

## Peer Learning (3 of 4): Anticolonial Practices and Anticolonial Leadership

**This is a summary of the peer learning session on anticolonial practices and anticolonial leadership held on 6 May 2022 as part of the decolonising digital rights process. The session was hosted by Coumba Touré and Anasuya Sengupta and the summary was written by Joel Hide.**

To begin this session, Anasuya Sengupta, co-founder and co-director of Whose Knowledge?, a global campaign to center the knowledge of marginalised communities (the majority of the world) on the internet, asked those participating, participants in the decolonising the digital rights field process, to share in the shared notes their response to the question: After all these months of working together on “decolonising” digital rights, what are the questions, concerns, challenges that people are still sitting with?

The session was opened by Coumba Touré, at the time one of the coordinators of a pan-african solidarity movement called Africans Rising. This movement is composed of workers unions and small associations, such as rural women’s associations. The movement has around 1000 organisations and 40,000 individual members. The movement works together primarily using digital technologies as they are spread across a large geographic area. Nonetheless, Coumba shared that a lot of their work is also done physically, on the ground – supporting people that are rising for their rights and letting them know they are not alone. The goal of the movement is to achieve African liberation, a project which is still in the making and which depends on African unity, including the African diaspora.

Coumba then addressed the question of how Africans Rising uses the digital space and the struggles that they face there. She started by acknowledging that they haven’t figured it out yet at all, stating that “we are making the world by walking”, keenly aware that the digital space is exclusionary. One of the key areas is language and ensuring that those who do not speak English, French or one of the other colonial languages also have access to the information and issues they discuss. This looks like putting in money to translate into multiple languages, including Arabic and Swahili. Looking beyond languages, there is also the question of network access – they share resources to enable those tuning into their work to buy data, and they deliberately use software that is less data intensive. It is a continual task to question who is in the room, who is not and why they are not there. Coumba affirmed that the digital space is not neutral: it is a segregated space that is not welcoming for the poor or for women: African feminist women are heavily targeted in online spaces.

Coumba also raised the issue of the content that exists digitally. The information that is there and that which comes up first on Google or Wikipedia is not always the knowledge of marginalised communities who often don’t have the access, language, capacity to put their info in there in their own voices. The result is that often it is other people who are putting that information there for them. Geography also plays a role online, shaping who can access what information or which services, particularly payment services. It took years for Africans Rising to find a way for people from across the continent to support their Gambia-registered entity because of this. As an organisation based outside the US or Europe, you are cast as illegitimate.

A big part of the struggle of Africans Rising is against oppressive regulation of the digital space. Coumba raised that the organisation has seen an array of new digital laws that criminalise people for speaking their minds or for their politics. Africans Rising struggle against surveillance and internet blocks, working to promote freedom of expression in those spaces, safeguarding each

## Decolonising the Digital Rights Field in Europe

other and practicing solidarity with each other, so that when the internet is cut they can speak out and get the information out for others.

Another struggle Coumba raised was around the material used to access the digital: how is it made, how much does it cost, what makes, it, where do the elements come from? What conditions did the people who extracted the resources or worked in the factories that made the products work under?

Following Coumba's outline of some of the main digital issues that Africans Rising tackle, the session then moved to audience questions. One participant asked how Africans Rising keep the energy up in their organising. In her response, Coumba cited the African feminist, Hope Chigudu, who often quotes "what's the point of the revolution if we can't dance". She continued that though the things we struggle with are heavy, it is crucial to bring joy and art into everything they do in order to make it sustainable. This looks like making organising spaces such as conferences comfortable, decorating them with photos and pictures, serving tea. In addition, Africans Rising starts every event, including the online ones, with music.

Another participant asked how activists based in Europe can express solidarity with African movements. In response, Coumba stated that solidarity is not a question related to the digital, it's an old question and that she responds the same way she did 30 years ago by saying that "the biggest need of people in Europe and the U.S. is to work with their people to change the situation there and shift the thinking". In Africa, there are already enough engaged movements and activists to fight for the Continent. What is not needed is government, military, and financial organisations to deal with on top of that. Therefore, people in Europe and the U.S. must ask what are the trade agreements that enable continued colonial extraction, what their countries' militaries are doing on the continent and hold their governments accountable for those choices and actions. A participant added that a lot of civil society organisations are also complicit and we have a role in calling them out on that, for instance this is extremely prominent in the climate sphere.

