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Digital source imperialism and the Arab world

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In recent years, the digitalization of printed books, manuscripts, and documents has promised a new democratization of knowledge. This is not, however, a globally equitable process. The digital world is not freely accessible to all.

The term "digital imperialism" has been commonly used to describe cases where digital products transform social customs, but I use the term "digital source imperialism" here to refer to those who seek to control or monopolize access to digital products that belong to the public domain.

A number of for-profit and non-profit initiatives that commercialize digital sources in the public domain limit access to them or make them selectively available to the public and researchers. This can result in the misrepresentation of what is actually available in the collections or the claiming of representation on behalf of others.

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So, who are the actors in digital source imperialism? They are primarily institutional: for-profit companies, private and state collections and private and state universities. Digital source imperialism must be viewed, I would suggest, as a function of development in this moment, as the capital needed to digitize the human past requires profit, which commonly results in unequal access.

James Boyle raises questions regarding intellectual property in his book, *The Public Domain*, in which he explores the legal, ethical and political aspects of copyright. He argues that, "Intellectual property rights are supposed to be handed out only when necessary to produce incentives to supply some public good, incentives that otherwise would be

lacking." However, he doesn't describe the consequences of commercializing sources in the public domain. Behind the question of what belongs to the "public domain," there is the issue of access to these materials and whether this should be a basic right of everyone in the digital age.

esearchers in North American universities have more access to online Arabic primary sources than in Lebanon, Egypt, or Iraq.

It is essential that both scholars and the public are aware of the politics involved in digitalization, as the decisions of policy makers often result in unequal access to information for citizens. This situation is particularly true in the case of Arabic sources and for scholars and populations in Arab countries. There is a general negligence of Arab state-owned collections to permit access to their sources online. This is only partly related to the limitations of technological infrastructure, or political upheavals and wars during the last decade in the Middle East. Rather, it seems governments deliberately obstruct the digitization of materials or online access to already digitized materials.

A wide selection of Arabic sources can be found in various collections all over the world. These were often amassed through colonial or imperial robbery, or commercial purchasing for private collections. So Arabic textual heritage is not solely in the hands of Arab governments or cultural actors. As sources in the national language are usually given priority, Arabic digitization and online presentation in non-Arab collections is often facilitated by commercial companies that seek profit in return for their investments, and whose means of digitalization are often extremely expensive.

Commercializing sources in foreign collections

should not necessarily result in inequality. In the case of languages with a small number of speakers, such as the Czech language, or more widely spoken languages, like German or Turkish, where free online access is provided by state institutions, inequality in access is not as much of an issue. A thorough survey is needed to investigate what percentage of online Arabic primary source collections is restricted from public access, either by means of subscription or institutional decisions, in comparison to other language materials.

Access to Arabic source collections exemplifies a classic capitalist trap: Technological investment is needed, but investors demand gains for their capital through commercializing products, thus development increases inequality. State intervention could counterbalance this process, but Arab governments have largely neglected the digitization of public domain material.

Digital source imperialism is, in many ways, an online reproduction of inequality of access in the physical world. Before the internet, researchers generally had more access to historical Arabic sources in London than in Sao Paolo, Mosul, Mexico or even Baghdad. Although the rise of the internet is widely credited with shattering physical and geographical limitations, the resources and capital required for digitization — computers, servers, labor — are commonly reliant on market sources (private universities can also behave as market actors in this regard), such that investment in digitization processes often results in new online hierarchies based on capital.

Today, there exists an elite class of global academic digital users. Researchers in privileged North American universities, myself among them, have more access to online Arabic primary sources than researchers in Lebanon, Egypt or Iraq.

What about the future? Even if access to online Arabic sources in the region and worldwide grows, it

is likely that issues of selection and representation will replace access, due to the hierarchies of power embedded in commercial and political interests. The online collections shall represent certain narratives and imaginations about the past, as with offline documentation, and will always be impacted by power dynamics, available funding and commercial interests.

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