

## DIGITAL LITERACY AND TECHNOLOGY IN TEJU COLE'S EVERYDAY IS FOR THE THIEF

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<https://doi.org/10.59009/ijllc.2026.0209>

Received Date: 2 July 2026 / Published Date: 13 August 2026

### ABSTRACT

This article analyses how Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief* (2014) redefines digital literacy in development contexts, challenging policy models that equate device access with empowerment. Using postcolonial theory — Madhu Krishnan's "reverse ethnography" — and Jan van Dijk's "digital divide 2.0", the study shows that infrastructure quality and strategic skills, not just devices, shape technological empowerment. Cole anticipates debates on AI data bias and infrastructure gaps through a tripartite framework: 1) Critical literacy: the narrator's camera acts as citizen-archiving and data sovereignty, prefiguring AI training debates. 2) Infrastructure-backed literacy: Lagos' generators reveal the deficit ignored by device-first policies, making SDG 7 and 9 preconditions for SDG 4.4. 3) Ethical literacy: the novel's "boys with phones" show how weak institutions turn tech into tools for surveillance and extraction, requiring digital citizenship and privacy. Cole repositions digital literacy as critical, powered, and ethical. For policymakers, SDGs 4, 7, 9, and 16 must be integrated. For literary scholars, African fiction serves as development data, capturing lived experiences of infrastructure failure that statistics miss.

**Keywords:** Digital literacy; infrastructure; AI, digital divide 2.0; data sovereignty; postcolonial theory.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Global development discourse in the modern society is dominated by three terms: digital literacy, artificial intelligence, and social media. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 4.4, SDG 8, SDG 9, and SDG 16, frame digital skills as a prerequisite for economic growth, innovation, and accountable institutions. The prevailing policy logic is linear: distribute devices, teach basic ICT skills, and then development follows. This model assumes that technology is inherently empowering once access is granted. Teju Cole's *Everyday is for the Thief* revisits that logic. Though published before the mainstream rise of ChatGPT, TikTok, and Starlink, the novel functions as a literary audit of technology in Lagos, Nigeria. The unnamed narrator returns from New York with a camera, a smartphone, and a diaspora outlook. What he encounters is not technological absence, but technological tension: devices exist alongside power outages, phones enable both commerce and scams, and photography becomes a tool for archiving a city that global media misrepresents. This article explores how Cole redefines digital literacy in development contexts. Through an in-depth appraisal of the narrator's use of cameras, observations of infrastructure failure, and depictions of surveillance at airports and on streets, Cole presents digital literacy as threefold: critical seeing and archiving, infrastructure-dependent access, and ethical and civic engagement. In

doing so, the novel anticipates debates on AI data bias, the social impact of social media, and the “digital divide 2.0” that separates device ownership from meaningful empowerment. Outside literary studies, development scholars define digital literacy beyond basic ICT. UNESCO’s “Digital Literacy Skills Framework” outlines seven competencies: access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely (UNESCO 7). Jan van Dijk’s work on the “digital divide 2.0” shows that after device access, the key inequalities are usage skills, strategic skills, and infrastructure quality (van Dijk 22). Kenneth Harrow and Dominic Head argue that contemporary African fiction is a data source for infrastructure problems. Novels document what statistics miss: the lived experience of power cuts, network failure, and informal digital economies (Harrow 31). This approach justifies reading *Everyday is for the Thief* as development evidence, not just art.

The significance of this study is twofold. For literary scholars, it expands readings of *Everyday is for the Thief* beyond postcolonial perspective and urban alienation to include development studies and digital humanities. For policymakers and educators, it uses literature as evidence that digital literacy programs must integrate infrastructure planning and ethics, not just device distribution. As African cities invest in smart city projects and AI training, Cole’s modern Lagos offers a cautionary guide. Teju Cole represents technology not as a development solution in itself, but as a site where gaps in infrastructure, ethics, and critical skills determine whether digital tools empower or exploit. His portrayal anticipates contemporary challenges of AI bias and social media impact, suggesting that real digital literacy requires seeing critically, powering access, and teaching civic responsibility.

