



Implications of Social Media on Student Activism: The South African Experience in a Digital Age

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Abstract

While the phenomenon of student protest in South Africa is not new, what characterizes the current wave is the successful use of social media to communicate and galvanize students to participate in protests across the country. Recent studies on the use of social media have noted that this form of communication greatly enhances the strength of student movements. However, some scholars have argued that the resulting leadership vacuum, undermines the achievement of their demands and makes it more difficult for the government and higher education authorities to effectively respond to such action. Through the lens of the learning community theory, this article reviews the current literature on social media and student activism in order to establish the effectiveness of its use and the shortcomings thereof. It argues that higher education institutions and the government need to become more conversant with the implications of digital infrastructure. It further suggests that these institutions should create an environment that supports and encourages effective use of social media through provision of the necessary infrastructure. The article provides a deeper understanding of the role that social media can play to galvanize students to advance their causes.

Keywords: Student activism, social media, student movements, social movements, internet-age activism, learning community

Résumé

Bien que le phénomène des manifestations estudiantines en Afrique du Sud ne soit pas nouveau, ce qui caractérise la vague actuelle, c'est l'utilisation réussie des médias sociaux pour communiquer et inciter les étudiants à participer à des manifestations à travers le pays. Des études récentes sur

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l'utilisation des médias sociaux ont montré que cette forme de communication renforce considérablement la force des mouvements étudiants. Cependant, des chercheurs ont fait valoir que le vide de leadership qui en résultait compromettrait la réalisation de leurs revendications et rendait plus difficile pour le gouvernement et les autorités de l'enseignement supérieur de réagir efficacement à de telles actions. À travers le prisme de la théorie de la communauté d'apprentissage, cet article passe en revue la littérature actuelle sur les médias sociaux et l'activisme étudiant afin d'établir l'efficacité de son utilisation et ses inconvénients. Il fait valoir que les établissements d'enseignement supérieur et le gouvernement devraient s'informer des implications de l'infrastructure numérique. Il suggère en outre que ces institutions devraient créer un environnement qui soutienne et encourage l'utilisation efficace des médias sociaux en fournissant l'infrastructure nécessaire. L'article fournit une compréhension plus profonde du rôle des médias sociaux dans l'incitation des étudiants à faire avancer leurs causes.

Mots-clés : activisme étudiant, médias sociaux, mouvements étudiants, mouvements sociaux, activisme de l'Internet, communauté d'apprenants

Introduction

Social media technologies have become an important feature of student activism. Student movements use social media as a communication and mobilization tool to highlight social justice issues and material conditions. This has been central to a wave of protests through social movements to challenge globalisation and neoliberal discourses (Callinicos 2006; Della Porta & Diani 2006; Starr 2000).

Student activists are vocal in defending their interests and benefits, and fighting alleged social, political, economic and personal injustices. On the African continent, student activism entails a wave of protests against alleged injustices (Teferra & Altbach 2004).

This article examines the extent to which student movements make use of new media technologies. It illuminates the interplay between these digital technologies and the operation of student movements, including communication and mobilization to advance a struggle (van de Donk, Loader, Nixon and Rucht 2004). Digital technology such as the internet, assists students mobilizing for political engagement (Dahlgren 2013). However, while the utilisation of virtual activism strengthens social movements and mobilization, digital technology can weaken student activism in the classical space (Tufekci 2014).

This article seeks to contribute a new dimension on the use of social media and its implications for social movements. It is presented in six parts:

section one states the study's objectives while section two presents a review of the literature on social networks and student activism. The third section outlines the research methodology employed.

The fourth section presents the learning community theory that was employed in this study as a lens through which to investigate this phenomenon. The fifth section provides a detailed analysis of the internet-age in South Africa, with a focus on recent hashtag movements, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. The sixth and final section discusses the findings and their implications, and presents a conclusion, recommendations, the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to analyse the use of social media in student movements for communication and mobilization. It further aimed to examine the empowering as well as disempowering effects of using social media on such movements. The study also sought to provide a deeper understanding of how higher education institutions (henceforth, HEIs) could provide digital facilities to service student activism on one hand and be conversant with it on the other. Furthermore, this could facilitate communication across all stakeholders, including the government, university management and student activists themselves.

