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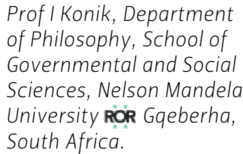
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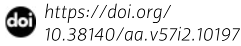
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Considering socio-ecological digital activism through a Fuchsean lens

Abstract

Digital technologies, platforms and applications, developed and disseminated by digital capitalist monopolies that at times collude with governments, pose a risk to democracy and socio-ecological justice. The potential for pro-democratic political activism can be eroded through people's enmeshment in solipsistic digital practices or be undercut by algorithmic manipulation among other mechanisms. And when grassroots activists striving for socio-ecological justice utilise digital tools, they can be targeted through the workings of what Christian Fuchs calls the 'surveillance-industrial complex'. For Fuchs, though, digital means remain key to anti-capitalist resistance, and he theorises that the digital commons and the digital public sphere are vitally important sites for such resistance. This paper presents a reading of Fuchs's arguments, supplemented by insights from global South theorists, and uses the environmental conservation and human rights organisation Environmental Defenders as a case.

Keywords: capitalism, digital activism, digital commons, digital public sphere, socio-ecological justice

Introduction

This paper was originally conceptualised in response to a call for contributions to a South African Society for Critical Theory conference on the theme of critical theory, digital media and the future of democracy, which thematised the Austrian critical theorist Christian Fuchs's arguments on these topics. Accordingly, the author set about engaging in an experimental exploration of how Fuchs's theorisations might interface with the digital activism of an environmental conservation and human rights organisation, Environmental Defenders (hereafter ED), with which she has been engaging over the past several years.

The paper offers a reading of Fuchs that highlights his arguments concerning digitally mediated capitalism, a socio-economic set-up characterised by all manner of interactions between digital monopolies, other corporations, states, and digitally connected individuals earmarked for political debilitation. Further, the reading considers Fuchs's contentions that digital resistance against capitalist encroachment on political freedom is both possible and necessary, and that the digital commons and the digital public sphere are important sites for such activity. However, the reading also reveals that Fuchs's work lacks consideration of the different contexts of, and nuanced challenges facing, political activists in the global South, requiring that his ideas be supplemented. Thus, the paper engages in some bridging work between Fuchs and other theorists, intermittently bringing the resulting theorisations to bear on the case of ED.

For context, ED was founded by a group of Ugandan and Congolese activists in 2018, and it operates in the Albertine Rift region of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (hereafter DRC). The organisation uses old and new media for coordination of activities and to raise consciousness about, and garner support for, its efforts to safeguard the environment and indigenous communities against capitalist extractivism. ED actively collaborates with and seeds other organisations in the region, so that together they can sustain their anti-capitalist, anti-extractivist resistance efforts under difficult circumstances. ED works with, among other partners, Buliisa Initiative for Rural Development Organisation (BIRUDO); Rudi International; Kazi Njema News; Kazi Njema Radio; Witness Radio; Ngetha Media Association for Peace; National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE); and *Le Centre d'Echanges pour des Réformes Juridiques et Institutionnelles* (CERJI). In DRC, ED's employees

and volunteers, and the activists it supports, carry out their work amid high-intensity conflicts between government forces and rebel groups seeking control over the mineral- and timber-rich areas. Corporations are also present, with some receiving government support for their extractivist activities while others work with rebel groups to facilitate their operations (Kamurai, Handler and Bazilian 2025). In Uganda, in turn, corporations explicitly ally with the government to suppress indigenous resistance against eviction from lands earmarked for extractivist enterprises, ranging from oil drilling to sugarcane farming (Adams 2024). The political atmosphere in both countries is suppressive of press freedom and civil society, and environmental human rights defenders (hereafter EHRDs) routinely face overt repression in the form of intimidation, threats of rape, actual arrests, as well as digital surveillance.

In effect, this paper involves bringing global North theory into conversation with global South theory and the work of an African NGO. It is not animated by any top-down patronising intention but is rather an explorative transversal endeavour. Social movement scholar Hamed Hosseini argues that transversal work acknowledges "diversity and difference" yet encourages "dialogue (deliberation across differences)"; it invites "systemic self-reflection, [and]… intentional openness…to explore the reality of the Other"; it fosters "critical awareness of the intersectional nature of power relations that affects interconnections"; and it involves a "commitment to create alterity through hybridization and creolization of ideas and deeds" (2015: 58). First-order transversalism occurs between different social movements such as those forming part of the alter-globalisation struggle. Second-order transversalism, by contrast, involves interfacing different discourses and seemingly discrete disciplines. And the theorisations that result from such second-order activity can, in turn, "be adopted, adapted and/or challenged in political experience, thus amounting to a third-order transversalism" (Konik 2018: 270). Accordingly, this paper involves a self-reflexive, second-order, transversal bridging of global North theory with global South theory and grassroots digital resistance practices, and its arguments and findings will certainly be tested by ED and its collaborative partners as part of an ongoing politically deliberative exchange. In a transversalist view, such acts of interweaving different ideas from different contexts for the purpose of facilitating alterity, while remaining open to and indeed welcoming of challenge, are both anticipated and unproblematic. As Hosseini advances, "transversality is not just an intellectual structure but also a life-worldly developed social imaginary…that is normally less self-consciously experienced by the people involved in inter-societal exchanges" (2015: 58-59).

