Digital colonialism: An analysis of Facebook's role in the Rohingya genocide

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Abstract

The Rohingya genocide demonstrates how modern technology can exacerbate historical ethnic tensions and facilitate severe human rights abuses. In 2016–17, Myanmar's military orchestrated clearance operations that forced over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. Meta, Facebook's parent company, played a critical role in this crisis through systematic failures in content moderation and platform design. The company's inadequate investment in Burmese-speaking moderators and culturally appropriate algorithmic systems allowed hate speech to flourish, while its engagement-based recommender system amplified anti-Rohingya content. Using Stanton's Ten Stages of Genocide model, this paper demonstrates how these platform dynamics catalysed the progression of offline violence against the Rohingya. These failures highlight a stark disparity in safety measures applied to Global South and Global North users.

This case exemplifies a broader pattern of digital colonialism, where Meta's Internet.org initiative drove users to Facebook while prioritising data extraction and market influence over local population safety. Similar patterns of Facebook-amplified ethnic violence have emerged in other Global South nations, including Ethiopia and Sri Lanka. The paper argues that this systematic neglect of user safety in favour of economically valuable data collection perpetuates colonial power structures, challenging the assumption that technology platforms are neutral intermediaries in protecting human rights.

Introduction

The Rohingya genocide is a stark example of how twenty-first-century technology can intersect with historical ethnic tensions to exacerbate human rights abuses. In late 2016 and early 2017, Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, commenced a crackdown against the Muslim Rohingya people of Rakhine state, razing villages and killing thousands (Maizland, 2022). This spilled over into widespread extrajudicial killings by Buddhist nationalists, resulting in more than 700,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh to seek asylum. The United Nations' Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (IIFFMM) found the Tatmadaw to be behind a network of Facebook pages that helped incite the violence. Meta, Facebook's parent company,[75] was ill-prepared to moderate content in the country (IIFFMM, 2018), lacking both sufficient Burmese-speaking human moderators and culturally appropriate algorithmic moderation systems. While the roots of this conflict stretch back decades, the role of social media in amplifying hate speech and facilitating violence demands critical examination. The situation in Myanmar is not an isolated incident but rather exemplifies a broader pattern of social media platforms enabling violence in the Global South. Similar patterns of Facebook amplifying ethnic violence have emerged in Ethiopia (Mackintosh, 2021) and Sri Lanka (Taub and Fisher, 2018), while online disinformation has fuelled lynchings in Indonesia, India and Mexico (Taub and Fisher, 2018).

This paper argues that Meta catalysed the progression towards the Rohingya genocide through algorithmic amplification of hate speech and systematic economic exploitation of Myanmar's digital sphere. Specifically, Facebook's recommender system, optimised for engagement, systematically

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[75] Facebook, Inc. was renamed Meta in late 2021 (Isaac, 2021). In this paper, *Facebook* refers to the social media platform, while *Meta* denotes the parent company overseeing broader strategic aims.

amplified anti-Rohingya content while the company aggressively pursued user data extraction for commercial gain, exemplifying a broader pattern of digital colonialism (Kwet, 2019). Analysis through Gregory Stanton's Ten Stages of Genocide framework, a model of the processes that lead to genocide, reveals that Facebook's platform design and content moderation practices enabled multiple stages of genocide to unfold simultaneously, demonstrating how online harms can lead to offline violence.

The analysis proceeds as follows. First, I provide an overview of Myanmar's historical context and the marginalisation of the Rohingya ('Background'). Next, I explore the concept of digital colonialism and its manifestation through Meta's Internet.org initiative, examining how the company's motivations and expansion strategies in the Global South parallel historical colonial patterns ('Routers are the new railways'). I then examine how these dynamics manifested in concrete harms through Facebook's platform design and content moderation practices, which infringed upon the rights of the Rohingya ('Engagement drives hate speech'). Building on this analysis, I apply Stanton's genocide model to elucidate Facebook's role in the progression of violence against the Rohingya. Finally, I challenge the defence of Facebook as a neutral intermediary, arguing that algorithmic curation and Meta's own acknowledgement of responsibility fundamentally undermine this claim.

