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To cite this article: Thierry Luescher, Lacea Loader & Taabo Mugume (2017) #FeesMustFall: An Internet-Age Student Movement in South Africa and the Case of the University of the Free State, Politikon, 44:2, 231-245, DOI: 10.1080/02589346.2016.1238644

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2016.1238644

Published online: 04 Oct 2016.

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#FeesMustFall: An Internet-Age Student Movement in South Africa and the Case of the University of the Free State

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ABSTRACT
How can we begin to make sense of the diversity of hashtag student movements that sprang up in South Africa in the course of 2015? In this paper we start by presenting key elements of Altbach’s empirical theory of student movements and Castells’ conceptualisation of internet-age networked movements to propose as conceptual point of departure the notion of ‘internet-age student movement’. At the case of the campus-based #SteynMustFall and #UFSFeesMustFall student movement at the University of the Free State (UFS), we illustrate the richness of data available for empirical analysis and reflect on related methodological challenges when seeking to understand internet-age student movements and the dynamic relationship between the campus-based and the country-wide movement, the territorial space and the cyberspace. We conclude by reflecting on some elements of a possible research agenda for engaging with the 2015 South African hashtag student movements.


Starting with #RhodesMustFall at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in March 2015 and culminating in the nation-wide #FeesMustFall movement, we argue that student activism in South Africa has taken on characteristics of networked social movements as conceptualised with reference to the Arab Spring uprisings, the Spanish Indignadas, the Occupy movements, and more recent similar social movements, by Castells (2015). In this paper, we therefore expand on an earlier proposition that the 2015 South African hashtag student movements can be conceptualised as internet-age networked student movement, insofar as the use of internet-based communication by students (and other actors), in particular the use of social media platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, Blogs, YouTube, and Cloud-based services, signals the advent of a new way of mobilising and organising student political power (cf. Luescher and Klemenčić 2017).

The in-depth comparative study of student activism and student movements on a large scale dates back to the global wave of student protests of the 1960s, and its systematic analysis and theoretical classification can mainly be attributed to Philip Altbach (Luescher-Mamashela 2015). Generally speaking, movements can be defined as ‘networks of individuals and groups, based on shared collective identities’ which engage in collective actions of political and social conflict (Rochon in Gill and DeFronzo 2009, 208). The political terrain engaged with movement activity is cultural and political, and particularly socially
and politically marginal groups have been noted to participate in social movements (Gill and DeFronzo 2009, 208). Student movements are one of the typical platforms from which student activism is collectively organised. They represent a special case of movements:

The dynamics of student movements are not unlike those of other social movements although the specific aspects of campus life – an age-graded population, a fairly close community, common social class backgrounds and other elements – make student movements somewhat unusual. (Altbach 1991, 252)

Academic life in general and student life in particular, both permits and hinders student activism. The role of universities as ‘factories of new ideas’ and the ‘structural realities of academic life’ have a powerful effect on student political thinking and organising, and create a tendency for students to be idealist, oppositional, and impatient to see change. The transient nature of the student population and the rapid turnovers in student leadership have an especially powerful impact on student movements: they are fast to emerge and difficult to sustain, short-lived, and sporadic (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 thus typically done through publications, public speaking, campaigning, the use of mass media, and finally through demonstrations and other forms of public agitation (248). Student movements thus present one of the typical forms for mobilising collective student political action and ought to be distinguished from student organisations (Badat 1999, 22).

There are a number of propositions Altbach made in his early writings regarding the characteristics of student movements. Among them are a distinction between value-oriented and norm-oriented student movements (Altbach 1966) and etudialist as against society-oriented ones (Altbach 1964). Etudialist student movements tend to be inward-oriented, primarily towards higher education and student-related concerns, while society-oriented movements are concerned with societal issues of a broader political, social, or cultural nature (Altbach 1964, 184). Moreover, norm-based student movements are reformist in outlook, particularistic, and ‘generally aim at the correction of specific grievances or at a particular goal’ while the value-oriented kind are ‘concerned with broader ideological issues’ and are therefore more likely revolutionary (Altbach 1966, 183–184). However, Altbach cautions:

What starts as a limited protest against some isolated issue may easily turn into a sustained movement, with concerns extending to the broader society. The leadership of the student movement is notably fluid, and it is very possible for a norm-oriented leadership to be supplanted by students interested in capitalizing on a particular movement for their broader political purposes. Thus, while the norm and value orientations offer some convenient models to work from, student movements often defy a tight definition of either category and care must be taken in applying these labels to various student movements and organizations. (184)

The argument here is that what may start as student activism in relation to a particular student-specific grievance may easily come to address wider societal concerns; what started as an etudialist movement may take up broader social grievances; and where the initial outlook was reformist and particularistic, the movement dynamic may take on a broader ideological outlook and thus change from a norm-orientation towards a
more value-based political orientation highlighting societal concerns and advocating for more radical change.