Critical attention to Cole’s novel clusters around three themes. First, postcolonial and cosmopolitan readings dominate. Madhu Krishnan argues that the narrator practices “reverse ethnography” by photographing Lagos to counter Western media stereotypes of African poverty and chaos (Krishnan, 138). Ashleigh Harris situates the novel in the flâneur tradition, where walking and observing become methods of reading the city as text (Harris 92). These readings emphasize vision and narrative, but treat technology as background. Second, diaspora and homecoming studies read the novel as an account of “Afropolitan” identity. The narrator’s dual American-Nigerian status creates what Simon Gikandi calls “negotiation without nostalgia” (Gikandi 14). Technology enters here as a marker of diaspora privilege: the camera and smartphone signify global mobility. However, scholars have not yet connected this privilege to development theory. Third, form and genre studies note the novel’s hybrid structure: short vignettes, photographs, and essayistic prose. Cole himself calls it a “novel in fragments” (Cole, Interview). Using digital literacy theory in this article, this fragmented form mirrors digital media consumption, yet literary critics have not analyzed it as commentary on attention, data, or social media logic.

## 2. TECHNOLOGY HAZARDS: SURVEILLANCE, SCAMS, AND DIGITAL DISTRUST

Teju Cole’s *Every day is for the Thief* is structured as a returnee’s walk through Lagos. The unnamed narrator arrives from New York with a camera, a smartphone, and a diaspora perspective. He does not write about AI or Twitter threads directly—the novel predates ChatGPT and TikTok’s global boom. Yet Cole’s attention to cameras, phones, generators, and surveillance anticipates the core debates of the modern days: infrastructure gaps, data ethics in AI, and the double edge of social media. Read through a development lens, the study argues that digital literacy is not device ownership. It is critical seeing, infrastructure-backed access, and ethical use. For African societies pushing SDG 4, 8, 9, and 16, Cole’s Lagos is both warning and blueprint.

The same phones enable exploitation. In *Everyday is for the Thief*, the “boys with phones” (Cole 8) track the returnee’s luggage, money, and movements. Phones become tools for scams, extortion, and “yahoo yahoo.” Today, this scales to phishing, romance fraud, crypto scams, and disinformation on Facebook, X, and WhatsApp. Cole’s insight is that social media literacy is not just about posting content. It is about digital ethics and cybersecurity. SDG 16 calls for strong institutions and reduced corruption. Online, that means teaching users to verify information, protect passwords, and recognize manipulation. The “everyone watching you” (Cole, 8) line is now literal: algorithms watch users, advertisers watch behavior, scammers watch for vulnerability. The airport in Cole’s home city is similar to today’s algorithm. The airport is a physical version of today’s algorithmic feed. Both are spaces of constant observation and targeted demand. Both reward those who understand the system and punish the naive. Cole’s narrator learns to be cautious, to verify, to not trust every person with a phone. That is this modern digital citizenship: scepticism, verification, and privacy. Cole’s third pillar of digital literacy is ethical engagement. Skills without ethics produce more harm. Schools and NGOs must add modules on digital citizenship, anti-scam awareness, and online mental health alongside coding.

The airport’s technological apparatus—scanners and CCTV—represents top-down institutional surveillance, while officials’ use of personal phones reveals bottom-up appropriation of technology for informal coordination. The narrator’s experience of being observed by both machines and agents’ models “institutional digital literacy”: the capacity to comprehend how data moves through formal and informal networks. This duality exposes the permeability of state systems, where technology intended for security is repurposed for extraction. Cole thereby illustrates that digital literacy must include an understanding of data governance, access logs, and the divergence between technological design and sociopolitical use.

Because institutions lack accountability, technology becomes an instrument of bribery rather than service delivery. This undermines SDG 16’s objective of building effective, accountable institutions. Today, the analogue of this problem appears in algorithmic opacity, paid verification systems, and biased automated decision-making. Cole’s narrative suggests that digital literacy must include “civic tech literacy”: knowledge of digital rights, data protection laws, and mechanisms for demanding institutional accountability. Without this, citizens remain subjects of technological systems rather than agents capable of contesting their operation. The scanner and CCTV thus symbolize a broader condition in which technology exists, but legitimacy does not.

The airport functions as a liminal space where technology exposes the subject to multiple regimes of surveillance. The “boys with phones” (Cole, 8) instantiate a distributed network of observation that tracks the returnee’s possessions, capital, and movement. This scene dramatizes privacy and security awareness as a foundational digital competency. The narrator’s rapid recognition of being “watched”—“everybody is watching you” (Cole, 8)—signals a shift from naive connectivity to reflexive vulnerability. Technology here does not merely facilitate communication; it renders individuals legible and exploitable. In van Dijk’s terms, this represents the transition from access to strategic and safety skills within the digital divide hierarchy (van Dijk 22). Cole’s Lagos thus models a condition in which visibility itself becomes a liability, demanding that digital literacy incorporate practices of obfuscation, verification, and data minimization.