Background

The persecution of the Rohingya is not isolated to Facebook; rather, it is a longstanding cultural phenomenon stemming from colonial-era ethnic tensions and Buddhist nationalism. Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, has a population that is overwhelmingly Buddhist, comprising about 88 per cent of its 54 million inhabitants. Buddhist nationalism has long been a significant force in Burmese politics, with anti-colonial movements before independence from British colonial rule in 1948 often focused more on preserving Buddhist culture than outright mobilisation (International Crisis Group, 2017). The British colonial strategy of 'divide and rule' employed in Burma, like in many other colonies (Bless, 1990), intentionally exacerbated ethnic tensions that persist to this day. Since independence, Myanmar has been embroiled in the world's longest-running civil war, with various ethnic militias fighting for self-determination. The conflict between the Rohingya and the Rakhine Buddhists, who are primary actors in the genocide, exemplifies these tensions. During World War Two, the British promised the Rohingya a Muslim state in exchange for fighting against the Axis-aligned Rakhine (Beech and Cai, 2024). This helped to exacerbate the already-existing division along ethnic lines in the region.

The passage of the Citizenship Law in 1982 created a new tiered system that effectively restricted citizenship of Myanmar, and the associated privileges, to 135 state-recognised ethnic groups (Rhoads, 2022). The Rohingya are considered 'Bengali' by the state, implying them to be illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, and are thus not recognised under the law. Not only does the law effectively render them stateless, but it has also been used to justify restrictions on their freedom of movement, access to education, and employment opportunities (Alam, 2019). These institutionalised forms of exclusion and discrimination, born from colonial-era divisions, would later find new expression through Facebook.

Routers are the new railways

Meta's Internet.org initiative, launched in Myanmar in July 2016, represents a modern form of colonial infrastructure designed to extract valuable user data from emerging markets. Like Britain's colonial railways in Burma that facilitated extraction of natural resources (Baillargeon, 2020), Internet.org's Free Basics program provided Burmese users with access to Facebook and a small number of additional services without data charges (IIFFMM, 2018; Global Voices, 2017). While marketed as a humanitarian endeavour to promote connectivity (Solon, 2017), this initiative—previously introduced across Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Liao, 2017; Nothias, 2020)—primarily serves to expand Meta's data collection capabilities in the Global South (Nothias, 2020). Data forms the foundation of the digital economy (Zuboff, 2019), with high-quality datasets being critical for training predictive algorithms such targeted advertising or generative AI. In 2017, for instance, Meta saw revenues of

US$40.65 billion, 98 per cent of which came from advertising (Facebook, 2018). To generate better predictions from these algorithms and hence more economic value, more data is required. Consequently, corporations are incentivised to extract data from platform users at an ever-increasing scale. Zuboff (2019) calls this quest for profit maximisation the 'extraction imperative'. Internet.org's provision of infrastructure for restricted internet access allows Meta to control data streams not otherwise available to the company, giving it a strategic advantage in the development of its predictive products (Coleman, 2019). The aim of providing free internet access to developing nations is therefore not truly driven by the belief that 'connectivity is a human right' (Zuckerberg, 2014), but rather by the intent to generate shareholder value through data extraction. Focusing on Myanmar, Meta's expansion has clearly worked. In 2011, following the downfall of the military junta, internet penetration was 0.23 per cent. By 2017, 26 per cent of Burmese were online, with over 10 million Facebook users (Amnesty International, 2022). The 2015 launch of a Myanmar-specific Facebook saw the platform quickly become a primary online gateway, with 95 per cent of internet users on the platform (Samet, Arriola, and Matanock, 2024). This rapid increase in connectivity and Facebook usage across such a relatively short period of time would likely be less pronounced in the absence of Internet.org and the profit incentives arising from the extraction imperative.

