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Twitter activism and youth in South Africa: the case of #RhodesMustFall

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the South African student-led campaign known as Rhodes Must Fall, commonly referred to simply as #RMF, to explore youth activism and counter-memory via social networking site Twitter. The RMF campaign took place at the University of Cape Town and comprised student-led protests, which campaigned to remove the statue of British colonialist Cecil John Rhodes, as activists argued that it promoted institutionalized racism and promoted a culture of exclusion particularly for black students. Through a qualitative content analysis of tweets and a network analysis using NodeXL, this article argues that despite the digital divide in South Africa, and limited access to the internet by the majority of citizens, Twitter was central to youth participation during the RMF campaign, reflecting the politics and practices of counter-memory but also setting mainstream news agendas and shaping the public debate. The article further argues that the #RMF campaign can be seen a collective project of resistance to normative memory production. The analysis demonstrates how social media discussions should not be viewed as detached from more traditional media platforms, particularly, as in this case, they can set mainstream news agendas. Moreover, the article argues that youth are increasingly using social networking sites to develop a new biography of citizenship which is characterized by more individualized forms of activism. In the present case, Twitter affords youth an opportunity to participate in political discussions, as well as discussions of broader socio-political issues of relevance in contemporary South African society, reflecting a form of subactivism.

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1. Introduction

The Rhodes Must Fall campaign at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, is a student-led protest movement, which originally centred on the removal of the statue of British colonialist, Cecil John Rhodes, from the main campus of the university. The campaign began on 9 March 2015 and the statue was removed a month later. The campaign known as Rhodes Must Fall led to a wider student-led political movement which calls for widespread transformation of the university, including 'decolonizing' the curriculum, raising issues around the low number of senior black academic staff, and an awareness-

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raising campaign around artworks on campus which are seen by the movement to promote institutional racism. While Rhodes Must Fall was originally formed primarily for the removal of the statue, it thus developed and continued beyond this first campaign, as a general movement against institutionalized racism and demands for the Africanization of the university curriculum, amongst others. The Rhodes Must Fall movement has also been central in the organization of the Fees Must Fall student protests against an increase in university tuition fees in 2015. While RMF organized on the campus of the University of Cape Town, Fees Must Fall is a national student-led protest campaign.

During periods of historical disjuncture, monuments often suffer one of three possible fates: co-optation and glorification, disavowal, or contestation (Mitchell, 2013). The South African political transition is ongoing, despite the move from the apartheid system of institutionalized racism to a liberal democracy. While the country's first democratic elections were held in 1994, South Africa could still be considered a transitional democracy as it still shows signs of incomplete democratic consolidation. More than 20 years after the birth of the new democracy, the country still finds itself in a period of historical juncture, reflected by growing socio-economic inequality and citizen discontent, together with frequent public sphere debates around collective memory and recollections of history, as in this instance. The reaction to the Rhodes statue – disavowal and contestation – is thus not surprising within the current context of South African political history. What might be surprising is that such public contestations have not been more frequent.

In this particular instance, debates and discussions about the removal of the monument took place in several online and offline spaces, but at the height of the debate, social networking sites became central to the organization of the campaign, through the hashtag #RhodesMustFall and later simply #RMF, which was used as centring tool for the debate, bringing together local and national contributors to the online conversation. This article argues that social media discussions on Twitter specifically and the resultant emerging networked public of #RMF successfully set the agenda for public debate in other virtual and real-world spaces including campus workshops and meetings, as well as mainstream print and broadcast media; and that the Twitter discourse also played a key role in public perception of the movement.

This article explores these claims further, by analysing the Twitter activism around the campaign, drawing on Bickford's (1996, 2000) conceptualizations of listening, the emergent field of memory research and Foucault's (1977) notions of counter-memory. The article argues that the #RMF campaign could be framed as a collective project of resistance to normative memory production, creating a new landscape of 'minority' memory and bringing to the fore the memory of groups who have been rendered invisible in the landscape, thus speaking to an alternate interpretation of historical events.

Through a qualitative analysis of the spatial relations of Twitter discussions, this article approaches social media as a space where indifferent detachment and intimate comfort between citizens can coexist, a kind of 'warm impersonality' that is central to the possibility of democratic politics in a diverse and unequal polity (Bickford, 2000). The location of monuments in specific symbolic, urban sites reflects the ongoing dialectic between local, city-based meanings and memories, and those associated with collective memory formation at the scale of the nation. In this case, the particular *habitus* of Cape Town, often perceived as the most 'racist' city in the country, is a symbolic space for these issues to play out. Moreover, commemoration in the form of statues could be seen as a

'practice of representation that enacts and gives social substance to the discourse of collective memory' (Misztal, 2003, p. 80). Challenging this discourse within the context of the city thus becomes especially significant.

