

ARTICLE

Digital Powers and Principalities, Decolonization and Faith-Based Activism

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Abstract

This article investigates the technological environments of faith-based digital activism, looking beyond immediate practices to the structures that shape them. Adopting the theological framework of “powers and principalities”, I argue that digital spaces are value-laden environments shaped by forces that are often intangible yet deeply felt. By putting Walter Wink’s concept of an “integral worldview” in conversation with indigenous theologies, the article develops a conceptual vocabulary to account for the spiritual dimensions of technological life. Suggesting that digital technologies invite quasi-enchanted readings, I consider how these “powers” manifest within the design and systems of digital platforms to represent new forms of empire-building and epistemic colonization. In response, I draw upon Kwok Pui-Lan’s call, “postcolonial imagination”, as a framework to develop practices that resist and subvert these colonial dynamics. Ultimately, I argue that faith-based activism must critically address the structural realities of its digital engagement. I conclude by proposing four practices – cultivating technopolitical awareness, challenging knowledge hegemonies, fostering transnational listening and strategic re-engagement – that can “bend” digital Powers toward liberative ends.

Keywords: Digital activism, Digital colonialism, Faith-based activism, Indigenous theology, Digital theology, Advocacy, Powers and principalities

Introduction

For centuries, media technologies have been central in efforts to mobilize people for worthy causes. Multiple examples can be drawn from modern church history. The abolitionists’ extensive use of pamphlets with “facts”, religious polemics and illustrations stands out as one such example; most famously, drawings of the *Brooks* slave ship, which powerfully visualized the cruelty of the slave trade, mobilizing support for the abolitionist cause in Britain and beyond. To give a further example, in their

endeavour to illustrate the relevance of Christian theology for pressing public and social issues in China during the New Culture movement in the 1920s, Chinese Protestant intellectuals at Yenching University made use of the printing of books and periodicals (Chow 2021: 323). A powerful instance of the use of radio in faith-based advocacy work is the broadcasting by El Salvadorian Archbishop Oscar Romero. Through his weekly reporting on the archdiocesan radio station YSAX, he exposed the atrocities committed by the military junta in the late 1970s. As the voice of the voiceless, Romero's broadcasting captivated over half of the Salvadoran population, leading to his assassination on 24 March 1980.

Today, whether e-petitions, social media campaigns, "botivism", the use of messaging platforms, or more disruptive forms of "hacktivism", digital tools are instrumental, if not indispensable, for activists. They support existing organizations and social movements, whilst fuelling new ones. Digital platforms offer greater visibility and a means of mobilizing protests, creating awareness and effecting cultural change. By providing channels of communication for public engagement beyond the control of traditional media gatekeepers and with the promise of instantaneously reaching large populations, digital communication technology affords effective means of activism. The #EndSARS protest against police brutality in Nigeria is a particularly striking example of the power of grassroots faith-based digital activism, discussed by Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke in this special issue as an example of a "lived-out incarnational moment".

However, whilst the internet is burgeoning with socio-political activism in every shape and form, the early optimism regarding the democratizing propensity of the internet has long faded. We are now conscious of the imperialistic ambitions of the tech giants, the extended capability of surveillance, the manipulation of algorithmic systems, disinformation, colonizing epistemologies and the extension of state power. Ominous clouds are growing as domineering forces are gathering momentum.

A basic premise of this article is that in order to reflect on digital activism we need to start by understanding digital technology – or any technology for that matter – as multilayered. At a basic level of digital technology are material artefacts comprised of hardware and software. They are tools that humans use for various ends, not least to communicate. But as tools they are products of certain values, they embody assumptions about the good life, they are designed with certain goals in mind, and they come with affordances which make some actions more plausible than others. As they are negotiated by users in everyday life, they give rise to new social practices and norms. Technology is therefore culture. Technology is also processes and systems, such as algorithms, data extraction systems and management systems, which shape the actions of those who are drawn into their proximity, creating new power dynamics. Digital technology thereby creates environments in which and through which humans negotiate their lives. "The digital" acts in this article as a

shorthand for these layers of digital technology and the environment they give rise to.