This moment anticipates the operational logic of the modern social media ecosystems: platforms that monetize attention through surveillance while enabling predatory networks. The coordination of touts via mobile phones parallels contemporary WhatsApp fraud syndicates

and algorithmically targeted scams. In relation to SDG 16, which emphasizes accountable institutions and reduced corruption, Cole reveals a paradox: the introduction of communicative technologies in weak institutional contexts accelerates extraction rather than transparency. Digital literacy in this framework must therefore extend beyond usability to include threat perception, identity verification, and defensive digital conduct. The airport becomes a microcosm of the online public sphere, where entry points are zones of maximum vulnerability. The narrator's observation of ubiquitous smartphones and tablets in Lagos highlights technology as a pervasive social force shaping everyday life. He notes:

As I walked through the bustling streets of Lagos, I couldn't help but notice the proliferation of smartphones and tablets in the hands of almost everyone I passed. It seemed that technology had become an integral part of daily life in this city, where even the street vendors now accept mobile payments. (Cole, 2014, Chapter 1)

By noting that nearly everyone he passes holds a device, the passage emphasizes how technology is integrated into ordinary routines, denoting a shift from novelty to normalcy. This ubiquity suggests increased connectivity, access to information, and new forms of social interaction, as digital tools become embedded in the urban rhythm. The detail about street vendors accepting mobile payments further underscores a tangible shift in economic practices, illustrating how digital infrastructure reconfigures transactions, reduces friction, and potentially broadens financial inclusion for segments of the population that might have previously relied on cash, while also implying a rapid adaptation to technological systems in a bustling urban economy. Taken together, the passage frames Lagos as a city where technology does not merely exist in pockets of elite use but permeates everyday behavior and commerce. The narrator's focus on common devices and digital payments conveys a sense of modernization and efficiency, yet it also invites reflection on accessibility, privacy, and the dependencies created by such technology adoption.

### 3. THE INFRASTRUCTURE DEFICIT BEHIND THE DEVICES

The most persistent "technology" in *Everyday is for the Thief* is not the narrator's camera but Lagos's generators. The unnamed narrator notices: "At night, Lagos is a city of generators. The hum of diesel engines is the city's real anthem" (Cole 23). The narrator's camera and phone are repeatedly running out of power due to outages in hotels, offices, and airports. Cole's most direct critique is of "device-first" development. He maintains that devices without watts are inert. This illustrates the first technology gap: hardware without infrastructure. The narrator documents the city through photography, but the success of each shot depends on battery life, memory cards, and a reliable electricity supply that Nigeria's Electrical Power Authority (NEPA) cannot guarantee. This is what scholars now call "Digital Divide 2.0." The first divide was access to devices. The second is meaningful access: reliable power, affordable data, and digital skills that match local reality (van Dijk 22). Cole dramatizes this when the narrator's tech tools function, but the city around them does not. Airports, roads, and government offices run on informal power and bribes, not on the seamless systems the narrator expects from New York. The generator symbolizes privatized solutions to state failure: the rich buy silent power while the poor sit in darkness. In this modern age, as Starlink and solar enter African markets, Cole's warning remains urgent. SDG 7 on energy and SDG 9.1 on infrastructure must precede SDG 4.4 on digital skills. "No watts, no web" means that digital literacy programs that ship laptops without solar panels reproduce inequality. Cole forces readers to see infrastructure as a cognitive competency: users must plan for outages, manage battery life, and understand that connectivity is a material problem, not just a software one.

