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# Democracy, Education, and Free Speech: The Importance of #FeesMustFall for Transnational Activism

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## Democracy, Education, and Free Speech: The Importance of #FeesMustFall for Transnational Activism

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### ABSTRACT

South African students across numerous university campuses joined together in the second half of 2015 to protest the rising cost of higher education. In addition to on-campus protesting, activists utilized Twitter to mobilize and communicate with each other, and, as the protests drew national attention, the hashtag #FeesMustFall began trending on Twitter. Then, what began as a localized movement against tuition increases became a global issue when a court interdict was granted by a South African court against the use of the #FeesMustFall hashtag. This paper traces that global spread of the #FeesMustFall hashtag on Twitter as a response to the extraordinary attempt to limit online free speech. In this paper, we analyze the global flow and geographic spread of the #FeesMustFall hashtag on Twitter. Our evidence supports the argument that the attempt to censor and curtail the protestors' right to organize and share the hashtag in fact propelled the #FeesMustFall movement onto the international stage.

Keywords: Social Movements, Media, University

The hashtag #FeesMustFall, began trending on Twitter in South Africa during a two-week long protest in which South African university students engaged in a national call for a reduction in tuition fee increases. At the height of the protest, the University of Cape Town (UCT) sought and received a court interdict from the High Court of South Africa that was intended to prevent protest action on its campus, and in the Twittersphere (University of Cape Town v Rhodes Must Fall and Others 2015). The High Court is similar to the Federal Court in the United States, in that it is divided into seven regional courts, all at the same level of power. UCT was not the only

institution that applied for a court interdict, but it was the first to list a Twitter hashtag as a respondent, alongside a number of political student organizations (Cowen 2015).

In this article we demonstrate how the censorship actions taken by UCT during the #FeesMustFall protests actually amplified the call for action locally and globally, instead of reducing protest action and ceasing the use of the hashtag. The university asserted that the court interdict was not an attempt to curtail free speech. In utilizing the legal system to prevent the use of the #FeesMustFall hashtag, however, the university directly sought to prohibit, censor, and criminalize protest action on its physical campus and in the digital space. We contend that the evidence of this claim can be established by analyzing the diffusion of the hashtag on Twitter. To gather this evidence, we compiled a dataset that included 1.2 million Tweets that utilized the #FeesMustFall hashtag during the protests.

This article contributes to the growing area of research that addresses the impact of social media and its role in social movements and change (Valenzuela 2013). Previous research has focused on how social media has allowed protestors to disseminate information, mobilize support, coordinate efforts, and garner media attention. These works include focusing on the Arab Spring in 2010 (Bruns, Highfield, and Burgess 2013; Christensen 2011), and the Occupy Wall Street Movement in New York in 2011 (Gleason 2013; Tremayne 2013). Our study adds to research that examines how social movements can capitalize on social media platforms to spread their message outside of local contexts.

### **Unfulfilled Promises**

Between 2000 and 2008, student enrollment in higher education institutions in South Africa increased by 43% (Bunting et al. 2010). Within institutions of higher education this change began with a transformation in the demographic profile of the university student body. By 2008, 65% of

all university students were black and 22% were white, indicating that significant changes had been instituted to make universities more representative of the country's demographic make-up (Bunting et al. 2010). This change is more representative of the current demographic composition of the country as 79% of the population is black, 8.9% is white, 2.5% is Indian/Asian, and 8.9% is colored (SA Census 2011).

However, the rapid rise in tertiary education enrollment has not been matched with an increase in higher education spending by the government (Letseka and Maile 2008). This has pressured universities to seek out alternative forms of funding either through research allocations by state agencies, contract research, and private funding (De Villiers and Steyn 2008). De Villiers and Steyn (2008) point out that the funds generated from tuition have increased significantly and this has placed significant pressure on students to obtain personal funds to attend university. The rapid rise in fee increases presents a barrier to accessing higher education for many middle and lower class South Africans.