In relation to communication, Altbach noted early on in his study of student movements that the publicity of student activism was of key importance to mobilise students, conscientise the public, and provoke a response by relevant authorities (e.g. government, university leadership), arguing that ‘it is difficult to overestimate the value of good communications in the development of student movements’ (178). At the same time, the communication technology involved in student mobilising does not have to be ‘expensive and complex’; indeed ‘the students are one of the most difficult groups to control partly because of the ease with which they can communicate among themselves’ (178).

And finally, Altbach highlighted the complexity of responding to student activism. While the responsiveness of authorities is a key factor in determining the nature of future activism he also found that it was difficult, even after a successful campaign, for students to return to ‘business as usual’:

Once students have taken action on some issue, it is difficult for them to quietly return to their routine academic life after having experienced the exhilaration of political agitation and contact with the centers of power in the society. (183)

Hence, what may appear as period of inaction and a return to ‘business as usual’ may actually be a ‘latency phase’ in the life cycle of a student movement: ‘Thus, phases of latency, far from being periods of inaction, are crucial to the formation and development of abilities and capacities for mobilisation and struggle’ (Badat 1999, 32).

In the context of the Internet age, Castells (2015) highlights an important shift in social movement organising and practice. He shows how outraged citizens in the process of responding to the 2009 economic crisis mobilised using the Internet. For instance, at the example of the Occupy Wall Street Movement Castells (2015) argues that the internet-age networked movement has a number of characteristics: First and foremost it involves new forms of space: a space of localised, territorial movements, and the virtual ‘space of flows’, that is, the cyberspace, which allows the local movements to share, communicate, and amplify their experiences using the internet, thus ‘… creating a permanent forum of solidarity, debate, and strategic planning’ (172). In addition, Castells’ empirical theory of internet-age networked movements suggests that they are successful in mobilising a greater diversity of activists and participants (issuing in truly multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-gender, multi-class, and multi-partisan movements), and that they are characterised by spontaneity, a lack of clearly defined leadership and an attempt at a new active democratic practice (169–171). Their larger significance is found in the possibilities they open up for real democracy: ‘These networked social movements are new forms of democratic movements, movements that are reconstructing the public sphere in the space of autonomy built around the interaction of local places and Internet networks … ’ (316).

Given the above conceptualisations of student activism, student movements and internet-age networked social movements, what theoretical, empirical, and methodological challenges and opportunities are there en route to understanding the 2015 hashtag movements of South Africa as internet-age, networked student movement? In the following section, we illustrate this by means of an analysis of the localised #SteynMustFall and #UFSSFeesMustFall movements of the University of the Free State (UFS) in central South Africa. We then engage with our account of UFS student politics by returning to the
questions of theory, empirical accounts, and methodological challenges involved in studying networked student movements, and conclude with the question what the relevance of such studies is for our broader understanding of politics in South Africa.

**Research design and methodology**

Our case study of the #SteynMustFall and #UFSFeesMustFall movements at the UFS provides a chronologically ordered analytical account of student activism and the UFS leadership’s response, contextualised within developments in the wider higher education sector mainly in the period of March to November 2015. Our analysis is based on three types of sources. Firstly, we use internal reports from the UFS Department of Communication and Brand Management (CBM), which are prepared by the CBM for the university leadership. This includes the *Chronological Report: Student Protest Action at the University of the Free State* (UFS 2015a) and the CBM’s *Social Media Analysis Report 19–25 October 2015* (UFS 2015d). The former is a descriptive, chronological log of events at the UFS Bloemfontein, Qwaqwa and South campuses maintained by the CBM as part of the documentation provided at senior leadership meetings (especially meetings of the Rectorate). We cross- checked this account with our personal observations, newspaper clippings, and in conversation with two interviewees.

The second key internal document is the CBM’s *Social Media Analysis Report 19–25 October 2015*. The CBM is subscribed to a number of professional media monitoring services, including Pearfactor, Meltwater, and Newsclip, which respectively continuously track different aspects of media activity (on traditional print and broadcasting media, social media, etc.) and provide daily updates thereof in relation to defined keywords. From this data, we used CBM’s aggregate report for the core period of 19–25 October 2015. Furthermore, we were given access to the UFS Digital RedBook prepared by Newsclip on #FeesMustFall for the intensive period of mobilisation and protests of 15–23 October 2015.