The exploitative logic of data extraction mirrors the extractivism of British colonial rule, remnants of which persist today. The Burmese colonial economy was structured to facilitate the export of goods to the metropole, with mineral and lumber extraction, processing of primary products, trade, and banking dominated by a few international firms. These firms prioritised Indian and European labour over Burmese, thereby limiting the benefit that Burma and its population gained from international trade (Fenichel and Huff, 1975). Like Internet.org today, colonial Burma's economy generated economic value for the Global North with negligible benefits for the local population through the exploitation of local resources. Thus, Internet.org perpetuates a modern form of colonialism, mirroring the exploitative economic structure of British rule in Burma. Kwet (2019) dubs this form of economic domination 'digital colonialism', observing how the monopoly power of multinational corporations creates technological dependencies that further consolidate data resource extraction and its benefits in the hands of foreign powers. Digital colonialism is manifest in the decision to introduce Internet.org to Myanmar in order to control previously untapped, economically valuable data sources. As I will show shortly, Meta's actions once in Myanmar reinforced digital colonial power structures with disastrous impacts on the Rohingya.

Engagement drives hate speech

Having established Meta's entry into Myanmar as colonial in nature, I now analyse how Facebook was abused by Buddhist nationalist groups and the Myanmar government to infringe upon the rights of the Rohingya. The platform became a vehicle for calls to violence, exemplified by a September 2017 post from General Min Aung Hlaing of the Tatmadaw. In the midst of 'clearance operations' displacing Rohingya from their villages, he wrote that under British colonial rule 'the Bengali population exploded […] All must be loyal to the State in serving their duties, so that such cases will never happen again' (IIFFMM, 2018, p. 14). The case illustrates the fundamental tension between competing human rights. While the General's post could be viewed as an exercise of right to free speech under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly, 1948a), it directly threatens the Rohingya's right to equality and non-discrimination guaranteed by Articles 2 and 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN General Assembly, 1966). As Debeljak (2009) argues, these rights must be balanced against one another. However, in this instance the right to free speech is clearly prioritised, to the detriment of the Rohingyan right to equality. This imbalance between free speech and protection from discrimination was not incidental—it was the consequence of specific platform design choices. To understand this failure, we must examine two related questions: how Facebook actively contributed to hate speech proliferation, and why the company failed to prevent its spread.

Internal documents from the Facebook Papers, leaked by whistleblower Frances Haugen (Cameron et al., 2023), offer insight into how the platform directly undermined Rohingya rights through specific platform design choices and operational practices. They reveal that Meta actively contributed to the

amplification of anti-Rohingya content by building Facebook's recommender system to maximise user engagement over user safety or information quality. In general, recommender systems filter a stream of online information into a set of relevant items based on users' preferences, behaviour, or other characteristics (Roy and Dutta, 2022). Facebook's system suggests content for the home page primarily on how much interaction, or *engagement*, it generates from users. An engaged user keeps using the platform, which increases the amount of data that they generate. Internal Meta researchers acknowledged in the leaked document *What is Collateral Damage?*, that these 'core product mechanics' are a 'significant part' of why hate speech flourishes on the platform (Cameron et al., 2023). Misinformation and inflammatory content are more likely to drive engagement (Munn, 2020), leading the recommender system to spread such content far and wide (Amnesty International, 2022). In following the extraction imperative to maximise data harvesting, Facebook's recommender system proactively facilitated the amplification of anti-Rohingya content.

Meta's content moderation systems failed to prevent the spread of hate speech in Myanmar, compounding the harm caused by the recommender system's amplification of inflammatory content. These systems, which combined human moderators with algorithmic tools, were inadequately designed and resourced to prioritise the safety of Burmese users despite the country having a history of ethnic violence. In April 2018, well after the genocide started, some reports suggest that there were only five content moderators for Myanmar, with none based in the country (Kang and Frenkel, 2021). According to Haugen (2021), 87 per cent of spending on combatting misinformation and hate speech through algorithmic means by Meta is spent on English-language content when English speakers comprise only 9 per cent of the platform. Accordingly, the standard systems intended to keep users safe are far less effective in the Global South than they are in the Global North (Debre and Akram, 2021).