Literature Review

Social movements can be defined as “networks of individuals and groups, based on shared collective identities” which engage in collective action in pursuit of political and social goals (Gill & DeFronzo 2009: 208). Student movements are one of the typical platforms from which student activism is collectively organized (Gill & DeFronzo 2009). Their dynamics are not dissimilar to those of other social movements, although the specific aspects of campus life – an age-graded population, a fairly close-knit community, common social class backgrounds and other elements – make student movements somewhat unusual (Altbach 1991).

The history of student activism on the African continent shows that different forms of extra-parliamentary oppositional politics became part of the political equation (Altbach 1984; Byaruhanga 2013). Such political activities have been evident in the history of democratic societies in western countries where stagnation of democracy was evident, particularly in the mid-1990s. With some historical reflection, this may make reference to the beginning of a new wave of social movements and alternative politics (van de Donk *et al.* 2004).

Alongside the rising crisis of democracy, the internet and other digital technologies emerged during the 1990s. They appeared to be utilised as a novel “strategic platform” to help student movements to mobilize and coordinate protests (Warkentin 2001). The internet has been credited by certain scholars with launching a communication revolution that has impacted virtually all spheres of society (Dahlgren 2013; Tufekci 2014). There are indications that social media is playing a significant role in the extra-parliamentarian context and the mobilization of social movements outside formal structures. It enables forms of participation that would have previously been impossible (Dahlgren 2013).

Governments in a number of countries have responded to this new information environment, which allows for fewer gatekeeper controls, by aggressively countering these new movements, traditional repression and novel methods are often combined and used towards curtailing online media. Their initial ignorance and misunderstanding of the use of social media quickly gave way to learning about its strengths and weaknesses, as well as developing new methods to counter dissent (Tufekci 2014).

Activist involvement in the Twenty-first Century

The use of digital technologies has contributed to political participation, civic engagement and governance processes in the twenty-first century. Digital infrastructure such as E-democracy, E-governance and on-line politics have been employed to boost citizen involvement in democratic processes (Bannister and Connolly 2012).

The environmental movement in the 1990s marked the start of a new era for civic engagement. Mass demonstrations and protests were organized to coincide with summits or fora where world leaders discussed, negotiated and reached agreements on “green” issues. The “Arab Spring”, “Indignados” in Madrid, “Occupy Wall Street” in the United States of America (USA), and revolts in Europe opposing austerity measures and cuts in social assistance, are current versions of civic action (Della Porta & Diani 2006; Diaz Romero 2013; van de Donk *et al.* 2004).

Although each of these social movements responds to particular causes and presents unique types of activism, some common and unifying elements can be identified. Firstly, they all use new technologies. Secondly, they employ internet politics and digital activism through electronic voting, digital campaigns, chat-rooms, or virtual mobilization through Facebook and Twitter. Certainly, the new tools of social media have reinvented social activism (Gladwell 2010).

Media technology is indispensable to attain identity and mutual targets, considering that members or supporters of these social movements might be on different continents while they convoke political action simultaneously around the world (Agre 2002).

Digital Infrastructure and Devices

Typically, devices used in activism include Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as computers and mobile phones that connect to all internet applications. While simple mobile phones allow only texting and calling, smart phones and tablets have increased the potential and capacity of mobile phones, making them more similar to computers and, thus, vital for social change (Joyce 2010).

The mobile devices used by these movements offer high “speed” for communication and mobilization. This enables more rapid coordination and organization; hence the term “*mobil(e)isation*” (Hands 2011).

Social networks provide opportunities for individuals to, among other activities, become members of pressure groups, join organizations, contribute funds, receive and respond to emails, make proposals to authorities, intervene in “online” discussions, circulate electronic petitions, exchange views, circulate announcements or activities, and call for demonstrations (Diaz Romero 2013). For instance, Castells concluded that the Zapatistas (in Mexico), which he described as “the first informational guerrilla movement” effectively used new technologies to instantly diffuse information throughout the world and to develop a network of support groups whose efforts crystallised in a movement of international public opinion (Castells 2015).