Given our positionality within decision-making support structures of the university leadership and our use of internal university documents, we considered it imperative to critically triangulate the received data and our reading thereof. We did so in two respects. Firstly, we conducted our own internet-based searches of news articles, blogs, Facebook posts, and tweets on the hashtag movements, covering the full period between March and October 2015. These searches yielded less comprehensive data records than what a professional media monitoring service provides, but also more focused ones. Secondly, we conducted face-to-face interviews with two student leaders on campus, primarily as member-checks and means to triangulate the data from CBM and our research, and to critically interrogate our emerging understanding with that of students who were directly involved in the movements. The interviewees were selected purposefully for their in-depth understanding of student politics at the UFS and involvement therein. One was a former member of the Students’ Representative Council (SRC), and the other a senior student in part-time employment at the Division for Student Affairs. Both participated voluntarily and anonymously in the interviews, and in addition to giving critical comments on our draft accounts of the UFS case, they offered their accounts of events and important additional insights and interpretations from their perspectives.
We therefore believe that our account of the student movement at the UFS is trustworthy and – in keeping with the purpose of the paper – able to provide an empirical grounding to our conceptual argument as well as illustrate what is available for empirical analysis and the related methodological challenges this poses as we seek to analyse and understand internet-age, networked student movements.

Towards #FeesMustFall: the UFS response to #RhodesMustFall

The run-up to #FeesMustFall at the UFS started in seriousness in early April 2015 when UFS students joined the #RhodesMustFall movement. On 25 March 2015 the UFS Student Representative Council (SRC) posted a statement on the SRC’s official Facebook page calling for the removal of the statues of OFS President MT Steyn1 and State President CR Swart2 from the Bloemfontein campus (UFS SRC 2015). The Twitter hashtag #SteynMustFall, and less commonly used #SwartMustFall – both clearly emulating the #RhodesMustFall tag – briefly became popular on Facebook and Twitter and were followed by attempts to further conscientise and mobilise students offline with panel debates organised by the SRC (UFS 2015a). However, given the racial divisions in the UFS student body and history of racial incidents on the Bloemfontein campus, the SRC was aware that a militant movement such as #RhodesMustFall led by black students on campus could stir up racial tensions too much and end up very badly (Interview with SRC member, 30 November 2015).3 At the same time, the University’s Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice ran a highly visible No-to-Racism/Yes-to-Equality campaign with mass meetings and dialogues involving all the campus community. During the campaign the urgent need for action to impact on the everyday lives of staff and students on campus emerged strongly (UFS 2015b). The Institute’s campaign, as well as the SRC’s moderate attempt to rally students around #SteynMustFall, became catalysts in a decision by the university leadership to call a University Assembly on 28 April 2015. Submissions by students and staff at the Assembly highlighted particularly two issues: the divisiveness of the UFS language policy which involved parallel tuition in separate Afrikaans and English classes, effectively creating a white Afrikaans-tuition university and a mainly black English-tuition university; and the sense that many statues, building names, and symbols on campus were irrelevant, unrepresentative, or even offensive. From the Assembly it became clear that these matters presented obstacles to the social integration of black and white students and a ‘deep’ transformation of the institutional culture (UFS 2015b).

At the meeting of the UFS Council on 6 June 2015, the university leadership was mandated to conduct a formal review of the UFS language policy by means of a comprehensive process of consultation (UFS 2015c). The process created considerable interest, not only from the university community, but also from parties across the socio-political spectrum. Solidariteit, a trade union with a strong Afrikaner membership base, saw the review process as an opportunity to advocate for the preservation of Afrikaans at the UFS and mobilised the Afrikaner community to ‘defend’ the language in a Twitter campaign and creating a dedicated email account for gathering and relaying submissions from the Afrikaner community to the language committee (UFS 2015c). For students, the review process created an opportunity to voice opinions on the University’s Facebook and Twitter pages, and a dedicated email address was set up to receive written submissions and respond to enquiries about the process. Beyond the cyberspace, the consultation
process, which lasted almost two months created a number of offline fora for discussion and making submissions. Overall, 408 specific submissions were received via email and open fora. In addition, several e-surveys were conducted (e.g. by alumni, by the Institutional Research Office) all of which were analysed and culminated in a report of the language committee to the university leadership and the UFS Council on 4 December 2015 (UFS 2015c).