While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948a) proclaims equity, Meta's operational practices reflect and reinforce existing global inequities. Amnesty International (2022, p. 37) quotes a former Meta employee as stating in an interview that, within the organisation 'different countries are treated differently. If 1000 people died in Myanmar tomorrow, it is less important than if 10 people in Britain die'. While hyperbolic in its presentation, the quote highlights that the internal approach treats countries according to their perceived importance, where countries in the Global North are given preferential treatment. Chouliaraki positions this indifference to lives in the Global South as a phenomenon perpetuated by Western media: the media positions Western audiences as superior spectators, reinforcing the idea that the West is the centre of moral authority and global importance (Iqani and Molokomme, 2017). This imbalance perpetuates colonial attitudes of racial superiority, like the ones stoked under British rule, and positions Rohingyan lives as less worthy of Facebook's protection than English speakers. The treatment of Global South audiences as peripheral concerns manifests in Meta's operational practices in multiple ways. First, it is reflected in the decision to spend 87 per cent of the trust and safety budget on the 9 per cent of English speakers (Haugen, 2021). Second, it is apparent from Meta's 'reluctan[ce] to hire specific staff for every one of the 195 countries in the world' (Amnesty International, 2022, p. 37), instead choosing to only staff 'important' countries . Finally, the treatment of Global South users as peripheral appears in Meta's continued operation in the country without adequate safety systems. This is despite the fact that concerns were raised as early as 2013 by Australian academic and journalist Aela Callan in a meeting with Meta's most senior policy executive (Solon, 2018). Even the Myanmar government, which 'contributed to the commission of atrocity crimes' against the Rohingya (IIFFMM, 2018, p. 18), held a 'crisis meeting' with Facebook in mid-2014 (Solon, 2018). The meeting followed deadly riots in Mandalay incited by false rumours of the rape of a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man (Fuller, 2014). Meta's lack of action in Myanmar suggests that Burmese lives are viewed as a resource to be exploited, rather than something to be protected.

Meta's systematic undervaluation of Rohingyan lives—reflected in Meta's decisions to provide inadequate moderation of an inherently unsafe form of content curation, and allocate disproportionate resources to an English-speaking minority—epitomises the extractive logic of digital colonialism. The extraction of data resources from Burmese users serves the Global North by fuelling lucrative prediction products, while neglecting their basic safety and human rights. This process actively reproduces historical colonial attitudes, placing the Global South's needs as peripheral and inferior to those of the

metropole. Thus, Meta's conduct in Myanmar represents more than a series of operational failures; it is a manifestation of digital colonial power driven by the extraction imperative.

Digital colonialism and genocide

Digital colonialism, driven by market forces and the extraction imperative, mirrors historical colonialism in its annexation of territory (in this case, users' attention) and the exploitation of local populations for the benefit of the metropole. I have demonstrated that digital colonialism was an underlying motivator to Meta's actions in Myanmar. Using Stanton's Ten Stages of Genocide (Table 1). I now show how the platform catalysed the progression of the Rohingya genocide.

Table 1: Stanton's Ten Stages of Genocide

1. Classification	2. Symbolisation
3. Discrimination	4. Dehumanisation
5. Organisation	6. Polarisation
7. Preparation	8. Persecution
9. Extermination	10. Denial

Source: Stanton, 2012.

The purpose of Stanton's model is to organise established genocide risk factors—such as previous genocides, political instability, exclusionary ideology, and massive human rights violations (Harff, 2003)—into a structured framework for understanding and preventing genocide. While Ten Stages of Genocide is recognised as the leading processual model in genocide studies (Theriault, 2021), it builds upon earlier frameworks like Fein's five-stage Holocaust analysis (Rosenberg, 2012). Stanton's model distinguishes itself through its non-sequential approach to stages (Hossain, 2021), offering broad applicability across different contexts. This practical utility is evidenced by its adoption by both the United Nations and the US State Department for genocide prevention efforts (Charny, 2024).

Classification of people by ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality is the first stage of the model. Without classification, there are no subsequent stages because there is no out-group to genocide (Stanton, 2012). These classifications are given names or other symbols (such as the yellow star for Jews under Nazi rule) in the next stage, *Symbolisation*. In the third stage, *Discrimination,* a dominant group uses their power to prevent other groups from exercising their rights (Stanton, 2012). These stages help fuel the fourth stage, *Dehumanisation*, where the dominant group denies the humanity of the other group by equating them with animals or diseases. These stages collectively define victims as the 'other', legitimising them as an enemy and thus deserving of their victimisation (Waller, 2002).