While the momentum around the #RMF campaign spread beyond Cape Town to other university campuses in other parts of the country, this article focuses specifically on the debates around the University of Cape Town activism. The city here is seen as 'significant as a space of attention orientation, a space that shapes citizens' sense of what people, perspectives and problems are present in the democratic public' (Bickford, 2000, p. 356). While unique to South Africa, focusing our attention on this particular case can illuminate developments within the spheres of student activism and youth politics in the rest of Africa, and even further afield. Student activism is an international phenomenon, but there is little research on how it has played out in contemporary African societies. Organized African students played a leading role in national liberation movements in the 1940s and 1950s; and the student intelligentsia are still often the only group that can maintain a degree of social cohesion as they organize in relatively autonomous urban spaces (Zeilig, 2013).

Revolutionary student movements have been a feature of transitional societies, but have also appeared with increasing frequency in Western societies (Skolnick, 2010). In this context, the present examination of the #RMF student movement may also help track and understand movements that arise out of it, such as the Fees Must Fall movement (#FMF) which began in South Africa in mid-October 2015 and also spread, with less success, to some parts of the United States and the United Kingdom, with similar smaller scale marches which were held in those countries. South Africa's transition to democracy in the mid-1990s was not marked by traditional features of violent revolution, but rising social inequality has led to ongoing community protests as citizens express disillusionment with post-apartheid democracy. The student protests are often seen as a contributor to the growing narrative of revolution and national political debate.

2. Background

South African youth demonstrate low levels of civic and political participation, a lack of public interest in civic and political affairs and a lack of trust in and respect for democratic processes.[1] Political discussion on campuses declined in the period after 1994, with demographic data showing youth to be apathetic and disinterested in mainstream politics (Deegan, 2002). However, in more recent years, student organizations have been seen as proxies for political organizations with vigorous political campaigning on campuses where there is often strong representation by various political parties.[2] This has not translated into increased numbers of youth voters, despite the apparent presence of political parties on campuses. In general, African youth tend to vote less and express lower levels of partisanship, consistent with global trends; and they are not more likely to engage in protest action than older citizens (Resnick & Casale, 2011). However, youth are frequently held up as a social barometer of wider social changes (Jones & Wallace, 1992) or their behaviours are listed as evidence of its moral degeneration.

The Internet has been listed as a vehicle for fostering political participation, with a particular scholarly focus on the role of social media. In general, the use of new information technologies can enhance voter information about candidates and elections, stimulating

increased participation (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003); and it has certainly begun to play an increasingly important role in the campaigns of Western democracies. More recently, social media has begun to play a central role in political activism in the global South, providing opportunities for a networked citizen-centred perspective, which connects the private sphere of autonomous political identity to a multitude of political spaces (Loader & Mercea, 2011). The most recent political events of the Middle East and North Africa, and before that in Moldova and Iran, raised the potentially transformative effect that social media could have to facilitate practical citizenship.

While the role of the Internet and mobile phones in these revolutions and others such as the Arab Spring remains contested, what is clear is that social media has facilitated protest participation by increasing opportunities for engagement in collective action. Critiques of this view regarding role of the Internet include those by Morozov (2011), who cautions against cyber-utopianism and the Net Delusion, that is, the popular view that the Internet can help to democratise authoritarian regimes and that it is responsible for political and social change, as in the case of the Arab Spring. Morozov (2011) shows how the Internet can also be a powerful tool for political repression and the spread of extremist propaganda, with its capacity for information control. Similarly, Dean (2005) has argued that, 'The proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity, far from enhancing democratic governance or resistance, results in precisely the opposite – the post-political formation of communicative capitalism' (53). The Internet and its related communicative spaces may thus not always be truly liberatory, as they could reflect offline power structures and hierarchies. A small number of citizens are politically active on social networking sites, and SNS users do not always reflect the views of a broader population. Despite this limitation, spaces like Twitter represent discursive arenas, even if they are micro-public spheres. Mainstream news outlets in which citizens participate such as radio call-in shows face similar limitations in terms of being truly inclusive and broad-based public spheres.

