GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

Digital Colonialism: Why We Must Leave Big Tech Behind

Article by Amir Hashemi, Renata Ávila Pinto
September 1, 2026

As tech giants have expanded their reach into every corner of public and private life, their products and services have increasingly come to be seen as impossible to replace or reject. Yet although the cost of leaving the current technological ecosystem is immense, the price of staying in big tech's grip is even higher. So, how can societies resist "digital colonialism"? An interview with Renata Ávila Pinto, CEO of the Open Knowledge Foundation.

This interview took place on 24 April, 2026, on the outskirts of the European Green Academy in Brussels. It has been edited and condensed for clarity and length. Some answers have been reordered thematically.

Amir Hashemi: What is digital colonialism to you?

Renata Ávila Pinto: I started using the term nearly two decades ago. At the time, I had many discussions with my colleagues in academia about the increasingly extractive practices of big tech companies. Some of them saw digital colonialism as the continuation of other colonialisms, but for me, this relationship has never been a Global South vs Global North issue. Rather, it's a one-per-cent-against-the-99-per-cent problem.

Europeans and North Americans feel very uncomfortable when being described as colonised by a small group of people in California that, until recently, held little political or cultural power over them. "We have the rule of law, human rights principles, and strong institutions, so we're safe," they would say. But whether we like it or not, our culture, our way of living, and the way we interact with one another on the street are all being wiped out.

Many of us are only realising now that much of the public infrastructure we used to have – and even things as simple as a paper map or a physical menu – is disappearing fast. Now, everybody is glued to their small screens, constantly surveilled and feeding the systems that have taken control of so much of our lives.

Why have governments been unsuccessful at stopping this?

The current tech landscape is like a crumbling house whose owners keep increasing the rent without providing any maintenance. For the vast majority of people, there is no possibility of thriving in this environment. Big tech makes you pay several times for everything it provides you with: You have to pay through your taxes because, increasingly, all your government administration is done inside this ecosystem; you have to pay for an ever-expanding list of subscription services; and you are also made to pay with your data and knowledge. And as the AI race rages on, you have to pay with your planet. This is the devil's deal that these companies get us into.

Governments and institutions use regulation as the

primary way to keep tech giants in check. But this is like putting on a helmet and a safety vest and hoping to be safe when the walls collapse on you

Leaving this collapsing building requires courage and a choice – one that is political, commercial, and pragmatic. But governments and institutions say getting out is too costly. Instead, they choose to use regulation as the primary way to keep tech giants in check. But this is like putting on a helmet and a safety vest and hoping to be safe when the walls collapse on you. It hasn't worked so far, and it will not in the future. The only viable tactic of resistance is to walk out of this crumbling building and deal with the consequences later.

How should this resistance be organised? Should governments take the lead, or is this primarily a choice for individual users?

One of the things that annoys me about certain currents of the environmental movement is their emphasis on individual choices and their belief that the general public is a big part of the problem. To me, this is victim-blaming, and it doesn't solve the bigger issues. That said, I think we need to go for big wins, and for this, everyone has to play a role.

For all the damage that they inflict on society – on mental and public health as well as the environment – tech companies contribute very little value because their profits go to tax havens. Ongoing efforts in the EU and individual countries to ban social media use for children are a good start, but they are not enough and only chip away at the edges of the problem. Both civil society and governments can put pressure on tech multinationals through other means, including strategic litigation and refusing to engage with emerging, unnecessarily complex technologies. It is also important to expose how deeply we have come to depend on a handful of companies for everything ranging from basic services to satellites. The invisible hand of big tech must be made visible.

Assuming we are willing and able to leave behind this structural dependency on big tech and its products, what replacement should we aim for?

At the Open Knowledge Foundation, we have been pushing for public-interest technologies – tech solutions that are good enough for the purpose they serve, while staying climate-friendly, accessible, and sustainable. One proposal that we are pushing for is the local stack. A lot of what we use technology for can stay local, small, manageable, and accountable. Do we really need to go through two American corporations just to take care of our government administration or talk to the people we love?

Likewise, nowadays we see teenagers using advanced AI to make memes or edit photos. Memes are great, but we don't need sophisticated, expensive technology to make them. You can do the same thing with a much smaller dataset. If we are going to consume vast amounts of energy and water, there should be good justification, like solving the world's most pressing problems.

