

Dr. Keith Plummer

I'm Keith Plummer, dean of the School of Divinity here at Cairn, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to be joined by Dr. Felicia Wu Song. Dr. Song is a cultural sociologist of media and digital technologies, currently serving as professor of sociology at Westmont College in Santa Barbara. She's the author of numerous publications, including *Restless Devices: Recovering Personhood, Presence, and Place in the Digital Age*, recently published by Intervarsity Press. And it is that book that I invited her to talk with me about today. Felicia, welcome. And thank you so much for making time to talk about that.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

Yeah, for sure. Thanks so much for the invitation.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, I remember when I saw the coming attraction for your book in the InterVarsity Press catalog, and I was just so excited. And I am very interested in the areas of media technology. And I think, as you relate in the book, that this is an area where Christians really need to become much more conversant as it relates to discipleship. And I want to get into that, but I'm curious in terms of what is it that led you at first to want to look into the impact of technology on society? And then we'll get into what led to the book.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

Sure. So there's a story. The story is that right after college, I was a history teacher at a private school. I had majored in history, and I was living at this private school in the dorms. And during that year, it was the first year that email came to town—to all the students. I know I'm dating myself right there. So email came. All the students were given email accounts. And it was an interesting experience because our private school, like many private schools, talked a lot about community and relationships—valued that as a part of their identity. And what struck me, even in my short time working there, was that there was no conversation at all when email came about how it was going to impact the community. And as a teacher and as someone who was living in the dorms, I saw it slowly changing the ways that the young women at the school were engaging each other and even their teachers. And it just struck me as very odd. And then it got me thinking, oh, wait, but we don't even have conversations like this in the broader American society. And that's what started me down this road of thinking about what it is about media and technology that, in American society, we don't talk a whole lot about.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

And then after that experience, I came across Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, where he discusses the impact of television, and particularly focusing not on the content, the programming, but on the medium, as he put it. And so that was just a revelation to me that there were scholars out there that were actually studying [this]. I had not studied anything remotely close to media in my college years. So I was so excited, and I knew I needed to go back to grad school to learn from all of these scholars and thinkers that had been really spending their lives already thinking about the social and cultural effects of technology on our lives.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Postman has been an influence on me as well. I'm very appreciative of his work. Now, what were some of the things that led you to think about *Restless Devices*? What gave rise to tackling that in a book?

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

So some of it was motivated from having experiences of being able to talk to different church communities or university communities and always appreciating the questions that come at the end of a talk or a workshop and listening to people's experiences and their stories and finding that whether they are young or old, that a lot of people just felt really frustrated and even stuck. I would use that word stuck with the role of technology in their lives, whether it was in their family or in their work lives, whatever it was. There was always this sense of frustration. And I've been teaching a course for several years called Internet and Society. It's been interesting watching the students through the years shift as well, in the sense that early on when I started teaching the class, it would take me 16 weeks to convince the students that maybe there something to be critical about with digital technology, but that through the years, especially in the last five years, I would say, students are right there with me from the beginning. They're right there. And there's a lot of questions about, well, what can we actually do? And so I've just always appreciated what sociology can offer.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

Sociology was a new discipline to me when I started graduate school. And so I felt like it's the discipline that has these diagnostic tools and categories for thinking that are super helpful for understanding the digital experience that so many of us have. But wanting so much to pair that with a theologically informed prescription, or at least imagining together about what it could be like for people in the church and wanting to bring that conversation into the church, into Christian educational context, families, different groups of people who I know are talking about this and

puzzling through, well, what are we doing? Not what are we going to do, but what are we doing? And how do we navigate what feels increasingly like an unsustainable set of circumstances?

Dr. Keith Plummer

There were so many passages in your writing that in some, I just wrote in the margin, "yes." You described things in my own life, and it was just I felt so understood and that you articulated so well what was going on. You describe us as "a culture that is beginning to experience an acute form of technological disenchantment." And you've touched on this a little bit already, but could you first say a few words about the enchantment that we have gone through technologically and delve a little bit more into the disenchantment?