An argument that I will pursue is that as these tools, cultures, systems and environments are engaged, negotiated and interacted with, they give rise to forces beyond the intentions of designers, developers and users. These forces are hidden and intangible yet powerfully felt and not quite within anyone's control. A final layer must therefore be added to our understanding of technology, one that might be spoken of as the spiritual dimension. For a vocabulary that adequately conveys this aspect, I turn to American protestant theologian, activist and pacifist Walter Wink as a key interlocutor, employing his concept of "powers and principalities" to speak of the intangible forces operating in digital environments. I argue that this concept – rooted in the New Testament – can provide faith-based activists with a means of "unmasking the Powers" that seek to dominate the digital.

As such, the article makes a contribution by taking a step back from the immediacy of faith-based digital activism to reflect more broadly on the context in which such activities transpire. To avoid perpetuating forces of domination in digital spaces, activists cannot utilize digital technology as mere tools of effective dissemination and mobilisation but must also engage the Powers by developing practices that in themselves are transformative, liberative and decolonizing. Taking heed of Hong Kong-born feminist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan's call, the article will employ a "postcolonial imagination" as a frame to challenge the Powers of empire and colonality within the digital. A postcolonial lens impels faith-based activists to reflect on how they "have colluded with, lent support to, or resisted and subverted empire" (Kwok 2005: 14).

I conclude by proposing four practices – cultivating technopolitical awareness, challenging knowledge hegemonies, fostering transnational listening, and strategic re-engagement – to "bend" digital Powers toward liberative ends.

Given the focus of this special issue of *Ecclesial Futures* on grassroots and indigenous faith-based digital activism, it is appropriate to say a few words regarding my positionality. I enter this discussion as a white Western Protestant theologian with a keen interest in, but admittedly limited lived experience of, indigenous ways of life and theologies or grassroots activism for that matter. I suspect that where my own disposition is most keenly felt in the argument is in its lingering secular tilt. Most of my research to date has been within digital theology, and it is from this vantage point that I engage with this topic and suggest a conceptual vocabulary to better account for the spiritual dimension of digital life.

Developing a Conceptual Language for Faith-based Digital Activism

“Powers and Principalities” and Indigenous Cosmologies

In Wink’s conception, “powers and principalities” refer to spiritual forces behind our “physical, psychic, and social existence”. These Powers are always “incarnate” or manifested in institutions, structures and systems (Wink 1984: 4). They are the intangible “corporate personalities”, the spiritualities, the “more” that undergird social institutions, corporations and communities. And, Wink asserts, “it is the ‘more’ that holds the clue to their profundity” (Wink 1998: 19–21).

For the purposes of this article, it is interesting to note that Wink suggests that such an “integral worldview” is congruent with non-Western worldviews such as those of Buddhism and Native American religion (Wink 1998: 19–21). We could expand the examples listed by Wink to include recent indigenous theologians. For example, through his exploration of the everyday theologies of Sámi peoples in Arctic Europe, Tore Johnsen suggests that a Sami cosmology inspires a less colonial form of Christianity as it assumes non-hierarchical co-dependent relations with an animated creation where elements within nature assume their own dignity and agency (Johnsen 2022). Writing from an American Indian perspective, George Tinker speaks of the *wakonda* as “the Sacred Energy or Mystery or Power” that animates the world. In American Indian worldviews, he argues, impersonal *wakonda* is manifested in personalized spirits which participate in the celestial-human collaboration to maintain the world (Tinker 2008: chapter 4). Similar references to an enchanted world can be found in African theologies. In rejection of the Enlightenment’s spirit/matter dualism and its disenchantment, Kwame Bediako advances a “primal imagination”. He suggests that one contribution that African theology can make today is its endorsement of a unified view of the world – a worldview found in traditional African religion, affirmed by Scriptures and the patristics – that “may help us restore the ancient unity of theology and spirituality” (Bediako 2013: 95). Bediako suggests that the vitality of African Christianity lies in its rootedness in nature and keen awareness of the forces within it: “In this setting of ubiquitous forces and mysterious powers, the Christian who has understood that Jesus Christ is a living reality, can be at home, assured in the faith that Jesus alone is Lord, Protector, Provider and Enabler” (Bediako 2013: 9).