The formal language review process at the UFS coincided with black student protests against the use of Afrikaans at the University of Stellenbosch under the banners of #OpenStellenbosch and #OpenStellies and with protests and violent clashes between black and white students at the Elsenburg Agricultural College over the use of Afrikaans there (Nicolson 2015; UFS 2015c). The latter became highly publicised after the YouTube clip #Luister went viral in social media and sparking national debate on language policy in South African higher education and prompting the Minister of Higher Education and Training to enter the debate (Evans 2015). While the reopening of the taaldebat (language debate) in Afrikaans-tuition institutions involved a great deal of online and offline mobilisation and protests by black and white students at the Stellenbosch University and beyond, the formal language policy review process at the UFS, including the open fora for the submission of oral representations, clearly pre-empted a more confrontational engagement of students at the time and diffused some of the anger of black students on the Bloemfontein campus. As one UFS student leader argued: ‘We had to respond to the anger of black students; our disappointment. As black students, we constantly are negotiating our existence and constantly are negotiating our dignity on this campus’ (Interview with SRC member, 30 November 2015).

#SteynMustFall was thus a localised diffusion of #RhodesMustFall, albeit living itself out in practice in a very different way: predominantly a formal consultation process with landmark moments such as the Anti-Racism Campaign, the University Assembly, the Language Policy Review Process, and other initiatives such as an institutional project on increasing student representation in academic decision-making, and with limited online presence and mobilisation (UFS 2015a). If at the UFS this was the immediate collective SRC/university leadership response to #RhodesMustFall, the content, process, and success of the UCT movement had a more generalised impact.

**From decolonisation to free education: #FeesMustFall**

Student leaders across the South African public higher education landscape, as well as in universities in the USA, asked themselves in response to #RhodesMustFall the question that ‘if at UCT it was the Rhodes statue that had to fall, what “must fall” in their respective contexts?’ (Luescher and Klemenčič 2017, 113). The announcements of annual tuition fee increases provided the common denominator for an answer to this question, and the demand of students at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg to halt increases and remove fees using #FeesMustFall spread like a wildfire across the university landscape, propelled especially by student political associations, such as the South African Students Congress (SASCO), the African National Congress Youth League, the Young Communist League, the Economic Freedom Fighters Youth Brigade, the Pan Africanist Student Movement of Azania, and the Democratic Alliance Students Association (DASO) to mention but a few (Interview with SRC member, 30 November 2015). Workshops for SRCs organised
by the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) in October as well as the Second National Higher Education Transformation Summit organised by South Africa’s Department of Higher Education and Training together with a broad range of stakeholders, ironically provided the rare platforms for the collective national student leadership to meet outside the cyberspace for information sharing and coordinating their local engagements around fees. The dominance of the student fees-related matters at the summit is evident in the Durban Statement on Transformation in Higher Education (DHET 2015), which after listing significant transformation gains in the sector, resolved that the top three issues to be addressed in the immediate and medium term all relate to questions of higher education funding, student fees, and financial aid for students (DHET 2015, 2–3). Students’ demands and responses in relation to the statement (and more announcements of university fee increases) were vigorous. Student protests escalated on a large scale nation-wide bringing most universities to a standstill (Sesant, Kekana, and Nicolaides 2015).

Students from the UFS Bloemfontein campus joined the national #FeesMustFall student protest movement on 20 October 2015. Hashtags such as #UFSFeesMustFall, #UFSshutdown, #nothinginlifeisfree, #kovsies, and #UFSRevolution were created in an instant (UFS 2015d). In the late afternoon of 20 October 2015 the Central SRC (including SRC members from the Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa campuses) met with the university leadership to discuss the proposal of a 0% increase in fees at the UFS in 2016. The mobilisation of students was equally instantaneous. Students gathered in front of the main building on the Bloemfontein campus (i.e. the offices of the Rectorate and related administrative units) and in its foyer, demanding the university leadership to agree to the 0% increase. No agreement was reached. Thus, all three campuses were shut down on 21 October 2015 while students blocked the main entrances to the campus and demonstrated mainly at the Bloemfontein campus’ main gate in Nelson Mandela Drive. A court interdict was served on protesting students in the late afternoon. Students took to the social media platforms even more to voice their opinions and to gather support for their activism. At the same time, other students used the social media to ask questions about the upcoming exam period, which was scheduled to start the following Monday, 26 October 2015 (UFS 2015a, 2015b).

