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VAR (video-assistant-referee) as Neo-Colonialism? Reading the FIFA 2018 Mens World Cup YouTube Video Comments

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The 2018 FIFA Mens World Cup saw the introduction of video-assistant-referee (VAR) as one of its main talking points. For the first time officials had the assistance of replays and VARs to support decisions. Nevertheless, the introduction of VAR was not without controversies. To understand how fans experienced VAR we employed a digital sociological approach (Marres, 2017) by focusing on one loosely defined community (FIFA's Official YouTube channel), and used digital tools (Rieder, 2015) to scrap users' comments. We scrapped over 300,000 comments from 31 videos that were analysed through CDA (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Three main categories emerged: Global North vs Global South; Non-Neutrality of Technology; VAR is Killing the Beautiful Game. In this paper our analysis focus on the first category - using the remaining two as support - to argue that VAR was comprehended as a tool for neo-colonialism. Fans recognised VAR as: favouring loosely defined Global North sides; improving Global North sides' chances; controlling Global South players' actions. We argue that VAR operated as a panopticon (Foucault, 1985) that rationalised/standardised the ways of playing (Mignolo, 1999; Santos, 2014) following an Eurocentric interpretation of the rules. Our findings highlight the paradoxes of technology, where VAR operated as a tool for systemic control and YouTube acted as a site for anti-systemic movements (Bragança & Wallerstein, 1982) that allowed for transnational networks of hope (Castells, 2012). We conclude by showing the reflexive nature of borders (Beck, 2004) where boundaries, barriers and belongings become more transient and fluid.