The fifth stage, *Organisation*, is when hate groups or militias organise against the targets. During *Polarisation*, the groups are driven apart through the use of propaganda, and the dominant group may silence moderates and pass laws giving them control over the targeted group (Stanton, 2012). *Polarisation* is closely followed by *Preparation*, where plans are made, perpetrators are trained and armed, and the populace is indoctrinated with fear of the target group to make the acts that may follow more palatable. *Persecution* sees the targeted group identified and separated out based on their otherness, with their human rights violated through extrajudicial killings, sterilisation, deliberate deprivation of food and water, and other disruptive acts (Stanton, 2012) that are outlawed by the Genocide Convention (UN General Assembly, 1948b). The ninth stage, *Extermination*, is the intentional destruction, in whole or in part, of the targeted group. *Denial*, the tenth and final stage, can be seen as the continuation of genocide as a 'continuing attempt to destroy the victim group psychologically and culturally' (Stanton, 2012).

Facebook's actions correspond to all but the final three stages of Stanton's model of genocide, playing a major role in the progression of violence against the Rohingya. The first four stages—*Classification*, *Symbolisation*, *Discrimination*, and *Dehumanisation*—are evident in how the Rohingya were portrayed

and treated on the platform. Classified as a Muslim 'other', they were symbolised as a threat to national unity (Chowdhury and Sifat, 2024) and discriminated against, a process long in place offline (Rhoads, 2022). Posts compiled by the IIFFMM show how Facebook played a role in dehumanising the Rohingya, with widespread use of slurs like *Kway kalar* ('Muslim dog') (Amnesty International, 2022), which further entrenched their portrayal as subhuman. In the absence of adequate safety systems, the subsequent stages of *Organisation* and *Polarisation* were supported by Facebook's engagement-based recommender system, which amplified divisive content and allowed nationalist groups (International Crisis Group, 2017), the government, and the Tatmadaw to organise and spread their message (IIFFMM, 2018). As Zimmerman (2008) argues, such hate speech and propaganda prepare populations for potential atrocities by creating a persecutory environment that normalises extreme actions, and therefore Facebook's role in spreading such content contributed to stage seven, *Preparation*. The final three stages—persecution, extermination, and denial—are largely offline acts, although Facebook has been used to disseminate genocide denial (UNESCO, 2022). Driven by digital colonialism, Facebook hence catalysed the escalation of violence against the Rohingya.

Theriault (2021) contends that Stanton's model is hindered by key inaccuracies that limit its predictive utility.[76] He argues that the model excludes an endpoint he calls *Consolidation*, where the aftermath of destruction becomes permanent through actions like the laundering of expropriated wealth and demographic engineering. He also argues that denial functions as a tool within consolidation rather than an independent stage and that stages may reflect outcomes rather than causal conditions. For example, Nazi concentration camps dehumanised victims through hyper-sadistic practices rather than following prior dehumanisation. Additionally, Theriault (2007) highlights a key complexity: that stages and their inversions can coexist. For instance, perpetrators may either dehumanise victims or 'superhumanise' themselves to justify violence. This duality complicates the model, potentially leading to legitimate genocides being overlooked.

In response, Stanton (2020) emphasises that the model is future-focused and identifies social processes predictive of genocide, rather than serving as a strict causal framework. Stages are contributive, not determinative, and their presence signals the need for preventative action rather than confirming ongoing genocide. Stanton also highlights the model's adaptability and non-exhaustive nature, pointing to the addition of *Discrimination* and *Persecution* to the original Eight Stages (Stanton, 2012). Processes like *Consolidation* or *Superhumanisation*, as raised by Theriault (2007), can coexist with the model without undermining its utility.