During the first two days of activism, the University’s Facebook and Twitter pages were inundated with questions and enquiries from students (especially about the possible postponement of exams), concerned parents (about the safety of students on campus) and concerned members of the public. Students in residences on the Bloemfontein campus also used the University’s Facebook page to stay informed. During the period 19–25 October 2015 the top 10 retweets (686 in total) on the UFS Twitter page were about official messages sent by the CBM’s crisis communication team informing the university community about developments.

The CBM’s social media analyses also shows how local developments on campus were mirrored in the cyberspace during the crucial week from 19 to 25 October 2015. Using the same suit of keywords (i.e. UFS, Kovsie(s), UFS and Universiteit van die Vrystaat, @UFSweb, and #UFSFeesMustFall), the analysis shows that compared to the preceding week, social media activity on Twitter quadrupled from 249 to 1065 tweets, of which the vast majority (80%) included the hashtag #UFSFeesMustFall. Pearfactor’s analysis of the tweets further indicates that general sentiment tipped towards increasingly negative views of the UFS in the tweets (UFS 2015d). The tweets originated from a diversity of handles, documenting
ongoing events, giving opinions and comments, and mobilising students. An example of a
documenting-type tweet is ‘#UFSFeesMustFall as students begin gathering bit by bit at the
University of the Free State’ which includes a picture of a crowd of students gathering in
front of the main building (@Tshimo_Leo, 20 Oct 2015; 900+ followers; 39 retweets); while
a typical tweet mobilising for protest action at the main gate on the 21 October is: ‘We
need numbers tomorrow. We appreciate the support in tweets and updates. But your
actual presence will go a long way. #UFSFeesMustFall’ (@ThokozaneMahl, 20 Oct 2015;
450+ followers; 6 retweets, UFS 2015d).

Among the most active and popular Twitter handles were those of IrawaPost, that is,
the UFS student newspaper with over 700 Twitter followers, the Afrikaans newspaper
website aggregation service Netwerk24, and of OFM, the largest private radio station
broadcasting in central South Africa (UFS 2015d). Student journalists from IrawaPost
were constantly present in front of the main gate to the Bloemfontein campus where
most of the protest took place, and took turns to tweet about what was happening.
On the second day of the campus shutdown, 22 October 2015, all academic and admin-
istrative activities on the Bloemfontein campus were postponed to resume only on 26
October 2015. All entrances to the campus were closed, and exit and entrance were dif-
icult (UFS 2015a).

The Facebook page of the SRC published regular updates on the protest. The post on 22
October 2015 is a particularly good example to show the way mobilisation via Facebook
occurred.

The campus shutdown will be continuing today 06:00, by the various gates of the University.
The SRC continues to be fully behind the protest; however, we condemn any form of violence
directed against any person or property. We say no to fee increment and yes to access to edu-
cation. The SRC will be heading the protest in Blazers to be visible to students and for protec-
tion purposes, we are one and we will be in the forefront. This is in light of the court interdict
we received yesterday, we plea that all students participating be peaceful and allow the SRC to
lead. (UFS SRC 2015)

The SRC’s Facebook post signalled the determination of the SRC to take charge of the
protest action which hitherto had been mobilised mainly by members of student political
associations. The post included hashtags #UFSFeesMustFall, #UFSRevolution, and #Acces-
sAndJusticeForAll; it was shared 31 times, liked 69 times, and included 24 comments (UFS
SRC 2015; 7000+ page likes). Yet, it took an incident at the main gate on the same day to
provide the opportunity for the SRC to effectively show leadership offline. As the group of
protesters increased and protest action escalated, some students tried to burn tyres in
front of the main gate to the campus. IrawaPost actively reported about the incident by
posting photos and messages on its Twitter account, for example:

Students arrive with tires. #UFSFeesMustFall;

Students react to 3 tyres being burned. Been extinguished by SRC, Associations members &
students #UFSFeesMustFall;

#UFSFeesMustFall arrival of police water tank; Water tank is being prepared #UFSFeesMustFall;
and

Students reunite, tyre will not be burned #UFSFeesMustFall. (@IRAWAPost, 22 Oct 2015; 700+
followers)
In response to the incident, Nelson Mandela Drive was blocked off by the South African Police Service (SAPS) in the afternoon, and 15 students were arrested and only released from custody later that evening. Every step of the day’s protests was reported widely in the social media by protesters, as well as the official media (UFS 2015a, 2015d).