Activist Involvement and the digital technology

The literature on activist involvement suggests that novel and differentiated forms of participation have emerged in which students display their activism using the cyber space for political engagement (Dalton 2013; Muntean 2015; Phillimore & McCabe 2015).

Activist participation via the internet may involve electronic versions of traditional forms of participation, such as signing petitions online, but also new forms of cyber involvement such as politically motivated hackings (Jordan & Taylor 2004). New social networking platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook offer unforeseen possibilities for the exchange of information on on-going activism or campaigns (Christensen 2011; Phillimore & McCabe 2015).

It is also worth mentioning that studies have shown that the internet is a positive factor. In particular, they suggest that the internet can help mobilize the participation into off-line forms, which suggests that its effect can grow stronger over time. More recent studies are generally more positive, although still cautiously so (Christensen 2011).

A meta-analysis of studies on the impact of internet use on activist involvement suggests that social networks have a positive effect on participation in activism. Furthermore, it suggests that the impact is increasing over time (Boulianne 2009; Heggart 2015; Phillimore & McCabe 2015). However, there is little doubt that the possibilities offered by the digital technologies have increased only in the recent years. Thus, it seems fair to state that most evidence in recent years points to the internet having a positive effect on off-line mobilization, even if it has by no means fulfilled the expectations of the most optimistic scholars (Christensen 2011; Heggart 2015; Phillimore & McCabe 2015).

Despite the positive effects of social media on student activism and social movements in general, this phenomenon has not been without its critics. This included the argument that the digital age does not help to mobilize previously passive citizens (Bimber 2001).

A related line of critique sees the internet as creating a digital divide (Norris 2001; Singh 2004). According to these critics, while it impacts participation, it may exacerbate existing differences among citizens in terms of their level of activity and stratum, since it is generally the well-educated and politically interested who take advantage of technological possibilities (Christensen 2011). It is argued that even if the internet does trigger activism, it does so in a pointless way, since the activities do not have any impact on political outcomes in real terms, hence, accusations of “slacktivism” (Shulman 2004; Morozov 2011).

However, there is no evidence of the internet having a negative effect on off-line participation, with even the most skeptical scholars finding a weak and non-significant linkage. Accordingly, there is no evidence to suggest that internet activism is replacing traditional political participation. Hence, it helps to mobilize citizens by increasing awareness of contemporary issues (Christensen 2011).

Research Methodology

This study employed document analysis to explore the state and trajectory of student activism in South Africa through social media. An extensive review of the relevant scholarly literature was conducted by accessing major relevant

databases and platforms using key words including student activism, digital age, social media, student movements, social movements, information and communication technology (ICT) and internet age social movements. The search generated rich material covering the past two decades, which was systematically organized and critically reviewed.

The selection of sources was predominantly guided by the learning community theory and the study's objectives. Preference was given to peer-reviewed journal articles and books that showcased the debate within the academic community, both locally and internationally. Other sources such as newspapers, including the *Mail & Guardian* and *University World News*, were also employed.

Limitations of the Study

The study was wholly sourced from both published scholarly literature and popular, but credible, news sources.

Theoretical Framework

The learning community theory was introduced by Bielaczyc & Collins (1999) and was used as a lens in a HEI as a learning community which advances individual and collective knowledge. The theory is based on the premise that an institution promotes a culture of learning among the university community members in which everyone is involved in a collective effort of understanding. The university determines a goal to advance the collective knowledge and, in that way, to support the growth of individual knowledge (Bielaczyc & Collins 1999).

In this context, the culture of learning in relation to all members of the university community's use of social media and becoming conversant with the digital infrastructure could be of paramount importance. Such knowledge could be a prime factor in understanding the implications of social media for student activism. There are four key elements of a learning community as discussed below (MacMillan & Chavis 1986).

Membership

This element of the learning community theory reveals that participants must feel some sense of loyalty and belonging to the group (membership). This drives their desire to continue working and helping others. Furthermore, what each participant does affects what happens in the community. In similar vein, a university consists of individuals who constitute the "membership" of the university community. These individuals have different needs and

belong to different stakeholder groups within the university community which is alluded to in the stakeholder theory (Freeman & Reed 1984).

The stakeholder groups include students, management, academics, support staff, parents, donors, government and others. These groups are glued together by the common goal of the university's survival, and ensuring its sustainability and reputation. A student dissent and protest that disrupt university business could pose a serious threat in the institutional survival.

