In other words, whereas the socio-political system should protect migrant workers against this form of modern slavery, it is attacking them, which makes their position in society even more fragile.

Furthermore, the infrastructural side of the digital revolution relates to a longer European centred history as well. Digital technology came forth out of the development of electronic communication technologies that started with the telegraph and telephone in the nineteenth century. It evolved over the broadcast media, namely radio and television, of the mid-twentieth century to more recent networks such as the Internet (Keniston & Kumar, 2003). Moreover, the first network of fibre optic cables followed the colonial navigation routes and came on top of the copper cables of the telegraph network that connected the British Empire with its colonies (Rezaire, 2020).

Other digital innovations such as photography and film follow a similar evolution by centring whiteness in their design to then be used as white hegemonic tools along colonial lines. White skin used to be the measuring stick for calibrating colours until corporate furniture and chocolate manufacturers complained to Kodak to fix colour photography's bias (Lewis, 2019). The visual exploitation of African subjects by travellers, journalists, photographers, documentary and filmmakers from the Global North sustains issues of inequality and stereotyping through poverty porn, voluntourism, and white saviour complexes (Unite For Sight, 2010; Weber, 2018).

It is a necessity to place digitalisation as an outcome of the colonial past, not merely as a separate modern invention existing here and now. Fragmentation of history and institutionalised colonial amnesia (Rutazibwa, 2018) allow the misinterpretation of global inequalities, including digital divides, as natural or isolated situations instead of the result of perpetuated power imbalances. Historical framing helps to explain the material, technological, and self-proclaimed moral superiority of the Global North over the Global South and to undermine its legitimacy (Rutazibwa, 2018).

3.2.3 Digital divides

Not everybody has the same level of access to the internet or other information and communication technology (ICT). The term "digital divide" arose at the end of the twentieth century to conceptualise the division between those with and without telephone access. Later, the same term was applied to address all inequalities in access to other digital innovations and technologies, including the internet (Adeleke, 2020).

Despite the large-scale expansion of the internet and ICT, almost half of the world's population today is offline and thus excluded from the benefits of digitalisation. Different demographics and regions still show large digital divisions. In 2019, more than two-thirds of Africans South of the Sahara lacked internet access compared to less than twenty per cent of Europeans (UNCTAD, 2019). Furthermore, an estimated number of half a billion Africans lack proof of a 'legal identity' such as birth registration or a valid ID (Desai, Diofasi, & Lu, 2018), which locks them out of access to basic (online) services and e-commerce (World Bank, 2019).

Within the African continent itself, there are also discrepancies between countries. For instance, Nigeria hosts eighty-two per cent of the continent's telecom subscribers and twenty-nine per cent of internet usage, while the country's population's size is more or less fifteen per cent of the total African population (UNCTAD, 2019; Worldometer, 2020). Contributing to this high number of digital consumers in Nigeria is the country's high attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI), especially in the telecommunication sector (Hasbi & Dubus, 2020).

Within countries as well, there are digital divides according to urbanity, with rural areas being disadvantaged, age, because youngsters are particularly more connected, and gender, as women have about thirty-four per cent less digital access than men in Africa South of the Sahara (Keniston & Kumar, 2003; FAO, 2018; Reiter, 2020). These discrepancies are due to lack of affordability, literacy, education and the appropriate infrastructure with regard to ICT (UNCTAD, 2019).

Parts of the necessary infrastructure to enable digitalisation are satellites and broadband fibre optic cables (Keniston & Kumar, 2003). Only an expansion of mobile broadband of ten per cent in Africa could increase the GDP per capita by two and a half per cent (ITU, 2018). However, traditional investment models in digital infrastructure are discouraged due to high deployment costs, regulatory barriers, and poor returns on capital (Reiter, 2020).

3.2.4 Digital crime

Digital technology and online space bring with them distinctive forms of crime. In Belgium, cyber criminality is peaking and underlying a shift from offline to online crime (Goedgebeur, 2020). Globally, cybersecurity company Cisco blocks on average 19.7 billion threats every day (Meads, 2017). Research shows how convicted white-collar offenders, which includes those committing cybercrime, in the United States, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands are typically male, white, and from the middle class of society (Phillips & Bowling, 2017, p. 171). On top of this, the global financial crisis of 2007-2009 was marked by widespread fraud in the mortgage securitisation industry. This fraud was enabled by the lack of transparency of digitalisation, including digital investments and value creation. It was predominantly committed by white men of economically developed countries. However, when looking at the prison population of Western countries, this demography is not reflected as people of African descent (PAD) are largely overrepresented compared to Caucasians (DuVernay, 2016; Phillips & Bowling, 2017).

One of the explanatory causes for the situation described above, namely white people are underrepresented in prisons, is found in the wider cultural and political-economic context for white-collar and corporate offending. Globally, the (digital) enterprise culture promotes individualism, free-market principles and deregulation. Contemporary capitalism requires the prioritisation of profit "leading to amoral calculations on the part of corporations" which "shapes the extent to which such crime is seen as more or less acceptable" (Slapper & Tombs, 1999, p. 41). In other words, certain crimes are institutionally supported (Phillips & Bowling, 2017).

A cause for the overrepresentation of PAD in American and European prisons is racial discrimination by the criminal justice system, state media, and other institutions towards black people and people of colour (DuVernay, 2016; Phillips & Bowling, 2017; Rothstein, 2017). Moreover, the digital tools used by police and surveillance institutions such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), including facial recognition software, are reinforcing the racist biases of these institutions (O'Neil, 2016; Buolamwini, 2017).

Research has proven biases along lines of age, race, and ethnicity in facial recognition software (Peters, 2020). The biases stem from training data sets used for facial recognition software. On average, these kinds of data sets exist out of more than seventy-seven per cent of men, and for more than eighty-three per cent of white people. As a result, studies show the margin of error by white males to be 0.8 per cent, compared with more than 34.7 per cent by dark skinned females (Wachter-Boettcher, 2017). Another possible issue with data sets used for facial recognition tools is that some technology developers pluck images from social media sites without consent. For example, the American company Clearview AI was taken to court for stealing three billion images of the net (Peters, 2020). Clearview AI's tools are developed for and used by both private sector companies and law enforcement agencies.

Through these combined biases of digital technology and the companies and institutions that (mis)use them, visible minorities, and particularly PAD, are targeted, intimidated and kept from opposing the government. In most Western countries, these are governments in which black and minority ethnic people and their interests are underrepresented, so these minorities are restricted in their power to change the status quo (DuVernay, 2016; OHCHR, 2019).