In the first section of this paper, a largely Fuchsean theoretical framework is constructed that delineates key characteristics of digital capitalism – characteristics that are shown to support the accumulative ends of capitalism as a system. In the second section of this paper, the prospect of digital resistance against contemporary capitalism is explored. The section opens with Fuchs's argument for a "[t]echno-realis[t]" approach (2021: 22) to digital resistance: his and others' theorisations reveal that digital technologies and applications can be employed by resistance groups but are readily used by corporations and states to neutralise political opposition – particularly through channelling users in a pro-capitalist-consumerist direction. Still, Fuchs maintains that digital activism is vital to the struggle against authoritarian capitalism today, and he identifies the digital commons and the digital public sphere as important sites for such struggle. Accordingly, a subsection follows that focuses on Fuchs's and digital studies scholar Michael Kwet's respective arguments concerning the role of the digital commons in countering authoritarian capitalism and digital authoritarianism, interspersed with reflections on ED's digital commons involvement. The next subsection thematises Fuchs's and Kenyan political activist Nanjala Nyabola's arguments concerning the role of the digital public sphere, and touches on critiques of the notion of the public sphere, before considering ED's digital public sphere activities to date. The paper then concludes with some final reflections, which include the identification of areas for future research.

Key characteristics of digital(ly mediated) capitalism

In "The digital commons and the digital public sphere: how to advance digital democracy today" (2021), Fuchs argues that the rise of digital capitalism in the 21st century has not, as some commentators believe, spelled the end of earlier phases of capitalism. Rather, in his view, "digital capitalism" simply constitutes an *additional* way of organising capitalism, through digital mediation (Fuchs 2021: 10). So now, "social processes such as the accumulation of power, capital accumulation, class struggles, political struggles, hegemony, ideology, [and] commodification…are mediated by digital technologies, digital information, and digital communication" (Fuchs 2021: 10). Given this centrality of digitality to contemporary exchanges, then, "[t]ransnational digital and communication corporations" have understandably come to "play an important role" (Fuchs 2021: 10). And these are tightly enmeshed with processes of power accumulation and capital accumulation themselves – something evinced by "[t]wenty-one

of the world's largest 100 transnational corporations operat[ing] in the communication, media and digital industry" (Fuchs 2021: 10).

Notably, these corporations' overwhelming success rests not only on the contracts they might receive from governments, institutions, and businesses, but also on the pervasive use of their technologies, platforms, and applications by billions of ordinary people worldwide, which generates massive revenues as "[a]dvertisers…along with other intermediaries…purchase [their]…data analyses" (Zuboff 2015: 80). American philosopher Shoshana Zuboff has accordingly coined the term "*surveillance capitalism*" to refer to a "new form of information capitalism" spearheaded by Google, which "aims to predict and modify human behavior as a means to produce revenue and market control", in a process involving "individuals' computer-mediated actions and utterances" being "acquired, datafied, abstracted, aggregated, analyzed, packaged, sold, further analyzed and sold again" (2015: 75, 79). The better the earnings that these corporations achieve in these dubious ways, the higher their stock market valuations – the key means by which enterprises become mega-corporations with market caps in the trillions of dollars. The technology-focused corporations which Michael Hartnett of Bank of America has labelled "the magnificent seven", namely Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta Platforms, Microsoft, NVIDIA, and Tesla, are testaments to this: they make up no less than "34% of the S&P 500 as of August 14, 2025", having experienced a nearly three-fold increase since 2015 (Daly 2005). Why Hartnett characterised these seven companies as 'magnificent' to begin with, actually supports Fuchs's argument regarding their power to penetrate every sphere of society: these are the seven companies "commonly recognized for their market dominance, their technological impact, and their changes to consumer behavior and economic trends" (Thompson 2025). And to continue growing their revenues to meet already-lofty investor expectations, corporations like Google must attract "'more eyeballs [to] the Web[,] lead[ing] inexorably to more ad sales'" (Varian, in Zuboff 2015: 79), while others must develop users' dependency on their platforms and applications and/or channel them in a pro-capitalist-consumerist direction ever more vigorously.

Fuchs also elaborates on how digitally mediated capitalism (or digital capitalism), of which these corporations are an inextricable part, works to maintain and augment this accumulative dynamic ideologically, within the context of capitalist-consumerist culture. He argues that digital capitalism is intertwined with "major societal problems" that spur capitalist-consumerism,