Influence

This element suggests that a learning community must enable its individual members and stakeholder groups to pursue and achieve their interests and needs.

Participative democracy advocates for university governance in which all stakeholders are represented in decision-making. The Higher Education Act of 1997, as amended, refers to this as democratisation of higher education (henceforth, HE). Through their representatives, stakeholders are able to influence university decisions to fulfil their particular needs.

Fulfilment of Individual Needs

Individual needs are fulfilled by means of the influence that individuals may have in the university community. By participating in university governance through their elected representatives, individuals can promote their interests.

Shared Meaning

This element refers to the notion that individuals and stakeholders are interconnected in the university community, creating a nexus among these individuals and groups. For example, while the members of the university community may have different individual or group needs, they create a culture and values that are shared by all about how things are done in the university. They thus share compelling culture and values which result in shared events and an emotional connection to the university community (Freeman & Reed 1984). Figure 1 provides a diagrammatical illustration of the learning community theory.

Murnane and Levy (1996) investigated the kinds of skills and knowledge required in a twenty-first century learning community. Their findings revealed that the members of a learning community should have the ability to direct their own learning, work with and listen to others and have ways of dealing with complex issues and problems that require different kinds of expertise.

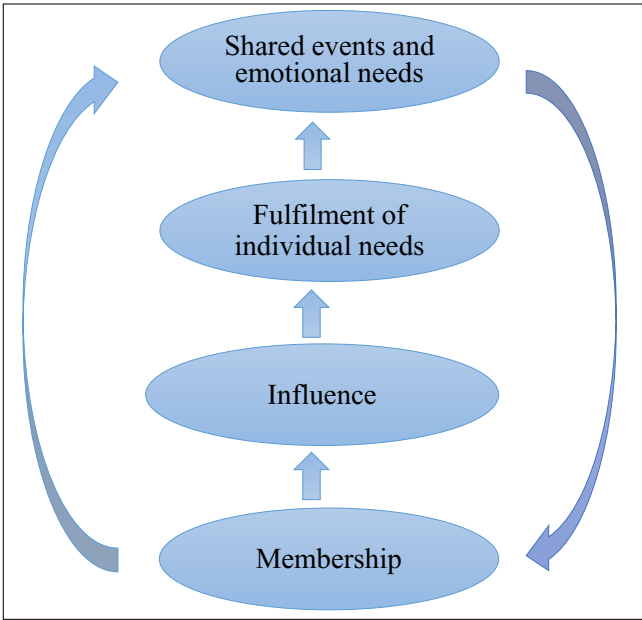


Figure 1: Learning Community: Adapted from MacMillan and Chavis (1986)

Some scholars emphasise the need for ideas, theories, and procedures to be co-constructed by means of negotiation among members of the community, with arguments resolved by the application of logic and evidence (Brown & Campione 1996; Collins 1998; Bereiter & Scardamalia 2014).

The learning community theory provides a lens through which to understand the interplay between social media and student activism. This can assist in determining the implications of the former on the latter. Knowledge and skills in using digital communication and being conversant with the digital structure can impact the nature of student activism in the learning community.

Internet-Age Student Movements: The Case of South Africa

The student movements during the 2015 and 2016 academic years caught South African higher education institutions (henceforth, HEIs) by surprise. Altbach posits that the role of HEIs as “factories of new ideas” and the “structural realities of academic life”, have an effect on student political thinking and organizing. This could create a tendency for students to be idealist, oppositional, and impatient for change. The transient nature of the student population and rapid turnover in student activists, have a powerful impact on student movements that emerge suddenly, and are difficult to sustain, short-lived, and erratic (Altbach 1991: 249).

The notion of student activism powerfully invokes the idea of political engagement through *public* action. It is essentially a public expression of new ideas aimed at shaping public debate on a topic, and is thus typically achieved through publications, public speaking, campaigns, the use of mass media, and through demonstrations and other forms of public agitation (Altbach 1991). Student movements, thus, present one of the typical forms for mobilizing collective student political action and should be distinguished from student organizations (Badat 1999).