The students participating in the protests felt that they had been shortchanged and that the economic promises made by the government had not materialized. One of those promises entailed increasing access to university. Section 29 of The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa enshrines the right to education by stating that;

*Everyone has the right - a. to a basic education, including adult basic education; and  
b. to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible.*

One of the protest placards that was widely shared on Twitter read, “our parents were sold a dream in 1994...we are here for a refund.” In 1994, South Africa had its first democratic elections, which ushered in a new period that ended legally upheld, institutionalized, racial

segregation and oppression. The post 1994 era in South Africa held much promise, and represented an opportunity to address the inequalities of the past. The protesting students felt that these promises were not only not kept, but in fact, that further action for progressive change had been stifled.

Protest action concerning the rising cost of higher education is not a new phenomenon in South Africa. Students recognize that accessing higher education is essential in realizing their own upward mobility aspirations, but also see roadblocks to their paths. Leibbrandt, Finn & Woolard (2012) illustrate that in South Africa, income inequality between racial groups has increased since 1993, and it is mainly the result of unequal participation rates in the formal labor market. The highest rate of unemployment in South Africa lies amongst young people between the ages of 20 to 24. This trend is more pronounced amongst black youth who have higher rates of unemployment compared to any other racial group (Verick 2011). The national unemployment rate has remained persistently high. In 2015, the unemployment rate stood at just over 25%, a conservative estimate as the unemployment rate does not include the number of individuals who have become discouraged and have stopped searching for jobs (Statistics South Africa 2011). Research indicates that higher education improves employment outcomes and increases labor market participation. For students seeking to improve their odds in a depressing labor market, gaining access to higher education represents a stepping stone towards social advancement and economic security (Sewell, Haller and Portes, 1969; Sørensen and Kalleberg 1981).

However, the current discourse around efficiency, global competitiveness, and market rationality as applied to South African higher education institutions has ensured that there is limited access to higher education (Badat 2009). Satgar (2012) states that post-apartheid South Africa exists in a highly contested ideological space as the neoliberal agenda has superseded the

state led ideals that were set out in 1994. Nkomo, Akoojee and Motlhanke (2007) and Vally (2007) find that the marketization of higher education has created an economic elite. Only those who can afford to attend institutions of higher learning are granted access. The protest action itself cut across a variety of themes including issues relating to race, structural inequality, gender, the persistent rise of contract labor at university campuses and all of this intersected to attract a diverse group of protestors.

### **The Rising Cost of Education**

In an attempt to address the unequal levels of access to higher education institutions, the South African government introduced the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in 1995. NSFAS was introduced as a loan scheme that would ensure that disadvantaged students could afford to attend university. NSFAS funding, however, only covers a portion of university costs and in 2003, NSFAS was only funding 13% of students in universities (Letseka and Maile 2008). Low completion rates at many universities and high youth unemployment rates have made it difficult for NSFAS to recover a significant portion of the loans from past recipients as repaying the loan is contingent on being employed (De Villiers, Van Wyk and Van Der Berg 2013; Letseka and Maile 2008). NSFAS in the 2014/15 academic year received just under ZAR 4 billion in funds. The current minister of higher education in South Africa, Blade Nzimande, noted that NSFAS is still struggling to fully support the approximately 414,802 students due to insufficient funds (NSFAS 2015). These problems still leave a significant amount of students without access to funding.

### **The Emergence of #FeesMustFall Movement and Use of the Hashtag**

The #FeesMustFall hashtag was widely shared across Twitter during the 2015 student protests in South Africa. Our dataset indicates that over 1.2 million Tweets were shared on Twitter

during the crucial period of the protests. Hashtags are brief keywords or phrases, prefixed by the # symbol that allows users to share information and contribute to discussions on current issues (Recuero, Amaral, and Monteiro 2012).

Before the protests became a nationwide issue, the rumblings of discontent over fee increases began in Johannesburg at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits, for short). In mid-October 2015, students at Wits began protesting in earnest against a proposed 10.5% tuition fee increase (The Daily Vox 2015). The proposed fee increases presented very real barriers of entry, especially for disadvantaged students who rely on public funding and student loans to finance their education. The protests at Wits University led to a two-day, campus-wide shut down as students engaged in protest action that was intended to garner the attention of the university council and lead to possible negotiations about the fee increases.