On social media, crime and (semi-)criminals also take on a specific form. Internet trolls or cyberbullies spread abusive language or harmful messages (Hawley, 2017; Vicente, 2020), often threatening with rape and death (Nourhussen, 2018). Many people dismiss complaints about it or do not take the abuse seriously, claiming that online abuse is not 'real' (Moran, 2016). Recent research in Flanders on language use on the social media platforms of Twitter and Facebook shows that racist and threatening

language use has tripled between 2015 and 2020. The targets of such hate speech are mainly migrants, asylum seekers, and people with a different skin colour than white. The results are remarkable because Twitter has not gained popularity during this period of time and has been more active in removing offensive content (Cools, 2020). In 2018, research confirms that black female journalists have eighty-four per cent more chance to be the subject of hurtful or hostile tweets compared to white female journalists (Amnesty International, 2018; Krieger, 2019).

3.2.5 Digital cultural imperialism

Americanisation

Globalisation on the base of digitalisation gets often associated with "Americanisation" (Boussebaa, 2020) or an "Anglo-Saxon linguistic and cultural hegemony" (Keniston & Kumar, 2003). The 'Think Different' campaign can serve once more as an illustration. Apple seemingly supports a global culture as different skin colours, gender, sexualities, and nationalities are represented. Yet, the majority is American, and no one in the commercial is born on the African continent. Of course, one advertisement is not representative, but it is a trend visible throughout the digital field. All the big players in the technology field, Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Microsoft, are headquartered in the United States of America.

Moreover, due to differences in wealth and power that led to English being the dominant language in software, most websites are developed by English-speaking populations of nations and city-states like the USA, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Singapore, Hong Kong, and lastly, the only African country, South-Africa (Keniston & Kumar, 2003; Statistica, 2020). Consequently, linguistic and cultural barriers led to low digital skills and demand in African developing countries, hampering digital entrepreneurship (UNCTAD, 2019).

Commercialisation, commodification, and cultural appropriation

People use social media as an expression, reflection, or extension of their identity and social status. As a response, a popular market strategy of technology producers is to brand the consumer instead of the technology itself. Apple sells more products if the

consumer identifies with the corporate myth it creates through its advertisements (Shields, 2001).

The internet allows for the global commodification of what is seen as the 'African' culture such as certain types of rhythmic music or colourful fashion. Yet, such cultural appropriation does not enable these cultural features to simultaneously change the terms of global power relations (Dabiri, 2014). The digital sphere intensifies the interrelation between culture and consumerism. An example on a global level is 'African' music as a category. On a local level, in most African societies with a large discrepancy between those with and without access to digital technology, a digital elite is established (Kajee & Balfour, 2011).

Technology firms like to present themselves as "benevolent leaders that will guide us to a better tomorrow" (Dirksen, 2018). The narratives told by these companies frame their digital applications as neutral instruments of progress and development (Cadwalladr, 2016; Amrute, 2020). Such demagogy echoes a colonial discourse whereby European metropoles claimed that colonisation was a universalising project (Cooper, 2005). Implied by notions of Western-led civilisation, modernisation, and development is the existence of others in need of enlightenment (Tripathy & Mohapatra, 2011). In truth, the motivation behind most colonial and digital enterprises was and is profit through the exploitation of resources, ranging from gold and rubber to personal data (Rezaire, 2020). Besides, tech companies often trade-off the compromise. They link participation to their products with the acceptance of all terms of use. However, users often have no alternative if they do not want to exclude themselves from educational or job opportunities for which online platforms are utilised (Varis & Cramer, 2020).

By diversifying their visual representation and online presence, multinationals can easily tap into different markets, while the actual decision-making level and beneficiary stakeholders are only constituted by an elite (Cordia, 2019). Many brands' and institutions' responses to anti-colonial movements, for example, protests or boycotts

are mainly an attempt to stay meaningful in a changing context while protecting the status-quo (Rutazibwa, 2018).

The same power dynamic applies to the redaction of most newspapers in countries of the Global North. For instance in Belgium and the Netherlands, the journalists, editors, and photographers in charge in the media sector are no reflection of the heterogeneous society about which they write (Matulessy, 2018). Often, they have little affiliation with or knowledge about the topics they address such as racism (Nourhussen, 2018; Krieger, 2019). In this way, white institutions profit from stories or topics regarding PAD and the 'diversity' or 'multiculturality' of their societies, at the expense of PAD. After all, the applied perspective, sometimes describes as "gaze" (Nwankwo, 2020), is highly probable to reproduce stereotypes, Eurocentric biases and misconceptions, and evoke racist, Islamophobic, and/or sexist reactions (Papaikonomou & Dijkman, 2018; Ingabire, 2019). The ease with which the white majority appropriates topics, functions, and power positions in society, often without being aware that their comfort is not shared by people of colour, has been called out as "white privilege" (Eddo-Lodge, 2018).

Next to white privilege, class and education also play a role in the extent of freedom one encounters online. The internet presences of public figures such as Teju Cole and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are an example in case. The online sphere connects them with a broad audience, but it cannot eradicate their privileged position in real life. The majority of Nigerians, let alone Africans, might not feel represented. After all, Cole and Adichie have studied abroad and are in an acknowledged position that enables them to speak freely and be listened to (Pahl, 2016).

Recreation, game-ification, and the echo effect

Virtual space lends itself easily for self-branding for companies as well as individuals (Mpoma & Amponsah, 2020). With the growing popularity of social media, there has also come some kind of "ballooning tendency towards being only 'recreationally offended'" (Adebayo, 2020). From time to time, the internet explodes over a story gone viral that shows overt racism, most often accompanied by shocking video images.

However, these waves of outrage are generally short-lived. Psychologically, internet and online social media work as a catalysator for communal coping. The trauma can be caused by environmental crises or man-made crises (Palen & Vieweg, 2008; Cheong & Lee, 2011). Although in se communal coping is a positive feature of social media, it can go at the expense of 'real' structural change.

Moreover, online exposure to traumatic content might shock people into movement initially but leads to desensitisation on the long-term. Desensitisation signifies that people tend to feel less or not shocked or distressed at scenes of cruelty or suffering due to overexposure to such images (De Choudhury, Monroy-Hernandez, & Mark, 2014; DuVernay, 2016).

Political parties and leaders have also found fruitful soil for marketing purposes and propaganda in the online community (DuVernay, 2016). It has basically turned the internet into a game to be won (Cadwalladr, 2016). Such game-ification shows for instance how American presidential candidates, Bill Clinton and Donald Trump among others, (mis)use video images in political campaigns to criminalise black Americans (DuVernay, 2016; Moran, 2016).