A study by Altbach (1991) highlighted that publicizing student activism was immensely important for mobilizing students and provoking a response by the relevant authorities (e.g., government or university leadership). Thus, the value of effective communication in the development of such movements cannot be overemphasised. Furthermore, the digital technology employed does not have to be “expensive and complex”. “Students are one of the most difficult groups to control partly because of the ease with which they can communicate among themselves” (Altbach 1966: 178).

Castells (2015), revealed a vital shift in the manner in which social movements communicate and mobilize. He displayed how incensed citizens mobilized using the internet in the process of responding to the 2009 economic crisis, (e.g., the Occupy Wall Street Movement). He stated that the internet-age networked movements had a number of features. These movements occupied both physical and virtual space - cyberspace, which allowed student activists to share, communicate, and amplify their experiences using the internet, thus creating a permanent forum for solidarity, debate, and strategic planning (Castells 2015).

Castells’ theory suggests that social movements are successful in rallying diverse activists and participants, resulting in multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-gender, multi-class, and multi- partisan movements. Furthermore, the theory suggests that these movements are spontaneous, lack clearly defined and formal leadership and seek to be democratic (Castells 2015).

Altbach’s (1991) conceptualisation of student activism and student movements and Castell’s (2015) notion of internet-age networked social movements offer both challenges and opportunities in understanding the 2015 hashtag movements in South Africa (Luescher, Loader, & Mugume 2016). These movements mobilized students to join protest actions that were known as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. They demonstrated a number of the typical features of internet-age social movements postulated by Castells and patterns that mimicked those of worldwide student protests following the 2009 global financial crisis (Brooks, Byford & Sela 2016).

#RhodesMustFall emerged at the University of Cape Town (henceforth, UCT) in March 2015 and culminated in the nationwide #FeesMustFall

movement, which started in October of that same year at the University of the Witwatersrand (henceforth, Wits). This provides the rationale for the argument that student activism in South Africa has taken a similar shape to networked social movements such as the Arab Spring uprisings, the Spanish *Indignadas* and the Occupy movements such as Occupy Wall Street (Luescher *et al.* 2016; Castell 2015) and Occupy Gezi Park in Turkey (Tufekci 2014).

It is argued that the student protests in South African HE did not begin in 2015 with #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall that occurred in the historically English white universities. Students at historically disadvantaged universities that enrol almost exclusively black students such as the Universities of Fort Hare and Zululand, the Tshwane and Cape Peninsula Universities of Technology and others have been protesting against academic exclusion, fees hike and the cost of HE since the dawn of democracy. However, this did not attract much media attention other than among regional newspapers (Davids & Waghid 2016).

It is also argued that these two very different responses are a clear reminder of the embedded inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa (Davids and Waghid 2016). However, the most recent #FeesMustFall protest movement which involved students from historically advantaged and disadvantaged universities attracted widespread media coverage and sparked solidarity protests in countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (henceforth, USA). The year 2015 will go down in history as one second only to 1976 in terms of students flexing their muscles in seeking to alter the direction of South Africa's future (Msila 2016).

From #RhodesMustFall to #FeesMustFall

South African universities reflect colonial history and, regrettably, symbols of this past have not been properly debated (Jansen 2017; Klemencic, Luescher & Mugune 2016; Langa 2017). In response to #RhodesMustFall, students across South Africa, as well as in countries like the USA, posed the question: "if at UCT it was the Rhodes statue that had to fall, what "must fall" in their respective contexts" (Luescher & Klemenčič 2016: 1).

The announcement of annual increases in tuition fees provided the answer to this question. Students at Wits in Johannesburg demanded a stop to fee increases and wanted free education under the banner of #FeesMustFall. The protest action spread like wildfire across the South African university landscape, propelled by student associations such as the South African Students Congress (SASCO), the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL), the Young Communist League (YCLSA), the Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command (EFFSC), and the Pan Africanist Student Movement of Azania (PASMA) (Luescher & Klemenčič 2017).