When the #FeesMustFall protests began at Wits University, there was no police intervention on campus even though the entire campus had been shut down during the protests. However, during the early days of the protests, Wits University issued a statement condemning the protests stating that the protest action “is also a clear violation of South Africa’s Constitution and Bill of Rights. We recognize that students have a right to protest, but this cannot happen at the expense of the rights of students and staff members to learn and work in a safe environment” (University of the Witwatersrand 2015). Protesting students, on the other hand, felt that the university was failing to recognize that economically marginalized students were facing financial exclusion in light of the proposed fee increases, and were effectively being prevented from accessing their rights to education. The students at Wits then called for the university council to initiate a tuition freeze, and stated that the university would continue to be shut down until their demands for a tuition freeze had been met (The Daily Vox 2015) .

As the protest action unfolded, students at Wits University expressed their discontent that university management was refusing to meet with them and hear their concerns. This led to a sit-in over the weekend that gained significant national attention. Students participating in the sit-in shared videos and Tweets of the Vice Chancellor of Wits University engaging with students. However, despite managing to draw media attention the protesting students were unable to realize their objective.

The incidents that unfolded at Wits led to the second stage of the movement, and the spread of #FeesMustFall across the nation. The following week, the protests at Wits University led to students from Rhodes University, Stellenbosch University, the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Tshwane University of Technology, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and the University of Cape Town all joining in the protests.

As a number of universities announced campus wide shutdowns, the hashtag #FeesMustFall trended numerous times on Twitter. The protests continued to garner national attention and participants in the protests were heavily active on Twitter as they called for students to join the protests, and to disseminate more information about the protests. The protest organizers and participants also utilized Twitter to challenge media reports that they felt misrepresented the protest. On Twitter, participants sought to debunk various news reports that reported that the protests had turned violent, reckless and dangerous. Utilizing social media in this manner is not uncommon. Penney and Dadas (2013) state that social media has allowed protest movements to amplify their narratives outside of mainstream media. Protestors used Twitter to bypass traditional media platforms to express their views about media bias and the media's unfavorable coverage of the protestors, their actions, and their demands.

**Links to the #RhodesMustFall movement**

This was not the first time that a student movement in South Africa had utilized social media as a tool to amplify its message. Earlier in March 2015, students at UCT began a social media movement titled #RhodesMustFall which was aimed broadly at addressing the lack of racial transformation at the universities in the country, including in both the student body and faculty. The #RhodesMustFall movement quickly moved from social media and developed into protest action at the university, UCT, and in days the movement had spread to other universities across South Africa. The protests, which garnered both local and international attention, resulted in the removal of the Cecil John Rhodes statue from campus. The students felt that the statue was a looming colonial figure, which symbolized the persistence of racial discrimination and the unwillingness of institutions of higher learning in South Africa to create conducive spaces in which black students can exist.

The #RhodesMustFall movement succeeded in beginning a national conversation about the slow rate of racial transformation (Webb 2015). The #RhodesMustFall movement was also included in the list of organizations that were legally prohibited from participating in protest action at UCT during the #FeesMustFall protests. What made #RhodesMustFall significant was that social media, particularly Twitter, acted as an extension of the movement. It was an open space where messages of support, mobilization, shared experiences and engagements could occur. In this sense Twitter did not precipitate the #RhodesMustFall movement; rather it facilitated its development. Twitter operated in a similar role for the #FeesMustFall movement.

As protest action escalated on campuses, there was a move away from solely directing student grievances towards universities but also demanding that the government take responsibility too. UCT students partnered with students from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and marched to Parliament, in the Western Cape, demanding that the President and the Minister of

Higher Education respond to the mass protest actions taking place across the country. Parliament was in session at the time, and a number of students were arrested outside of Parliament (Mail and Guardian 2015). However, the failure of any government officials to address students led to further outcries about the apathy that the current government had shown towards students. The students in Gauteng, South Africa's economic hub, organized a march to the Union Buildings, located in the capital city as well as marching to the headquarters of the ruling party, the African National Congress in Johannesburg.

The victory for South African students came when the President, Jacob Zuma, announced that for the 2016 academic year there would be a 0% fee increase (Mariann 2015). This was a triumph for the students in the short-term because it did not mean that tuition fees would be off the table altogether. Fees would only be temporarily frozen for one year, and students would still have to pay fees at the current rates. Therefore, for some, this represented a partial victory. Despite this, the students had managed to get the attention of the country's leaders as they exploited social media platforms such as Twitter under the hashtag #FeesMustFall.

