

Assignment 3: Data Colonialism and Uneven AI Infrastructures

Module 2 examined the often-invisible labour involved in producing data and AI systems. This module expands the analysis to the global infrastructures, resources, institutions, and power relations that make AI possible.

Please read the texts in the following order:

1. The Politics of Artificial Intelligence Supply Chains, James Muldoon, Ana Valdivia, and Adam Badger (2026)
2. Uneven Datafication, Azadeh Akbari (2026)
3. Extending Uneven Datafication, Payal Arora (2026)

Begin with “The Politics of Artificial Intelligence Supply Chains” to develop a concrete understanding of the different processes involved in producing AI, including infrastructure, mineral extraction, data work, model development and deployment, and e-waste.

Then read “Uneven Datafication” as a theoretical framework for examining why these processes, resources, benefits, and harms are distributed unevenly. Focus particularly on the concepts of territorialisation, dispossession, unequal exchange, and coloniality.

Finally, read “Extending Uneven Datafication” as a critical response to Akbari. Pay attention to Arora’s emphasis on agency, aspiration, ambivalence, and the danger of representing people in the Global South only as passive victims of technological extraction.

Write a short essay of approximately 800–1,000 words addressing the following three areas. Use the questions as guidance rather than answering every question separately. Your essay should connect the readings rather than provide three separate summaries.

1. Select one or two parts of the AI supply chain discussed by Muldoon, Valdivia, and Badger, e.g., mineral extraction or data work. How does Akbari’s concept of uneven datafication help explain the relationships between these activities? Consider who controls the infrastructure, where different forms of labour and extraction occur, who receives the benefits, and who bears the social and environmental costs.
2. Consider a dataset, model, computational system, research tool, or digital infrastructure related to your own work. What resources, infrastructures, data, and forms of labour make it possible? Where are they located, and which actors control the important decisions? What people, places, dependencies, or costs become invisible when the system is viewed only as a technical object? Explain how thinking in terms of AI supply chains and uneven datafication might influence your research questions, methods, or evaluation practices.
3. Reflect on the tension between structural critique and human agency raised by Akbari and Arora. How can researchers examine colonial and extractive relations without treating communities, particularly those in the Global South, as passive, homogeneous, or without agency? What assumption about data, AI, technological development, or your own research did these readings lead you to reconsider?

Conclude with three open-ended questions for the group discussion. The questions should emerge from the readings and invite different interpretations rather than have simple factual answers.

Submission and assessment

Submit your essay and three discussion questions before the next session. The assignment will be assessed as complete or incomplete based on engagement with the readings, connection to your research, and depth of critical reflection.

Please submit the questions until Oct. 16, and the final essay until Oct. 23.