Workshops for student representative councils (SRCs) organized by the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) and the Second National Higher Education Transformation Summit organized by South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training (henceforth, DHET) together with a broad range of stakeholders in Durban in October 2015, ironically provided rare platforms for student activists from across the country to meet outside cyberspace to share information and coordinate local engagements around fees (DHET 2015). After listing significant transformation gains in the sector, the Durban Statement on Transformation in Higher Education resolved that the top three issues to be addressed in the immediate and medium term were HE funding, student fees and financial aid for students (DHET 2015).

Students responded vigorously to this statement and other announcements of university fee increases. United under the banner of #FeesMustFall, they brought most universities to a standstill (Sesant 2015).

The South African hashtag movements can be conceptualized as internet-age networked student movements due to the utilisation of communication, mobilization and coordination that was digitally-fuelled (Castells 2015). This indicates the emergence of a new way for student activists to mobilize and organize student political power (Luescher *et al.* 2016).

The #FeesMustFall movement was successful in focusing engagements on a no fee increase in 2016. However, given that internet-age social movements are horizontal, broad-based and leaderless, negotiations between the DHET and SRCs were somewhat ineffective as the movements did not recognize formal leadership as their representatives (Castell 2015). This led to the emergence of informal student activism in South African HEIs, which operates parallel to formalized activism in the form of SRCs (Luescher & Klemenčič 2017).

It is important to distinguish #FeesMustFall from formally constituted representative student associations. While both may serve as platforms to collectively organize student activism, formal student associations are "membership organizations" while activist student movements are "broader entities, typically consisting of individual persons and several organizations with no formal individual membership" (Badat 1999: 22).

Student movements in South Africa used the internet to disseminate information throughout the country and across the world. The power of social media enabled the #RhodesMustFall movement at UCT to echo across the South African public HE landscape which entailed *inter alia* the statue of King George V at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) being similarly vandalized (Oxlund 2016). This also echoed across universities in the USA. It inspired national protests that spread to the USA, with student activists advocating for inclusive cultures, demanding the removal of statues and changing the names of buildings and academic units named after known

slavers, racists and segregationists such as Jefferson Davies and John C. Calhoun (University of Texas), Thomas Jefferson (University of Missouri), Woodrow Wilson (Princeton and Yale), Isaac Royall Jr. (Harvard) and others (Moja, Luescher & Schreiber 2015).

In South Africa, the demands were accompanied by the vandalism of statues and plaques, e.g., spray-painting #Racist on them. Hashtags used in the USA included #BlackOnCampus and #BlacksLivesMatter. On some campuses, students adopted #...MustFall; for example, #JeffersonMustFall was sprayed onto his statue at the University of Texas (Moja *et al.* 2015).

Makoni (2015) notes that the South African Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande supported the relocation of Rhodes' statue, but added that it was important for institutions to note that transformation goes far beyond such measures.

Discussion

The scholarly literature notes student movements' use of social media as tools for communication and mobilization. It also shows that student movements in South Africa have shifted from the traditional way of organizing to what Castells (2015) termed internet-age networked movements. Given the transient nature of the student population, the internet offers an efficacious and cost-effective way of galvanizing support for a campaign in a short span of time.

The literature differentiates between student movements and student organizations. While formal student associations are organizations bound by group membership, activist student movements are informal gatherings of individuals and organizations that form a broader entity to advance a particular cause. The horizontal, loosely organized and leaderless nature of student movements challenges authorities as they seek to negotiate with them.

One of the challenges of the new informal formations has been the lack of requisite negotiation skills among *ad hoc* committee members as they are selected without due consideration to their leadership acumen. These committees also lack the authority to articulate the next line of action. It has also been observed that because of the nature of mobilization, (i.e., scaling up quickly and mobilizing a large number of participants), members hardly know each other.

The charge of "slacktivism" has been levelled against the use of social media as it was apparent that some participants engaged in virtual activism to "click and like" without participating in the field. These participants become involved in activism in a virtual space but not physically engaged in real-life. As a result, some scholars question whether activism through social media can supplant physical participation as it does not always help to achieve the intended goal(s). However, most scholars endorse it as an effective way of promoting physical activism.

The literature also shows that online activities are sometimes elusive and ephemeral, meaning that they do not contribute to formal decision-making. Finally, the different activities tend to have a destructive and nihilistic quality, which can make it difficult for them to be taken seriously, in effect disempowering the social movement.