For development policy, Cole's point is direct. SDG 9 calls for resilient infrastructure and innovation, while SDG 7 demands affordable energy. Handing out laptops or smartphones without addressing electricity and broadband creates "device graveyards." The generator becomes a metaphor for self-provision. Africans are forced to subsidize the infrastructure that global tech firms and governments assume is already there. Cole suggests that digital literacy training must start with the question: "Can you charge it? Can you connect it?" If not, the device is decoration. The recurring motif—"At night, Lagos is a city of generators" (Cole 23)—shows that phones and laptops exist, but no NEPA. Airport scenes show tech failing under corruption. This is the "digital divide 2.0." Device access does not equal meaningful access. Without SDG 7 energy and SDG 9 infrastructure, tech becomes expensive and unreliable. The generator sound becomes a metaphor for stalled development. Policies must pair digital literacy training with electricity and internet reliability. Hardware without infrastructure is a wasted investment. The generator emerges as the novel's most insistent technological motif and its most trenchant critique of device-centric development policy. The narrator's camera and presumed smartphone remain contingent on an unstable electrical grid, thereby exposing the fallacy of "device-first" interventions. This corresponds directly to van Dijk's formulation of the "digital divide 2.0," wherein disparities shift from device ownership to the quality of infrastructure, electricity, and data affordability (van Dijk 22). Cole's acoustic image—the generator's hum as anthem—materializes SDG 7 and SDG 9.1 as preconditions for SDG 4.4. The text insists that digital skills are inert without watts, bandwidth, and maintenance. In this sense, Cole positions infrastructure literacy as a cognitive competency: users must understand that technology is embedded in material systems that can enable or nullify its utility.

The generator also serves as an allegory for privatized governance. In the absence of reliable public power, citizens effectively pay for infrastructure themselves, creating a stratified landscape where access to light and connectivity is determined by wealth. This dynamic prefigures contemporary dilemmas surrounding Starlink and off-grid solar: connectivity solutions that bypass the state but remain economically exclusive. Cole's critique extends to digital literacy programs that distribute laptops without concomitant energy solutions, thereby perpetuating inequality under the guise of empowerment. The phrase "no watts, no web" condenses the novel's infrastructural argument that digital inclusion is not solely a software issue, but also an energy and governance problem. Technology without reliable power exacerbates the very disparities it claims to solve.

#### 4. AI, THE CAMERA, AND DATA SOVEREIGNTY

The most consistent "technology" in *Everyday is for the Thief* is the narrator's camera. From the opening pages, photography structures how he interacts with Lagos. He writes: "I lift the camera to my eye and look through the viewfinder" (Cole 17). This act is not casual tourism. It is data collection. In modern context, the narrator engages in citizen archiving, which is a core competency in UNESCO's digital literacy framework: "Create information safely and effectively" (UNESCO 7). In development discourse, literacy has moved beyond reading and writing to include visual and data literacy. Cole's narrator models this shift. He does not just see Lagos; he records it. He photographs street vendors, decaying buildings, traffic, and rituals. Each image is a data point about urban life that official statistics often miss. From this perspective, Kenneth Harrow claims that African novels function as "archives of the everyday" that document infrastructure and social practice (Harrow 31). Cole's camera literalizes that function.

This endeavour by Cole matters for AI. Modern large language models and image generators are trained on vast amounts of data. If African streets, faces, languages, and objects are



underrepresented, AI will misrecognize or stereotype them. The narrator's photography is an early example of data sovereignty. By documenting Lagos himself, the narrator is refusing to let outsiders define what an "African city" is. This is an important aspect of critical digital literacy. It means using technology to control the narrative, not just to consume it.

The camera functions as the narrative's central technology and epistemological tool. The act of lifting it to the eye exceeds casual documentation; it constitutes a deliberate intervention in the production of knowledge about Lagos. Framed through UNESCO's digital literacy competencies, this gesture enacts "creating and evaluating information" (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 7). The narrator functions as a citizen-archivist who selects, frames, and preserves aspects of urban life that global media routinely omit. Where Western reportage tends to reduce Africa to spectacle—poverty, conflict, or disaster—Cole's narrator counters this representation by recording street vendors, traffic flows, infrastructural decay, and quotidian rituals. This practice illustrates visual literacy as a political act: the ability to determine what is rendered visible, how it is framed, and whose narrative authority is legitimized. In Cole's formulation, critical sight precedes technical proficiency; the ethical and analytical dimensions of observation determine whether technology empowers, humanizes or merely replicates.