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

The enchantment, I think there's so many different layers of that. Certainly for many of us, when we get our first smartphone or we get that new device, whatever it is, it feels magical. It really does for so many of us. It seems to make life so much easier. You can coordinate. There's all these cool bells and whistles. And so we all want to figure out how to integrate it into our lives. It's just exciting, and it's always so sleek and appealing. So I think on a personal level, many of us experience that with new devices. I think culturally, there's always been... I mean, what's been interesting to me is that in American society, we've been a society that has a kind of historical enchantment commitment with technology. That is, we tend towards an optimistic, even utopian view of what technologies can offer to us. And so the internet is just one of a whole string of media and communication technologies that have come along with many promises, right? Promises of uniting people, right? Across space and time, of increasing harmony, when people can just speak anonymously to each other, right? And so there's all these wild exciting promises that are part of the enchantment, and certainly, I think, part of a lot of the discourse in the first 10–15 years of the internet, all the way up through Arab Spring, and then the excitement of how the internet can empower marginalized voices, empowering carrying the Davids against the Goliaths of the state, the traditional institutions, and so forth.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

But I think there's been a turn, right? There's a turn in people's experiences where the underbelly of a lot of these digital practices and technologies, they were always there. It's not like suddenly something happened or something somehow soured. They were always there, but that we just needed the time in some ways to live into the degree of enmeshment of the technologies in our lives for it to manifest in a way that all of us could start seeing. And so, again, I think there's the individual experience of, okay, now I have all these fabulous devices, but I feel like they're

constantly driving me now, that is with notifications, with alerts, with email demands, and I can't escape it. What used to be efficient and it's now inescapable on an individual level. And then culturally, I think anyone who's been watching what's been going on over the last couple of years knows deep inside of their very being of just how our devices have contributed in large part to a lot of the duress we feel as a society, the differences that we have, the polarization, the kinds of discourse that we engage in. But that's all somehow connected to what's going on on social media and the degrees to which people feel like they can express themselves in harsher ways than they would if they were in person with each other.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You said that it used to be the case that it would take 16 weeks to persuade your students that there is something that needs to change. I teach a class called Technology and Christian Discipleship. For the most part, I don't have to persuade them either. (There's always a few holdouts.) But I listened to some of the reflections that students did after—something not as well developed as your Freedom Project, which I want to talk about at some point in our conversation—but where they either switched from one medium that they don't normally use, or they switched from a medium that they normally use to one that they don't normally use, or they fasted from a particular platform or device. And there were times when I listened to the very profound reflections that they offered in response to that. And I was on the verge of tears in response to some of them. And you give a number of responses from some of your students. And there was one that I just wanted to read a portion of, maybe have you comment on. One of your students said, "After taking some time away, when I'm with friends walking around on campus or by myself doing nothing, I feel my phone crying out to me. It begs for my attention. It tells me to check my Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram. Your friends have sent you a video or posted a new photo that you need to see. You have emails you need to look at. It tells me it will save me from awkward conversations and social situations I do not feel like dealing with. I now see that without restrictions and limits, my phone will always be telling me what to do." That is profound and moving.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

Yeah. It's always the case for, I think, many of us teachers that those kinds of reflections surprise us even more when they come from students we didn't expect it from. And this was certainly the case. And I think it is the quality of demand that students feel from their devices that I think are enmeshed with the kinds of demands they may feel within their relationships with each other that make the compulsive habits of checking one's phones hard to resist. And yet what I appreciate about this student's remarks is their own self-awareness about how the technology gives them an escape from a degree of awkwardness or discomfort that they feel and being upset about that, knowing that that's not a great habit to have, but not knowing what to do.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that [is the] sense of feeling trapped that you mentioned earlier to some degree. In the book, you do an excellent job of diagnosis. The first part of the book, you deal with our digital compulsions and some of the factors that contribute to them and the impact that it is having on us individually and communally. And then the second part, you deal with what you call a diagnosis or prescription from diagnosis to prescription. Reading the research that you did with respect to the diagnosis was fascinating and frightening in some respects. One of the things that you deal with, though, in that section is you talk about the impact of particularly social media. And you use a phrase, you talk about how it industrializes us and our relationships. And that was a very interesting section, and there's so much to it. But could you say a few words about what you mean by that and how it is that our interactions in those platforms industrialize us?

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

That's a term that I use from the sociology closet, shall we say, in that industrialization is a huge part of how sociologists see the ways that societies have changed. And one thesis that often comes up in the discipline of sociology is the degree to which the industrialization that we're familiar with in factories and in businesses and manufacturing, there's a dynamic of valuing efficiency, of valuing profit, that moves beyond the factory and moves into other spheres of society and starts to drive them as well. And so when I talk about the industrialization that happens to us in social media, the idea is that the relationships that we have with each other, the construction of identity that we're encouraged to build in those spaces are framed within a context that is commercial, that is driven by priorities and dynamics of efficiency. And therefore, and this is a common sociological thesis, dehumanizing, right? That there is something intrinsically problematic when we see our relationships or treat our relationships between human beings as transactions, for example, or that we treat our identity, this fullness of our human personhood as a brand, as an image, it flattens it in a particular way.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