Twitter provides several ways of making connections between trending topics (hashtags) and account owners (Twitter handles). The use of multiple hashtags in tweets creates links between trending topics to optimise tweets for Twitter’s search function and enable users to follow trends. Thus, tweeters would link the national to the local and campus to campus by means of multiple hashtags, as exemplified in the following tweet: ‘We need to organize a joint protest for UFS & CUT #CutFeesMustFall #UFSFeesMustFall #NationalShutDown (@juju_junior11, 22 Oct 2015)’ with over 1200 followers and 10 retweets. Another way of networking in cyberspace is by adding Twitter handles to a tweet, as a means to mention or reply to an account owner and link a tweet to the owner’s profile: ‘Co asks – @juju_junior11: what time is the CUT and UFS protest? #CUTfeesMustFall #UFSfeesMustFall #FeesMustFall’ (@Keamo___, 22 Oct 2015), 2300+ followers, 4 retweets. The reach of a tweet is thus multiplied as it snowballs to own followers, the followers of tagged handles, and followers of trending hashtags. Joint protests between students of the UFS and CUT (i.e. the Central University of Technology in Bloemfontein) eventually took place on 22 and 23 October 2015.

On Friday, 23 October, students on the University’s Qwaqwa campus in the Eastern Free State also started protesting in the residences. The Bloemfontein campus SRC met that morning to discuss a memorandum provided by the university leadership the previous day on the implications of the 0% fee increment and a proposed joint statement between the SRC and the university leadership. Throughout, all entrances to the Bloemfontein campus remained closed: it was #UFSshutdown as part of #NationalShutdown (UFS 2015a). Protesting students, some staff as well as representatives of the media and police remained at the main gate, while the major offline national protest was happening at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. Eventually in the early afternoon, the statement by President Jacob Zuma at the Union Buildings that there will be no increase in tuition fees in 2016 created a jubilant atmosphere among the students country-wide and instantly turned the protest gathering at the UFS main gate into a celebration (Presidency 2015; UFS 2015a).

Throughout the duration of the local #UFSFeesMustFall student movement it was crucial for the university leadership to stay in touch with each other and to be informed about the protest action – especially about the conversations between students and postings by the media in cyberspace. The importance of social networks for information, communication, and mobilisation among different student groups – for example, the ‘militants’, ‘sympathizers’, and ‘non-participants’ (Emmerson 1968 in Badat 1999, 23) – as well as the university leadership, is illustrated by the work of the University’s crisis communication team which monitored social media platforms on a 24/7-basis from 19 to 26 October, scanning the cyberspace and keeping management informed. As noted above, the CBM used several professional media monitoring services for this purpose. Separate WhatsApp groups were created for the university leadership, the deans of faculties, the Qwaqwa campus management, and so forth, and regular updates and photos were posted. This was the first time crisis communication took place on WhatsApp groups.
The effectiveness of these groups was evident in the fact that the majority of the participants constantly took part in the conversations (UFS 2015d).

In the aftermath of the #UFSFeesMustFall protests, the SRC, student leaders from student associations and student activists marched to the main building on the Bloemfontein campus and handed a memorandum to Prof Jonathan Jansen, the UFS rector and vice-chancellor, on 26 October 2015. In the memorandum the SRC addressed matters such as fees, deregistration of students, the language policy, institutional statues and symbols, and – in another diffusion of student demands to the UFS, the insourcing of service workers, amongst other matters. The memorandum, which was posted on the Facebook page of the SRC President, created much conversation in the cyberspace (UFS SRC 2015). In response, a Student Assembly took place on 27 October 2015 where Prof Jansen agreed with most of the demands in the memorandum. However, tensions ran high during the question session and several students expressed their anger towards the university about matters in the response as well as events during the previous week’s #UFSFeesMustFall student protest (UFS 2015a). The hashtag #JansenMustFall created further conversations on Facebook and Twitter, as did the #StopOutsourcing campaign which followed a week later and led to a commitment by the university leadership to contribute to the basic salaries of workers (UFS 2015d). IrawaPost again reported actively about the march on its Twitter page by posting photos and messages such as,

Student workers forum will be marching to main building. The march is in connection to outsourcing #outsourcing #ufs;

Campus may be shut down if demands of marching delegates are not met. March leads to Paraxel. #ufs #outsourcing; and

@JJ_UFS promises to ‘take serious’ what has been brought forward & no contractor will punish workers for striking #ufs #outsourcing. (@IRAWAPost, 10 November 2015; 700+ followers)