Despite its critics, the use of social media has been highlighted by many scholars as an effective tool to galvanise social movements in pursuit of different social, political, cultural and economic causes. Scholars that argue that only those who are part of social media are mobilized have been outweighed by others who show that social media has been able to mobilize beyond this narrow grouping. This has been evident in the South African hashtag movements, pursued through social media platforms to unite students across the country regardless of race, gender, social class, and/or political affiliation.

In this study, the learning community theory provided a lens through which engagement in social media could be extended to all members of the HEI as a learning community. In this context, it depicts a culture of an HE learning community that represents the interests of various stakeholder groups and has the following characteristics: 1) membership, 2) influence, 3) fulfilment of needs and 4) shared events and emotional needs.

Whereas the first element of the theory (membership) focuses on the notion that participants in a learning community must feel a sense of loyalty and belonging to the group, the second element (influence) provides an opportunity for role players to meet particular needs by using their influence. Furthermore, the notion of student activism raises the idea of student political involvement with an intention to shape public debates on topical issues through engaging in various campaigns, the use of mass media and demonstrations, and other forms of student agitations to put pressure on government or university management to respond to issues (Altbach 1991). Activism plays a role in ensuring that students influence the university community to enable them to pursue and achieve their demands.

The third element of the theory refers to the fulfilment of individual needs which are achieved through individuals' influence in the community. Through different forms of student activism such as dialogue, debates or mass demonstrations and protests, students put pressure on those in authority to achieve their demands and thereby fulfil their individual needs (Della Porta & Diani 2006; Diaz Romero 2013).

The fourth and final element refers to the interconnectedness of individuals and stakeholders in the community. A university community consists of different stakeholder groups with different, interconnected interests (Freeman & Reed 1984) but with the common goal of pursuing and sustaining individual

interests. This nexus calls for shared values which translate into shared events and emotional connection to the community.

It is imperative that student activists fully grasp the university's mission, vision and strategy. University management and activists should use social media for sound engagement and information sharing. The manner in which the authorities respond to demands determines the next line of action by student movements. Other stakeholders, such as the government could also employ social media as a platform for dialogue and active engagement with student activists and others. However, this requires that all stakeholders be conversant with social media. Physical spaces could then be used to rehash issues raised during virtual engagements and cover those that were not exhausted or covered in cyber space. This nexus is crucial for a progressive and successful university.

Virtual conversations could trigger or initiate engagement in a physical space in the form of meetings, debates, and other forms of constructive engagement. This could avert student protests as most issues would have already been debated using social media. According to the learning community theory, this would enable different stakeholders to assume a culture of shared values. Decisions taken at meetings between student activists and management could then be communicated to all members of the community, especially students, to provide updates, comments and ways forward in terms of implementation of decisions. This would promote effective student activism and student engagement through social media.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The implications of social media for student activism are immense as many student movements use digital tools for communication and mobilization. The disadvantages of these movements' use of digital technology that are cited in the literature include leadership vacuum, and a lack of collective capacity in organizing and decision-making that can only be overcome through sustained periods of working together.

Despite these weaknesses, it is apparent that the internet is an effective tool to mobilize and galvanise support for student movements. Creating a learning community culture at HEIs on the use of social media can be a step forward in the effective utilisation and deployment of this powerful tool.

This article posits that, a learning community advances collective knowledge and, in this way, supports the growth of knowledge among individuals. This calls for a radical shift among HEIs and government to become more conversant with the implications of digital infrastructure and internet-age student activism. Investing in ICT infrastructure and providing the requisite support and training to all members of the university community could promote effective student activism and productive engagement in social networks.

University management, together with student activists could organize social media awareness programmes to raise consciousness among students who are (barely and) not yet on social media platforms. HEIs in South Africa should acknowledge that social media is indeed a force to be reckoned with in promoting student activism. The government and universities should be conversant with the implications of digital infrastructure for political, economic and social transformation at individual and institutional level as well as in society at large.

Future Research

Future research in this area may benefit from interrogating on how student activists use social media in social, political and economic movements in HEIs in South Africa and beyond. Furthermore, future research may investigate how the anticipated leadership vacuum in this new form of social movement is manifested and navigated. Furthermore, the future research on the topic can be based on the empirical data.

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