Twitter has recently become the focus of scholarly attention, with increased research on how it can be used to facilitate communication, to inform and mobilise during social unrest, to inform political discourse and to precede revolutionary events on the ground (Gleason, 2013). The role of Twitter and other social media during the Arab Spring has been well researched and documented; and researchers such as Gerbaudo (2012) argue that social media has resulted in the emergence of new forms of protest and is used as part of a project of re-appropriation of public space, which has involved the assembling of different groups around places such as Cairo's Tahrir Square and New York's Zucotti Park. These and other social movements have used social media to mobilize protesters, and also to keep them (and outsiders) informed of protest activities and developments. Twitter is the third most popular social networking site in South Africa (after Facebook and YouTube) with 6.6 million users, though Twitter has more intensive engagement than Facebook despite having fewer users.[3] Internet penetration in South Africa currently stands at 61.1%.[4]

Social networking sites have several affordances to promote participation in protest behaviour among youth. They facilitate access to large numbers of contacts enabling movements to reach critical mass, they promote the construction of group identities that are key features of protest behaviour, and they function as information hubs, all of which can inspire an interest in politics in young people (Valenzuela, Arriagada, &

Scherman, 2012). Until now, the democratic potential of the internet for youth political participation has not been fully realised through their online interactions, though their use of social media reflects a degree of subactivism (Bakardjieva, 2010), which is an important dimension of citizenship and democracy. Subactivism is 'not about political power in the strict sense, but about personal empowerment seen as the power of the subject to be the person that they want to be in accordance with [their] reflexively chosen moral and political standards' (134). Young people are critical of government and mainstream political processes, 'and many have turned to a new form of political participation, the "life politics" of self-actualization' leading towards micro-political or cause-oriented actions 'in which young people act not towards the state but towards specific issues' (Farthing, 2010, p. 188).

Young people are using social network sites to develop a new biography of citizenship which is characterized by more individualised forms of activism (Bosch, 2013). They may be especially drawn to the collective experiences of social media and the new forms of citizenship these spaces afford. Twitter, in particular, supports multiple opportunities for participation, including creating, tagging and sharing content, as well as reading, watching and following hashtags, which may facilitate a move to more informed, engaged citizens (Gleason, 2013). This paper argues that while online political participation is generally seen to be undertaken by individuals who are also politically active in offline spaces, in this instance, Twitter affords youth an opportunity to participate in political discussions, which they might otherwise not have chosen to engage with. While the issue at hand is not overtly political, in that it does not relate to party politics, the #RMF discussion resulted in the discussion of broader socio-political issues of relevance in contemporary South African society (e.g., racial identity), reflecting a kind of subactivism, as defined above.

Ang, Dinar, and Lucas (2014) use the term youth bulge to show how growing youth populations and the penetration of Information and Communication Technologies has led to the growth of anti-government protests, arguing that these forms of communication which are more likely to be used by youth, 'have worked to successfully amplify calls for mobilization even when those cohorts are otherwise smaller in size' (1228). They argue that countries with sizeable youth bulges (like South Africa) are more prone to political instability. These countries are more likely to experience social frustration, higher youth unemployment and low mobility prospects reflecting weak political institutions, and together with the absence of personal constraints such as family responsibilities, this makes youth more willing to undertake the risk of getting involved in protests. The #RMF movement in Cape Town should thus be considered within the context of the rise in social protests which began in 2004, largely a result of growing citizen frustration in reaction to inadequate service provision, crime, corruption and high levels of unemployment, together with the particularities of the youth bulge and the historicity of youth political protest in South Africa. This particular instance of subactivism can be seen as reflective of general patterns of youth politics in South Africa and beyond.

3. Methodology

The methodology comprised a qualitative analysis of conversations on Twitter yielded from hashtag searches. Drawing on Maireder and Schwarzenegger's work (2011), the research collected and analysed tweets on a wide range of issues related to #RMF, as well as

> opponents of the movement such as inclusion and exclusion processes, the shaping of common modes of behaviour, mobilisation and distribution of resources, political interpretations and the (ideological) assumptions they were based on, the participants' goals and course of action, and their perception by the public. (173)

Much of the scholarly work on Twitter focuses on conversations coordinated by hashtags which makes tweets more easily searchable and allows users to follow real-time feeds of all messages containing the hashtags, making communicative exchanges easy to track (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013).

