

Mirca Madianou, **Technocolonialism: When Technology for Good is Harmful**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2025, 258 pp., \$29.99 (softcover).

Reviewed by

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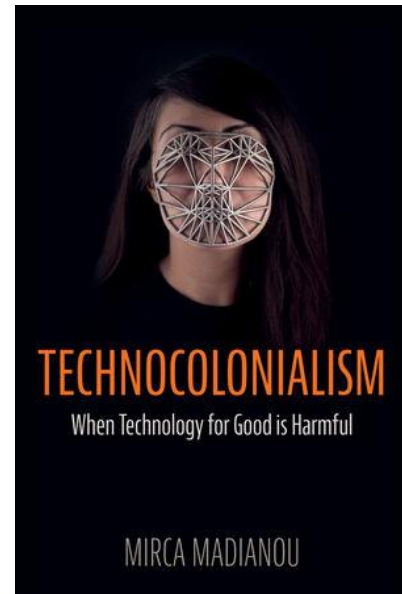
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Mirca Madianou, professor at Goldsmiths, University of London, and leading scholar of digital media, migration, and humanitarianism, began her research on digital humanitarianism in 2013 with a year-long ethnography following the “politics of recovery” after Typhoon Haiyan. This sparked over a decade of extensive fieldwork and desk research across diverse humanitarian contexts, culminating in ***Technocolonialism: When Technology for Good is Harmful***.

In *Technocolonialism*, Madianou dismantles the humanitarian sector’s embrace of digital tools like biometrics, blockchain, and AI, arguing these “technology for good” innovations perpetuate colonial power dynamics in refugee management. Through extensive fieldwork and a postcolonial lens, she coins “technocolonialism” to reveal refugee camps as testing grounds for surveillance technologies that prioritize efficiency and control over human dignity and consent. The book challenges scholars and practitioners to reckon with digital humanitarianism’s imperial undercurrents.

Discourses of digital humanitarianism over the past decade have been saturated with promises of innovation, efficiency, and benevolent disruption. From biometric identification in refugee management to blockchain for aid distribution, such interventions are framed as “technology for good” (p. 10). Yet Madianou argues these narratives obscure continuities of domination tracing back to the colonial encounter. Through incisive ethnographic research and critical theory, she develops “technocolonialism” as a framework for understanding how digital innovation recasts humanitarianism’s enduring entanglements with empire.

Madianou’s long-term ethnographic engagement, most notably her fieldwork following the 2013 typhoon in the Philippines, prompted her to question the politics of “communication for development.” Building on that trajectory, *Technocolonialism* extends her critique to the humanitarian sector’s embrace of digital infrastructures (biometrics, data analytics, and AI), particularly in the context of the European refugee crisis. Drawing from fieldwork across camps, labs, and policy forums, she demonstrates how humanitarian innovation operates as both a continuation and a reinvention of empire, shoring up entrenched hierarchies of knowledge, value, and control between minority-world institutions and majority-world populations.



The book's central concept, technocolonialism, denotes the convergence of three domains: digital innovation, humanitarianism, and coloniality. In Madianou's account, technologies introduced under the banner of progress or efficiency, such as biometric identification systems and blockchain-based aid platforms, function as instruments of surveillance and governance over displaced populations. Far from being neutral tools, they materialize long-standing asymmetries of power. Refugee camps, she observes, serve as "laboratories" where new technologies such as biometrics are tested on the world's most vulnerable populations, with little accountability and no meaningful informed consent. Madianou links the current use of such technologies to postcolonial critiques of humanitarianism that trace the sector's roots to 19th- and 20th-century imperial expansion.

Madianou's intervention is both conceptual and empirical. The opening chapters develop a genealogy of humanitarianism and its institutionalization of compassion, revealing how the language of care has historically been intertwined with projects of domination. Later chapters engage directly with the infrastructures of humanitarianism and digital aid (biometrics, blockchain, and data analytics). For those of us who have worked on digital rights in crisis contexts, Madianou's analysis of biometric infrastructures will feel uncomfortably familiar. Such neutrality permits systemic violence to persist under the guise of efficiency. Madianou's ethnographic vignettes, drawn from interviews with aid workers, engineers, and refugees, bring these abstractions into sharp relief, illustrating how harm occurs not only through spectacular institutional failures but also in ordinary encounters between people and machines.

