Chapter 9

Euphoria and Delusion of Digital Activism: Case Study of #ZumaMustFall

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to question and problematize the concept of cyber-utopianism that has characterized the phenomenal increase of digital activism in the African continent in the last decade. Using tweets collected between November 1, 2015 and May 1, 2016 on the #ZumaMustFall digital activism as a case study, the chapter argues that the ability of new media technologies in digital activism to create awareness has created a sense of euphoria that digital activism can bring about political, economic and socio-cultural changes. The study revealed that #ZumaMustFall digital activism has had limited impact as Zuma has not fallen and this can be attributed to the elite nature of the movement that has excluded vast majority of ordinary South Africans from the activities of the movement. In addition, the racial coloration of the movement (i.e. identity) hindered the movement from reaching out to the public who could have actively participated in translating the movement from the online space to the offline space and achieve their goals and objectives.

INTRODUCTION

The inspiration of digital media developments has altered activism and ushered in new and dynamic ways of generating awareness and participation (Diani 2000; Meyer & Bray 2013). The need for contestation of authority through constant interactions with power holders in order to stimulate change has been facilitated by

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new media technology. Activism, described by Cammaerts (2007) as the practice of individuals challenging the status quo in order to bring about social, political, or economic change, has been transformed by the wizardry of digital technology to a large extent. While the intensity of involvement in activism ranges from determined participation to passive compliance, the advent of digital activism has increased people’s intensity of involvement and power as they have become strong and far-reaching (Tilly 2005).

Groups and individuals have been allowed to negotiate their influence across time and space in ways that are more cost-effective and environmentally friendly while tackling essential political, economic, and social issues either at local, national and transnational levels (see Porta & Tarrow 2005). Consequently, there has been a rise of digital movements across the globe most especially from the global south. As the last decade has witnessed the growth and rapid spread of digital movements across the African continent. For instance, from Occupy Nigeria to Occupy Ghana, down to #ThisFlag of Zimbabwe to #BringBackOurGirls, to #RhodesMustFall, and #FeesMustFall amongst others. One common feature amongst these digital movements is the cyber utopian believe that these movements are instrumental in bringing about the needed political and economic changes that will help advance accountability and strengthen democratic institutions which have been a major bane in the continent. This perception is further echoed by cyber utopian studies of digital movements that believe that the adoption of new media technologies by social movement or digital movements will facilitate development and bring about the needed change due to the sense of empowerment and participation associated with such digital movements (see Castells 2012; Tilly 2004; Tarrow 2005).

However, recent studies have established that beyond the normative ideas of empowerment and participation that characterize digital movements, the success of any digital activism depends on other social relationships and structures in society (Fenton & Barassi 2011). In other words, the socio-cultural, political and economic context of any society does to a large extent determine the success of any digital movement campaign in relation to the attainment of their goals and objectives.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine #ZumaMustFall movement that was established in 2015 at the wake of political and economic crises in South Africa, where President Jacob Zuma had series of accusations against him, including the Nkandla Scandal, the Gupta family link, and his indecisive appointments of finance ministers, among others. Given the ability of digital activism to mobilize via digital media, and based on the cyber utopian arguments of Castells, Tilly and Tarrow amongst others, one may be compelled to enquire about the extent to which #ZumaMustFall movement can realize its set objectives, and if the movement is not just basking on the euphoria of cyber possibilities, hence lacking the active citizen participation and engagement that is salient in translating from the digital space to
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