Cole also reverses the colonial gaze perception. Early Western travel writing and media framed Lagos as a problem to be observed. The narrator flips this: "The city is not a place for looking, but a place for being looked at" (Cole 17). By taking the camera, he becomes the observer. Madhu Krishnan calls this "critical cosmopolitanism"—a diaspora subject using global tech tools to write back (Krishnan 140). For development, this is crucial. Communities that can document their own schools, clinics, roads, and markets gain leverage in policy debates. Photographs become evidence. In Nigeria, groups like BudgIT already use civic tech and photos to track government projects. Cole's narrator does this analogue version in 2014. The lesson: digital literacy programs must teach youth not just to scroll, but to document. To ask: What story am I capturing? Who will use these data?

Cole does not mention artificial intelligence, but he stages the central AI problem: who controls the data? Today, AI models learn from images, texts, and videos. If Africans do not produce their own archives, AI will learn Africa from outsiders and reproduce bias. The camera also operates as a prefiguration of modern age debates on artificial intelligence and data sovereignty. Machine learning models are fundamentally dependent on the scope and quality of training data; gaps in representation produce algorithmic distortion and cultural erasure. By photographing Lagos on his own terms, the narrator enacts a manual form of data sovereignty: the localized production and curation of visual archives that resist external classification. Cole thus anticipates Abeba Birhane's critique that AI trained on Western datasets replicates colonial patterns of misrecognition (Birhane 3). The novel's warning is methodological: digital literacy cannot be reduced to operational skills. It must include control over the apparatus of representation. Without local agents determining what is recorded and how it is labelled, technological systems reproduce asymmetrical power relations. The camera becomes, therefore, a site of contestation over who owns the future's training data.

The risk Cole exposes is the gaze. As a Nigerian-American, the narrator sometimes frames Lagos as spectacle for an imagined Western reader. Madhu Krishnan calls this "critical cosmopolitanism"—the narrator reverses the ethnographic gaze but cannot fully escape it (Krishnan 140). With AI, that risk scales. Training data that only show Lagos as poverty or chaos will teach AI to predict only poverty or chaos. Cole's lesson for digital literacy is twofold: First, create content. Africans must photograph, write, and upload their own realities. Second, be critical. Literacy means querying: Who took this picture? For whom? What has been left out? UNESCO's current definition of digital literacy refers to the ability to "access,

manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely” (UNESCO 7). Cole’s narrator models the “create” and “evaluate” aspects. For societies preparing youth for an AI-driven economy, *Everyday is for the Thief* suggests that curricula must include visual literacy, metadata ethics, and local data collection, not just coding.

The narrator takes “pictures of the men unloading a truck” (Cole 18). This image captures the ethical tension inherent in documentary technology. By selecting manual labor as subject, the narrator exercises curatorial power over what matters in “Lagos.” However, Cole implies the risk of “museumizing” everyday work—transforming lived activity into aesthetic object for external consumption. This is ethical digital literacy: recognizing that every image is a political and editorial choice. In 2026, the same dynamic occurred when users posted images of poverty, labor, or informal economies online to generate engagement. Technology amplifies visibility, but without ethical reflexivity it fixes subjects in reductive frames. The quote also prefigures foreshadows AI training dynamics. If models are predominantly trained on images of manual labor, decay, or congestion, they internalize a narrow “Africa equals struggle” ontology. Cole’s narrator exemplifies the responsibility now expected of data labellers, annotators, and prompt engineers, which involves the conscious selection that resists statistical reduction. The image demonstrates that archiving is never neutral, as it encodes assumptions about value and visibility. Therefore, digital literacy curricula must teach “responsible creation” by prompting users to ask: who benefits from this representation, who is harmed by its repetition, and what counter-archives are necessary to correct bias?

## 5. SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT: CONNECTION AND EXPLOITATION

Phones calls saturate the novel, even before smartphones dominated. At Murtala Muhammed Airport, “everyone is watching you”—the “boys with phones” (Cole 8) act as distributed algorithms, collecting data on individuals and monetizing it instantly. The narrator’s response is one of caution, verification, and limited sharing—exactly the “privacy and security awareness” competencies now being taught in the context of WhatsApp fraud and social media stalking. This scene is Cole’s 2014 version of modern surveillance capitalism. Cole shows that digital distrust grows not from the device itself, but from weak institutions. Technology accelerates both connection and predation. For SDG 16 on accountable institutions, the narrative establishes that without regulation and transparency, phones can become tools that facilitate corruption. Digital literacy here must include “threat perception”: knowing you are visible, verifying identities, and protecting personal data at entry points. The airport becomes a physical model of the online public sphere where trust is the first casualty.