Extremist parties benefit from the world-wide reach of the web and other digital applications to overcome their marginality. They also inspire each other and exchange strategies across time and space. Far-right parties such as Vlaams Belang in Flanders, who are excluded from government formation by the other Belgian parties (Maerevoet, 2019), and Flemish youth movements such as 'Schild en Vrienden', whose founder was under juridical investigation for violations of the anti-racism law, the negationism law and the weapon law (Vanrenterghem, Heymans, Terryn, & Santens, 2019), connect online with other identitarian nationalist and alt-right movements (Cools, 2020). They seek to protect the "white (man's) world" by forcefully re-affirming and re-articulating their privilege as a response to decolonial efforts (Rutazibwa, 2018). Compared to other political parties, far-right parties invest to a large extent in advertising on social media in order to gain popularity, increase visibility, and win votes (Vandeputte & Smedt, 2019). Their online presence and participation are directly linked

to the increase in populist talk, hate speech and polarisation (Donovan, Lewis, & Friedberg, 2019; Noujaim & Amer, 2019; Corbu & Negrea-Busuioc, 2020). Within this polarised environment, no one is protected against insulting and threatening language, including politicians from the far-right themselves (Cools, 2020).

In all of the above, language and terminology play a major role. A shared vocabulary enforces a feeling of togetherness and inclusion (Kim, et al., 2018). Interpreting 'language' broadly, the whole meme culture of alt-rights movements can serve as an example. Symbols such as hashtags and tags shared by family, friends, and others to whom digital users are somehow connected, form also the base on which digital algorithms decide what fits someone's interests (and what does not), whose profiles and topics social media platforms suggest to follow et cetera (Noble, 2018; Thorson, 2019). Through previous choices and online behaviour and 'guided' by algorithms, so-called "filter bubbles" (Bruns, 2019) or "echo chambers" (Adebayo, 2020; Amrute, 2020) are created. The tendency to cluster is prevalent among all groups on the internet (Adebayo, 2020). It happens unconsciously but has a big influence on the virtual environment people spent increasingly more time.

The echo chamber effect of the internet and social media also stalls progress with regard to social issues such as (anti-)racism. Black anti-racist activists indicate how they are exhausted from repeating the same arguments over and over again. They often get stuck in time-consuming semantic discussions online. Journalist, author, and activist Sabrine Ingabire notices that the debate around (anti-)racism often gets decentred from blackness to whiteness. Ingabire calls this the 'coming-of-age' of white people's online journeys, whereby they 'discover' that racism exists (Ingabire, 2020). Such a decentring makes it more difficult to come to solutions and constructive approaches towards solving racism because black people are constantly pushed into a reactionary role.

Algorithmic bias and non-transparency

Next to the deliberate commercialisation, commodification, and game-ification of digital technology, there is also an inherent bias present in the technology itself. Even if the

systems are developed with the intention to be objective or neutral, they mostly rely on data that is not. Algorithms feed themselves through machine learning with data produced over time (Thorson, 2019). In this process, they do not take into account that knowledge production of the last centuries was dominated by Eurocentric, sexist, and racist tendencies (Cordia, 2019; KBC, 2019). A characterising aspect of colonisation was "epistemicide" (de Sousa Santos, 2015; Rutazibwa, 2018), i.e. the erasure of alternative knowledge and belief systems, and ways of being of colonised peoples. The production of digital knowledge largely relies on the accumulated knowledge of the past. Thus, digital technology continues to centre epistemologies and ontologies of the Global North, thereby decentring those of the Global South (Risam, 2018).

A related problem to using these biased technologies is the absence of transparency. Algorithms lack human control on the 'logical' choices they make (O'Neil, 2016; Priebe, 2019; Amrute, 2020). An example is Word2Vec, a machine-learning system of Google that searches for language connections in entered data. If 'engineer' gets more often combined with 'man' than with 'woman' in the data found online, this system would filter female resumes out of an automatic evaluation in recruiting programs. Consequently, fewer women would apply for engineer jobs, and so the bias would be reinforced (Wachter-Boettcher, 2017). A similar logic can reinforce other existing social injustices based on race, age, sexuality, or other socio-cultural factors (Hu, 2016; Ajunwa & Schlund, 2020; Amrute, 2020).

Asymmetrical power relations and social inequality are also present in the firms leading the digital technology sector. The sector continues to attract, promote and follow the leadership of the most privileged segments of our society (Dirksen, 2018). This has consequences for the composition of developers and algorithm creators, as they are predominantly white men. Their perspective is thus (unintendedly) reflected in the technologies. This engenders a negative impact on people with different features or other experiences (Buolamwini, 2017). Because technicians had not incorporated enough examples of black people during the learning phase of Google Photos, this 'intelligent' software first tagged black people as gorillas (Cordia, 2019). A similar

problem arises with certain webcams that only recognise faces with a light skin colour (Buolamwini, 2017).

3.2.6 Digital neo-colonialism

Corporatisation

With regard to geopolitics, digital technology can be used as a tool to penetrate and control states with less financial capacity. In the current world order, these states are often formerly colonised countries which are now dominated from the outside via the operations of capitalism. After all, capital plays a big, arguably the biggest, role within the digital sphere because software, publicity and visibility, data, and the newest devices all come with a price. Yet, the impact of money is often hidden behind the interface of online space that presents itself rather as socio-cultural than politico-economic.

Since August 2018, Apple ranks higher than the entire nations of Russia and Saudi Arabia regarding the world's largest economic entities (Dirksen, 2018). In the top hundred list, there are seventy-one corporates and only twenty-nine states, of which none is African (Oxfam, 2018). The globalised hegemony of capitalist relations has also been described as "post-Cold War global corporatisation" (Quist-Adade, 2016, p. 122). Neoliberal discourses have been fostering the expansion and growth of Transnational Corporations (TNCs) with the help of digital technology. The ideology claims to promote international trade, competitiveness, and cost-effectiveness for all. However, it mainly favours Western-owned businesses and so-called "one-percenters" (Lemieux, 2020), namely the top one richest per cent of societies with high wealth inequality (Quist-Adade, 2016).

Online exposure, hidden money flows, and migrant labourers

While capitalism is grafted on class differences due to structural inequality, there are particular cases of individuals who go from 'zero to hero' (Elliott L. , 2019). The extreme exceptionality of these cases – exceptional because capitalism generally requires asymmetrical power relations and preserves social inequities and injustices – is downsized by the fast spread and far-reaching visibility of these success stories online.

Online exposure can have major consequences as was illustrated by the case of the burning Notre Dame, of which video images went viral. In three days' time, 600 million euro was raised to rebuild the cathedral, as were the following questions: how come that the ultra-rich can chuck in so many millions of euros for a building, but not to end hunger and poverty (Chakrabortty, 2019)?

The major economic profit created by digitalisation does not benefit Africa. Only around 0.5 per cent of worldwide applications for patents come annually from Africa, according to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO, 2018). American-owned technology giant Google preferred Europe over Africa to invest in financially during the latest decade. The company's investment in European data centres and related infrastructure during 2007-2018 supported economic activity in Europe worthy of 8.8 billion euro GDP and the creation of 9,600 jobs per year on average across a wide set of European industries (CE, 2020). In contrast, Google's investment in Africa is more recent and focusses mainly on the "training of individuals in digital skills", a "launchpad accelerator program" for innovators and start-ups, and "venture capital" to *help* train people for "software development with valuable capital to gain access to markets" (Fritzjunker, 2019). The angle and motivation behind these initiatives reflect patriarchal attitudes towards Africa. In this way, existing asymmetrical power relations between the Global North and the Global South are reinforced and even worsened by the digital industry.