Technology and Enchantment

Wink does not explicitly engage with technology and, with some exceptions, neither does technology feature as an object of theologising in indigenous theologies.¹ Nevertheless, the use of “powers and principalities” can arguably provide a language to speak of the spiritual dimension of life in materialistic technological societies. This might seem counterintuitive; modern technology is often seen as quintessential of Western materialism. As tools, technologies are indeed material objects. However, tools are never merely *tools*. Tools embody human dreams and aspirations, they are value-laden, they play a part in the matrix of human culture-making, they are processes and systems operating in the background of our lives, they give rise to new environments that humans occupy and navigate. It is this sense of technology as processes and systems that resonates most strongly with Wink’s ideas, for he holds that structures and systems embody “powers and principalities”.

There is then a case to be made for a spirituality of technology that chimes with Wink’s “integral worldview”.² Challenging the technology-as-disenchanting narrative, Sam Han suggests that technology shares the same “cosmo-ontology” as religions in that it concerns ultimate questions of meaning and purpose (Han 2016). Powerful quasi-religious myths of human progress in posthumanist movements that spur entrepreneurs and innovators towards the infinite and eternal can serve as an example here. For futurologist Ray Kurzweil, singularity – the point at which humans evolve into superhumans – is “about as close to God that I can imagine” (Kurzweil 2018 (2005): 375). On a more mundane level, whether steam engines, electricity or the latest AI application, humans have frequently attributed “magical powers” to new technologies. Digital technology in particular seems to invite conceptions of technology-as-enchanted. Take the theological categories, or “god-language”, that lend words to our experiences of the digital: the internet is said to be omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent (Reichel 2026). The recent trend towards greater personification of technology through the advancement of artificial intelligence is suggestive. Devin Proctor even speaks of a “cybernetic animism” in which bots, as non-human entities, generate an “animating presence” (Proctor 2019: 238). As subjects from another dimension, such technological agents become partners to humans, or in some cases foes. Whether predictions of superintelligence, whereby robots gain consciousness, will ever materialize is highly contested. However, the felt intimacy

1 There are some publications within digital theology that use concepts from indigenous cultures to shed light on digital practices. Stephen Garner and Terry Pouono, for example, have used the Samoan concept of the *vā* to reflect on online communities and interactions (Garner and Pouono 2021). Another example is Katleho Mokoena’s use of “ubuntu” for a South African contribution to a theological ethics of AI (Mokoena 2024).

2 For a fuller exposition see Kurlberg 2021.

with current chatbots has been widely reported. Many users already turn to these bots for solace, advice, companionship and pastoral support. AI applications might not ontologically be subjects, but they can appear as such to us. This has a powerful impact on our social imagination and actions. I argue then that a conception of technology as enchanted is an expansion of Wink's "integral worldview" which challenges entrenched heaven and earth dualisms in favour of a cosmology in which God's presence is understood to be permeating the universe and the creation.

Traces of such a quasi-enchanted reading of technology can be found in indigenous traditions, not least in the use of rituals where material technological objects are sacralized. Writing from a Ghanaian perspective, digital theologian Agana-Nsiire Agana, however, argues that the turn to traditional religion and spirituality seen in much African theology is unfortunate. This "past-oriented paradigm that reduces Africanness to tradition" does not adequately address the lived religion of ordinary Africans today, which to a large degree is digitally mediated (Agana 2022: 93). Agana suggests that if culture is a source of theology, then theologians need to pay greater attention to the culture of today, and less to that of the past; for contemporary West Africans, their cultural context is not that of past ancestral traditions but is digital. Whilst Agana's concerns are valid, perhaps we do not need to choose between Bediako's turn to African traditional enchanted worldviews and Agana's insistence on digital culture as the site of African theologising today. The theological enterprise of many African theologians could be brought into conversations regarding the construction of an African digital theology that Agana advocates.