So that's the most obvious way in which our relationships and our identities become industrialized in social media. I think what's interesting about social media is the way that our relationships and our construction of our identities through our posts, the pictures that we offer up, those actually are a part of a commercial industry for the tech companies. We are actually creating, we are the widgets that they are building a business model on. And so I just find that so fascinating and troubling all at the same time. And wanting folks to just think about what that means. It's not to say that we just abandon social media, but just to become a little more aware of how it does... It

is a context that bounds us in certain ways. It bounds the way we relate to each other, and it bounds the way we can even express our identities.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You write, "As users, we are the ones who bear the cost. The substance of our time and our lives are the treasures being mined, and we are just giving it away without a care or thought. We absorb the cost not just by handing over the precious details, revealing what we value and what motivates us, but by opening ourselves and our perceptions of the world to be modified and adjusted by actors and agents who have an interest in steering us in a direction that benefits them, not us." And the things that you're getting at there are some of the things that, almost to some extent, we don't want to know.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

Yes, it's terrible. Yes.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But we need to know, and you do a very good job of bringing those things to our attention so that we can act with greater discernment. The pushback that I'm sure you're familiar with and that has been very prominent in Christian circles is technology is a neutral tool. What matters most is how we use it. And as long as we're not using it for immoral ends, we don't have anything to worry about. And you have a lot to say about that, and you also have a good deal to say about how it is that American Protestantism has tended to cling to that view of the neutral instrument. What is wrong with that way of thinking about technology?

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

I think that perspective tends to focus, for one, only on the content of what is being expressed through a technology, a media technology, usually. And so focusing, therefore, on the positive, beneficial content that can go through the channels of social media or television or whatever it might be. Where when you only focus on content, you actually lose track of the fact that there is also the medium or the environment or the ecology that the technology forms around us, that we are communicating to each other or expressing ourselves within a bounded space that shapes us. We can easily lose track of the ways in which we are actually being formed when we are using the technology without knowing it. And so in that sense, being a good sociologist that I am, I think the view that technology is merely a tool forgets that technology is a part of society. It is actually an artifact of society. And therefore, as an artifact, like any other artifact, is embedded with values

and visions of what the good life is or what being human should be or is, embedded by its producers, by its designers, by the corporations that promote them, and that all of us as users are also filled with either known, well, known and unknown values that we have about the technologies.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

For example, most of us might just merely think about the the positive content that we might put on social media that has good ends because it's enhancing people's lives in good ways. But we might not be as aware of the ways in which our use of technology is also tapping into our cultural enthusiasm for productivity, for example. There are other sorts of cultural assumptions that are at work every time we use our technologies.

Dr. Keith Plummer

What I really, really enjoyed about the second part of your book is you're taking the diagnosis, and at one point, you said that a lot of scholars are thinking that really the problem with technology is that we're just creating things that are requiring us to adapt at a pace that we can't. That the problem really is that we're just creating things that are revved up to speeds that we can't catch up to. And you had an observation that I thought was very, very on target. You "I wonder if the central problem isn't so much a matter of how we can't evolve fast enough to adapt to the new demands of our economy and technological world, but an ill-defined or misguided sense of what is essential to human well-being and personhood." And the second part of your book, you are really thinking Christianly about what does optimal human functioning look look like? What is the good life? And how do the stories about what it means to be human that are mediated through our various devices, how do those conflict. Could you say more about that? Because I think that is just so helpful.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

So I think if we accumulate the different kinds of digital habits that we have and bring together all the expectations that might exist when we are on social media or trying to get through our email inbox, the picture of the human being and the context that we're dealing with is often one of scarcity, one in which we don't have enough time. We're fighting each other for attention. We're competing. And that we need others to constantly be affirming us for us to have our value, have our sense of dignity. And we have to constantly be working at it. 24/7, you can't miss anything. You've got to know what's going on around you, and you've got to stay in the game. Otherwise, you are left behind and obsolete. It is a very demanding picture of what it means to be human being. It's exhausting. Whereas I think, and this is why I get excited about thinking about the

Christian heritage and the resources that we have, is that it's a very different picture of what it means to be human and the kinds of circumstances we are invited to live into. I think Christianity, in the end of the day, is a religious faith of abundance, of grace that says, even when it looks like there is nothing, there is always enough for everyone. Our sense of identity comes not from the whim of public opinion and what our friends might think, but is grounded in our relationship and our understanding of God's love for us and the kinds of relational fulfillment that we all seek, which is very natural as human beings, is one in which is first and foremost fulfilled in our relationships with God and then with each other through that.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