Furthermore, most of the economic profit created through digitalisation in Africa flows out of the continent. Illustrative is the case of M-PESA, a mobile phone-based money transfer, financing, and microfinancing service. M-PESA is highly popular in Kenya and owned by Vodafone, a British multinational telecommunications conglomerate. They claim to have lifted two per cent of Kenyan households out of poverty in alliance with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda (Suri & Jack, 2016; United Nations, 2018). Yet, the near-monopolistic providers of M-PESA are also criticised because the service imposes unnecessary high costs on its users, thereby exploiting customers with

already little financial means (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2013; Mudzingwa, 2019).

M-PESA is even called extractive as they create large profits, going to foreign shareholders, from taxing small-scale payments. Hereby, digitalisation involves no benefit, compared with cash transactions, for its users. This has a negative impact on local economic development as spending power and demand are reduced and local enterprises pushed out of the market (Wyche, Simiyu, & Othiena, 2016; Baterman, 2018; Gibson, 2019).

A perceived economic benefit of digitalisation is that digital technology provides chances for more automatisation in the supply chain of products and services, yet this should not be overestimated. Most digital systems, including e-commerce and the digital international banking system, are supported by software from the 1970s. The systems can only function by the hands of ten thousands of IT developers, a workforce consisting out of cheap labourers to suppress costs (Varis & Cramer, 2020). Cheap labour in the current international system is either outsourced to the Global South or mainly performed by immigrants. Generally, the working conditions are rather harsh in combination with a high dependency of the employees, which restricts them in their power to negotiate (Gurman, 2019; UNCTAD, 2019). Despite Apple's huge profit, the tech company's manufacturing 'partners', of which Foxconn in China is the most notorious, continue to violate labour rights (Merchant, 2017; Gurman, 2019).

Much of the manual work is hidden behind interfaces that come across as automatical (Varis & Cramer, 2020). Another example of this kind of labour is the content moderation or the generation of value and attention by Click Farms in South Africa among other developing countries (Oentaryo, et al., 2014). Artificial Intelligence software is currently not fully capable to recognise violent or abusive content due to their lack of contextual awareness or critical thinking (Varis & Cramer, 2020).

The impact of digitalisation on the labour markets manifests also in the emergence of platform economies, leading to short-term assignments online. On the one hand, this

created employment opportunities for developing countries. On the other hand, there are growing concerns about the relationships between employers and workers, as the latter have less access to traditional benefits, including job security and union strenght (UNCTAD, 2019).

Negative externalities and environmental impacts

While the advantages of digital technology are mostly felt by those outside the African continent, the disadvantages do come down most heavily on African countries. Much of the material needed to build technology such as coltan is mined, for instance, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The extraction, however, is done dominantly by foreign companies using local workforces and under bad working conditions (Loreto, 2018).

Furthermore, the continuously increasing energy consumption created by digital technologies such as computer servers contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and will be unsustainable in the long run (Rezaire, 2020). Online video alone generates sixty per cent of world data flows which means over three-hundred million tons of carbon dioxide per year (The Shift Project, 2019). The environmental and climate impact is mostly felt by fragile states, of which many are situated in Africa.

3.2.7 Digital colonisation of the mind

The above arguments reveal how digital technology undergirds so-called neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism is manifested as well through globalisation, foreign aid or multilateral development cooperation, and foreign direct investment (FDI) by multinational corporations, all activities intertwined with digitalisation (Quist-Adade, 2016; Risam, 2018). Political scholar Olivia U. Rutazibwa (2020) states that the current notion of aid and disciplines such as international development and international relations, that are predominantly Western-led, are "built on a profound whitewashing of history and the erasure of the contributions of previously colonized people to the wealth and advancements in the West". Similar to 'classic' colonialism, part of neo-colonial practices through digitalisation is a "colonisation of the mind" (Fanon, Peau noire, masques blancs, 1952; Said, 1978; Wa Thiong'o, 1986).

The ideological and rhetorical (mis)use of the digital sphere can be seen as "corporate colonisation of the unconscious" (Shields, 2001). Apple's commodifying of the dead in their 'Think Different' advertisement is an example, stripping them of their cultural potency. Clickbait is another example, commodifying people's words in online headlines to attract attention and thereby generate profit (Nourhussen, 2018).

Every digital consumer works for free for the technology companies and online media, as did the colonised people for the colonisers, albeit minus the violence of forced labour. However, this commodification does include violence as it thrives by sensational events such as racist incidents, shocking images, and controversy (Nourhussen, 2018). This kind of content with regard to black people is often framed in the context of the anti-racist struggle, yet exposure can be harmful to the mental health of those involved, including the digital consumers who associate themselves with the victims (Krieger, 2019; Bouchallikht, 2020; Elliott J. , 2020).

In order to attract digital consumers and thus profit, their behaviour needs to be mapped. The tracking, storage, and commodification of digital consumers' behaviour online is meticulously done by specialised software. An example of such a web analytic tool is Hotjar, owned by Google and used by over 500,000 organisation across 184 countries (Hotjar, 2020). Next to session recordings and service, website heat maps are part of their service. Such heat maps graphically represent through colours what users do on a website page: where they click, how far they scroll, what they look at, or what they ignore (Hotjar, 2020). The derived information is used by marketers, product managers, and user experience designers to adjust websites and applications according to the psychology of digital consumers. Because Africans are a minority in the digital space, the digital design will be more of a reflection of Western or Asian thought patterns and behaviours. After all, end-user privacy makes it impossible to take every subgroup or minority into account (Hotjar, 2020).

Through the use of browser cookies and the exchange of data between companies, advertisements, suggestions, and other provided information you see online, get personalised. They adjust according to individuals' interests and needs but are

simultaneously supported by extern economic interests. So-called 'Dark Patterns' are tricks used in websites and apps that make digital consumers buy things or signing up for something that they did not mean to do (Brignull & Darlington, 2020). In this way, technology constitutes an ideological tool in the hands of the dominant classes in an advanced capitalist society (Parvathy, 2014).

3.3 Decolonisation: digitalisation as a tool

In order to tackle the challenges of digital technology in relation to globally and locally disadvantaged groups, digitalisation should be decolonised. However, as the philosopher Achille Mbembe has pointed out, "internet is a means, it is not the end" (Mbembe & Van der Haak, 2015). For this reason, it is important to know how decolonised digitals would contribute to the bigger picture, namely a decolonised society.