I suggest that there are points of connection between Wink's conception, indigenous theologies and an enchanted view of technology, which enable fruitful investigation of the context of digital faith-based activism. Admittedly, real differences do persist and these must be acknowledged. For despite Wink's insistence on the compatibility of his "integral worldview" with non-Western cosmologies, his work remains Western-centred (as does mine). He intends to develop a language beyond Western materialism, but it is unclear whether for Wink the powers and principalities – "the more" of institutions and systems – go beyond psychological and emotive intuitions. In contrast, within indigenous cosmologies the world *is* enchanted; that is, inhabited by spirits and forces. Whilst God's presence in and through creation is not in question, for Wink Powers are largely phenomenologically felt as opposed to ontological beings. These differences are not inconsequential since they may lead to different spiritual practices and means of addressing the forces within the digital (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007: 228). Nevertheless, whilst acknowledging such differences, I suggest that, regardless of whether understood as phenomenological or ontological, Wink provides a constructive and conceptual language for engagement in digital environments. Whilst working from a premise of Christian faith and theology,

I suspect that if at least taken as experiential, this outlook may even be recognizable for those of no faith or other faiths.

Digital Powers and Decolonization

Wink reminds us that Powers are everywhere, that they can be “good” or “fallen”, and that they must be “redeemed” (Wink 1992: 10). When corporations, institutions and communities serve the people, their Powers are benign. But when they cease to do so, when they serve their own ends at the expense of people, they become demonic (Wink 1992: 5). Unmasking the Powers is therefore a task of discernment. What Powers are then operant in the digital, its systems and environments? There are naturally multiple. Some are good, others fallen, but today we would be forgiven for doubting that the resilience of forces of good can stem the onslaught of the malevolent forces at play in the battle over the internet.

It is here, when considering the neo-colonial forces of the internet, that Kwok Pui-Lan’s “postcolonial imagination” becomes a useful resource. Pui-Lan defines postcolonial imagination as “a desire, a determination, and a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and guises” (Kwok 2005: 2–3). This entails participating in communities which engage practices and discourses resistant to empire (Kwok 2005: 10). For the purposes of this article, the postcolonial lens trains our gaze in two significant ways. Firstly, it homes in on the Powers at play in empire-building within and through the digital, which I will briefly outline in the following section. Secondly, it forces a conversation about praxis. A postcolonial imagination invites a move towards decolonisation by practices of resistance, by deliberate power redistribution, and by creating transnational communities of sharing and listening. In this way, Kwok helps us ground Wink’s theoretical work. This will be the focus of the final section of the article.

Colonial Dynamics within the Digital

Empire building comes in different guises through different actors, yet we have been trained into a methodological nationalism which imagines empire building as centred around the nation state and can therefore fail to notice its occurrence outside these boundaries.³ Even the origins of the British Empire can be traced to crude pirating and the advancement of private enterprises; it was only at a later stage that the

3 The term “methodological nationalism” was coined by Ulrich Beck. Beck argues that our socio-political analysis and research are all too often based on a methodological nationalism which fails to understand the cosmopolitan or cross-national social, political, religious and economic dynamics of the world today (Beck 2007).