The “boys with phones” operate as a distributed surveillance network: they collect, transmit, and monetize information about the returnee’s possessions and capital. In 2026 digital literacy frameworks, this dramatizes “privacy and security awareness” not as an abstract principle but as a survival skill. The narrator’s immediate internalization of being watched marks a shift from naive connectivity to what Shoshana Zuboff terms “surveillance consciousness.” Technology here is not a neutral infrastructure; it is an apparatus that renders the individual legible, trackable, and exploitable. Cole thus positions surveillance literacy as the first competency required upon “entry” into digital space, whether physical or online.

Written in 2014, the scene anticipates the operational logic of today’s WhatsApp fraud syndicates, SIM-swap scams, and algorithmically targeted social media stalking. Phones accelerate coordination, but in the context of institutional fragility, they also accelerate extraction. This directly implicates SDG 16 on accountable institutions: where state oversight is weak, communicative technologies increase predation rather than transparency. The “boys with guns” append to the “boys with phones”—that is, the “yahoo yahoo boys” in the narrative

space—signals that digital threat is not virtual alone; it converges with physical coercion. Consequently, digital literacy must extend beyond usability to include threat perception and verification protocols. Users must learn to assess identity, limit data disclosure at entry points, and recognize that in under-regulated digital economies, the speed of communication correlates directly with the speed of exploitation.

That scene encapsulates two social impacts of mobile technology that social media have later amplified. First, the hustle economy: In Lagos drivers negotiate fares on phones. Touts coordinate via phone calls. This is the informal sector operating at digital speed. Since 2014, WhatsApp, mobile money, and Twitter/X have turned this “hustle” into national GDP. SDG 8 promotes decent work and economic growth. Cole shows how phones lower transaction costs for informal business. The phone is thus a tool for survival and entrepreneurship. Second, surveillance and digital distrust: the same phones enable scams, “yahoo yahoo” (Cole, 19), and airport extortion. Everyone wants something from the returnee because phones make it easy to track and target people. In this modern age, social media has scaled this problem of phishing, romance scams, fake news, and algorithmic manipulation, all of which start from the same device that connects families on WhatsApp. Cole’s airport is an offline version of today’s feed, where constant watching and perpetual demand are the norm. This is linked to SDG 16. Online, “strong institutions” means digital citizenship. Cole’s text implies that digital literacy curricula must incorporate cybersecurity, verification skills, and ethics. Without this, the adoption of technology increases exploitation. The “boys with phones” are not inherently evil—they are responding to a system where tech access outpaces regulation and ethics education. Cole’s narrative therefore asks: Can we teach youth to code and to think critically? To post and to protect?

In the early chapters of the novel, drivers and vendors negotiate fares and coordinate via phone calls. The proliferation of mobile phone calls among drivers and vendors illustrates the functional integration of digital tools into Lagos’s informal economy. This usage exemplifies UNESCO’s competencies of “managing and communicating information” by reducing transaction costs for actors excluded from formal banking and bureaucratic systems (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 7). The phone becomes a technology of logistical intelligence, enabling real-time coordination in a city characterized by congestion and institutional opacity. In developmental terms, this prefigures emphasis placed on decent work through digital enablement in SDG 8. The informal economy’s reliance on mobile coordination reveals that digital literacy often originates in survival and entrepreneurship rather than formal education. Cole thus documents a bottom-up adoption of technology that predates platform capitalism.

However, the same affordances that expedite economic coordination also intensify risk. The speed of communication reduces the time available for verification, increasing susceptibility to fraud and misrepresentation. Cole captures the dialectic of technology in the social media era, where speed amplifies both opportunity and exploitation. Consequently, digital literacy must incorporate financial and communicative scepticism as well as skills in caller verification, transactional security, and fraud detection. The novel’s implicit argument is that technical proficiency without risk literacy produces exposure. In the modern days’ Nigeria depicted by Cole, as mobile money and WhatsApp commerce dominate African markets, this dual impact remains central. Technology expands economic possibility while simultaneously expanding the attack surface for predation.