including pervasive "digital ideology…[and a d]ominant Internet culture… shaped by a competitive, individualistic digital culture that is me-centered and focused on the accumulation and asymmetric distribution of online attention, influence, reputation, visibility, and voice" (Fuchs 2021: 12). Moreover, Fuchs observes that "algorithms create online content and attention", making it increasingly "difficult for humans to discern which online activities are human and which ones are machinic" (2021: 12). Kenyan activist Nanjala Nyabola underscores this risk when she writes that "the digital is…full of inorganic users – bots, automated processes and coordinated inauthentic behaviour" (2024: 570) that threaten political awareness. And French philosopher Bernard Stiegler provides an even more subtle argument on algorithmic manipulation that further emphasises the consumerist docility inculcated by digital monopolies. He theorises that corporations like Amazon are actually mechanising our future consumer choices, based on traces of our past activities and instantaneous calculation of our present activity – while masking such automatism as our own volitional acts. In short, Stiegler advances that "the problem…with digital technology" is that "it is possible to control the automatisms of everybody and to make them converge into the interest of the controller", and so, "when you are dealing with Amazon online", for instance, "Amazon is able to anticipate by analyzing what I call your retentions, your past retentions produced as traces on the network[, and]…anticipat[e] the retention you are producing now,… so as to conduct you, to lead you, through what I call protentions, which are automatically reproduced" (2015). Returning to Fuchs: he adds that the problem of "digital acceleration" also looms large, as "high amount[s] of online information flows [are] processed at high speed", resulting in a "lack of time and space for sustained political debate" (2021: 12). Stiegler, in his turn, deepens this point through thematising the unnerving bio-ontological ramifications of digital acceleration. In relation to his example of Amazon, and equally applicable to Google and YouTube, Stiegler writes: "The question here is that the network works at 200 million kilometers a second while your own body works at 50 meters a second. So the coefficient of difference is that the network is 4 million times faster than your own body. So you are taken by speed" (2015). Finally, for Fuchs, "social media" compound this crisis of depoliticisation, as these not only inculcate narcissism but are overrun by "fake/false news and post-factual politics that deny facts and are led by emotionalisation, tabloidisation, and ideology" (2021: 12). Stiegler's work supports Fuchs's claims regarding social media but also enriches them by stressing how these platforms inspire uncritical group-acts and group-think. He argues that "[t]hese technologies of social

networking are produced by what is called the network effect, which means that you are forced to go on Facebook, for example, because all your friends are on Facebook; it is a very mimetic technology [and t]his technology is integrating several levels of automatic behavior" (Stiegler 2015).

In light of the above, it is clear that the system of digital capitalism, and the corporations underpinning and profiting from it, require the constant narrowing of people's political horizons – to a point where conformance and consumption become erroneously conflated with freedom. For Fuchs, the processes entailed in digital capitalism are thus compounding existing societal problems, placing "democracy…under threat" and fuelling "the rise of authoritarian capitalism" (2021: 12).

Sites for digital resistance

From Fuchs's perspective, then, contemporary "digital society [comprises]…a digital capitalism that undermines democracy", but even so, he argues that "[p]rogressive digital politics" are not only possible but indeed "the active and practical hope for safeguarding and advancing democracy in the age of, and in opposition to, digital authoritarianism" (2021: 24). He is thus advocating a "[t]echno-realis[t]" approach (Fuchs 2021: 22), one which allows all digital phenomena, ranging from Wikileaks to activist blogging, to be analysed through "a political economy framework in order to evaluate [their democratic]… limits and potential" (Fuchs 2011: 2). Stressing the need to carefully scrutinise digital phenomena to gauge their complicity with, or transgressive potential against, the status quo, is in keeping with media theorists Anne Kaun and Julie Uldam's caution against "(over)emphasiz[ing] the role that digital technologies play for…mobilization", and is supportive of their efforts "to counter dominant epistemologies of seeing digital media as an exceptional force and the idea that technologies are used in a universal way" (2018: 2099, 2102).

The phenomenon of Facebook illustrates the authors' latter point and with it the need for techno-realism. Facebook can be utilised for various divergent purposes, ranging from cultivating a vapid narcissism, through pro-democratic mobilisation, to enabling the "disseminati[on of] hate speech in local languages in countries like South Sudan" (Nyabola 2019). Additionally, such social media platforms have been used by firms like Cambridge Analytica

for "illicit data harvesting" for political purposes, such as to produce targeted political advertising in the run-up to US elections (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018; Nyabola 2019). This firm has also been directly contracted by political parties, such as when it helped shape political opinion in Kenya through surveying Kenyans and then "developing an online social media campaign for the [ruling] Jubilee [coalition's] presidential campaign to 'generate a hugely active following'" (Nyabola 2019). Moreover, tech companies at times curtail information on their platforms at the behest of governments, something Meta and Alphabet recently admitted to doing during COVID (Chicago Tribune 2025). In addition, as the whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed, "for data collection" the American National Security Agency (NSA) engages in active "partnerships with corporations (via the PRISM programme)", and can "tap… the Internet backbone (via the UPSTREAM programme)" (Kwet 2019: 15; see also Zuboff 2015: 79).

The above findings validate Fuchs's argument that a most sinister aspect of digital capitalism is the intertwining of monopolising "[c]ommunication/digital corporations and state apparatuses…[to] create a surveillance-industrial complex" (2021: 12). And Michael Kwet's theorisations on "*tech hegemony*", "*global surveillance capitalism*", and the "digital colonialism" connected to these (2019: 3), lend further support to Fuchs's contentions in this regard. Kwet confirms that users quite easily "can be spied on by an ISP [Internet Service Provider] or government" (2019: 10), and opines that such surveillance activities augment, specifically, *American* "political, economic, and social power" (2019: 4), given the dominance of US communication/digital corporations in the global digital ecosystem.