Focusing on Twitter specifically, the present study set out to explore the use of social media in relation to the community-building processes of the #RMF group as a political movement. In addition, using NodeXL, a free and open source network analysis and visualization software package, 16,311 tweets were collected over a period of one week, 19–23 March 2015, shortly after the movement began. Social network analysis can show structural relationships in communities, though its limitation is that it only provides static snapshots while neglecting the network's dynamics (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2013). The NodeXL analysis shows relationships between clusters in the network, but does not reveal the quality of the tweets (only the frequency). However, this gives a useful sense of relationship clusters and influence. In addition, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on a selection of the tweets. The results are discussed further below.

4. Findings

4.1. #RMF – brief overview

Social media communication was central to the #RMF movement, as it allowed protesters to participate using a habitual medium of communication (most students already widely use social media, particularly Twitter). It allowed individuals to easily connect or disconnect from the movement without having to formalize membership to a politically organized group. Members and supporters of #RMF used social media communication for self-representation, self-organisation and interaction with outside dialogue groups such as mainstream media, university administration, and opponents to the campaign. In addition to official communication from the movement, ordinary users also used the hashtag to generate discussions and to respond to comments. Hashtags help users find and contribute to existing discussions, with Twitter functioning as a kind of 'information neighborhood' 'which friends visit to acquire, share and communicate information' (Gleason, 2013, p. 4).

While social media is perceived as two-way interactive communication, posts in online spaces can often become merely a series of freestanding, isolated comments, which bear no relationship to each other. In the #RMF case, we see that while there were individual clusters of communication, there was also a high level of communication *between* these clusters. Clusters are communities within a larger network, which are formed not only around common social ties, but also shared interests and backgrounds. The NodeXL analysis shows the extent to which the conversation around #RMF was national, not just on the ground but on social media as well. In general, tweets showed both support for and against the removal, but opinion was generally weighted towards support for its

removal, as Twitter became a space for public deliberation and the formation of moderated public opinion.

4.2. #RMF and mainstream news agendas

'Tweeting may intensify the relationship between political actors with other stakeholders, as it facilitates an easy and continuous discourse free from the constraints of official (and unofficial) gatherings' (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013, p. 292). In this case, the hashtag and tweets on the topic also served the purpose of setting the mainstream news agenda. When Twitter is used to spread and comment on the news, it results in a stream of information, opinions and emotions related to current events, a phenomenon Hermida (2010) refers to as 'ambient journalism' – a journalism derived from the absorption and negotiation of micro-content within complex media environments. It is also interesting to note that groups or clusters formed around influential people, and that these were often journalists or newsmakers – DJ Gareth Cliff, radio personality Eusebius McKaiser, and E-News Channel, who seemed to be at the centre of most of these clusters; but also around popular students and a Rhodes University professor. The individuals who were most replied to were (1) Eusebius McKaiser, (2) Gareth Cliff and (3) E News. There is an interesting paradox at play here – as the Twitter debate by citizens affects the mainstream news agenda, but then simultaneously, influential journalists are found at the centre of the Twitter debates, as informal 'experts', moderating and directing the debate (see Figure 1).

Even though mainstream media was at the centre of the clusters, those who tweeted the most were students and civil society, though the quantitative analysis cannot reveal the nature of these tweets. In general, however, media, students and civil society were most influential in the flow of information in the network. The NodeXL data show the interconnectedness of the discussion. Popular individuals in the network came from diverse groups though most of the attention was directed at the media and at students. This shows a high level of interaction between different social groups, and reveals that students did not just tweet amongst themselves, but engaged with the media as well.

4.3. #RMF and collective memory

If commemoration in the form of statues is seen as a 'practice of representation that enacts and gives social substance to the discourse of collective memory' (Sherman, 1994, p. 186), then the Twitter discussions around #RMF played a key role in terms of challenging memory around Cecil John Rhodes. There is a deep politics to memory, and each age attempts to refashion and remake memory to serve its own contemporary purposes (Mitchell, 2013, p. 443). In this instance, much of the debate revolved around who Rhodes was and the role he played in South African society. Through the debates about whether he contributed meaningfully to South African society or not, several unknown facts were uncovered as tweets revealed, for example, excerpts from his speeches or writing in which he had made overtly racist statements. Rhodes was a colonialist and is seen to have supported the institutionalized racism of the apartheid government by changing laws on voting and land ownership. The campaign thus represented contemporary struggles over the transformation of old monuments and their associated meanings, the rewriting of history and memory and translations of the past (Mitchell, 2013). Resisting