Crown took over the helm. In a similar vein, empire building continues today not only through state actors, but also through the ambitions of entrepreneurs and private enterprises. Digital empire building, whilst certainly deeply geopolitical, is perhaps less geographically territorial than previous manifestations. It manifests itself in the info wars and the battles to control the information that floods users' social media walls. It is seen in ubiquitous digital surveillance, whether state-sponsored or under the auspices of corporations. It is expressed in the expansive application of persuasive technology, which, through design mechanisms, seeks to manipulate users into acting or thinking in certain ways (Fogg 2003). It advances its own forms of cultural and epistemological colonialism. This is evident in the linguistic dominance of English on the internet, which serves the purposes of the tech giants who stand to profit from homogeneity. This digital colonialism is also seen in the bias towards American culture in Generative AI responses, which are based on statistical inferences made from the model's training data (Palta and Rudinger 2023). Underlying all of this is the struggle over data. Empires have always been built on the extraction of valuable goods and materials from conquered lands. Today, data extraction is the source of wealth of digital forms of imperialism. As such, Ulises Mejias and Nick Couldry speak of "data colonialism", by which the tech giants extract data from users. The power dynamics of this form of colonialism follow those of former colonial enterprises. It ultimately benefits a small elite and leaves the powerless exploited (Mejias and Couldry 2024).

Algorithms in the Service of Empire

An instructive example of the workings of digital colonialism is that of the operations of algorithms. On a basic technological level, algorithms are sequences that follow a set of rules to complete computational tasks. Whilst not strictly algorithms, in popular use the term is associated with the "recommender systems" that determine what content, such as ads and social media posts, users are exposed to. It is according to this popular understanding that algorithms will be discussed here.

Some years ago, Shoshana Zuboff made a significant contribution with her *Surveillance Capitalism*, problematizing the tech giants' business model based on monetizing personal data (Zuboff 2019). Personal data is collected to create user profiling. Individuals that match certain profiles can then be microtargeted with relevant marketing content. The effectiveness of data-driven marketing lies in the possibility of targeted messaging that with eerie precision manipulates individuals at an emotive, dare we say spiritual level. Algorithms are a central design feature of this operation. A positive spin on the use of algorithms would point to their usefulness in exposing individuals to content and products that might be of interest or use to them. A more sinister reading would point to the fact that companies and political actors seek to manipulate users for financial or political gain.

This business model is dependent on users spending as much time as possible on platforms whilst conferring a maximum amount of data. Therefore, the algorithms are set up to keep users engaged. What engages users is normally content that draws an emotive reaction. Some of the outcomes of such uses of “recommender systems” are innocent: reels of cute jumping cats that make people laugh, content about the sports team people love or recipes of mouthwatering dishes from around the world. Whilst this content promotion is fairly harmless, it still has an impact on users’ behaviour and how they engage online. To give an example from religious engagement, Peter Phillips has suggested that therapeutic content which speaks of God’s favour in the individual’s life elicits stronger emotive reactions on social media. It is therefore this content is algorithmically promoted rather than propositional posts highlighting God’s character, nature or will (Phillips 2020). In this way, in order to be seen, heard and affirmed users need to submit to the rules of the algorithmic authorities.

More worryingly, content that expresses strong sentiments is algorithmically promoted at the expense of viewpoints that are nuanced and measured. Whilst it is difficult to quantify the impact of this, there is extensive research that suggests that such design features impact the ideas and sentiments expressed in the digital public square, and consequently, the socio-political sentiments of users. It has also contributed to the polarized socio-political climate that we find ourselves in. According to Wink’s conceptualization, algorithms are in this sense demonic, embodying the spirit of greed of “empire” over the wellbeing of people and society.

A decolonial lens will further problematize how algorithms contribute to a colonization of knowledge. Algorithms are part of the regimes of knowledge that govern the content people are exposed to. For whilst everyone can share content online, not everyone will be read, heard, or seen. Firstly, platforms will promote content that has been paid for; those with financial resources can therefore ensure that their content appears high up in Google’s search rankings. Secondly, algorithms accelerate content that is already popular, leading to biases and obscuring marginal voices. Thirdly, algorithms personalize content, catering to users’ tastes and interests. In the process, they reinforce echo chambers that sustain the ignorance of users, by concealing ideas they would not normally encounter. Fourthly, human voices are drowned in the ocean of bots who manipulate algorithms and masquerade as human actors seeking to sway public opinion.