Decolonisation today is multifaceted. The process involves a holistic approach as it encompasses all domains of society, aiming to dismantle harmful ideological systems and structures. Interpreted broadly, decolonisation provides an opportunity to enhance diversity in an inclusive manner and support anti-racist social justice efforts. Urging for decolonisation in Belgium and Western societies in general is the activist, journalist, and socio-political scholar Dr. Olivia U. Rutazibwa (2018). She offers a threefold framework to bridge decolonial theory and practice. The three strategic components constitute of de-silencing, de-mythologising, and anti-colonial decolonisation.

3.3.1 De-silencing

Firstly, Olivia U. Rutazibwa urges societies to de-silence. Obviously, this strategy involves more than raising your voice in capital letters on Twitter. De-silencing relates to the epistemology (Rutazibwa, 2018) of knowledge cultivation (Shilliam, 2015), more particularly – for this dissertation – on a digital level. Epistemology is about the theory of knowledge, namely the methods, scope, and validity, for instance, the distinction between justified belief and opinion. In the digital context, this revolves around *who* speaks, writes, types, edits, develops, codes, and designs our online landscape, and *who* does *not*? Knowledge cultivation differs from knowledge production in that it

embodies more than mere accumulation, 'invention', and extension. Knowledge cultivation is the critical assessment, broadening, and deepening of knowledges as well (Shilliam, 2015; Rutazibwa, 2018). Key to the strategic component of de-silencing lies in bridging the digital divides and democratising the access to and power over digital knowledge cultivation and future production.

In 2016, access to the internet has been recognised as a basic human right (Reglitz, 2020). Furthermore, the nineth Sustainable Development Goal, "build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation" (UNSDG, 2020), requires the provision of universal and affordable access to the internet. This goal is particularly important in relation to Africa. Additionally, the leverage of digital technologies is needed to achieve the other SDGs (Reiter, 2020). Equal access to the digital sphere across the different geographical and demographical regions will also help to solve the current online overrepresentation of the Global North.

On a personal or individual level, de-silencing means that one should not be deaf for voices other than one self's, to go against the "echo chamber effect" (Adebayo, 2020). Practically, a very simple example can be the adjustment of browser settings to allow non-personalised advertisements in order to see more than only what is accustomed to your (perceived) interests.

In the 'Commercialisation, commodification, and cultural appropriation' section, the privileged position of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was pointed out. However, she decided to use her privilege and transnational experience to address societal issues such as racism and feminism that go beyond the individual. By doing so, she carries out the multifaceted and layered character of contemporary decolonisation. She explores global society from different angles: published literature, online blogging, talks, appearances in fashion magazines, and music videos. The various fora and media that she has access to, allow her to take a critical stance and reach different audiences. She puts words into action. Through careful management, as she has a team of communication experts in control of her formal profile online, Adichie illustrates how cyberspace can be a tool for commentary and transformation (Pahl, 2016).

One of Adichie's famous speeches concerns "the danger of a single story" (TEDGlobal, 2009). Decolonisation and de-silencing entails going beyond stereotypes and preconceived notions of what it means to be an 'African' or 'black'. Rutazibwa states a similar objective by pointing out the common use of invariably hierarchised representations through simplification. Examples of such simplifications are "Africa is a country" (Paquette, 2020), vilification, for instance "angry black women" (Asare, 2019), criminalisation such as "corrupt African leaders" (Gearan, 2013), and victimisation applied to women in the Global South in general (Rutazibwa, 2018).

An example of digital de-silencing is Nigerian filmmaker Aderonke Adeola. With her documentary 'Awani' (2018) and her presence on social media, she illustrates how digital technology can be used as a means to an end. The documentary serves as an instrument for Nigerian women to tell their own story and de-silencing a side of Nigerian history that puts women to the foreground. As such, it counts as a counter-discourse for colonial and religious patriarchal narratives that impact contemporary political and social attitudes towards Nigerian women. Overall, women of the Global South are too often victimised in discourses of, for instance, international development, creating a systematic bias through hyper-visibilising them in the single-dimensional role of a passive victim (Rutazibwa, 2018). The documentary of 'Awani' can operate as an educational tool within Nigeria and across the world, stimulating debate even beyond virtual space. By its online promotion, Adeola raises her work's visibility and facilitates the exchange of information. Through making this anti-colonial documentary, Adeola appropriated the genre of documentary that originally was used as a colonial discursive strategy (Ukadike, 2004).

De-silencing is also the component where language comes into play. Online media have to take care of how they label or tag people, events, movements et cetera. Who do we call experts or activists or criminals? Especially in relation to racialised issues, the framing matters. After all, words or "labels" are what feeds algorithms (Kim, et al., 2018). Sabrine Ingabire, a black journalist herself, calls for newspaper and magazine redactions to let black journalists interview black interviewees as they are closer to the

subject, which will increase the quality of the conversation. Her call is not in favour of racial segregation, more the opposite as now white journalists seem to have access to every topic while black journalists – and, consequently, black interviewees – are restricted by white ignorance, prejudice, and centring of white people's interests (Ingabire, 2019; Mpoma & Amponsah, 2020). A similar complaint echoes in critique on social media platforms: "where are the digital spaces where black, indigenous, and WOC feminists can connect, speak, build that is not about centering a white mainstream feminist audience?" (Kim, et al., 2018, p. 152).

Digital technology can be a tool for communication in the fight against racism and injustice. However, critiques warn for the danger of binary oppositions in the mainstream online discourse: 'black' versus 'white', 'victims' versus 'perpetrators' (Adebayo, 2020). To link political opinions to moral judgments, skin colour and gender in a monolithic manner reduces the dialogue to a preach that neglects information not fitting the preconceived format (Beeckman, 2020; Ingabire, 2020). De-silencing online also involves nuancing: who is speaking to whom? What are the speaker's competences, insights, and legitimacy regarding the topic of conversation (Rutazibwa, 2020)? To find out the sender or source of information can be a challenge online, but the effort to find out should nonetheless be undertaken.

For future betterment, Human Rights lawyer and Dutch strategic advisor for diversity and inclusivity in the European Union, Domenica Ghidei acknowledges the importance to speak up on social media but points out that actions speak louder than words. The institutional tools, including United Nations treaties and organs, to go against racism are currently not utilised to their full potential. Ghidei also wants European citizens to use their power to influence bills on a national level, as they are able through internet consultation (Ghidei, 2020). The European Union can help to de-silence the local industry. If the European Union takes more of a hard stance against digital technology companies that violate European privacy regulations, many non-European firms would be pushed out of the market. Digital expert Florian Cramer points out that if violating companies would be prohibited to operate within Europe, it provides opportunities for

the local industry to develop legal and representative alternatives (Varis & Cramer, 2020).

3.3.2 De-mythologising

Two basics in communication theory are that the medium is the message and that it is important to adjust the message (and thus the medium) to the previous knowledge of the receiver. For decolonisation, this holds the task to de-mythologise. According to Olivia U. Rutazibwa, the core question here is *what* do we perceive as our social reality (2018, p. 163). It concerns the ontology, namely the nature or type, of the knowledge produced, transferred, and received through – in this case – digital technology.