The narrator also reflects on technology’s psychological toll. He states:

As I scrolled through my social media feeds, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the constant stream of information and opinions. It made me question the impact of



technology on our mental health and ability to disconnect from the digital world. (Chapter 22)

This final quote highlights the dangers of technology addiction and its impact on mental health. The constant bombardment of information and pressure to stay connected can take a toll on individuals, raising concerns about the need for digital literacy and balance in our use of technology. The user's act of "scrolling" becomes an involuntary confrontation with informational excess. This moment captures what modern digital literacy frameworks term "attention management" and "evaluating information" competencies. The narrator's feeling of being "overwhelmed by the constant stream" signals more than fatigue; it exposes the psychological cost of algorithmic feeds designed for engagement over well-being. When he questions "the impact of technology on the reader's mental health and ability to disconnect," the text moves from personal affect to structural critique. It implies that platforms mediate not only content but also the user's capacity for disengagement. In this sense, the quote heralds Cole's Lagos vignettes: just as the narrator in *Everyday is for the Thief* learns to be constantly "watched" by phones and generators (pp. 8 and 23), the contemporary user learns to be constantly "seen" by feeds that erode boundaries between online and offline life. The analytical insight is that digital literacy in the modern age must therefore include "strategic disconnection"—the ability to recognize when technology shifts from tool to environment, and to reclaim autonomy over attention before mental health is compromised.

In another passage, the narrator observes how technology reshapes intimacy:

I checked my email and saw that I had received a message from my friend in New York. She had attached a link to an online article about the latest social media craze - a dating app that promised to match you with your soulmate based on your search history and online habits. (Cole, 2014, Chapter 2)

Through this quote, the narrator shows how technology has transformed the way people connect and form relationships. The use of dating apps and the reliance on online habits for connection reflects the growing prevalence of digital literacy in modern dating. The passage foregrounds how digital media intermediates personal connection and curiosity. The act of checking email situates the narrator within a networked, information-rich environment where communication is quick and asynchronous. The attachment of a link to an online article about a dating app introduces the idea that contemporary romance is mediated by algorithmic tools and data trails, highlighting how intimacy and attraction become objects of calculation. This setup invites readers to consider how online platforms shape expectations around compatibility, social validation, and the pursuit of connection, suggesting that desire is increasingly entangled with digital surveillance and data-driven heuristics. Together, the elements of a friend in New York, an article link, and a dating app anchored to search history and online habits emphasize the transnational and pervasive reach of online culture. The passage hints at a world in which romance is navigated through platforms that quantify behavior, potentially commodifying personal preferences. It raises questions about agency, privacy, and the reliability of algorithmic matchmaking, while also hinting at the allure and anxieties surrounding technologized intimacy in the connected era.

## 6. REDEFINING DIGITAL LITERACY FOR DEVELOPMENT

Cole's ultimate contribution is redefinition. He refuses the tech-utopian claim that "more apps equal more development." Through the camera, the generator, and the phone, he proposes three pillars.

Firstly, critical literacy: use technology to document, question, and archive your own context. Do not just consume global content. The camera is a thinking tool. The narrator constantly uses

a camera to archive Lagos streets, vendors, traffic, and rituals: “I lift the camera to my eye and look through the viewfinder” (Cole 17). The novel itself mixes prose with photos, functioning like a print Instagram feed. Cole anticipates modern age AI debates around training data and representation. Large language models and image generators are only as accurate as the data they ingest. If African streets, faces, and languages are underrepresented, AI reproduces “Africa equals poverty/war” stereotypes. The narrator’s photography is a manual act of “data sovereignty”: Africans curating their own archives instead of waiting for external datasets. This parallels today’s social media economy, where TikTok and Instagram determine which African content goes viral. Digital literacy in the African context therefore means more than just using apps; it also involves critically engaging with and creating information that resists algorithmic bias. Cole’s diaspora narrator brings technology expectations from New York, but learns to adapt them to Lagos. This is a warning that African users must produce data, not just consume feeds, or AI will define them.

Secondly, infrastructure-backed literacy: skills are useless without light and data. Policies must pair digital training with rural electrification and broadband expansion. Cole’s narrator is tech-savvy and from the US, but he still feels like an outsider in Lagos. His photos risk “museumizing” poverty. Cole equally warns against “digital tourism.” Diaspora digital literacy can facilitate development through remittances and advocacy, but only if it is grounded in the local context. Programmes engaging the diaspora must focus on cultural literacy, not just on tech transfer.