Nevertheless, Fuchs and Kwet alike encourage digital, rather than merely grassroots empirical, resistance to this status quo – with Fuchs's work focusing on both the digital commons and the digital public sphere as important sites for such activity, while Kwet's text on digital colonialism focuses predominantly on practical avenues of resistance within the context of the digital commons. Their arguments on these matters are discussed in the following subsections, supplemented with inputs from other theorists, and interspersed with reflections on the current positioning of ED in relation to the digital commons and the digital public sphere. This reflective exercise also helps to clarify in what respects ED might be able to augment its digital resistance efforts.

The digital commons

For Fuchs, acts that "[a]dvanc[e] digital democracy, the digital public sphere, and the digital commons should be part and parcel of movements [and]…parties…that campaign for the strengthening of democracy, the public sphere, and the commons in general" (2021: 22). With such a statement Fuchs is acknowledging that digital resistance practices cannot on their own overcome authoritarian capitalism, but that these practices should form part of broader struggles for political freedom. His statement also discloses that digital practices interrelate with empirical events. Indeed, in his text, Fuchs thematises such interrelation through focusing on the concept of enclosure. He discusses parallels between the original enclosure of the physical commons as a precondition for the rise of capitalism and industrialisation, and the contemporary inhibition of a technological commons to help maintain digitally mediated capitalism, both infrastructurally and ideologically (2021: 17-18). In short, Fuchs defines "the commons [proper as]…non-market and non-profit-based resources…available to everyone" (2021: 17), and refers to Karl Marx's foundational argument that original accumulation involved "divorcing the producer from the means of production" (Marx 2007: 786) – that is, the commons – to create the class divisions between capitalists and workers essential for capitalism's functioning. He then defines the "digital commons [as]…digital resources that are commonly controlled by humans" (Fuchs 2021: 19), and advances that the digital commons is continuously being undermined by Big Tech dominance of hardware and software, which results in digital authoritarianism. And Fuchs explains that one ideological outcome of such dominance, from a political communication perspective, is "the expropriation of voice as a common resource and practice" that "undermine[s] democracy" (2021: 18).

Relatedly, in a paper critiquing the much-vaunted Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), Fuchs underscores the political necessity of fighting for a digital commons, against capitalism's acts of digital enclosure. He contends that "capital aims to appropriate digital machines as instruments for political control, economic accumulation, and ideological manipulation", and that "[s]ocial struggle in digital capitalism is [thus by implication] one *over the control and shaping of digital machines*" [emphasis added](2018: 287). Kwet supports such a contention, by similarly arguing that to "construct…a digital society aligned with human rights, democracy, and socioeconomic justice,… *decentralised ownership and control of software, hardware, and the Internet*

are prerequisites" [emphasis added](2019: 4). Yet, adds Kwet, it is "nearly impossible for Global South firms to compete with the...established [Big Tech] giants" (2019: 13-14), which "are [engaged in] colonising digital technology" (2019: 6). First of all, these giants enjoy the phenomenon of "network effects", as networks become "more valuable...the more users" they attract, and second, smaller companies' entry into the digital playing field is further blocked through "economies of scale[...since i]t is very expensive to run centralised social networks", given their infrastructure, expertise, data curation, and monetisation requirements (Kwet 2019: 13-14). This results in "the largest sets of valuable data – such as social data (Facebook, Twitter), e-commerce (Amazon), and search (Google) – [being]...dominated by a handful of 'winners' (multinationals)" (Kwet 2019: 14). Fuchs supplements Kwet's insights in this regard, by explaining that platform cooperatives can only be successful if they "turn into capitalist projects" themselves, through working to obtain the monopolistic status, "network effects", and "vast resources" of their mainstream rivals (2021: 22).

That said, both authors identify and/or propose digital commons endeavours to contest the dominance of Big Tech firms. Fuchs argues that in terms of digital infrastructure projects, there already exist "community networks run as cooperatives", while "free software and non-commercial Creative Commons licences are examples" of a growing "software and digital content" commons (2021: 19). Moreover, he discusses digital "platform cooperatives", such as Fairbnb, developed in opposition to the exploitative Airbnb, which are "collectively owned and governed by the digital workers who produce the resources that underpin these platforms" (Fuchs 2021: 19). Fuchs cautions, though, that such commons-based projects "do not automatically advance all levels of the commons" (2021: 19). For example, some do not focus on "reduc[ing] e-waste and energy consumption" and thus fail to contribute to the natural commons through "digital environmental sustainability" (Fuchs 2021: 19). Admittedly, in the latter respect, Fuchs is glib in his assumption that anything digital can be environmentally sustainable. This is because so-called 'green' products and energy generation usually involve "mov[ing] costs around from one region of nature to another and from one class or generation to another" (Salleh 2024: 110).