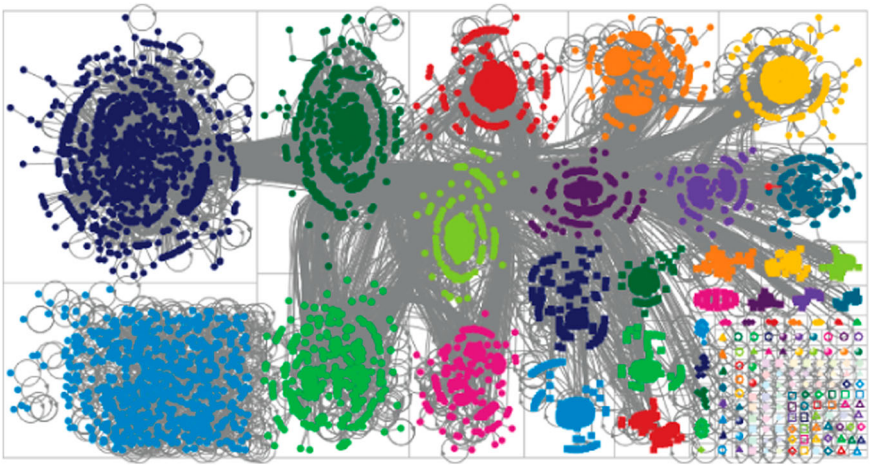

Figure 1. A visualization of the various clusters in the #RMF Twitter conversations, and the communication between these clusters.

and/or transforming dominant forms of memory production in the landscape is somewhat easier when the city in which these forms are located is in a state of upheaval and flux (Mitchell, 2013, p. 453).

The #RMF campaign could also be seen as a collective project of resistance to normative memory production, creating a new landscape of 'minority' memory and bringing to the fore the memory of groups that have been rendered invisible in the landscape and in doing so speaking to a different interpretation of historical events (Mitchell, 2013). There has been a strong emphasis on the democratic potential around notions of voice, representation, and speaking up or talking back in the media (Dreher, 2009), but theories of listening rather address possibilities for speaking and listening, emphasizing that it is not only important to speak, but also to be heard. This active listening has been described as a key component of citizenship, and Bickford (1996) points out that 'patterns of oppression and inequality result in the systematic distortion of some people's appearance and audibility' (95) and that in short, how we listen shapes the way others can speak and be heard.

5. Discussion

The #RMF Twitter engagement highlights the politics and practices of what Bickford refers to as listening across difference, or political listening, which she argues can undo oppression that happens partly through not hearing certain kinds of expressions from certain kinds of people. During the #RMF Twitter discussion, it seemed as though much of the conversation was happening at cross purposes, with unresolved and emotionally heightened arguments about the role Cecil John Rhodes played in South Africa and at the university. Some proponents pointed out his financial contributions to the country and to the university, while others dismissed this in the light of his racist statements. But as Dreher (2009) points out, the aim of political listening, then, is not so much to manage or to 'get over' differences but rather to maintain connections that enable shared action despite deep inequalities and unavoidable conflict. She writes that 'colonial histories

and contemporary struggles produce unearned privileges' and that 'attention to privilege and a commitment to listening that might undo privilege is a vital challenge for "listening across difference", particularly as privilege most often operates through remaining unmarked, normalized and naturalized' (452). The removal of the statue as a result of the campaign may be seen as one instance of 'listening', as well as the formation of the white student movement set up to learn about racial privilege – UCT: The White Privilege Project. As Bickford writes, 'A particular kind of listening can serve to break up linguistic conventions and create a public realm where a plurality of voices, faces, and languages can be heard and seen and spoken' (1996, p. 129). In this instance, Twitter certainly created a space for the voicing of black pain in ways that we do not see in any other medium or social space, mediated or otherwise. Listening is evidenced by the fact the users often acknowledged others' arguments, or modified their own positions, in relation to the posts of others and their online conversations with those users. In this instance, there was certainly a plurality of voices and opinions, the kind of racial and political diversity that is seldom seen in other offline spaces. Despite the limitations involved in analysing social networking sites, in this instance, Twitter represents a unique space for conversation in the South African landscape, even if not everyone was participating in the conversation.

