

THE DIGITAL CONTINENT. PLACING AFRICA IN PLANETARY NETWORKS OF WORK

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This book is the result of a five-year project funded by the European Research Council, an organization that aims to stimulate the development of research activities in the European Union. A large-scale study was carried out in the largest and most stable economies of the continent, without taking into account the Arab region of North Africa with its own specificities, namely South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana and Uganda [4]. It is based on over 200 interviews conducted with direct participants of the digital labor market, including representatives and employees of the ICT sector, call and contact centers, self-employed freelancers, business people, civil servants, trade union representatives and industry experts.

The focus of the book is on the remote work format, which is relevant in the COVID and post-COVID period, as digitalization makes it possible to maintain a high pace of business and managerial activity without the need for the physical presence of employees in offices. For this reason, the book examines the impact of “digital jobs” on both the quality of work itself and the standard of living of African professionals, their ability to earn living funds. It also looks carefully at the development and penetration of the Internet on the continent over the past decade. Africa, like most of the world’s population, is now closely connected to the global Internet. In fact, the accelerating mass inter-networking means that for the global digital space, the Internet is no longer a network - the exclusive prerogative of the rich and privileged. In recent years, regular users and professionals from different parts of Africa have been able to work and fulfil orders for clients in different parts of the world. Even the service providers themselves

often leave their country of origin and are no longer tied to a physical place of work, which in turn suggests both new markets for African IT products and greater mobility for local specialists, at least within their own continent.

The authors of the book are well-known researchers on contemporary issues in Africa: *Mohammad Amir Anwar*, Lecturer in African Studies and International Development at the University of Edinburgh, and *Mark Graham*, Professor of Internet Geography at the Oxford Internet Institute, Research Fellow at the Alan Turing Institute, Senior Researcher at Green Templeton College, Research Fellow at the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford, Research Fellow at the Centre for Information Technology and National Development in Africa at the University of Cape Town, and Visiting Fellow at the Berlin Centre for Social Sciences.

Some of the chapters in this book have previously been published as articles about conducted field research in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda. Some of the data and results obtained formed the basis of this book. In this sense, it is a logical continuation and complement to the findings of the field missions to assess the impact of the digital economy on the livelihoods and working conditions of African workers involved in it in some way.

In addition to a fairly detailed analysis of the impact of globalization on the development of the chosen countries in Africa, the obvious merits of the book include a fairly successful attempt to look behind the scenes of human labor in the frames of digital capitalism, to assess the prospects for the labor market and the employment of young professionals, and to feel the impact of the global digital economy on the formation of professional IT associations in Africa.

The book is quite well written, obviously with a focus on scientific and academic circles, but will be useful for students of relevant faculties starting from the bachelor's level. It is worth noting that the book is in the public domain on the Internet, which increases the potential audience and allows the chapters and structure presented to be used for educational purposes. It should be noted that the tandem of authors has a deep understanding and knowledge of the subject, although it should also be acknowledged that their approach to the study of the material is non-standard, if not original, given the initially serious level of immersion in African realities and the empirical depth of elaboration of individual plots. What has been said, however, is not a drawback, but rather characterizes the author's approach to the study of the chosen subject.

The book explores the hopes for Africa's development through the digitalization of its economy, from job creation to poverty eradication. It begins intriguingly with a description of the daily routine of a machine learning training center in a small African town, housed in the most ordinary of shipping containers. Such a prologue to the story is somewhat shocking, because behind the formal dilapidation and inappropriateness of the center's location, the authors convincingly point to the hidden potential of Africa, which is gradually being realized as such centers are integrated into the global digital economy and information society. But this is the very essence of

modern Africa, which many have traditionally treated lightly and with prejudice [2]. The main conclusion of this book is that African IT workers are not powerless in their labor relations with transnational corporations, even though the methods of “algorithmic management” and “digital Taylorism” practiced by companies are inherently anti-democratic. As a rule, workers hired under foreign contracts are not informed about the ultimate goal of their activity or how the result of their “micro-work” will be used (for example, marking or marking images for subsequent training of unmanned vehicles). In other words, as the researchers point out, Africans are used to stay “blind”, without revealing their true role in the decentralized distribution of labor that covers the whole world and into which Africa is gradually being integrated. However, local specialists have also adapted to the new conditions of recruitment for them, learning to develop and apply various strategies and forms of collective unification of efforts for the purpose of their own survival in the “planetary labor market”.