Be that as it may, Fuchs's categorisation of digital commons projects is a valuable heuristic device for determining whether, or to what extent, ED – the Uganda- and DRC-based NGO with which the author is engaged –

has a stake in the digital commons. From this, it has become evident that, at present, ED does not contribute to augmenting the digital commons as it does not own digital community networks or platform cooperatives. However, this limitation is understandable, given the costs involved and the technological expertise required for network and platform development and maintenance, and given the nature of ED as an environmental conservation and human rights organisation, which demands that it channels all possible resources toward addressing the most immediate challenges falling within its purview. In short, ED possesses only the basic digital infrastructure required to run its website, engage in social media and networking activities, facilitate website livestreaming, and produce news features, podcasts, and scientific and interactive reports. These modest digital activities do, however, play an important role in ED's struggle to protect the region's physical commons from those socially and ecologically destructive depredations carried out by the two governments, rebel groups, and corporations. To clarify the latter point: ED and its collaborative partners are actively fighting enclosure of the natural commons. What Marxist scholar David Harvey terms "accumulation by dispossession" is well under way in these countries, and involves "the suppression of alternative, indigenous forms of production and consumption… [and] neo-colonial and imperial processes of appropriation of assets, including natural resources" (2004: 74). Indeed, Big Tech firms are directly implicated in these acts of accumulation by dispossession in the region where ED operates – especially in DRC which is very rich in the rare earth minerals indispensable to the manufacture of digital technologies. In fact, the Congolese government itself recently launched a lawsuit against Apple, openly accusing this third-largest American company by market capitalisation, "of sourcing illegally mined Congolese minerals…and smuggling them through Rwanda with the help of the M23 rebel group" (Vivuya 2025). Still, in its fight against this form of enclosure, ED draws on some aspects of the digital commons. That is, it publishes its scientific and interactive reports under "non-commercial Creative Commons licences" (Fuchs 2021: 19). Moreover, in terms of current digital security measures, ED utilises Signal, a free and open-source encryption- and privacy-focused messaging application, the open-source SecureDrop, and free and open-source Mailvelope email encryption for very sensitive work. Finally, ED is heedful of the UN Sustainable Development Goals aspiration toward "digital environmental sustainability" (Fuchs 2021: 19). While the organisation is aware that digital hardware, software, and processes will always exact an environmental toll, it nonetheless tries to limit its contribution to technological

pollution, by acquiring "low-cost but long-lasting technologies" (Konik et al. 2025: 154), and ensuring that its "[w]ebsite is running on sustainable energy" (ED n.d.).

Returning to digital commons theory, this time focusing on the more nuanced work of Kwet: Kwet echoes Fuchs, by defining the digital commons as "publicly owned and controlled technology", but adds that such technology should be "built for freedom *by design* at the architectural level" (2019: 17). Drawing on Eben Moglen (2004), a prominent figure in the Free Software Movement (hereafter FSM), Kwet elaborates that Big Tech's and other large American corporations' "centralised ownership and control of the…core pillars of the digital ecosystem: software, hardware, and network connectivity", perpetuate capitalistic digital enclosure, or, what he terms "digital colonialism" (2019: 3-4). To counter this, he supports Moglen's goals of "Free Software, Free Hardware and Free Spectrum (network connectivity)", reasoning that these stand "to prevent authoritarian forms of digital technology" (Kwet 2019: 18-19). In relation to free software, Kwet stresses the importance of "[a]ccess to the source code" of programs, because it is "[t]he control of code [that] is foundational to digital domination" (2019: 8, 18). He also unpacks what Moglen means by free hardware, that is, devices "without digital locks and widely distributed in the hands of the people", before discussing Moglen's ideal of free spectrum or internet connectivity (Kwet 2019: 19). Kwet suggests that rearranging "the three core pillars of the digital ecosystem" in this way would yield "Free Culture", in terms of which "anyone with a device and the Internet can freely access, produce, and share published works" (2019: 19). He also discusses FSM's endeavour of "building decentralised networking alternatives" that counter "cloud centralisation" and thereby surveillance; as Kwet quips, "'There is no cloud…just someone else's computer'" (2019: 9, 19). In response to the latter fact, in 2010, FSM launched its FreedomBox project, which "is designed to run a secure, personal server that protects privacy and provides infrastructure for communities to network their online activities without the need for centralised intermediaries" (Kwet 2019: 19). This project is characterised as liberatory from a digital infrastructural perspective, as it promises "the decentralised hosting of alternative platforms built for privacy,… through either peer-to-peer or highly decentralised networks with servers based in local communities" (Kwet 2019: 19).