Next to nuancing in the sense of *who* speaks (not) and related to *what* is (not) said, it is necessary to critically (re-)consider the *why* behind people's words. In the wordings of postcolonial scholar Ann Laura Stoler: "what truth-claims inform our accounts, on what grounds do we take some accounts to be more credible and sensible than others, how do we imagine racisms to be secured, and what originary myths do we assign to them?" (1997, p. 184).

For instance, why do some Congolese today talk about the time of Belgian colonisation in a nostalgic way? The answer according to the colonial myth, which has been reproduced in the dominant public discourse, would be because Belgian colonisation realised some good things for the African population (Swinnen, 2020). However, when looking beyond the colonial propaganda, it is clear that the violence, racism, and exploitation of colonial systems outweighed any sign of benevolence. Besides, on a second look, this 'benevolence' often also supported economic goals of the metropole instead of humanitarian ones or it served merely as a cover-up. To understand then why some Congolese talk 'nostalgically' about the past can be due to an unequal power relation whereby the Congolese wants to please the Belgian (whom they are talking to), or it can be a form of criticism on their current reality (Mathys & Mestdagh, 2020).

De-mythologising digitals is about dismantling fallacies. One of the myths structuring our digital behaviour is the idea that technology is neutral or objective. To deconstruct

this myth, technological innovation needs to be recognised as "a fundamentally human endeavour" (Dirksen, 2018). Digital technology must be made more transparent. The same objective also resonates in the Zuckerberg trial concerning the use of private data by Facebook that has been ongoing since 2015 (Tanghe, 2018). Only in 2018, Facebook started to explain in a more transparent manner how facial recognition technology was used through its platform. Since then, Facebook users can disable it at their settings page. In 2019, the company did no longer turn it on by default for all users but made it opt-in only (Peters, 2020).

Another myth concerns the idea that technological development always implies progress, another step forward to underline human genius. Awareness should be raised about the harmful impact of digitalisation. Technology corporations should be held more accountable. Their responsibly is currently often neglected or bought off. After all, they are mainly driven by profit and market dominance, which produces very different outcomes than citizen rights or social justice (Dirksen, 2018). For example, since 2017, Google has been fined multiple times by the European Union for violating antitrust rules, a total of fines worthy of roughly 9.3 billion dollars. However, Google is appealing these court decisions and has not yet paid any of these fines. Besides, the amount to pay is neglectable compared with the annual revenue of Google's parent company, Alphabet, which is 137 billion dollars (Satariano, 2019).

Related to the subjectivity and biases of digital technology is the recent announcement of IBM, one of the tech giants, to stop using facial recognition technology (Deckmyn, 2020). The racist aspect of this technology has been addressed earlier in this paper, in the section on dangers of digitalisation. In an open letter to Congress, USA, IMB CEO Arvind Krishna wrote that "IBM would like to work with Congress in pursuit of justice and racial equity focused initially in three key policy areas: police reform, responsible use of technology, and broadening skills and educational opportunities" (IBM, 2020). Therefore:

> *IBM no longer offers general purpose IBM facial recognition or analysis software. IBM firmly opposes and will not condone uses of any technology,*

including facial recognition technology offered by other vendors, for mass surveillance, racial profiling, violations of basic human rights and freedoms, or any purpose which is not consistent with our values and Principles of Trust and Transparency (IBM, 2020).

De-mythologising includes fighting fake news or so-called alternative facts, while at the same time acknowledging there is not just one version of reality. It requires accepting the complexity and messiness of history. Eurocentrism *an sich* is not necessarily a problem. The real issue is that is has been projected as a neutral, objective, and universal given and then the neglect, ignorance, or even denial of this projection by many people up to today (Rutazibwa, 2018). Most of the time, there is no 'perfect' victim of racism, due to circumstantial reasons and the multi-layered nature of identity (Tilly, 1995; Eddo-Lodge, 2018). However, this should not mean racism cannot be acknowledged as a crime. Similar to sexual assault, it does not matter which clothes the victim wore in order to condemn the deed. The responsibility for such de-mythologising lies both with individual digital consumers as with the companies that provide platforms to spread information.

3.3.3 Anti-colonial decolonisation

As a third focal point next to de-silencing and de-mythologising, Olivia U. Rutazibwa stresses to really *anti-colonially* decolonise. This strategy is linked to normativity, namely which actions or outcomes are desirable or permissible. It involves the reconstructive aspect of decolonisation, namely an anti-colonial society (Rutazibwa, 2018).

Digital scholarship, for instance, needs to redress the traces of colonialism in order to truly democratise knowledge (Mbembe, 2015). This redressing involves overcoming the distinctions between the immaterial and the material world and – for digitalisation – between online and offline reality. Part of this is tackling restrictive visa policies for African scholars, researchers, students and artists and racially discriminating work environments (Amrute, 2020). One such discriminatory tactic is the reproduction of a divide and rule logic that fragmentises different colonial diaspora communities. For

example, in Belgium, colonial hierarchies are reproduced by higher valuation of non-Muslims of North African descent, than non-black Muslims, to be followed by non-Muslims with roots South of the Sahara, and so on (Rutazibwa, 2020).

It will no longer suffice – if it ever did – to "add and stir" (Rutazibwa, 2020). Adding 'diversity' is not enough, nor is only the articulation of perceived exclusions along lines of race, class, gender, nation or other axes of privilege and oppression (Risam, 2018). Rutazibwa's anti-colonial angle for former colonising countries such as Belgium largely overlaps with the anti-racism movement in the United States of America. In the words of civil rights activist Angela Davis: "In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist" (Kendi, 2016, p. 205).

It is necessary to revise and redesign the existing digital landscape. Democratisation can only happen by discontinuing to constantly centre the logics and reflexes of the White World (Rutazibwa, 2020). Through founding the Algorithmic Justice League, computer scientist Joy Buolamwini (2018) urges using an algorithmic audit for existing software in order to detect and report social biases. The League provides workshops and inclusive data sets among other tools for more equitable and accountable Artificial Intelligence (AJL, 2020).

Another example of revision is GitHub, the world's biggest site for software developers and owned by Microsoft. GitHub has recently changed its default terminology to more neutral terms. What is now renamed the 'main' branch used to be called 'master', referring to a (technological) system that controls other copies or processes similar to a master-slave relationship. The adjustment is the result of a years-long campaign. It took place in the context of the recent wave of Black Lives Matter protests across the United States (BBC, 2020). Similar measures or attempts to use more racially neutral language are found by Chromium, a free and open-source software project owned by Google. They encourage the use of 'blocklist' instead of 'blacklist' and 'allowlist' as a replacement for 'whitelist', moving away from racially charged notions that depict black as bad and white as good (BBC, 2020).