Whilst the consequences of these design features might be unintended, they manifest a colonializing spirit within the digital. Using the language of “powers and principalities” in this context provides words to express the experience of being up against something bigger and more fundamental than the immediate applications of technological artefacts. It captures the powerful forces at play in the digital world that we cannot quite grasp or control but that tangibly work upon us. This sense is only amplified by the fact that the operationality of these systems is becoming too

complex for even their designers to fully understand. The reality that algorithms remain opaque to us, that their impact upon us is tangible but not quite measurable, and that there is a lack of transparency about how they work, make them appear mysterious to us. Algorithms are part of the systems and structures of the digital and are therefore not the Powers in Wink's understanding of the term. Rather, they embody the "more" of the Powers. Powers and principalities accordingly speak of that which is not entirely under human control. It is also here that the framework goes beyond the claims concerning digital power dynamics in the existing literature and the socio-political framings discussed above.

Developing Decolonizing Practices for Digital Faith-Based Activism

Wink's insistence that the Powers are not inherently evil but also good, enables us to hold in tension the seemingly disparate dynamics of democratization and colonialization that are manifest in the digital at the same time. They are both part of the reality of our digital engagement, and therefore rather than withdrawal, they call for engagement. This invites us to adopt a decolonial posture, mindset and practice in the environments and contexts of our engagement. What gives us hope is Wink's insistence that fallen Powers can be transformed and that there is the possibility of "bending" them back to their divine purposes (Wink 1998: 35). In the context of algorithmic influence, this requires creative intentionality. Foregrounding Kwok's call for a postcolonial imagination in the face of imperialism, I will finish by proposing a few suggestions of what such "bending" might concretely entail.

Engaging the Powers through Technopolitics

The first practice relates to how digital technologies can be used in digital activism – for technopolitical purposes – and its implications. Despite the positive potential of digital activism, scholars investigating this phenomenon have observed several potential weaknesses. Digital social movements tend to be unstable because, whilst there is huge potential to mobilise large groups of people in a short period of time, digital activists "organize around emotion" rather than shared values (George and Leidner 2019: 15). The lack of clear leadership structures, shared values and goals can lead to internal fragmentation and conflict.

Activists working towards justice are, furthermore, not the only actors struggling for prominence on online platforms. Authoritarian political actors also exploit the possibilities afforded by digital media. Far-right movements mobilize political bots giving a false impression of the popularity of their ideas and normalizing them. For powerful groups, market actors and governments, digital technology creates unprecedented possibilities of surveillance and therefore control. However, for

Zeynep Tufekci, the greatest obstacle to activist movements is disinformation rather than Orwellian types of totalitarian surveillance society. Through social media, those “defending the status quo only [have] to create enough confusion to paralyze people into inaction” (Tufekci 2017: xxix). In other words, by flooding social media with disinformation, malevolent political actors are not primarily establishing alternative truths but creating an environment of distrust and apathy.

This is all the more reason for grassroots movements to improve their level of digital literacy. For example, by understanding how algorithms work and co-ordinating the sharing of the same post simultaneously so that they can algorithmically boost their content. Or by encouraging “metavoicing” by understanding what content is likely to gain traction and sharing and commenting on such posts. Such digital activism has been dismissed as “slacktivism” for the low level of commitment it requires. However, in their survey of digital activism, Jordana George and Dorothy Leidner argue that there are empirical grounds for asserting that simple “clicktivism”, the liking, sharing and commenting on activists’ posts on social media, can effect change in attitudes and encourage individuals to take political action (George and Leidner 2019). Furthermore, in contexts of authoritarian surveillance, even a like or retweet comes with considerable risk for the individual.

