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Editorial

'New' Media: Decolonial Opportunities or Digital Colonialism?

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Can one colonise or liberate cyberspace, space that is not actually space? Certainly, individual countries have cyber armies that battle each other's security networks, both trying to farm information through their viruses, spiders, worms, and phishing. But despite all these naturalising metaphors, cyberspace is unnatural; it has no borders, mountain ranges, rivers, or coastlines. Thus, for scholars such as those writing in this Special Issue, who study the effects of settling or colonizing physical locales, the extension of colonial relations of subjection into cyberspace is both problematic and fascinating. And yet the 'space' we commonly call 'the internet' exists, as its name implies, in and from the interconnection of digital devices, many owned by people who understand themselves as place-based. This interconnected network thus enables people to choose temporary existences outside of their bodies and to use the internet as a vehicle to escape or resist subjection.

This ontological and teleological push–pull extends to the real-world effects of the digital. While the internet certainly has had positive effects on communication speed; on the reach of education, information, and entertainment; on social connections; and on the availability of certain products, this same interconnectedness has its downsides: a swamp of unsought information and communication; a physically, psychologically, and cognitively unhealthy expenditure of time and energy; and most dangerous, a new vehicle for repression and surveillance. It is this tension, this yin–yang of cause and effect that this Special Issue takes as its purview. What happens, our authors ask, when the space of postcolonial and settler colonial studies is cyberspace? When it comes to decolonization, is the internet good or bad? Or better, is it also good or exclusively bad? It may be both.

On the one hand, our online life is increasingly fraught—cyberconflict is a growing reality and prospect, and 'cyberbalkanisation' characterises the current online era. Gone seem to be the days of a global 'sharing economy' and 'digital commons'. 'Community' online has proved elusive or a weasel word never actually intended by corporate agents. And gone are the days when we naively assumed that social media could serendipitously unleash democratic revolutions, like when they allegedly did with what in 2010 was called the 'Arab Spring', or when they enabled activist organising elsewhere. Then we should consider the blowback that followed the realisation that digital platforms that thrive on radicalisation may influence elections. Concerns about surveillance and corporate control have become more prominent than in the past, and a wave of nostalgia for the 'old' Internet has recently taken hold. *Dazed* noted in 2022 a longing for 'an innocent time when the internet was a boundless site for experimentation and play' and commented on a growing interest in 'early web aesthetics' (Yalcinkaya and Marc 2022). There is also widespread 'enshittification' (Doctorow 2023). The mood is darker now in the digital worlds we live in. On the other hand, a widespread pessimistic mood may be reflecting the online experience of constituencies located in the Global North while failing to register developments happening elsewhere.

The editors of this Special Issue felt that it was especially important to reflect on the tension separating the decolonial opportunities offered by new media and the online

Citation: Veracini, Lorenzo, and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower. 2024. 'New' Media: Decolonial Opportunities or Digital Colonialism? *Humanities* 13: 2. https://doi.org/10.3390/h13010002

Received: 30 September 2023
Accepted: 12 December 2023
Published: 21 December 2023

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worlds in which we live, from the 'digital colonialism' that has engulfed our collective online life. Part of a widespread pattern of algorithmic violence and the subject of a recent explosion in critical data studies, digital colonialism identifies datafication as a form of resource extraction and appropriation leading to renewed colonial subjection (Couldry and Mejias 2019). The ten papers gathered in this Special Issue collectively explore this tension in relation to both the colonialism and anticolonialism found in new media. We wanted to explore how 'new' media is different from 'old' media, whether new media is allowing a different kind of access to different kinds of audiences, or whether, conversely, the digital divide, still so evident in these spaces despite ubiquitous mobile phones, makes the idea that new media could be a leveller just hype. But when we gathered the essays, we found that other questions threaded their way through our collective thinking. These included, how does the tension between surveillance and expression in new media play out in settler colonial spaces, and does the new media function differently in the settler colony than in the former occupation colony? We wanted to know how the representation of Indigenous people was affected by the proliferation of new media (Stam 2023).

In order to best tease out these complexities and ambivalences while creating a conversation among our authors, we have organised these papers into three sections. The first section, comprising three papers, is dedicated to investigating the ways in which new media enable a new language of decolonisation; the second section is dedicated to understanding the myriad of ways new media led to the transformation of the moving image and its delivery, and exploring this transformation's impact on decolonial practices; while this Special Issue's third section is dedicated to investigating the ways new media can enable a new politics and sustain new social movements.

The first section opens with Abdalla Uba Adamu's exploration of social media-enabled neoproverbs in Nigeria, '"Komai Nisan Dare, Akwai Wani Online": Social Media and the Emergence of Hausa Neoproverbs'. Adamu uncovers a consolidating archive, observing how northern Nigerian techno-antiproverbs subvert traditional hierarchies and linguistic hegemonies that were one of the legacies of colonial domination. Also weaving traditional and modern forms, Joanie Crandall's paper, 'Videographic, Musical, and Linguistic Partnerships for Decolonization: Engaging with Place-Based Articulations of Indigenous Identity and Wâhkôhtowin', considers Indigenous music and social media in Canada's far north. Crandall investigates the growing archive of Canadian Indigenous and community-produced songs that use YouTube for dissemination, while recentring Indigenous epistemologies and resurgence by weaving traditional and modern mediums and forms to create an important avenue for self-determination for the remote communities involved. Madi Day and Bronwyn Carlson, the authors of this collection's third paper, 'So-called Sovereign Settlers: Settler Conspirituality and Nativism in the Australian Anti-Vax Movement', reverse the gaze and follow an instance of white supremacist appropriation and misuse of Indigenous tropes by far-right and anti-vaxxer activists in Australia. Again, we see that social media, while enabling the circulation and impact of ideas related to decolonial practices, also subverted and distorted them in ways that fundamentally betray Indigenous discourse and sovereignty.