Again, education and awareness-raising can really make a difference. American educator Jane Elliott exposed the impact of early-age socialisation with her 'Brown-eye/Blue-eye' experiential learning exercise that she started in 1968 (Holt, 2020). Video images show how toddlers can be manipulated into separation and discrimination based on physical features over the course of two days of instruction. The disadvantaged brown-eyed group of children will have lower self-esteem and perform poorly in stark contrast with the other blue-eyed group. When the discriminatory system is reversed and the brown-eyed children get preferential treatment, the opposite effect will take place, which shows the randomness of discriminatory mechanisms.

Another pedagogical valuable example is the Crypto-Party who organises workshops around encryption and data security throughout Europe (Varis & Cramer, 2020). Digital literacy needs to be invested in and promoted by governments as well, including integrating digital skills into national curricula for students (UNCTAD, 2019; World Bank, 2019). Of course, in order to really make a difference, pedagogical institutions first need to be decolonised themselves. To avoid "educated ignorance" (Elliott J. , 2020), decolonial education should be prioritised. Under the hashtag *#WhyIsMyCurriculumWhite?* public pressure is levelled up, showing the interplay between education online, which can be considered to be more bottom-up, and offline, which is typically top-down (Greaves, 2018).

A wholesome education program should involve how to constructively use social media. Moreover, it should include training for mainstream media as well, especially on sensitive topics such as 'race'. Discussions and debates, whether moderated digitally or not, should be supported by facts and not merely by opinions. In this way, the debate about racism can go from what racism *is* or even worse, whether it exists towards solutions (Ingabire, 2020).

With regard to decolonisation, Belgium has undertaken multiple efforts over the course of the last decade to decolonise its institutions and history (Debeuckelaere, 2017; Africa Museum, 2018; Canvas, 2018; Cauwenberghs, 2020). This history concerns

the country's relation to Congo Free state (1885 - 1908), the colonial past in Belgian Congo (1908-1960) and in Rwanda and Burundi (1919-1962), and the impact and implications up to this day. For the first time in history, the Belgian King Filip expressed his regret for the violent and brutal act committed during the colonial era in the Belgian Congo (Verbergt & Lecluyse, 2020). Yet, most of these efforts lack an overt anti-colonial approach (Goddeeris, 2019; Grymonprez, 2020; Nsayi, 2020). As a consequence, digital platforms or online media are being used to address these lacunas in the state's approach towards decolonisation (Torbeyns & Cauwenberghs, 2018; Mpoma & Amponsah, 2020; Rutazibwa, 2020). Although these critiques are part of democratising the decolonisation movement, they often fail in their intent due to the construction of the digital space that favours those in power. This observation underlines the limits of cyberspace. As civil rights activist Audre Lorde has put it: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 1984).

Therefore, according to the same logic as applied earlier, if structural change on a decision-making level takes place offline, it will be reflected online (Rutazibwa, 2020). A redistribution of power is needed (Eddo-Lodge, 2018; Olodo, Ibnouthen, Sacré, & Hmouda, 2018). In this context, governments should take a critical stance with regard to the control over companies, the transfer of technologies, and disabling the formation of monopolies in order to fight abuse and unintended consequences. Developing countries and fragile states must be protected by international laws, which need political will from developed countries (UNCTAD, 2019). The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) emphasizes that internet corporations need to respect their behaviour policies and codes of conduct in order to prevent and eradicate hate speech, discrimination and intolerance (Ghidei, 2020). Within countries, in particular in countries with colonial and African diaspora, governments and institutions need to focus on smooth communication with the whole population including the black and other ethnic minorities and ensure fair representation, safety and the capacity to put words into actions (Ingabire, 2019; Nsayi, 2020; Rutazibwa, 2020).

Companies must also encourage each other to take anti-racist action. In July 2020, nearly a thousand companies and organisations were boycotting Facebook to 'Stop

Hate for Profit' by pausing their advertisements spend on the platforms of Facebook and Instagram (Sterling, 2020). The campaign reacts on Facebook's involvement in racism, hate speech, and voter suppression (Dang, 2020). CEO Mark Zuckerberg states Facebook will address the issues by policy and practical changes, including the prohibition of "claims that people from a specific race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, gender identity or immigration status are a threat to the physical safety, health or survival of others" (Zuckerberg, 2020).

Lastly, anti-colonial decolonisation is not a competition, nor an aesthetic performance to merely advertise one's 'wokeness' by attacking others in their ignorance, racism, bigotry, sexism et cetera (Adebayo, 2020). It cannot simply be a label to brand your online profile independent of your offline every-day practice (Maya Binyam). Through producing a counter discourse, raising awareness, diverse and inclusive representation, anti-colonial decolonisation embodies a process that dismantles harmful structures of a colonial past in order to create an inclusive society, on- and offline.

4 Conclusions

The key objective of this dissertation was raising awareness of the multiple challenges and obstacles regarding digitalisation in relation to decolonisation.

The principal research question revolved around how digitalisation and decolonisation relate to one another. Starting from the overlap between digitalisation and decolonisation discourses as visionary, revolutionary, and inclusive, I argued that – on a deeper level – the two processes are not aligned. Within a *long-durée* Africanistic perspective, the analysis focused on the positions of Africa and people of African descent in the contemporary 'Digital Age'.

In addition, it was discussed how to solve the in-between discrepancies so digitalisation can serve as a tool for decolonisation. Decolonisation in this context was shaped after the strategic decolonial framework formulated by Dr. Olivia U. Rutazibwa.

Data from diverging and predominantly online sources provided a rich base of information in a combination of daily and scholarly knowledge productions. Because both digitalisation and decolonisation are currently hot topics of study and debate, substantial material of recent date was available and accessible. My personal and educational Belgian background at Ghent University influenced the data collection and selection in the sense that locally relevant content was preferred.

In an adaptation of postmodern critical theory, this study conceptualised digitalisation and decolonisation as social issues that have gotten politically charged through history and stand in interaction with specific cultural contexts. In other words, a dynamic multi-disciplinary approach was applied to capture both the general condition and particular forms in which the processes of digitalisation and decolonisation are expressed through time and across space.

The added value of the study lied in the combination of daily (online) sources, in addition to academic literature. In this way, both theoretical issues, on a more abstract level, and practical ones, on a more daily basis, were addressed. The different and

often diverging information was situated into the bigger picture in order to envision a digital and decolonial society. Overall, the study as such aimed to provide global citizens with constructive insights on their role and responsibilities in society at large.

Generally, digital technology holds some positive promises. The apparent egalitarian infrastructure of the internet enforces movements such as Afropolitanism that stretch beyond national or geopolitical boundaries. Cyberspace offers a way to avoid institutional bottlenecks, a benefit for black and other ethnic minority people in Western countries.