Thirdly, ethical literacy: tech skills must include digital citizenship. Users need to understand privacy, scams, misinformation, and the social impact of being “always watched.” The narrator photographs decay, open drains, and crumbling buildings (Cole pp. 45-47), but Cole makes him self-aware of “museumizing” poverty. Later he records religious processions and cultural rituals, raising consent issues. The camera in Cole’s novel is an early analogue of AI’s archival power. Whoever controls the lens controls the dataset, and the dataset defines the model. When the narrator photographs decay, he risks conditioning future viewers and ultimately future AI to equate Africa with ruin. This is the core reality of “AI and the camera”, as representation is never neutral. Ethical digital literacy means asking, “Who benefits from this image? Who is harmed?” Cole’s narrator oscillates between critique and aestheticisation, modelling the reflexivity now required for AI prompt engineering and data labelling. The inclusion of photos in the book turns it into a hybrid archive, like an Instagram feed embedded in literature. In the modern era, Cole’s message is that African digital literacy must comprise “responsible creation.” If Africans do not document their own complexity, including rituals, innovations, and daily life, then AI systems trained on biased data will only archive absence. The camera is thus both a tool and a warning: technology defines reality, so archivists must act ethically.

For African cities aiming to achieve the goals set out in Agenda 2030, Cole’s Lagos is a test case. Devices are appearing more quickly than electricity. AI is arriving faster than data ethics. Social media is arriving faster than digital citizenship. *Everyday is for the Thief* warns against skipping steps. It also shows a way forward: start by critically examining things, powering the tools, and teaching ethics. “Everyone is watching you... the boys with phones” at the airport. Phones enable scams such as “yahoo yahoo,” and quick bribes. Cole demonstrates the dual nature of technology. Hence, digital literacy must include ethics, cybersecurity, and civic responsibility. Otherwise, technology adoption increases crime and exploitation. This links to SDG 16. Digital literacy curricula in Africa must include “ethics modules”—teaching safe usage, privacy, and anti-scam awareness alongside basic skills.

Based on Cole’s perspective, governments and NGOs should prioritize funding “critical digital literacy,” rather than merely distributing devices. Curricula should include photography, data

collection, and media analysis. Digital literacy programs must be linked to rural electrification and broadband expansion. Without power, there can be no progress. Schools should teach digital citizenship and anti-fraud training. Tech skills without ethics produce more scams. We should therefore create platforms that match diaspora tech skills to local needs rather than imposing them from above. In *Everyday is for the Thief*, Teju Cole does not reject technology. It redefines it. Through the camera, the generator, and the phone, Cole argues that development requires more than just devices. Real digital literacy must be critical, powered, and ethical. For African cities aiming to achieve the SDGs 2030, Cole's depiction of Lagos serves as a warning and a guide: invest in skills and light, not just screens. If literature can "see" development problems, perhaps it can also help teach development solutions.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, from a postcolonial perspective and in light of digital divide theory, Teju Cole's *Everyday is for the Thief* is not a tech manual; rather, it is one of the sharpest literary audits of technology in urban Africa. Through the lens a camera, a smartphone and a returnee's gaze, Cole exposes what modern age policy documents still fail to admit: that devices do not equate to development. The novel sets out three pillars of digital literacy that remain crucial today. Firstly, it promotes critical literacy, encouraging the use of technology to observe, question, and archive one's own reality. The narrator's photography in the narrative space models data sovereignty before AI made it a buzzword. Secondly, the novel advocates infrastructure-backed literacy, reminding us that a lack of electricity means a lack of internet, despite the large number of smartphones that are shipped. Thirdly, Cole's novel emphasises ethical literacy, as it is a fact that phones and social media accelerate both hustling and scamming. As highlighted, without civic ethics, skills can lead to failures in SDG 16 online.

Set in 2014, before the advent of ChatGPT, TikTok and Starlink, *Everyday is for the Thief* depicts Cole's vision of Lagos, which reflects the idea that AI will fail Africa if Africans do not produce data. Social media will harm societies if users lack verification skills. Digital literacy programs will squander funds if they fail to take power outages into consideration. For scholars, this critique demonstrates that literature constitutes development data. For policymakers, it emphasizes that SDGs 4, 7, 9 and 16 must be implemented together rather than in isolation. For students, Cole's message is simple: take control of the camera, question the feed, and then demand the light. If development in 2030 depends on digital tools, then Cole's novel asks us to focus on people first, and then plug in the devices. It is not screens alone that build nations, but rather those citizens who are critically and ethically balanced enough to use them for this purpose.

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