### **The Court Interdicts**

UCT was the first university to apply for and receive a court interdict that would prevent students from engaging in protests action on the university's campus. All of the respondents that were listed on the court order were prevented from protesting on the UCT campus unless they sought permission from the South African High Court, which issued the interdict. The court interdict listed politically active student societies on its campus as respondents, as well as the #FeesMustFall hashtag which had been trending in South Africa during the protests.

Other universities, such as the University of the Free State and Stellenbosch University, also followed suit by applying for court interdicts. However, the Cape Peninsula University of

Technology (CPUT) was the only other institution that also listed the #FeesMustFall hashtag as a respondent in the court interdict. One of the arguments that the University of Stellenbosch presented to the High Court in order to be granted a court interdict, was that universities were not to blame for the increases in tuition fees as they too were the victims of government funding cuts. The Stellenbosch interdict application stated that;

*“The overall University sector now receives only 40% of its funding from the government and the University of Stellenbosch, that is the applicant, only receives 22% of its total budget from the government. In short, based on the level of government funding our universities can hardly be termed public universities. Further, based upon these figures, it is difficult to see how all who deserve to be at a university can be admitted as students and continue to receive the quality that every person in this country, no matter their gender, their race, class or social standing deserves, unless some serious consideration is given to the manner in which government subsidizes universities.”* (Stellenbosch University v Open Stellenbosch 2015)

The interdict added that the “order should not be construed as denying to students the right to protest vigorously” (Stellenbosch University v Open Stellenbosch 2015). As the protests spread to other campuses, the view of the universities was that protestors were infringing on the rights of other students by engaging in protest action. It is unclear what the legal repercussions of listing a hashtag in a court interdict has for protest action and free speech in South Africa, both now and in the future. Could the justice system actually prosecute students for tweeting?

### **Methods and Analyses**

Using the Social Media Tracking and Analysis Software, SMTAS, we were able to capture all of the Tweets using the hashtag #FeesMustFall from October 13<sup>th</sup> through November 10<sup>th</sup> 2015.

SMTAS was initially developed to monitor the use of Twitter during natural disaster events. SMTAS is based on cloud servers and the database consists of a cluster of PostgreSQL servers. The graphs and the geo-mapping were completed by utilizing Plotly and Google Maps.

Collecting the Tweets utilizing SMTAS allowed us to examine (1) the overall flow of Tweets, (2) the geographic distribution of the Tweets, and (3) how the spread of the hashtag outside of South Africa occurred over that month. We identified 1,270,738 Tweets that utilized the #FeesMustFall hashtag during the protests. We selected the dates from just before the protests garnered national attention in South Africa and after the protests had ended. We constructed the dataset so that we could clearly see the periods before and after the main protest activity, to demonstrate the global spread of the #FeesMustFall hashtag.

Figure 1 shows the overall time trend of the #FeesMustFall for the period including the 1.2 million Tweets. During the protest, numerous other hashtags such as #WitsFeesMustFall, and #UCTFeesMustFall also trended alongside the #FeesMustFall. We selected the #FeesMustFall hashtag for analysis because it was not a hashtag that was localized in certain contexts and tied to particular events at different universities across the country. Rather the #FeesMustFall hashtag was utilized as a rallying call for all students engaged in protest action or those commenting on the protests.

One limitation of the dataset is that a significant portion of Twitter users switch off their geo-locators, reducing the final number of Tweets included in the analysis. We anticipate that if a greater number of Tweets included geo-codes, we would be able to illustrate how much further the #FeesMustFall hashtag had spread. The number of Tweets that utilized geo-locators was significantly reduced and only included 5,482 final Tweets for geo-mapping. In the final analysis we only included Tweets that were geo-coded as this would allow us to track the global spread of

the hashtag. We assume that that users who shared the hashtag were tweeting from their actual locations. Therefore, we are looking at a sample of Tweets that occurred both inside and outside of South Africa in our geographic analysis. In the time trend analyses we are looking at the full population of the 1.2 million Tweets containing #FeesMustFall.