This does, however, raise important questions about ethics and about the thin line between sharing information and manipulation. As already discussed above, it is the content that is emotively loaded that is likely to gain traction. Further, should activist movements engage in “botivism”, employing non-human agents to further their messages? Or should they be involved in “hacktivism”? Some forms of “hacktivism” seek to disrupt, expose and even destroy, but there are however more benevolent forms. Indigitous, the digital mission offspring of Cru International, has for example organized hackathons for the purposes of creating tools for missions. During a hackathon in 2019, they created a chatbot that disrupts human trafficking by enticing potential buyers of sexual services into conversations about their behaviour.⁴

Challenging the Hegemony of Knowledge

A second practice involves challenging the hegemony of knowledge advanced through the internet. A central aspect of the work of activism involves increasing knowledge and changing attitudes towards certain issues. The internet is without comparison the greatest global bank of knowledge in history. As such, by being present online, indigenous and grass-roots movements are making visible alternative ways of doing,

4 <https://indigitous.org/article/hackathon-creates-chatbot-to-disrupt-human-trafficking/>, accessed 23 December 2025.

seeing and thinking. Their presence and visibility are in themselves decolonizing. Here we can point to several examples in the articles of this special issue of *Ecclesial Futures*. Steve Taylor's case study evidences how Oceanic digital grassroots activism sheds light on indigenous eco-theologies. Tai Ragui's research illustrates how digital media technology can become a means of preserving indigenous heritage that would otherwise have been lost. This work becomes all the more important with the development of Large Language Models (LLMs) that are quickly replacing the search engine as the first port of call when users scavenge the internet for information. AI chatbots can only provide users with ideas and responses based on their training data. Yet a real challenge in this regard is that AI-generated responses are based on predictive inferences. That means that there is a built-in bias towards the most prevalent viewpoints and ideas within the data set of LLMs. Without specific prompting, minority groups' outlooks and data are likely to be omitted from AI-generated outputs. One could argue that having more indigenous and other minority group data available at least raises the likelihood that their knowledge will gain visibility.

It is also important to acknowledge that whilst digital media does permit the spread of knowledge and ideas, when such knowledge or practices are digitally mediated they are always renegotiated into something different. I am struck by an example shared by Steve Taylor of a beautiful video of traditional Pasefika mat weaving.⁵ The video adopts the widespread use of short videos and reels on platforms to visualize this tradition. But whilst it becomes a means of displaying Pasefika culture, the format of the video – the cutting of clips, the superimposed text overlays and the chirpy music – is that of popular “explainer videos” prevalent online. Thus, the video showcases indigenous practices and traditions, making these available to a larger audience, but it has been presented in a new form, adjusted to the grammar of digital culture and therefore transformed into a new cultural artefact.

Developing a Postcolonial Listening

Transnational engagement and mutuality are central to how Kwok envisions postcolonial projects. Here digital technology offers the possibility of a third practice consisting of providing spaces where such encounters and listening can transpire. We can here mention the growing trend of producing podcasts that invite a conversational mode of communication. Some of the more successful podcasts have set up adjunct communities in which individuals are encouraged to continue to exchange ideas and engage in further conversation. A further example is how video-conferencing technologies allow for the gathering of people from communities across

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEcn-vxo9vk>, accessed 4 January 2026.

the world. Majority world scholars who might in the past have been excluded from academic conferences due to prohibitive costs or visa restrictions can now participate. Such technologies have, for example, been central to the annual conferences of the Global Network for Digital Theology, allowing theologians around the world to meaningfully exchange ideas. This has been essential to the identity and vitality of the network.⁶

Re-engagement as Challenging the Hegemony of Digital Empires

A final and fourth practice concerns engagement that directly challenges digital colonialism. I have suggested that the presence of grassroots movements in digital spaces can be decolonizing. Even so, that much of such presence transpires on dominant platforms is not without its drawbacks. We have already discussed the problematic business model of many of the leading tech firms. We see a continuous practice of takeovers of startups furthering hegemony and undermining democratic pluralism. The sheer power of the tech giants means that the industry can resist calls for regulation and accountability by state actors (see (Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2018: Chapter 7). The current AI race is a case in point, where many governments are nervous to regulate out of fear of losing out on important financial growth. To use digital tools and platforms does mean participating in this economy.