For artists, digital technology constitutes new creative freedom. It also creates an opportunity to take control of the narrative. Self-expression, advocacy, and socio-political engagement are facilitated and supported by digital means. Social media are the preferred platforms to drive anti-racist movements such as Black Lives Matter. The organisation of the digital sphere offers tools for information exchange and networking in a coordinated yet decentralised manner. The innovativeness of digital technology gets also associated with economic development. For African countries, the Fourth Revolution can bring rapid economic growth, job creation, and access to basic services such as health care, education, and e-commerce.

All of the above arguments seem positive for people in a disadvantaged position, whether in local or global society, as digital space apparently transcends all boundaries, be it political, economic or otherwise. However, underneath the surface, there is a downside to digitalisation regarding vulnerable groups and/or minorities. So, although digitalisation has a positive side, it also reproduces social injustices and inequalities due to asymmetrical power relations. Digital technology is built on socio-economic structures that sustain colonial relations of exploitation and domination. These kinds of power relations and structures are what decolonisation aims to dismantle and counter. As such, decolonisation reacts to European colonisation in Africa and its long-lasting consequences for the African continent, the diaspora, and Europe or the Global North in general.

It is a necessity to see digitalisation as an outcome of the colonial past, not only as something existing here and now. Otherwise, common but harmful illusions might prevail that digital technology is neutral or objective, that the internet is all-knowing, and that cyberspace is an egalitarian place of absolute freedom. Historical and cultural contextualisation can explain how and why digital knowledge production is incomplete and biased with regard to certain subjects.

Algorithmic thinking fits into the European tradition of systematic classification and ranking. During the past centuries, this was exercised by the administrators and 'scientists' that predominantly supported European imperialism and colonialism in Africa. In this way, Eurocentrism and white supremacy seeped into the data that fed digital technology that is used globally, such as the internet and machine-learning software. Also, the infrastructure that enabled digitalisation is largely situated in western countries. They employ this advantage to enforce their power position in relation to economically fragile countries, of which many are African.

Unequal distribution of digital technology translates into digital divides on an international as well as on a local scale. Two-thirds of the people living South of the Sahara lacks internet access while in Europe, this number is less than one fourth. Urbanity, age, and gender also play a role in having access to the digital sphere. Next to appropriate infrastructure, these dividing lines relate to levels of affordability, literacy, and education.

Both reason and consequence of digital divides are digital cultural imperialism and, more particularly, Americanisation or Anglo-Saxon hegemony. American tech giants, Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and Microsoft, impose linguistic and cultural barriers that obstruct others to participate and profit of digitalisation in an equal way. Tech companies and digital consumers commodify African cultures, yet without empowering these cultures to set the rules.

A similar tendency characterises the diaspora. Black and minority ethnic (BME) people are used as window-dressing by white-dominated institutions, including digital

enterprises. BME people and their stories help to polish an image of social engagement for the company or institution and help them to tap into the trend of diversity and/or multiculturality. However, they encounter more often difficult – discriminatory – circumstances than their white counterparts and are seldom offered a decision-making position.

Political (mis)use of the digital sphere led to the game-ification of the internet. It became a playing field for extremist parties, especially on the far-right of the political spectrum. For those targeted by racism, sexism, and abusive language, it resembles more of a battlefield. The polarised environment on social media, which is also segregated by filter bubbles, hampers the chance on structural change and progress regarding social issues such as anti-racism. Besides hampering anti-racist progress, digital technology even constitutes a counteractive force due to inherent racist biases in algorithms that lack transparency and thus control.

Next to Americanisation, corporatisation characterises the globalised Digital Age. Transnational corporations and the mainly Western states where they are headquartered use digital technology as an instrument for neo-colonisation. The driving ideologies behind digitalisation are capitalism and neoliberalism. These politico-economic systems are grafted on structural inequality and power imbalances, disfavouring African countries, and migrants in other countries.

The corporations which control the digital sphere, (mis)use software to track the behaviour of digital consumers. Furthermore, interfaces cover the overt promotion of these companies' own interests. In this way, they employ digital consumers who are unaware, to enhance their profit. This practice is considered a continuation of the colonisation of the mind. After all, people get indoctrinated and involved in a system without active consent or without knowledge of the full consequences. Again, this colonisation is Western-dominated in two aspects. First, the corporations are mainly from the Global North. Second, the majority of digital consumers is from the Global North. Their behaviour influences how the digital sphere is shaped as such adjustments help to increase profit.

The applied strategic framework for decolonising digitals in this dissertation is three-folded: de-silencing, de-mythologising, and anti-colonial decolonisation. Respectively, the three strategies address issues of epistemology, ontology, and normativity. All components are intertwined with one another as all are quintessential in order to simultaneously deconstruct coloniality and reconstruct an inclusive society.

De-silencing concerns who is active on, in front of, and behind the interfaces of digital technology. De-mythologising looks at what is produced, transferred, and received as reality and knowledge online and why. Finally, anti-colonial decolonisation is concerned with how to deconstruct coloniality in order to construct an inclusive society.

What became clear through the analysis and discussion is the importance of a combined approach between studying power from below and power from above, and all forms of agency in-between. Decolonisation is a contextual process and requires a specific shared mindset. The applied framework is made to provide insights that are workable, thinkable and applicable.

The decolonisation of digitals makes also clear that it is not about intentions or blaming individuals. Digital technology does not want to discriminate, but it operates in a system that enables racial or other unequal treatment. If we succeed in making our society more inclusive offline, this will be reflected online. However, with interactivity as a fundamental aspect of digitalisation, the reverse effort to strive for online inclusion should also be undertaken.

To set the score at 'zero – one' for Africa in relation to the digital sphere as a decolonial space would reflect the binary trap, but equality is still far from reach. Decolonisation is not 'now or never', nor fit for a balance sheet approach. After all, the downside of digitalisation undermined multiple perceived benefits. Between zero and one are infinite numbers. Yet, one thing is clear: the future holds room for further connection, both offline and online.

To conclude, the following recommendations can encourage further research.

This study is largely centred around Africa, but elsewhere similar colonial tendencies in the digital sphere can be remarked. An example is the role of social media in spreading hate speech against the Rohingya minority in Myanmar. The relation between Asia and digitalisation can inspire an interesting comparison as the economic component has led to a shift from low-income to middle-income for certain formerly colonised Asian countries, including India.

The focus of this dissertation lies mainly on racism, sexism, and economic inequality, leaving other aspects of the perpetuating power-systems that constitute the so-called colonial matrix of power in need of investigation. These aspects include patriarchy, hetero-normativity, ableism, gender-binarism, and religion among others (Daggers, 2010; Rutazibwa, 2018).

As secondary data was the base for this analysis, other insights can come to light with primary data collection through methods such as interviewing, focus group discussion, and case studies. A comparative perspective can be valuable as well to understand how different subaltern groups have appropriated the digital sphere.

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