Anasuya Sengupta then took the floor. To start, she addressed one of the questions raised by participants in the shared notes in response to the question posed at the start: "How can we make decolonising accessible, even though it can be very academic at times?", which prompted a visceral reaction in her. She noted that Coumba had given a very embodied explanation of working across Africa. She then added that newspapers and the internet are largely foreign to her and those who look like her. The internet is a deeply oppressive, extractive and violent space; even as it also offers space for solidarity and joy. Anasuya stated that decolonising is neither an academic nor a distant concept for most racialised people. In her words: "It happens to me so often, either I'm told you're too angry or you are too academic. There are no ways to win. Embodied responses are too angry, but when I use conceptual complicated words, I am too academic. What is the third way? Is there a third way in which I can take my anger and my academic to talk about practice?"

At the organisation Whose Knowledge?, Anasuya explained, they don't use the word decolonial because it assumes a clear destination- and nobody knows what decolonial realities will look like. Decolonising is always a verb, always in process. Instead, they use anti-colonial as a value, drawing on Angela Davis on anti-racism, this is not a passive act- it is about being in opposition against colonial structures.

Furthermore, Whose Knowledge? do not use a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) framework, because it has become one more way to co-opt ways of challenging power in a way that makes it palatable for those of us that are uncomfortable in this. Diversity is a checklist. Inclusivity is about inviting in a room, not designing it. Equity can be used in a way that is shallow.

## Decolonising the Digital Rights Field in Europe

Within decolonising, Whose Knowledge? is using a frame of acknowledging, affirming and repairing history. As Anasuya explains, this is not about the now, it is about now and the future in unapologetically looking toward the past, which lives in in our bodies and our institutions.

Anasuya encouraged us to shift the way we think about the Global South, from a colonial notion of “rescue” or “saving” to reparations frame, and to reflect on what a reparative frame would mean and how it might change how we give money, who we give money to, and who we centre.

Closely linked to reparation, Anasuya stated, is the importance of imagination. What if we were to reimagine that colonisation didnt happen, that Silicon Valley is not in California, but in Dakar, Senegal where Coumba Touré is a head of a feminist collective that has the biggest socially connected platform in the world. What does that look like? What does that feel like? Who is on it? That act of imagination is not a simple intellectual exercise for all of us, and it should not be. In fact, its a question that has to be really embedded in our work in terms of tools and the ways we challenge colonial capitalism, built on anti-Blackness and racism, and which has enabled the tech industry to come to exist as it does. she explained. Anasuya noted that there is an ethos and a myth that the internet is emancipatory and demcoractic, but in many ways, it is not and has harmed us and worsened our lives.

Anasuya then moved on to address how Whose Knowledge? put this framing into practice in their work: “When we say knowledge and justice or epistemic justice we are being clear that, in collusion with each other (power is always dynamic, intersectional, relational), you end up in a place where some people’s knowledge is understood as being more valid than that of others. How is it that-Black and brown folks, working Black and brown folks, working class Black women are not heard, seen, appreciated in the same way?”

Anasuya shared findings from a Whose Knowledge? [report on the state of the internet's languages](#) which found that only about 500 of the world's langauges are represented in any form online, most of which are European languages. None of the languages spoken in India are in the top 10 biggest Wikipedias although they are some of the most spoken langauges in the world. There are more article about the Antarctic on Wikipedia than there are about the African continent.

The internet is currently based on episitomologies, etymologies, and ways of knowing that don’t represent most of the world, Anasuya stated. At the heart of decolonising practice are the zapatist visions of the multiverse – singularity and homogeneity are an oppressive and colonial frame. Wanting everyone to be like us is colonising.

Before closing, the group reflected on how we can make decolonising more concrete, given that we have spent a lot of time talking and discussing as a group. Anasuya asked the group to reflect on what three practices in your own lives that we see as decolonising practices, with each person able to define what decolonising means for them.

Shared in the chat during the session:

- [Strategies for Building an Organisation with Soul](#), Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu
- [What's the Point of the Revolution if We Can't Dance](#), Jane Barry and Jelena Đorđević
- Wikipedia: [Racial Capitalism](#)
- Wikipedia: [How Europe Underdeveloped Africa](#)

## Decolonising the Digital Rights Field in Europe