ED's current level of participation in the digital commons is limited to the use of creative commons licenses and free software, as already touched on in

relation to Fuchs's digital commons reflections. Moreover, what Kwet advocates above, concerning free hardware and free spectrum, well exceed ED's capabilities as a small, grassroots environmental conservation and human rights organisation, even though his arguments disclose how essential it is for these pillars of the digital ecosystem to be democratised. Yet, it is worth investigating further whether ED might benefit from adopting FSM's FreedomBox system; after all, it seems relatively easy to deploy since, on the face of things, it simply requires a hard drive of sufficient capacity. However, because FreedomBox relies on personal servers, the system is vulnerable to attack, and so continuous and potentially sophisticated measures would be needed to protect it. In short, as a server is simply a hard drive that acts as the source of whatever software is being accessed by whoever has access, a primary concern is how to secure the server from external and internal cyber threats, which is a difficult task and a very real problem (FreedomBox Forum 2022). So, ED would have to engage in careful cost-benefit analysis of FreedomBox adoption, in consultation with its existing digital security partners Tor Project, Open Technology Fund, and the Hivos Digital Defenders Partnership. As noted, ED's existing digital security measures include the use of Signal, SecureDrop, and Mailvelope, and its website is encrypted with an SSL/TSL certificate. These measures are good, but by no means airtight, and so further options for strengthening digital privacy and security will always be necessary to consider.

The digital public sphere

Fuchs identifies the digital public sphere as a second site for digital resistance against authoritarian capitalism. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas, he defines the public sphere as "a sphere of public political communication that mediates between the other subsystems of society, namely the economy, politics, culture, and private life" (Fuchs 2021: 13). He then goes on to define the *digital* public sphere not as "a separate sphere of society, but a dimension and aspect of the public sphere in societies where digital information and digital communication are prevalent" (Fuchs 2021: 13). The latter kind of definition is supported by Nyabola, who explains that "Habermas's conception…of the public sphere do[es] map strongly onto the digital" (2024: 571). Once more echoing Habermas, Fuchs proceeds to argue that the digital public sphere involves "the publishing of information, critical publicity, and critical public debate mediated by digital information and communication technologies" (2021: 13). Accordingly, he maintains that the Internet, tablets, and mobile phones

(Fuchs 2021: 13), among other digital devices, fall within the ambit of the digital public sphere. Admittedly, his manner of mentioning digital infrastructure and hardware here, makes these latter appear neutral. By contrast, as already discussed, Kwet discloses how spectrum and digital devices by their current design perpetuate "authoritarian forms of digital technology" (Kwet 2019: 4, 18-19). This omission aside, Fuchs is nonetheless circumspect regarding digital practices, in contending that those shaped by "processes of commodification and capitalisation…, domination…, and ideology" (2021: 13), are not public sphere activities, whereas those that counter such processes of "economic… and political accumulation" (2021: 13), *are* public sphere activities. In effect, then, Fuchs regards anti-capitalist endeavours as the business of the general and the digital public spheres alike.

To an extent at least, Fuchs's treatment of 'the public sphere' as such, overlooks the fact that "conceptual models of the public sphere have moved toward multiplicity,…spurred by recognition of social complexity and sociocultural diversity" (Asen 2000: 424-425). Habermas's original conception of the public sphere has come under criticism "for neglecting the exclusion of women and laborers", among other vulnerable groups (Asen 2000: 430). Indeed, Habermas himself later admitted that certain exclusionary dynamics "structured the historical bourgeois public sphere" (Asen 2000: 431). Communications scholar Robert Asen explains that the "critical term… [of] counterpublic…emerged" from such debates, to "signify that some publics develop not simply as one among a constellation of discursive entities, but as explicitly articulated alternatives to wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants" (2000: 424). Fundamental to the concept of counterpublics is thus recognition that there is no homogenous public sphere to speak of, but rather "a public sphere conceived as a multiplicity", since "differential power relations among diverse publics" are constantly in play within it (Asen 2000: 425).

Accordingly, discourses positing publics and multiplicities problematise Fuchs's rather monolithic talk of *the* public sphere. However, in his discussion of the digital realm and the digital public sphere, Fuchs acknowledges the characteristic of multiplicity raised above. As already discussed, Fuchs suggests that the digital realm is a place of contestation, because while some users might transgress the status quo, many others become absorbed into the "[d]ominant Internet culture", which is "competitive, individualistic [and]…me-centered" (2021: 12). Furthermore, as noted, Fuchs argues that algorithmic manipulation

diverts online users' attention and undermines authenticity through blurring boundaries between humans and machines (2021: 12) – something also thematised by Nyabola (2024: 570). Related to these notions of contestation and manipulation, Fuchs moreover indicates that the digital public sphere itself is marked by multiplicity. In short, he asserts that "[i]n the online world, there are fragmented digital public spheres where we find filter bubbles" (Fuchs 2021: 12). Fuchs thus explicitly acknowledges that what he speaks of as the digital public sphere consists, in actuality, of various fragmented spheres. Turkish scholar Emre Bayamlıoğlu, referencing Fuchs's arguments in this regard, elaborates further on how exactly filter bubbles generate fragmented digital public spheres. He explains that filter bubbles are the result of how, "owing to the commercial strategy based on collection, aggregation, and analysis of personal data – communication and content are algorithmically personalized to surround and isolate individuals in an invisible echo-chamber of their own voice" (Bayamlıoğlu 2017: 117). In this way, he contends, "ICTs…act as tools of exclusion [since]…people are not only excluded *from* information but *by* information as well" (Bayamlıoğlu 2017: 118). Filter bubbles are therefore inherently problematic, because "[i]n a democracy we need both coherence and diversity so that individuals can see matters from others' point of view and still act as a polity" (Bayamlıoğlu 2017: 117). However, how one might work to overcome filter bubbles to forge connections between fragmented digital public spheres, so as to strengthen resistance against authoritarian capitalism, remains a formidable challenge. Another serious challenge to digital democracy, also centring on exclusion, and of particular relevance within global South contexts, is thematised by Nyabola. She points out that in less developed nations, the very prospect of participation in a digital public sphere is severely constrained by lack of access to digital means, as well as by the predominance of English as "the default language of technology" (Nyabola 2024: 570, 573). Although Nyabola stresses these exclusionary dynamics, she nonetheless proceeds to speak hopefully of *a*, if not *the*, digital public sphere – maintaining that "participating in digital platforms produces new relations between the individual, the collective and…power", and that "the mere act of participating in these spaces gives shape to them, and that shape is a form of a public sphere even if it is incomplete" (2024: 571).