And also as to the exhaustion, opposed to the exhaustion that we are prone to in our digital landscape, Christianity is a faith in which there is a call to rest and to be, actually, that our worth does not come from our doings, but it comes from being and being even allowed and gifted with rest and communion and delight that God wants to give to us as dear children. And so I think it's just such a contrasting, full, and robust picture of what it can be to be a human being in the light of Christ. That is something that has always been there. It's always been there. We just need to place it next to the technological situation that we have right now, to see it anew, to see it for what it means to be in our given context now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You draw upon some of the work of James K. A. Smith and his idea of cultural liturgies and the practices, the rituals of culture that we are engaged in, often unthinkingly, that are somehow shaping us. And it made me think in one of his talks at Wheaton College, he said a line that really struck me. He said, "You may not even be aware of all the ways your heart is being taught to sing the songs of Babylon rather than the songs of Zion." And as I was reading what you were saying about the vision of what it means to be human that is mediated through our practices digitally and what it is that the biblical vision consists of. That came to my mind frequently. Part of that vision, part of the stories that are digitally communicated is what freedom means. And you had some very insightful observations there. Could you speak to that some? And then maybe that would be a good segue into what the Freedom Project is that you incorporate to your classes, and that is at least partially woven through your book for the reader to incorporate?

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

When it comes to our digital technologies, I think we are often encouraged to think of freedom in terms of permission or license to be freed from certain things, freed from time, the limits of time, the limits of space, freed from space, freed from our bodies, even, freed from various kinds of

limitations, and that our technologies will grant us freedom that way. And while I think there is truth to many of those promises, the kinds of freedom, I would argue that it's a quality of freedom that isn't necessarily as fulfilling as we think it will be, and that there are other kinds of freedom that we're actually looking for that we actually want to be free to be, not freed from, but free towards, free to be fully ourselves, for example. Right. Fully who we are, not just the successful happy parts that we can post on Instagram, but also our weak and flawed parts, and still be welcomed into communion with others. And we also seek to be freed to live into the kinds of lives so many of us actually want to live into. We want to live full lives that have healthy relationships, have robust experiences. And now, so many of us find ourselves living lives in which so many of the digital demands seem to prevent us from living those kinds of lives, just enjoying that cup of tea or that conversation with a friend on the porch. It always feels like there's something else that needs to be done.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

And so the Freedom Project is one that I think of as one that frees us to begin living into the lives that we actually want to be living, not the ones that we've slipped into living because of the various demands that are mediated through our technologies. And so it's a set of experiments. And I always like to emphasize that, that it's not like a 30-day plan, a five-step solution. I mean, there are different stages and steps in it. There is a sequence, but it's not meant to solve. It is actually meant to be a set of experiments that we try on and we observe after we've tried them to see what happens. I encourage folks to reflect on what we discover. The experiments vary from taking a digital fast for 24 hours to trying different sorts of experiments of becoming more aware of how we use our devices to actually changing some of the routines that we have.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

And again, it's just meant to help us actually gather more data and increase our awareness of what's happening in our routines, but also to maybe ignite our appetite for something that we forgot or maybe even never tasted. I think so many of us forget how amazing it can be when we actually sit in a room with a bunch of our great friends and we have a good time. Our lives are so busy, and we have that time with them, and they're like, Man, we should do this more often. We all say that, and then we don't do it for six months. And so the Freedom Project is in large part trying to encourage folks to try different things, to maybe have little experiences like that. Hey, that was really great. Maybe I can try that again.

Dr. Keith Plummer

The book came out before the big announcement from Mark Zuckerberg related to the metaverse. But reading it after that and thinking particularly about this idea of how freedom is conceived of, I think about some of the ecstatic utterances that were made in terms of the hope of the metaverse. And you really do get a sense from some of the comments that were made that it is the ideal existence would be a freedom from the the limits of our embodiment, and that somehow this was going to provide us, and here's the irony, is going to provide us a greater opportunity to connect with one another. I'm still trying to figure that out.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

Writing the book was... I had to constantly think about the fact that by the time the book got published, there'd be a technology, and the book would be obsolete. And so in writing the book, one of the things I really wanted to pay attention to was thinking about, well, what can I say in this book that's going to stand the test of time and all the different new technologies that are going to come inevitably? And so in some ways, even though I focus on social media because that seemed to be the dominant modality for so many people, I think the focus on reflecting and becoming more self-aware on, well, what do we think being human actually is, is the right way to go? Because then it doesn't matter what the new technology is. That understanding of what it means to be human is going to be stable to which we measure then the new technologies.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And part of being human is being social. And what I appreciated about your approach is you are acknowledging that there is a place for individual discipline, self-control, but you also say that in order to counter the trends, we need to do so corporately. Could you say something about that?