One of the book's most persuasive sections concerns the double valence of digital infrastructures: the same networks that allow refugees to navigate borders and communicate with loved ones are also leveraged for surveillance, profiling, and control. This paradox, Madianou suggests, is not accidental but structural—an inherent feature of technocolonialism, where infrastructures simultaneously empower and oppress. Her discussion of how platforms have become *de facto* communication infrastructures in the absence of public alternatives in the majority world underscores the non-neutrality of connectivity itself. Far from bridging divides, such platforms entrench dependency and expose users to new forms of data extraction.

In linking humanitarianism to colonial histories, Madianou joins a growing body of scholarship that critiques digital development and "AI for good" paradigms. Her distinctive contribution lies in integrating ethnographic sensitivity with a systemic critique of technology's political economy. By following the "thing"—tracing the movement of technological artifacts, protocols, and data across contexts—she constructs a multi-sited ethnography of the humanitarian-industrial complex. The result is a nuanced portrayal of how empire "permeates tech," not through overt domination but through infrastructures, imaginaries, and practices that normalize inequality.

At its most provocative, *Technocolonialism* challenges the moral foundations of humanitarianism itself. The book compels readers to confront the uncomfortable possibility that interventions intended to alleviate suffering may simultaneously perpetuate it. By situating technological solutionism within the broader history of imperialism, Madianou reframes the ethics of innovation: "move fast and break things" is fundamentally incompatible with the humanitarian principle of "do no harm." Her critique extends to the corporate and institutional actors—UN agencies, NGOs, and start-ups—whose alliances sustain the

humanitarian-tech nexus. These actors rarely share the same values or goals, yet collectively they reproduce a system of dependency and control. For organizations piloting biometric or AI tools in camps, the book should be read less as a warning and more as a mandate to halt certain experiments altogether.

If there is a limitation to *Technocolonialism*, it is perhaps that the rich analysis of resistance in the chapter entitled “Mundane Resistance” appears relatively late in the book and remains somewhat underdeveloped in relation to the broader argument. Importantly, Madianou does not treat refugees and crisis-affected people merely as objects of technocolonial power, instead turning to the everyday tactics through which individuals and communities quietly contest humanitarian technologies. Rather than spectacular acts of refusal, these practices include strategic noncompliance, workarounds, and subtle forms of misalignment with digital systems. By drawing attention to such ordinary forms of resistance, Madianou complicates the image of refugees as passive data subjects and shows how people appropriate, subvert, or evade technological infrastructures in ways that unsettle the humanitarian machine.

At the same time, the book’s ambition—to connect ethnographic detail with macrohistorical analysis—sometimes leaves limited space for deeper engagement with alternative imaginaries or more sustained accounts of resistance emerging from refugee and migrant communities themselves. While Madianou acknowledges such agency, her analytical focus remains primarily on the reproduction of domination rather than its subversion; for some readers, this may underplay the transformative potential of grassroots organizing and design justice interventions, even as it remains consistent with her purpose of revealing the systemic nature of technocolonial power rather than cataloguing isolated acts of dissent.

Overall, *Technocolonialism* is a landmark contribution to the critical study of technology, media, and humanitarianism. It deepens the conversation on digital inequality by situating it within centuries-long structures of coloniality and offers a vital corrective to the celebratory discourses that pervade humanitarian innovation. For scholars of media and communication, the book revitalizes debates around imperialism and dependency in the digital age; for practitioners and policymakers, it demands a reckoning with the ethical contradictions of “innovation for good.” Madianou’s lucid prose, rigorous fieldwork, and theoretical acuity make this an essential text for anyone concerned with the politics of digital infrastructures and the futures they enable—or foreclose.