The second grouping of essays focuses more on the new in old media, pondering Marshall McLuhan's assertion that 'the medium is the message' (McLuhan 1964, chp. 1). For its heuristic immediacy, the moving image was always an important element of decolonial struggles, and the development of this element continues in new media. Prabhash Ranjan Tripathy's article, entitled 'Divide and the Rules: A Study on the Colonial Inheritance of Digital Games', traces the colonial origins and current legacies of digital gaming. Tripathy explains that in India it is traditionally the lower castes that play and dance, while games have a 'colonial' background, as the missionaries thought that games would be 'civilising'. Thus, postcolonial Nehruvianism maintained a sentiment of 'antiludicism', an ideology that, like colonialism, saw a world divided between work and play, and play as dangerous, though video games challenge that division. Lorenzo Veracini's 'Cinema, the Settler' faces cinema's historic links with settler colonialism as a distinct mode of domination, follows

recent examples of attempts to free it from this legacy, and observes the consequences streaming is having on audiences and their agency. Fragmentation is not the only outcome of these processes, he contends, and a recent wave of Indigenous cinema demonstrates that there are opportunities for reclaiming the moving image for decolonial purposes. Rebecca Weaver-Hightower's 'Mobile Film Festival Africa and Post-colonial Activism' surveys an online short film festival based on films shot on mobile phones. This essay questions whether 'ordinary people' engaging in short film-making, with minimal budgets, released on the corporate platform YouTube, can be empowering a moment of decolonial liberation.

This Special Issue's third section on the politics of decolonisation enabled by social media opens with Bolette Blagaard's paper, 'The Practices and Positionings of a Postcolonial Counterpublic: An Analysis of Black Lives Matter in Denmark', which reads activism and social media in Denmark to interrogate the connectivities of publics and counterpublics, digital activism, cosmopolitanism, and postcolonial activists. Black Lives Matter Denmark took on an important local flavour, dealing with borders and restrictive immigration policies, contesting a closed European space, and a space that is porous for some lives that 'matter', but not for other ones. Like Blagaard's analysis of the racism/antiracism technological binary, Magdalena Pycinska's essay, 'Israeli and Palestinian Settler Colonialism in New Media: The Case of Roots', focuses on settler colonial media production, on a plethora of individual social media accounts, non-related information network interviews, and short documentaries. From this research, social media emerges as a crucial site for the production and circulation of ideas supporting the settler colonial project in Israel–Palestine. The dynamic of surveillance and repression on the one hand, and resistance on the other, is the topic of Hanine Shehade's 'Palestine in the Cloud: The Construction of a Digital Floating Homeland', which examines Palestinian decolonisation and sovereignty 'in the cloud'. New media, she argues, emerge as a 'battleground' and an important site for the articulation of an unsurrendered sovereignty. Finally, Deepak Prince's essay, 'Power and Subjectification at the Edge of Social Media Interfaces in the Aftermath of the Jallikattu Protest', explores a test case of new media-enabled activism and social movement. A 'leaderless' protest in Tamil Nadu and its repression and co-optation provide an opportunity to reflect on traditional 'weapon of the weak' strategies and the transformation of traditional politics that mobile technology carries with it. Traditional protest and modern media, he argues, mix with unpredictable results.

Our findings are ambivalent—a predicament that postcolonial studies as a scholarly endeavour has faced extensively (a seminal text outlining this point is (Bhaba 1984, pp. 125–33)). As we expand below, we find that while new media offer opportunities to develop anticolonial practices, they also and at the same time create opportunities to constrain ongoing subjugation. These new media could be seen as tools or weapons; and as such, they can be used for building or bludgeoning, in some cases by the same actors at the same time.

In the end, this Special Issue offers a collective investigation of the psychological, sociological, and political push/pull of new technologies, and the 'two steps forward, one step back' that those of us watching new media emerge and decline envision. Readers of this Special Issue will likewise recognise that these papers collectively explore whether the subversions and language hybridisation of test cases can be seen as anticolonial and/or a reclamation of language, and whether new media and their texts (i.e., short videos) affect anticolonial expression (and whether it can be considered 'authentic'). Another question explored by this collection relates to 'space', which includes, of course, online space: newly configured, stolen, repurposed, remade. We see how new media and social media offer space for authoritarians to propound falsities and for anticolonial sensibilities to break away for governmental censure.

The tensions collectively teased here include tradition and its dissolution, the contradictions pitting the local vs. the global or centralised, moments of liberation and expression vs. moments of repression and censure, new spaces for decolonising actions and also opportunities for renewed appropriation and for the perpetuation of digital colonialism, and finally the reconstitution and defence of place and its annihilation. As a provisional note,

at the conclusion of this journey, we conclude that the flattening of authority that follows the irruption of new media creates a distorting effect. Ambivalence is, as noted, a classic trope of postcolonial studies, and scholars have emphasised that it can offer important opportunities for resistance and subversion. And yet, decolonisation is traditionally about the capture of colonial power, but through 'new', digitally delivered media we witness power's very dissolution (and its reconstitution). A comprehensive reorganisation of the modalities of domination that characterise colonialism and its afterlives remains elusive.

Author Contributions: Both authors (L.V., R.W.-H.) contributed equally to the writing of this paper and to the editing of this Special Issue. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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