In sum, then, Fuchs might be faulted for referring to *the* digital public sphere across most of his text, but such usage was likely for linguistic expediency, as he does in fact acknowledge the sphere's fragmented nature as multiple digital

public spheres. And overall, his framework remains valuable, as groups can use it to consider how their digital activities can help to augment if not *the*, then at least *a*, digital public sphere. Also, although various digital (counter)publics might focus on interests other than combating capitalism, Fuchs's specific argument that the main purpose of the digital public sphere is contestation of authoritarian capitalism, is compelling in contexts where capitalism is directly negatively impacting people and ecosystems, as is the case with ED.

ED appears to adopt the Habermasean (and Fuchsean) view that there is "a functional correlation between civil society, discursive communication, and a democratic public sphere" (Trentmann 2003: 24). The organisation believes that "[a] vibrant civil society can promote human rights, the rule of law, digital democracy, gender equality, sustainable development, the interests of marginalized groups, and other public benefit objectives" (ED 2025). Echoing Fuchs, ED also argues that, "across Africa and globally,…authoritarianism is on the rise", and so "the space for civil society is shrinking" – with governments clamping down on civil society organisations, including on their "use of information and communication technology" through "practices such as mass surveillance" (ED 2025). Thus, observes ED, within the contexts of Uganda and DRC, much like elsewhere in the world, "[c]ivic space restrictions [are] also extend[ing] to the digital realm" (ED 2025). In relation to the latter, ED vividly describes how the EHRDs it supports are being threatened:

> Digital threats…are increasing in…number and frequency across the Albertine Rift and Congo Basin regions…[and involve] various tactics, including surveillance, targeted malware infections, hacking, trolling, device confiscation, and theft. Governments and companies have become increasingly sophisticated in using technology to monitor activists, journalists, and political opponents…[Some EHRDs]…have received threats on social media platforms…[that] reveal that perpetrators have access to specific personal information and locations of the targeted individuals. Many of the threatening messages include misogynistic language and explicit threats of sexual violence against the women involved. (ED 2025)

That certain actors are willing to target EHRDs in such menacing ways, both "reflect[s] the widespread access EHRDs have to digital devices and the critical role technology plays in their work" (ED 2025). And in response to these threats, ED collaborates with Tor Project and the Hivos Digital Defenders Partnership, among others, to augment its own and EHRDs' digital security. ED also provides

training to EHRDs on protection of data and computer systems, email privacy, and security related to social media and mobile phone use (Konik et al. 2025). The organisation goes to these efforts because, much like Fuchs, it regards digital public sphere activities as "a[n integral] dimension and aspect of the [workings of the] public sphere" (Fuchs 2021: 13), and hence as essential to the maintenance and strengthening of resistance struggles today.

In line with this stance, ED, in its fight to protect the natural and cultural commons, complements its empirical grassroots activities with digital networking. Beyond using digital devices, platforms, and applications for its grassroots organising, ED also searches and applies for funding from grantmakers and links up with potential collaborative partners online. Moreover, it emails the scholars cited in its publications to alert them about the organisation and invite them to collaborate. Such tactics go a good way toward countering the "filter bubbles" that "fragment…digital public spheres" (Fuchs 2021: 12). For instance, the present author was emailed by ED after it had cited her work in a report. Conceivably, in the absence of such communication, she would have remained oblivious to the organisation's existence, despite her interest in, and continuous online research into, environmental and social justice movements as an ecofeminist scholar. Such situations are understandable, because as Fuchs and Bayamlıoğlu, among others, have pointed out, the World Wide Web tends toward fragmentation given the vast number of interest groups and competing actors on it, while dominant Internet search engines through algorithmic operations personalise results, so that one does not come across new organisations unless one has previously looked for them or unless the algorithm by chance suggests them. Yet, it is often less visible, smaller, less resourced, and relatively unknown global South organisations that have the biggest impacts on local communities and environments. The initial contact between ED and the present author has resulted in years-long interaction, and most recently in an international journal article coauthored with three ED employees on the extractivist activities underway in the region. This international open-access publication also stands to visibilise ED and the other Ugandan and DRC organisations discussed in the paper, even more.