## Findings

Figure 1. Daily Count of #FeesMustFall Tweets<sup>1</sup>

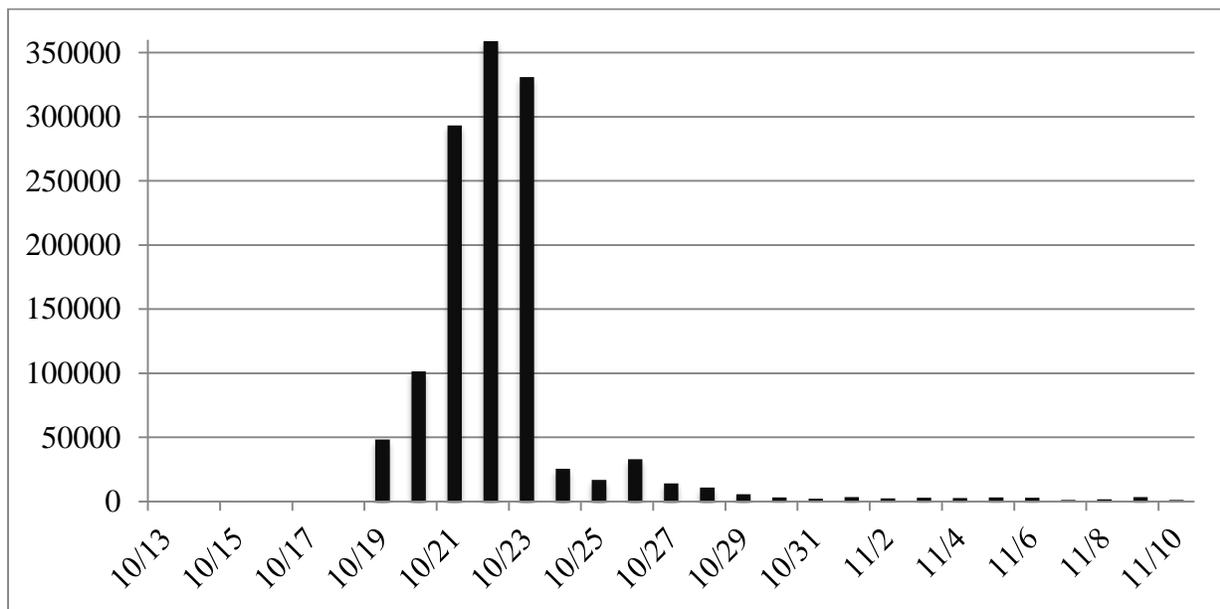


Figure 1 illustrates how frequently the #FeesMustFall hashtag was shared daily. After a general upward trend throughout early and mid-October 2015, there was a sharp increase after October 19<sup>th</sup>—the day of the UCT court interdict. On October 19<sup>th</sup> 2015, approximately 50,000 Tweets were shared and four days later on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 350,000 Tweets with the hashtag #FeesMustFall were shared. This sharp rise in tweets is evidence that when UCT applied for, and was granted, the court interdict listing the #FeesMustFall hashtag as a respondent it had the actually had the effect of encouraging local Twitter users to share news and Tweets about the hashtag. This, of course, was exactly what UCT and the court did not want.

We conclude that the increased use of the hashtag could have resulted from four possible events: (1) over the weekend the protests at Wits University had reached a tipping point as a campus wide shutdown was continuing into its second week, (2) on the same day the #FeesMustFall protests had spread to other campuses, (3) increased news coverage about the court interdict being shared on Twitter and lastly (4) Twitter users sharing the hashtag as a direct response and form of protest against the issuing of the court interdict. Without more detailed data from Twitter users on why, when, and how to use the hashtag we are unable to explicitly single out which explanation of the four led to the increased use of the hashtag on Twitter. It is reasonable to assume that all four explanations could have contributed to the rise in the number of Tweets including the coalescence of the movement around this hashtag.