While student protests continued in a number of institutions, particularly the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), University of the Western Cape, and University of the Witwatersrand, student life at the UFS for now turned to focus on the upcoming exam period: academic life took over, temporarily, at least. In the meantime, public higher education has not exited the ‘crisis mode’ it has been cast into by the 2015 hashtag student movements, and the movements themselves merely entered a latency phase to become visible again with the start of the 2016 academic year.5

In place of a conclusion: towards a research agenda for hashtag student movements

We started our conceptual discussion highlighting Altbach’s (1964, 1966) argument on the unpredictability and mutability of student movements. #RhodesMustFall, in this respect, can be interpreted as expression of an originally norm-oriented etudialist movement focused on matters of institutional culture and curriculum, which then was adapted by other campus-based groups to their local context and eventually muted into #FeesMustFall as a more value-oriented nation-wide movement. The latter argument can be illustrated by frequent references of #FeesMustFall activists to the promise in the Freedom Charter that ‘the doors of learning and culture shall be opened’ which was interpreted
as free education (M사이트 2016). It is also illustrated by the expansion of demands to go beyond addressing the plight of poor and working-class students to include the conditions of service of outsourced workers (e.g. gardeners, security officers, cleaners) on university campuses, and thus taking on a more working-class rather than purely etudialist student character.

In conceptualising the 2015 hashtag student movements in South Africa as internet-age student movement, we have proposed in keeping with Castells that there is a dynamic relationship between the space of localised, ‘territorial’ movements and the virtual space, whereby local movements are virtually assembled, discussing ideas, engaging with knowledge, mobilising and acting virtually, and developing a common sense of being: the cyberspace thus takes on the character of an informal curriculum for the internet-age student movement. The importance of the internet is further signalled in the use of hashtags to name the movements and the dynamic relation between the localised tags and their non-localised variants, which we have illustrated at the case of the UFS with, for example, #UFSShutdown as against #NationalShutdown, and #UFSFeesMustFall and the nation-wide #FeesMustFall. It is also signalled in the mere observation that apart from the few instances we have referred to above, especially the CEPD student leadership workshops and the Durban Higher Education Transformation Summit, there have been no occasions to our knowledge where the collective national student leadership has been able to meet physically in the immediate build up to #FeesMustFall. However, what grounds do we have to determine the status respectively of the online and offline presence of the movements? Does our UFS case study merely represent a contextualised version of a national, virtually coordinated student movement, that is, some form of local manifestation of an idea elaborated mainly in the cyberspace? Or is the relationship between the territorial, local and the national a much more dynamic one? Certainly the Internet has provided more than mere platforms for communicating and amplifying what happens offline; however, could either form of movement have a sustained existence without the other? While it is clear that the use of the Internet by the hashtag student movements was momentous, this assertion raises more questions than it provides answers.

Thus, the analysis of an internet-age student movement presents a theoretical challenge as well as a methodological one that requires new skills and tools for a ‘cyberspace analysis’ without which it is impossible to account for agency. For instance, if we argue in keeping with Castells that there is a dynamic relationship between the space of localised, ‘territorial’ movements and the virtual space, without an analysis of the chronology, geographical spread and interrelation of Facebook posts and likes, tweets and retweets, blogs and YouTube clips, and so forth, how can we even hope to understand the basic chronology of local action, notwithstanding more complex questions? With regard to Twitter, for instance, there are numerous analytical tools available to search for handles and tags and generate Twitter word clouds, timelines, and maps. Social media monitoring services not only offer the raw data for further analysis but provide customised analyses of various kinds, such as the one published in Haffajee (2015, 168–169) to illustrate her argument that ‘Twitter helped to fuel and maintain the student uprising’ (168). In short, not one but numerous chronologies of the localised movements and their relation to developments in the cyberspace are needed as a starting point to understand the relationship between the local and the virtual: where what started when and, perhaps, why.
Furthermore, our analysis here has focused primarily on the student element in the student movement. However, the student body is not a homogenous entity. It includes students with different sociological characteristics, students of different levels of political participation, ideological orientation, and political affiliation. In the latter case, research in a number of African countries shows that political parties and their student organisations have an ambiguous impact on student politics (Luescher, Klemenčič, and Jowi 2016; Mugume 2015). Moreover, Altbach has rightly argued ‘student political activity often contains an important non-student element, which sometimes provides direction and ideological sophistication to the movement’ (Altbach 1966, 185). The involvement of progressive academics and other members of the university community in the case of #RhodesMustFall is widely known (e.g. Mangcu 2016); some of them, alongside student activists in the movement may provide leadership of a different kind, for example, as “movement intellectuals” […] who are central to the production and dissemination of ideology, to the theoretical and empirical definition of the opposition, and to the education of new members’ (Badat 1999, 31). In our own analysis we also included reference to the agency of the ‘targeted opponents’ or rather ‘respondents’ to the student action: the university leadership and related support units. Again, if one was to venture into a more comprehensive ‘stakeholder analysis’ (Clark 1978) of student politics, it must be remembered that they too have (at least) two lives, living in the local and cyberspace, as we have shown at the case of the UFS.