As noted, as part of its digital public sphere activities, ED also creates and publishes digital outputs. Following Asen, it can be argued that ED's digital outputs address a mix of audiences, among these local communities with Internet access, wider publics in Uganda and DRC, potential regional,

continental, and foreign collaborators or donors, and in certain cases, the states of Uganda and DRC themselves (Asen 2000: 442-443). ED posts, on the social networking platform LinkedIn, content about its own activities and those of other regional social and ecological justice organisations, as well as news regarding positive strides taken by government authorities. Most of its digital outputs, however, are found on its official website (https://watetezi.org/). The website contains routine information about the organisation, including where it operates from; the programmes it runs ranging from livelihood and security initiatives to biodiversity and climate interventions; and news reports featuring its own recent activities, the efforts of park rangers, and landmark national legislative changes pertaining to land use, among other pertinent topics. But the site also carries far more elaborate digital products, which can be seen as contributing to "critical publicity, and critical public debate" (Fuchs 2021: 13) relating to the social and ecological impacts of capitalist extractivism in the Albertine Rift region. ED's most notable outputs in this respect are its scientific and interactive reports and surveys. These appear to be addressed primarily to international as well as regional, national, and digitally connected local, audiences that are construed as potential donors and/or collaborators, and secondarily to public servants and government authorities of Uganda and/or DRC. An illustrative report thematises the livelihood activities of, and hardships faced by, fisherwomen on Lake Albert, whose survival is at risk as the Ugandan and Congolese government authorities have outlawed traditional fishing boats as part of their initiative to manage lake resources (Environmental Defenders 2020b). Ironically, the governments are doing this, while permitting ecologically destructive oil drilling in the lake by China National Offshore Oil Corporation and TotalEnergies (AFP 2024). Other interactive reports are similarly critical of capitalist extractivism and government collusion with companies whose operations, very clearly, harm local communities and ecosystems. Certain of these reports also visibilise ED's collaborative partners, such as Ngetha Media Association for Peace, and many give voice to EHRDs and local community activists who detail environmental crimes and the corporate displacement of peoples in numerous locations. Other reports, in turn, are not so much outward-looking as addressed to local communities and local government authorities for direct deployment, such as those describing food security models or detailing ecological restoration plans. On the other hand, investigations mapping the cultural heritage of Ugandan and Congolese peoples in the region, are explicitly addressed to the country's educators, while concomitantly serving as legal documents and fostering cultural revival among local communities.

For example, the aims of a participatory mapping investigation into the cultural heritage of Mahagi territories are to "help researchers and writers gather information to write and publish school books on history and geography", to create "supporting documentation required within impact assessments… of development projects" and for "court cases in the context of land litigation involving protected areas", and to "make…the Indigenous groups…aware of [their] cultural and social wealth" (ED 2021).

The ED website also showcases newsletters, videos, and maps, as well as seven podcasts that give local women EHRDs a voice. Notably, the podcasts are available not only on the ED website, but also through Spotify, Google Podcast, and Apple Podcast, allowing the organisation to more easily reach international audiences. One podcast episode, for example, features Janepher Baitwamasa who works for the Navigators of Development Association (NAVODA) in Hoima. In English, she explains to listeners that she used to be a manager in the oil and gas industry, but that she quit after seeing the human and environmental rights abuses it involves. She then goes on to argue that other corporations in the area are similarly exploitative, and details how "the Hoima sugar factory… evicted over four thousand six hundred people who are currently living in a makeshift camp" (ED 2020a: 06:58-07:07). And significantly, like all but two of the other guests, Baitwamasa in the second part of her presentation "speaks [exclusively] in Runyoro language directly to local communities" (ED 2020a). The latter message is also tailored to the community rather than being a translation of the preceding English – something crucial to connecting with the local community and reinforcing their sense of socio-cultural self-worth; after all, "[c]ommunities are more likely to protect their natural environment and stand up for their rights in decision-making processes when they feel like they belong" (Konik et al. 2025: 154). Such gestures go a good way toward countering the exclusion of indigenous peoples from the digital public sphere, which Nyabola in part attributes to the hegemony of English in the digital realm (2024: 573).

Conclusion

While Fuchs's framework is limited in its primary focus on a global North digital context, when supplemented by global South insights from Nyabola and Kwet, among others, it offered a valuable heuristic device to help categorise and reflect upon ED's activities vis-à-vis the digital commons and the digital public sphere. It is evident that ED's participation in the digital commons is

constrained, but it is also clear that the organisation is actively contributing to a digital public sphere in the process of seeking to "produce…new relations between the individual, the collective and…power" (Nyabola 2024: 571) within the contexts of Uganda and DRC. Notably, the organisation's digital mission resonates powerfully with Fuchs's argument that digital public sphere activities proper, are those that counter authoritarian capitalism. This is because ED seeks, through its digital work, to build discursive and movement resistance against extractivist capitalist corporations, including those from the digital industry. This exploratory work has also uncovered areas for future research to be undertaken by the present author in collaboration with ED, including mapping digital public spheres in Uganda more exhaustively, and investigating how ED's radio station and programmes contribute to the public sphere of the DRC.

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