Challenging the neutrality of technology

My analysis suggests that Facebook helped to progress the Rohingya genocide because Meta's digital colonial focus put trust and safety second to data extraction. This conclusion appears at first glance to be at odds with a common defence of social media platforms, which frames them as neutral communication infrastructure not to be held legally liable for their users' content. Jaitly (2007), writing about proposed amendments to India's *Information Technology Act* of 2000 on behalf of Google, for instance, highlights that telephone companies are not usually held liable when their systems are used to plan a crime. This view is consistent with Section 230 of the United States' *Communications Decency Act 1996*, which provides immunity to social media companies and other online services so long as they engage in good faith moderation (Citron and Wittes, 2017). According to this perspective, it would be ridiculous to claim an intermediary service contributed to a genocide.

I argue that this position ignores two important considerations. First, Facebook is more similar to a news outlet than a neutral communication tool like the telephone network, as the content users see is algorithmically curated by the recommender system in partnership with content moderation. Publishers of newspapers have previously been found guilty of crimes against humanity for publishing hateful content and inciting genocide, as in the case of Julius Streicher and *Der Stürmer* in Nazi Germany

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[76] Theriault had previously signalled his key criticisms of Stanton's model in a 2020 op-ed (Theriault, 2020). While Stanton's response (2020) to this criticism primarily addresses Theriault's op-ed, it also engages with the core arguments that Theriault would later expand upon in his 2021 article (Theriault, 2021).

(Bytwerk, 2015). Streicher both published and edited the virulently anti-Semitic newspaper, which while not an official publication of the Nazi Party was nonetheless a 'major organ of the National Socialist press' (Showalter, 1983, p. 174), and regularly called for the destruction of the Jews (Bytwerk, 2006). I stress that Meta lacks the intent of Streicher, however, the case does highlight that publishers can be held responsible for what they publish. Algorithmic curation functions similarly to a human editor (Peukert, Sen, and Claussen, 2024), and so it is not a great leap to consider Meta a publisher and thus ascribe it some level of moral and legal responsibility for its role in the genocide. Further, Meta has previously argued in court that it is a publisher, despite a long-held public position that it is merely a neutral platform (Levin, 2018), which lends credibility to my argument.

The second consideration moves beyond publisher status to Meta's explicit acknowledgement of platform responsibility. In a 2018 testimony before a joint congressional committee in the United States, Zuckerberg admitted that Meta is 'responsible for the content' on Facebook (Associated Press, 2018). This declaration of responsibility is supported by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which establish that companies should have ongoing and proactive due diligence processes to identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for their human rights impacts (Forrer and Seyle, 2016). Meta neglected these obligations in Myanmar by failing to build adequate safety systems, instead treating Burmese users merely as sources of extractable data. It is hence responsible for the resulting harms to the Rohingya population.

Thus, the defence of Facebook as a neutral intermediary platform fails on both theoretical and practical grounds. Algorithmic curation fundamentally distinguishes Facebook from traditional communication infrastructure, placing it closer to a publisher than a neutral carrier. Moreover, the company's own acknowledgement of content responsibility, coupled with its legal positioning as a publisher, undermines any claim to mere intermediary status.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Meta, driven by the extractive logic of digital colonialism, played a catalytic role in the Rohingya genocide. While the groundwork for the violence was laid by the historical and political context of Myanmar, Facebook's platform design and operational practices exacerbated existing tensions and facilitated the progression of the genocide. Facebook's recommender system, optimised for engagement, actively amplified anti-Rohingya content, while Meta's inadequate investment in content moderation did little to protect against the spread of such content. These technological failures form part of a broader digital colonial system which positions users in the Global South as mere resources to be exploited, rather than as human beings deserving the same protection as their Global North counterparts.

Based on this case, I challenge the notion that technology is neutral with regards to human rights. The situation in Myanmar exemplifies a broader pattern of social media platforms contributing to real-world violence, as seen in Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, and other countries where Facebook has operated without sufficient safeguards. Facebook did not merely reflect existing ethnic tensions; it contributed to their escalation by prioritising user engagement over human safety. We must move beyond abstract notions of neutrality to adopt a more nuanced understanding of how technological systems can perpetuate and exacerbate systemic violence, and reconsider how we develop, deploy, and moderate software in order to uphold the rights of users and those around them.

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