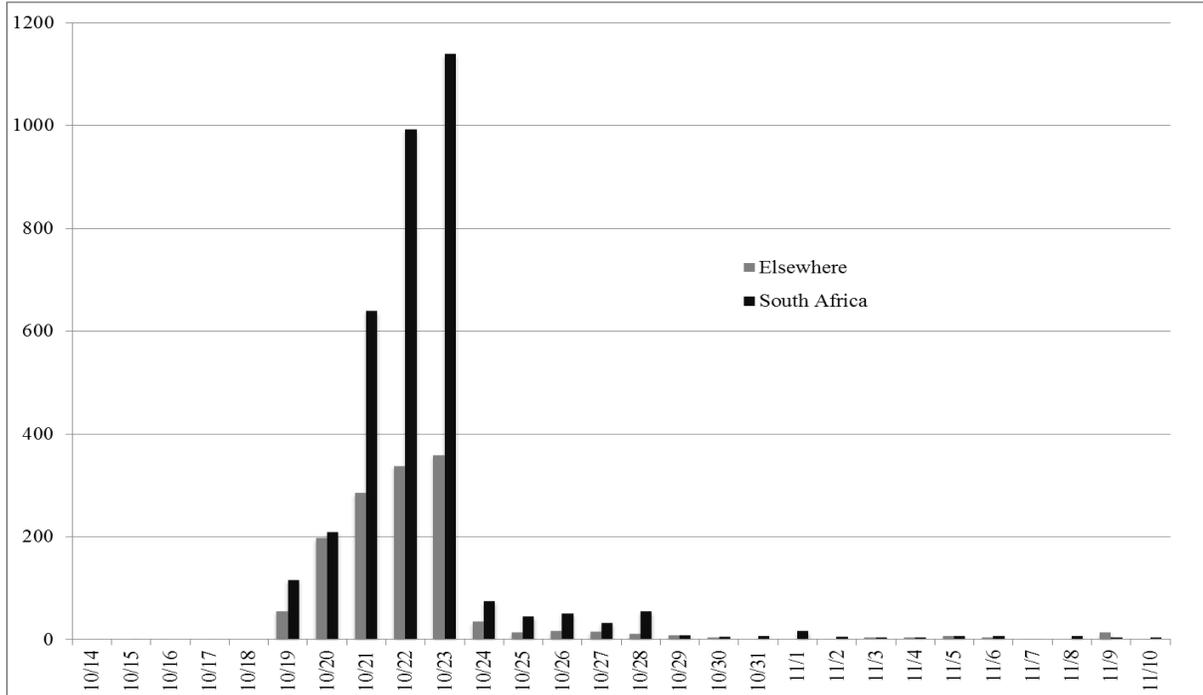
Recuero, Amaral, and Monteiro (2012) state that hashtags shared on Twitter have the ability evolve in order to capture issues being expressed in specific regions. For instance, at Wits University, the #WitsFeesMustFall hashtag had been used to share Tweets about events unfolding at Wits and the same process had occurred at UCT through #UCTShutdown, at Stellenbosch University through #StelliesMustFall, at the University of Pretoria through #TuksMustFall, and the CPUT through the #CPUTFeesMustFall hashtag. There were numerous other hashtags that referred to occupying university spaces, typically administrative buildings during sit-ins. Issues that were being raised such as the sidelining of women activists during the protests led to the #PatriarchyMustFall hashtag being used. And hashtags directing Tweets at the leadership of the various universities such as #MaxPriceMustFall and #HabibMustFall, who are both currently Vice Chancellors at UCT and Wits University respectively, were also widely shared.

We suggest that the #FeesMustFall hashtag was not widely shared until there was a unified and broader movement that connected all the various campus protests. We believe that was driven

by the issuing of the court interdicts, first by UCT, which unintentionally had the effect of unifying the nationwide protests under one umbrella: students against university management. It was also at this point that the protests began gaining momentum. The action by the universities to dispel protests seemed to have the opposite effect. And that effect was amplified on social media as participants in the protests shared videos, Tweets, and updates. These responses were subsequently shared internationally as well.

In November 2015, recognizing the impact of the interdict and responding to accusations of attempts to criminalize protest action, UCT released a statement contextualizing why the university sought the interdict. However, no mention was made about the inclusion of the hashtag; “The only intention with obtaining the interdict was to protect the UCT community against unlawful behavior if and when it occurred. It was not obtained to prevent or curb legitimate forms of protest nor to criminalize anyone involved in such action” (University of Cape Town 2015).