The book rightly points out that it is much easier to join forces to protect your rights in the conditions of face-to-face physical employment, i.e., when workers in the same job or company can meet informally and organize protests or strikes, but there are many other forms of resistance, including in the area of remote work [3]. Where digital platforms specifically track African workers’ computer activities, for example by recording their income from other tracks or flagging visits to third-party employer websites, a common way of resisting this is the so-called “double check”. In essence, “double check” means that one computer is always connected only to the employer’s digital portal, while the other is used in parallel for other purposes, including personal goals. However, not everyone can afford such a “solution”: the negative consequences of “digital Taylorism” for Africans are exacerbated by the deplorable socio-economic situation of most local professionals.

The book takes a detailed look at various areas of work in the African digital economy, such as business process outsourcing. It describes a lot about government regulation policies and support of the IT sector in the selected countries, and notes the industry’s contribution to stimulating economic growth in recent years. At the same time, the authors caution that Africa’s perceived competitive advantage in the global IT labor market may be short-lived, as it is directly dependent on many factors, such as frequently changing currency regulations and unstable exchange rates.

One of the main advantages of the book is the wealth of illustrations, graphs, maps and tables. It presents quite interesting and entertaining facts that show Africa from an unknown angle. For example, there are 618 regional hubs of digital technologies on the continent, which is quite enough even by the standards of countries considered to be technologically advanced. It is true that 116 of them are located in the Arab countries of northern Africa, but for the purposes and objectives of this book, they should not be taken into account [1]. Moreover, it will surprise many to learn that Kenya and Ghana rank higher on the Kearney FDI Confidence Index than Ireland, a well-established offshore services region [5].

The authors of the book focus on the labor market in the digital space, by which they mean “types of work related to the paid processing of digital user data using ICT and electronic devices such as mobile phones, computers, laptops, etc.”. This statement contains one of the main semantic intrigues of the study. It all depends on which side is referring to this thesis and how it is presented. For example, from the point of view of the managers of large transnational corporations involved in the development and promotion of digital platforms, their companies offer their employees, including those who work remotely, the opportunity to manage their lives flexibly. However, the authors convincingly demonstrate that work in these companies is still dialectical. Of course, by its very nature, remote jobs, which requires only a mobile device with Internet access, contain obvious elements of employee empowerment. However, race, gender, socio-economic status, place of actual residence and other factors still strongly influence the costs (wages) and outcomes of remote work. In this sense, the postulated erasure of space, distance and national boundaries in the era of globalization is more declared than real. So, while some freelancers with higher education (the presence of which often increases social status in the eyes of the employer) can earn relatively well from working on global digital platforms, this is the exception rather than the rule. For example, more than 90% of South African professionals earning more than \$10,000 a year on *Upwork* is ethnically white. Formally, they are also African, but the principles of equal treatment proclaimed by large IT companies very often fail in reality. Against the backdrop of ‘white’ South Africans, many workers with lower social status or intra-corporate rating may earn nothing at all, as may most other foreigners registered on the platform. The reason lies in the entrenched anti-democratic approach of foreign clients, which the authors call “accumulation by dispossession”. As practice shows, it is relatively legal not to pay workers at all for the results of their work, using various reasons and excuses. For example, Africans often agree to work for free in order to get good references and recommendations for future employment. However, there are ways of countering this on the part of professionals who have demonstrated really high productivity, which in a number of cases allows them to achieve high wage rates.

It is logical that the main conclusion of the book is based on the thesis that the African IT sector is an obvious and blatant exploitation of labor. At the same time, most of the value created goes to a small group of people, the so-called “digital financial elite”, which usually located outside of the continent’s borders. In support of this, the authors present two well-founded key arguments:

1. Digital capitalism is bringing new jobs to Africa, but it is also creating a heterogeneous economic geography in which the remnants of colonialism are sometimes decisive.
2. New jobs tend to be closely linked to the application of “digital Taylorism” - an ambiguous system of scientific management and control over the activities of outsourced workers. Overall, this suggests that while digital work can bring some forms of freedom and flexibility to the lives of African workers, it can also perpetuate their precariousness and social vulnerability.

Overall, the book provides a unique perspective on the emerging digital economy in Africa, its current role and place in the global distributed digital labor market system. The study will be of particular interest to digital economy professionals, Africa experts, academics and sustainability practitioners, as well as civil society, students and young Africans aspiring to careers in the IT sector.

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