Chapter 10

Twitter Use in Student Protests: The Case of South Africa’s #FeesMustFall Campaign

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ABSTRACT

In October 2015 a series of protests at South African universities against proposed fee increases escalated into a nation-wide protest with marches globally in support. Twitter proved to be a major communication and information sharing tool during these protests. The protests provided a platform to investigate the use of social media during a political crisis in South Africa. The chapter analyses the role and use of Twitter in the student protests and discusses this phenomenon from a crisis, advocacy and social information warfare perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a country, not unfamiliar with a “protesting society”. From the pre-apartheid era into a new democracy, protests have engulfed the South African landscape on a global scale. With the advent of democracy in South Africa since 1994, public protests focused on areas such as service delivery, against undemocratic laws or the issue of land redistribution—these forms of protests have become embedded into South Africa’s democratic society. According to Reynolds (2015) in the past decade of democracy, there has been a sturdy escalation of popular protests, increased militancy that is reminiscent of the anti-apartheid regime. South Africa’s political landscape has been a tumultuous one - The student protests that had brought South Africa’s top universities to an academic standstill, erupted in October 2015, with what became known globally as the #FeesMustFall Campaign.

However, in recent years with the evolution of collaborative enabling technologies the mobilization of the masses for the purpose of protest has become easier than ever. There has been, as what is described, an explosion of social media and related user generated content for ordinary citizens. Journalists now utilize social media platforms for the sharing of news, events and other incidents of interest. Social media is used to the extent of effecting political change to aiding in emergency response during crises and natural disasters (Heinzelman & Waters, 2010). There have been numerous incidents supporting the role of social media in crisis and disasters. After the Japanese earthquake and tsunami, social media websites, which were accessed through smart phones, enabled individuals to reassure citizens of their safety when landline communication was impossible as a result of earthquake and tsunami damage (Gaudin, 2011).

In the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake, emergency first responders were believed to have benefited from the geo-location information provided as well as crowdsourcing information regarding outbreaks of violence. Citizens used it to locate food aid.

What had been termed the social media revolution which ultimately proved to be the app that helped overthrow the incumbent president Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in 2011, and thereafter lead to the mass mobilization of protestors across the Middle East and North Africa became known as the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring had not occurred because of social media but it remained the defining characteristic, escalating the peoples cause for a new regime. Social media afforded the masses the opportunity of using a wide-reaching collaborative platform to communicate, something that the traditional media could not previously do (van Niekerk, Pillay & Maharaj, 2011).

Kotsiopoulos, Hagen, Watson, and Kalemaki (2014) provides insight into the various platforms that facilitate the use of social media and other Web 2.0 collaborative tools in recent crisis as illustrated in Table 1.
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