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‘Tweeting in Solidarity’: A corpus linguistics-driven analysis of tweets during the South African student protests

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Abstract

The social media boom has affected people the world over, allowing them a platform to voice their opinions and sentiments, but also allowing them to create connections with people around the globe. In many instances, these connections have been based on shared political beliefs, effectively creating ‘issue communities’, which has lent itself to the reappropriation of social media as a space that can facilitate political activism both in the online sphere and in the physical sphere, as well as widening the action opportunities for participation. This work seeks to uncover the different identities, communities, and discourses that were constituted on the social media site Twitter during the student protests spanning from the #RhodesMustFall protest of 2015, to the #FeesMustFall protests that spread like a veldt fire through 26 of South Africa’s universities. Collections of 1000 tweets per hashtag (namely #RhodesMustFall, #OpenStellenbosch, #WitsFeesMustFall and #UCTFeesMustFall) were collected and run through the corpus linguistics software AntConc, whereafter findings were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Overall, users were able to use Twitter for the purpose of information-sharing by reporting on the live events of the protest, requesting resources and for the purposes of organization and planning. While the ‘fallist’ protests, which are often categorized and grouped under the umbrella as the student protests of South Africa, further analysis exposed that in fact, the discourses that were prominent in the earlier protests, namely the #RhodesMustFall and its derivative protest #OpenStellenbosch were far more aimed at the metaphysical conditions of higher education, where the #FeesMustFall protests focused on the material conditions of student life. Moreover, it was found that Twitter’s main function was in fact to behave less as a tool or additional paradigm to traditional participation, in the stead of its use as a means for bringing ideas such as free education into the political imagination, as well as for users to bring their private lived experiences into the public sphere, and thereby creating new types of subject positions and public identities.