Foucault's (1977) notions of counter-memory also provide a useful theoretical tool to better understand what we see happening on Twitter, with particular reference to memories by individuals or small groups that differ from or challenge dominant discourses. Foucault defined counter-memory as resistance against official versions of historical continuity, and so we see through #RMF how the campaign resulted in highlighting notions of the selective memory of the past, and the construction of a new national identity, or at least, the idea that new meanings can coexist with old ones, creating 'an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile from within or underneath' (1977, p. 146). In Foucault's view, the recovery of these other voices allows one to make visible the relationship of domination, which is fixed through rituals (or in this case statues). The #RMF campaign represents what Foucault would refer to as a counter-discourse, with Twitter central to the campaign of 'undermining power where it is most invisible and insidious' (208). Through providing alternative narratives to challenge dominant discourses, the Twitter conversations challenged the hegemony of existing constructions of the past, turning the statue into a contested territory and turning memory into a process of negotiation. In the Twitter discussions on this topic, there was often reference to emotion, with individuals often accusing others of being overly emotional with the judgement that this excluded their contributions from the realm of rational thought. However, as Bickford (2011) argues, emotion and partisan thinking could be seen as morally appropriate elements of democratic communication, and thus 'the ways people think *and talk* about emotion are part of communicative struggle over meaning and political conflict over public decisions'. In this particular instance, what is striking is the degree of interactive conversation, with users frequently directly addressing each other and engaging in conversation, as opposed to the more common Twitter phenomenon of isolated tweets. Of course, this refers only to tweets where users chose to use the hashtag #RMF.

The #RMF Twitter conversations often revolved less about the statue and more about race, with several tweets overtly racist, even though the poster was usually clearly identifiable and sometimes even known to other users. Retweeting and reposting of such posts

became a form of public shaming – on Facebook, unfriending became a political act as users publically stated their intention to unfriend users they perceived as racist, or unfollowing users on Twitter.

Researchers have argued for the principle of homophily, the notion that individuals are more likely to associate with those most like them, and that social networks are often skewed along lines of race, ethnicity or gender (Gleason, 2013). Spaces on Twitter could be described as bounded spaces, with people 'settling in' to enclosures, as Bickford (2000) writes,

> we endanger the possibility of democratic politics when we settle in these enclosures, particularly when we become so accustomed to the walls that we forget they are there, for then we begin to imagine that 'the world' exists only of those inside our gates. (363)

While Bickford (2000) is referring to public spaces of gated communities, her references can be applied to the Twittersphere when she writes that

> If the consuming white middle-class public comes to feel at risk in the presence of those who do not look or act like them, then purifying public space of risk for them means increasing danger, discomfort or outright exclusion for those typed as alien or unknown. (362)
> While the Twittersphere itself is open-ended, the way people experience it is individually structured. The content of a user's 'window' into the Twittersphere is based on tweets from accounts the user chooses to follow, and is thus bound to the individual networks he/she chooses to maintain. (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013, p. 293)

With respect to social networks generally, individual preferences usually reveal an unequal spread of social ties, resulting in a disproportionate authoritative influence over information sources, though in some ways social media is still at the forefront of the shift towards a more participatory culture (Loader & Mercea, 2011).

6. Conclusions

This examination of the #RMF student movement in South Africa demonstrates the role that social media – in this case Twitter – can play in facilitating youth participation in politics. While youth have been perceived as generally apathetic and disinterested in mainstream party politics, they do engage in political discussion for causes that might be seen as more personal, but which are still intensely political, a form of subactivism which helps to create new biographies of citizenship. Moreover, these online discussions should not be seen as detached from traditional media platforms, particularly, as in this case, they often set news agendas. While youth may not regularly consume mainstream news media, Twitter offers an element of immediacy, existing in parallel with more traditional news platforms, and giving them a vehicle for political participation.

The youth who participate in these online conversations congregate in the online space and come together to form a networked public sphere, creating spaces for manifestations of counter-memory, through their enactment of subactivism. The #RMF Twitter conversations also facilitated the creation of a space where people were not only given voice, but where they also listened to each other, across their real or perceived differences. As such, the Twitter conversations around the #RMF campaign can be seen as a collective project of resistance to normative memory production.

Notes

1. http://mediaandcitizenship.ru.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Youth-identity-study-major-findings.pdf
2. http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/students-awakening-from-20-year-sleep-1908088
3. South African Social Media Landscape 2015, www.worldwideworx.com
4. www.internetworldstats.com

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

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