Figure 2 allows us to see the geocoded daily trend data, in which we can differentiate between the local (South African Tweets) and the international Tweets for the sample with available geolocation data.

Figure 2. Geolocated Daily Trend of #FeesMustFall<sup>2</sup>

Based on Figure 2, it is clear to see that international attention on the #FeesMustFall protest, through the sharing of Tweets with the hashtag, began on October 19<sup>th</sup> 2015, the day the court interdict was issued. In fact, one day later, on October 20<sup>th</sup> the number of Tweets shared internationally was nearly equal to the number of Tweets shared in South Africa. Before the interdict was issued, the #FeesMustFall hashtag had rarely been utilized on Twitter outside of South Africa. However, its inclusion, and subsequent news reporting about its inclusion in the interdict, resulted in increased use of the hashtags around the world.

We reason that if UCT had not issued the interdict, the global spread of the hashtag may have not have taken off or had such a reach. This is because the interdict provided the #FeesMustFall movement with significant momentum which led to protest action filtering out of the university and being directed towards the government. It was here that students were brutally attacked by police officers and images and Tweets of students arrests were Tweeted and shared.

Access to these data offer a key and unique insight into when and where the #FeesMustFall hashtag was utilized. There is no way to test whether or not the protest would have continued to gain traction and international attention if the interdict had not been issued. However, the issuing of the interdict played a significant role in bolstering protest action and creating a ripple effect where other institutions also sought interdicts and forced protest action to move outside of university campuses. The marches to symbolic government institutions, Parliament and the Union Buildings, were in part a reaction to the failure of government to address student issues. And this created increased media attention on the #FeesMustFall protest.

After October 21<sup>st</sup> 2015 the international diffusion and sharing of the hashtag continued to increase, but at a much slower rate. In South Africa, the increase in the number of Tweets using the #FeesMustFall hashtag continued between October 21<sup>st</sup> and October 23<sup>rd</sup>. We hypothesize that this was due to a number of events such as the arrests at Parliament, the marches to the headquarters of the ruling party in Johannesburg, and finally the grand march to the Union Buildings where the President announced the 0% fee freeze.

Figure 3. Map of all Geolocated Tweets<sup>3</sup>



The map above in Figure 3 illustrates where in the world the hashtag #FeesMustFall was shared during the entire protest period. The greatest number of Tweets was shared within South Africa, but also in other regions within Africa, in South America, North America, and Europe. We assume that this is a conservative estimate of the number of Tweets that were shared due to geocode limitations, but this is a useful illustration of where in the world the #FeesMustFall hashtag had an impact.

### **The Global Reach**

During the #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa, a number of Tweets were shared in solidarity with students who were engaging in protest action. Aday et al. (2013) state that cross-border flows of information are important if they are able to encourage smaller groups of activists to take action in countries outside of where the protests are happening. The international support from the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. are examples of this contention. It is true that these are locales where a number of South African may be residing internationally. Tweets of admiration and support, however, were also shared in countries such as Zimbabwe and Nigeria. This move from the local to the global is significant. The ability for a social movement to gain traction and international attention is not easy. Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev (2011) indicate that physical distance and geography greatly constrains social ties overall, and the same is true on Twitter. This may seem counterintuitive on a microblogging platform such as Twitter, which seems to encourage building connections with individuals outside of one's own network. Yet, Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev (2011), indicate that high-profile events such as the Arab Spring are unique occurrences in their abilities to move from the local to the global agenda. In a similar vein, the #FeesMustFall movement perhaps managed to garner international attention because it appealed to current issues

such as student debt, the increased costs of higher education, unemployment, and the institutional infringement on the right to engage in protest action.

### **Education as a right in the World Polity**

Access to, and affordability of, higher education is increasingly a global rights issue. #FeesMustFall resonated not only within South Africa, but around the world. One of the arguments we are making in this paper is that while #FeesMustFall is a movement with distinctively South African foundations, the question of whether or not higher education is a “right” is consistently highlighted in global student protests about higher education accessibility. Protest action such as the #FeesMustFall movement, which was able to capture global attention, is an example of that growing global narrative.