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

Well, that I definitely need to credit Jamie Smith's work, even I'm a sociologist. Reading Jamie Smith's work was super helpful, especially when he talks about how liturgy is the work of the people. It just made so much sense to me. I was like, yes, that is totally right. We can understand that within the context of our church communities. But then when we apply it to thinking about our digital practices, it also really makes sense. It's like if we weren't all on social media together, none of us would be there. It's a collective act that makes it work. And so then if we want to moderate our use or change it, it makes sense that I can't do it alone in a way that is sustainable, that is going to make the impact that I would long for. And so I think that's where church communities become super important for talking about these matters. And if not church communities, then families or smaller groups or work organizations that we might find ourselves in. But I think there are certain kinds of expectations and norms that we share with others that

would need to shift for us to really start moving substantively in a direction that is more, I would say, friendly to being human.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I did want to spend some time talking about that. I ventured to guess that we have a number of people who are involved in church leadership in some capacity who will listen to this, pastors and others. What kinds of things would you recommend to church communities to begin, even in small steps, to try to implement some of the working against resisting the cultural forces, the norms, the things that are just taken for granted with respect to technological usage, what things would you offer by way of recommendation and encouragement for churches?

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

I think one of the things that first comes to mind that might just be a helpful handhold for folks thinking about this, to begin thinking about these digital matters in the same way that we think about other issues related to discipleship. Discipleship is what a lot of churches already know and talk about and teach on and preach and share in their life together. I think it is very often we set technology over there, like it's separate somehow, this other issue, when I think it's actually completely bound up. As you were saying earlier, in teaching us, training us into a story or a song, that is not the song of Zion. And so whatever existing resources and ways of thinking about discipleship we already have, I think there could be a really interesting exercise to think about, well, how does this apply to our digital lives and in bringing people along in their spiritual formation? I think, specifically, there might be practices for a church community to reconsider that have to do with embodiment and time. I think of these two as rich areas for communities to think about.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

And so embodiment, I think, is a really interesting one now. We've been in through a pandemic. We're still in it. A lot of churches have had to do virtual church and so forth and are happy, many places to be together again. But I think that it raises very interesting questions about, well, what does it mean that we can be together? Hopefully, we all appreciate that more than we used to. But what are we doing together that we can't do through YouTube? And that's a question many of my students, my younger students ask. They're like, Why can't I just listen to a podcast or watch a YouTube? Why do I need to go to my local church? And that's a legitimate question for many of us thinking about, well, what is it in our church life together that really leans into the presence of each other and makes that truly a gift? And how can we be more intentional about that. And then when it comes to time, as an organization, I think many of us slip into the 24/7-ness of our

digital lives. And so I think there's an interesting question for church communities to ask themselves about, well, what time do we want to live into?

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

What time do we want our people in our community to live into? And also, for those who are working in the church who are employees, what work culture are we expecting of each other? And can we build certain boundaries to protect people's times in ways that technology isn't naturally going to do? In the past, you'd go home and there'd be answering machines and so forth. Now, it's like we all have these beepers, basically. We're all first responders all the time, and we're all very tired because of it. And so I know it's the case certainly for so many clergy and staff members that the digital just makes their work lives, it really never stops now, right? and so needing to put in the measures in the work expectations and culture, I think, is not only a generic best practices, but I think it's truly Christian, truly respecting the humanness of the people that are serving us.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, I want to let people who are listening know that your final chapter is the "Church as Counter Liturgy," and you've got a number of extended ideas there that could be implemented, including a list of commitments to order digital life that Christians might agree to together to practice. And I think that that is very, very helpful. I would love to talk to you forever about these things. I feel like I knew going into this, I'm only going to scratch the surface, but I am so grateful that you put in the time that you did to produce this, because I think it has great, great potential for much profit to the church in terms of thinking about what you said, how do we disciple one another, to faithfully follow Christ amidst this new environment that we're in. And I also want to say thank you to the folks at IVP who are making available some complimentary copies of your book to be used in a giveaway for a social media. I hope that's not too out of sorts, a social media promotion.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

Complicated world.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Felicia, thank you so much for your time today. And again, the name of the book is *Restless Devices Recovering Personhood: Presence and Place in the Digital Age*, published by IVP. Thank you again.

Dr. Felicia Wu Song

Thank you so much, Keith. It's been great.