


# Book Review



Mirca Madianou, *Technocolonialism: When Technology for Good is Harmful*. Polity Press, 2025, 256 pp.; ISBN: 978-1-5095-5903-9.

## Technocolonialism and the Politics of Digital Humanitarianism

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Today, humanitarian aid infrastructures are increasingly shaped and managed by digital technologies and AI-based systems. These tools, which usually determine who qualifies for support and how aid is distributed, are often presented as neutral solutions, with claims of efficiency, accountability, and fairness. Mirca Madianou, in her book *Technocolonialism: When Technology for Good Is Harmful* (Madianou, 2024), however, asks us to step back and question what these systems actually do, and whose interests they ultimately serve. At a time when colonial violence is visibly ongoing, from aggressive resource extraction such as cobalt mining in the Congo to settler-colonial violence and genocide in Gaza, the book reveals how colonial logics continue to shape contemporary systems of power, including those built in the name of humanitarian care.

Madianou does not argue for rejecting technology outright. Instead, she challenges the common assumption that humanitarian technologies are neutral or automatically beneficial. To this end, she introduces the concept of *Technocolonialism*,

situating digital and AI-based systems within longer histories of colonialism and capitalism. She shows how technologies designed in the Global North are deployed in the Global South under the language of innovation, efficiency, and accountability. Much like colonial logics in earlier periods, these systems often extract data, impose rigid categories, and prioritize institutional needs over people's lived realities. Through empirical cases, Madianou demonstrates how colonial logics embedded in institutional structures become part of the everyday operation of humanitarian technologies, resulting in structural harms rather than the product of isolated design flaws. For example, biometric registration is required to access aid, making bodily data extraction a condition of survival, and experimental AI tools are deployed in crisis settings in ways that treat affected populations as testing grounds without real decision-making power.

Madianou characterizes digital humanitarianism as a form of *infrastructural violence* that rarely appears as open abuse or visible system breakdown. Instead, it is reproduced through what Pierre Bourdieu calls *symbolic violence*, a form of domination that becomes normalized through accepted classifications and institutional language (Bourdieu, 1991; Burawoy, 2019). In this context, unequal and harmful arrangements come to seem normal and necessary, for example, when extensive data extraction is justified in the name of accountability and participation despite offering affected communities little real influence. As these logics become embedded in technical systems that shape how aid is delivered, inequality, exclusion, and surveillance come to be treated as inevitable rather than political and open to challenge.

The organization of this process is captured through the concept of the *humanitarian machine*, a global network of NGOs, governments, donors, and private tech companies in which automated tools and data infrastructures guide humanitarian decisions. Within this humanitarian machine, decision-making is increasingly distanced from affected communities through layered data systems and reporting protocols, which transform exclusion and non-response into routine procedures. As feedback from crisis-affected people flows upward to donors for audit and reporting, those seeking help may receive silence or automated replies, making neglect appear as an administrative matter rather than a political choice.

Madianou also shows that humanitarianism has long been embedded in unequal global relations, from its involvement in colonial projects to its present-day alignment with market-based solutions, in which crises are treated as forms of *disaster capitalism*. Within this context, the growing influence of corporations and wealthy donors has normalized *philanthrocapitalism*, reshaping humanitarian action to align with capitalist priorities while sustaining a moral discourse of care. For example, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, beyond funding humanitarian programs, helps shape which problems are prioritized and which technological solutions are scaled (McGoey, 2015). In such settings, technological innovation increasingly defines what counts as legitimate humanitarian intervention, leaving less room for participatory alternatives.

While these dynamics are most visible in humanitarian contexts, the implications of *Technocolonialism* extend well beyond them. The patterns Madianou identifies, such as data extraction, unequal control over data, and the shifting of responsibility from institutions to technical systems, also appear in AI platforms, digital labor markets, and many projects labeled as responsible AI. In these domains, fairness metrics and inclusion frameworks often serve as a substitute for real change, creating the appearance of accountability while leaving existing power relations largely unchanged. One example is Amazon Mechanical Turk, where thousands of workers perform a range of invisible microtasks that sustain AI

systems and digital services (Casilli, 2025). Although this platform promotes rating systems and transparency tools as signs of fairness, workers remain classified as independent contractors and are subject to opaque algorithmic management. Fairness in this platform is reduced to performance metrics, while ownership and decision-making power remain concentrated. In this way, algorithmic management replaces negotiated labor relations with automated control. This reflects Dan McQuillan's argument in *Resisting AI* (McQuillan, 2022) that AI embeds authority within technical systems and presents managerial power as neutral efficiency while limiting democratic contestation. Seen together, Madianou and McQuillan show how ethical AI and humanitarian innovation can stabilize hierarchies of ownership and control rather than redistribute power.

At the same time, Madianou's focus on *mundane resistance* highlights how small, everyday actions can push back against dominant systems. In this account, those affected by technocolonial systems are not passive victims but active agents who resist through practices such as using platforms in unintended ways, withholding data, or choosing silence. This view of resistance closely echoes Asef Bayat's *Life as Politics* (2013), in which political change emerges from ordinary, scattered acts rather than formal movements or organized protest. However, read alongside *Resisting AI*, this perspective highlights an important tension. Madianou shows how limited forms of agency persist within technocratic systems that cause harm, while McQuillan argues more directly for collective refusal and alternative forms of governance, such as workers' and people's councils.


Read alongside McQuillan's call for collective refusal, Madianou's account reveals a strategic dilemma. Her cases show that technocolonial systems are never total; people resist, adapt, and subtly subvert them in everyday ways. As Bayat suggests, such acts can accumulate over time and reshape practices, sometimes compelling institutions to adjust. Yet, in Madianou's analysis, this resistance occurs within systems that remain directed by donor priorities, external oversight, and technological control. Because the architecture of authority stays intact,

everyday resistance may open space within the system and alter how it operates, but it does not necessarily change who designs, governs, or ultimately benefits from it. McQuillan targets the deeper structural level more directly, seeking to transform governance rather than negotiate its terms. In humanitarian settings, however, where access to aid often depends on compliance with biometric or digital systems, refusal can carry immediate and serious consequences. The tension thus lies between forms of action that work within technocolonial infrastructures and those that seek to redesign them at their core.

Because neither adaptation nor refusal alone resolves this tension, the strategic dilemma also underscores a productive limitation of Technocolonialism. While the book offers a strong critique of the harms produced by humanitarian technologies, it does not substantially engage with questions of how these systems might be redesigned or governed differently to reduce harm while preserving their potential benefits. Given that digital tools can, even imperfectly, provide access to aid and communication in crisis situations, the challenge is not simply whether to accept or refuse them, but how they might be transformed. This absence foregrounds important questions for future research and practice. In particular, it raises the question of how humanitarian technologies might be designed and governed in alternative ways that shift authority toward affected communities rather than

distant institutions, and what forms of community-centered design could enable such a redistribution of power.

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