According to the World Polity theory, culture—including conceptions of rights—has moved outside the nation-state and into the world society. Boli and Thomas (1997) and Meyer, Boli, Thomas and Ramirez (1997) in particular provide explanations for why many would argue that higher education is a right, and not a privilege. The general premise of the World Polity perspective is that through increased flows of people (Dahlin and Hironaka 2008), information, and ideas, formerly particularistic cultures—and specifically nation-states—are adopting similar organizational structures, guiding documents, and ways of thinking. In particular, nation-states have followed a trend of increasing the rights of the individual in theory and on paper, although the practice of respect for individual rights may be uneven (Cole 2005; Goodman and Jinks 2008; Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui and Meyer 2008; Torfason and Ingram 2010). In general, World Polity research centers around the arguments that (1) rights are framed in individual terms in more places over time, (2) the language used to describe rights has become similar, and (3) more formal documents, such as constitutions and treaties, are enshrining the rights of individuals to pursue

some version of “life, liberty, and happiness.” (Ramirez and Wotinka 2008; Swiss 2009, 2012; Swiss, Fallon, and Burgos 2012)

There are many caveats to the World Polity perspective, centering on the problems of (1) decoupling, (2) reversals in trends, and (3) inequality (Rossem 1996). Critical papers on decoupling argue that World Polity theory overstate similarities between societies, and understate important differences. After scholars, students, and activists meet on a global stage to discuss best practices in higher education, they go to their home countries and implement practices that will actually work given their unique situations. The second caveat to World Polity findings is that one must be careful not to overstate progress toward expanded rights for all individuals. Instead, there are fits-and-starts (and steps back) that happen for a wide variety of reasons, including countries making promises that they cannot live up to (or simply do not live up to) or crises such as war and recession that spur majority groups to advocate for reversals in or denials of rights to minority groups. Finally, newer World Polity research has demonstrated that richer and more ‘developed’ countries are more embedded in the world polity, which gives individuals from these countries a much louder voice in the formation of ‘global policy scripts’ (Beckfield 2003, 2010; Hughes et al. 2009). Inequality also affects a country’s ability to attain world society standards. If national incomes are low, tax bases are small, and governments have a harder time providing their citizens with a full range of public goods that enhance at least the ‘happiness’ part of ‘life, liberty, and happiness’, then these states are susceptible to making ‘on paper promises’ that they cannot keep. Such is the case for many states, including South Africa, that would like to provide higher education for all who qualify. Even given these very important limitations of the theory, World Polity provides a solid theoretical ground on which to build a case that #FeesMustFall is embedded in a much larger, in fact a global, debate over access to, and the costs of, higher education.

## **Conclusion**

U.S. research shows that student debt is having increasingly deleterious effects on those who have college degrees, and even worse effects on those who have gone to university for a few years but did not earn degrees (Dwyer, McCloud, and Hodson 2012). Young Americans with some college or college degrees are delaying home ownership, marriage, and child-bearing in part because they are leaving college burdened by crushing debt and finding good-paying jobs to be scarce.

South African students are only now accruing the government-financed debt that American students have faced for years, but their families are also shouldering a more substantial part of the burden. The unemployment rate in South Africa suggests that even more students will face unemployment, underemployment, and loan default. What will the future be for (arguably) the brightest and highly motivated young people all around the world if they become trapped by debt?

This manuscript illustrates how significant moments, in this case the issuing of the court interdicts, played a role in moving the #FeesMustFall student protest action, from a local movement and allowing it to be shared globally. The success of the hashtag amplified other pressing issues for South African “born-frees”, as well as raised serious questions about the future of born-frees in post-apartheid new South Africa.

In this manuscript we have demonstrated how attempts at censorship by institutions of power can fail spectacularly in the era of social media. Not only do more and more people see education, and higher education, as a right, but the rights of speech and association are ever more fundamental. Of course, there are many rights violations occurring all across the world, some with deadly consequences for those being oppressed and repressed. The global movement for

improving access to, and affordability of, higher education will not end soon. If governments around the world cannot find a way to assist students financially, student protests, similar to those that occurred in South Africa, may increase, inspire other movements and spread the call for truly recognizing education as a right.

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