Thus, whilst the platforms of Meta offer unprecedented opportunities in terms of reach, from a postcolonial perspective the trade-offs are apparent. As Kwok suggests, a postcolonial imagination requires a “process of disengagement” from the processes of colonization. One way of doing so is not necessarily total disengagement but a re-engagement by considering alternative platforms, such as those that depend on a different business model and ethos, and perhaps even where the algorithmic influences are minimized. Ecosia, for example, functions as an alternative search engine but, unlike Google, it does not sell user data. It still makes money from ads, but all profit goes towards planting trees and other projects to combat climate change. Ecosia claims to have contributed to the planting of 250 million trees, and its financial reports are published online for added transparency.⁷ There are also a number of alternative messaging platforms. Signal has become the favoured platform amongst activists as it places a premium on privacy and is not-for-profit. It instead operates on donations and grants. Critics will, however, argue that its end-to-end encryption enables illegal activity. Another messaging platform, Discord, has become popular amongst avid gamers, which is reflected in its quirky aesthetics. Whilst it is free to use, the platform is a profit-making company building revenue by

6 For transparency, this is a network that I chair.

7 <https://www.ecosia.org>, accessed 17 June 2026.

offering subscriptions to certain perks and benefits. Much of the critique against the tech giants, however, relates to the design of their social media platforms, which most prominently use algorithms to target users and where some of the more abusive behaviours can be found. Since Elon Musk's purchase of the social media platform X and his public alignment with right-wing populism and far-right politics, many users have left the platform.⁸ Some have shifted to Bluesky, which has positioned itself as being a more decentralized microblogging platform where users have greater control over the content that they view. The company has promised not to sell personal data. Yet the downside is that whilst its popularity is growing, it has to date just 40 million users, which limits its possible reach in comparison to the market-leading social media platforms.

Such re-engagement is consistent with Wink's "third way" of *engaging* the Powers in nonviolent ways. This can be especially effective as companies are subject to the market and are sensitive to consumer preferences. Despite the dominance of the tech giants, they are susceptible to reputational damage and consumer pressure. In its relatively short timespan, the internet era has seen a number of platforms emerge as powerful players only to subsequently falter as users have found other platforms. Could this kind of engagement therefore be viewed as a means of bending the digital Powers back into their proper place?

Conclusion

All of the practical suggestions that I have discussed could admittedly apply to digital activism in general. Lots of groups and movements are mobilising through digital media technology, seeking to bring peace, different forms of justice, equality and so forth. Faith-based digital activist groups use the same digital tools and often in similar ways. What, then, differentiates faith-based digital activism from other forms of digital activism? The answer is, in part, that its source of motivation is rooted in the grammar of faith.

I have argued that the language of "powers and principalities" provides activists with a conceptual language to speak of the realities of their struggles. When St Paul wrote that "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph. 6.12 (NRSV))", he was not resigning to defeatism. Rather, he was highlighting the fact that there are greater domineering forces at play than is immediately apparent. In relation to faith-based digital activism, the language of Powers draws attention to the forces behind

8 Despite this, the total number of registered users on X has continued to grow in recent years.

contemporary digital empire-building. By ignorantly participating in the economies of their platforms, they risk, as Kwok warns, perpetuating the forces that they seek to overcome. Employing a postcolonial imagination in their digital activism invites activists to call “digital powers and principalities” to serve their proper ends, that is to serve humanity and creation.

Finally, in the popular imagination, religion is largely seen as otherworldly and as having little relevance for the real everyday struggles of people. However, engaging an enchanted cosmology renders such a dualism obsolete. In the integral world-view that Wink and others advance, material problems matter because they are also spiritual. This bestows our material actions with eternal significance. Further, this biblical imagery holds in tension the fallen Powers and God’s ultimate rule over them. With this assurance, activists can retain hope even in the face of adversity, for their efforts are ultimately not in vain.

Acknowledgment

I am very grateful for the input and feedback that I have received from colleagues, which has significantly strengthened this article. In particular, I would like to thank Alexander Chow, Nuam Hatzaw, Nina Kurlberg and Steve Taylor, as well as the anonymous reviewers. I acknowledge that I have used generative AI to proofread and to improve the readability of a dozen or so sentences.

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