With its growing financial, political, and cultural power, big tech is increasingly closing off space for innovation. Today, if you want to release an app, you first have to agree to the terms and conditions of Apple and Alphabet. In other words, even for the simplest of tasks you have to go all the way to Silicon Valley and back. But things weren't always like this. In the early days of the web, there was a lot more freedom to play with technology and innovate. It is this same openness that we have to aim for today to break big tech's monopoly.

You have reinterpreted the term "digital transition", which typically refers to the adoption of digital technologies, to describe the need to wrest these technologies out of big tech's hands. Would you characterise this as a sort of technological degrowth?

It's not necessarily degrowth. It is recalibration. And for Europe, it is also decoupling. There is no reason for my dating life, my medical records, and the way I interact with the state to all be in the same data centre.

The transition that I call for is from a sphere of submission to a space of control, autonomy, and more importantly, accountability. This vision is not anti-tech: it acknowledges the fact that technology mediates our lives, but refuses to accept that the current tech landscape is our best and only choice.

Such a transition also embraces friction. Without friction, you are trading away your rights for convenience or speed. In that way, it resembles and can learn from the green transition. For instance, riding a bike somewhere might take longer than taking the car, but in the eyes of those who wish to pollute less, do physical exercise, and avoid getting stuck in traffic, it is a trade-off worth going for.

What is the AI boom, coupled with the continued "enshittification" of tech platforms, doing to our knowledge systems?

It is very naïve to think that these companies will keep their services available free of charge for everyone, forever. This presents a profound danger, as more and more people get stuck in these ecosystems through years of intense interaction. And when you reach that point, it doesn't matter whether you have a university degree or not. Everyone is vulnerable.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression. But nowadays, freedom of information is no less important and no less under threat.

The system was already flawed, with browsers ranking content and burying webpages – the equivalent of a very censored library. Now, AI has made things much worse, removing the human element of knowledge seeking, curation, and presentation. We no longer have access to the "books". There is only a voice reading certain information to us and omitting others, for reasons that we don't know, and I think that's terrifying. Another likely outcome is that AI companies will embed the nasty system of marketing in their products. If this happens, it will be very hard to differentiate facts from opinion, suggestion, or manipulation.

There are, of course, those who are trying to use advanced artificial intelligence for good, such as climate activists and digital rights campaigners, but there is no guarantee that access to these technologies will remain open.

Tech companies present the uncontrolled spread of advanced AI as inevitable while at every step fighting efforts to make the industry more transparent. For instance, Palantir's "manifesto" disparages public discussions about the development of AI weapons and other digital technologies as "theatrical debates".

Tech oligarchs often make these remarks, and they are nothing but pure rhetoric. What they want in reality is not a project of how they see the world. It's just economic gain, power, and control. We know that one of the most polluting industries in the world is the military, and we know that one of the most polluting technologies is AI. What Palantir and its likes sell is fear, control, and global destruction.

This is precisely why openness is key, and why defending and advancing public information sources should be one of our top priorities. As Greens have correctly pointed out, large corporations have become the biggest hoarders of data, including public-interest data. This has to change.

That said, we're not powerless to stop this. One of the things I learned from my years on Julian Assange's defence team is that we often have far more space to act against injustice than we think we do. We have to keep pushing the boundaries and asking uncomfortable questions. There is now a small window of opportunity for this fight as well, since at no previous point have we had so many technologies that could help us map power and understand how it works in real time.

If social movements and political partisans recognise and seize this unoccupied space, I think the tech minority cannot circumvent the majority. But first, as I mentioned earlier, it is essential to get out of big tech's playing field. If we only fight them in their own spaces, using the same platforms that they comfortably employ as megaphones, we will lose. But if we abandon their broken building, they will be shouting their empty prophecies to the walls.



Amir Hashemi is editorial assistant at the Green European Journal. Previously, he was language editor at The European Correspondent and copywriter at Geeks.ltd. He has a master's degree in Communication Studies from the VUB.



Renata Ávila Pinto (born 1 January 1981) is a Guatemalan attorney and activist specialising in technology and intellectual property. Since October 2021, she has been the CEO of the UK-based Open Knowledge Foundation. A former fellow and affiliate of the Stanford Institute of Human-Centred Artificial Intelligence, she is currently associated with the Centre for Internet and Society at CNRS, France.

Published September 1, 2026
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/digital-colonialism-why-we-must-leave-big-tech-behind/

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.
Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.