Finally, the question remains: for what? Why is an in-depth scholarly engagement with the hashtag student movements of 2015 worth our while? We would argue that the relevance of such scholarly engagement is founded in seeking to understand the role, character, and significance of the movements, as proposed by Badat (1999), and thus ultimately the implications of the movements for the polity and society at large, the changing nature of democratic governance, civil (or rather political) society mobilising in the internet age, and citizenship (cf. Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014); for the changing higher education sector, the transformation of public higher education in South Africa, higher education governance, university and student funding, and the curriculum; and finally the movements’ impact on academic life, student life, student organising and, last but not least, the lives of the activists themselves.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. SDG. SDG = Soli Deo Gloria. An ancient acknowledgement of the grace of God, found in many acknowledgements of academic and artistic works.

Notes

1. MT Steyn was sixth and last president of the independent Orange Free State (OFS) (1896–1902).
2. CR Swart was the first State President of the Republic of South Africa (1961–1967).
3. We use the racial categories of black (as inclusive of the apartheid categories of African, coloured and Indian), and white as far as they are relevant to understanding the political organizing of students. For more details on conceptualisations of ‘race’ in race relations politics see Luescher (2009, 416).
4. For example, starting in mid-April 2015, #RhodesMustFall-inspired protests mushroomed across the campuses of universities in the USA, advocating for more inclusive campus cultures, and demanding the removal of statues of, and changing the names of buildings and academic units named after known slavers, racists, segregationists, etc., 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), Thomas F. Mulledy and William McSherry (Georgetown University), and others. As in South Africa, the demands often went along with vandalizing statues and plaques e.g. by spray-painting #Racist on them. The main Twitter hashtags used in the USA included #BlackOnCampus and the more generally used #BlackLivesMatter, with only few instances including the ‘... MustFall’ tagbit, e.g. in the case of Thomas Jefferson, #JeffersonMustFall was sprayed onto his statue at University of Texas (cf. related reports in InsideHigherEd 2015; also see Moja, Luescher, and Schreiber 2015).

5. While we conclude our analysis of the hashtag student movements at the end of 2015, the beginning of 2016 brought a new phase of student activism. The student leadership used the end of the exam period for having several face-to-face meetings, including the third Neville Alexander Commemorative Conference, ‘Students Rising’, of 1 December 2015 at the University of Johannesburg, organised collectively by #FeesMustFall, #ReformPukke, #TukssUprising, #OpenStellies, #RhodesMustFall, #PatriarchyMustFall, #TheTransCollective, #BlackStudentsStokvel, and #BlackStudentMovement; and a #FeesMustFall National Summit was held at CPUT from 9 to 11 December 2015 to consider the way forward for the #FeesMustFall uprising. Upon the reopening of institutions, protests resumed in a number of universities, including UCT where the #Shackville protests by the #RhodesMustFall movement created much turmoil. Contrary to expectation, the UFS experienced probably the most traumatic event during the protests of early 2016, when on 22 February a group of staff and students who protested against outsourcing under the banner of #OutsourcingMustFall disrupted a Varsity Cup rugby match between the UFS Shimlas team and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University’s Madibaz and were violently attacked by spectators (Shange 2016). In the wake of the ‘Shimlas incident’, the UFS Bloemfontein campus experienced a night of intense student protests which was finally suppressed by riot police involving a great deal of police brutality. All UFS campuses were closed for the week of 23–26 February 2016 (UFS 2016). The racialised nature of the Shimlas incident – whereby most protesters were black and most spectators white – was followed by intense racial tensions on campus. During the protest week, students inter alia dismantled the statue of CR Swart (Pijoos 2016).

6. Lange (2015, 8) defines the (formal academic) curriculum as ‘a process of engagement with knowing, acting and being’. Future analysis may also fruitfully engage with the notion of a ‘cognitive praxis’ of social movements, the offline curriculum of teach-ins, seminars and debates, as well as the richness in their representation and cultural artefacts produced on and offline (cf. Badat 1999, 30–31).

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