

## Can The Subaltern Tweet? Reflections on Twitter as a Space of Appearance and Inequality in Accessing Visibility

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**ABSTRACT** Defining contemporary social movements as 'Twitter revolutions' has become increasingly common. A wide array of studies, however, suggest that social media and political participation have a complex relationship that cannot be reduced to easily intelligible causal links. Based on Gerbaudo's choreography of assembly and Butler's performative theory of assembly, this paper will firstly explore the case in favor of an understanding of Twitter as a place where people can perform their political claims and enact resistance. Based on Fuchs' asymmetrical political attention economy of capitalism, this paper will then put forward the argument that inequality in access to visibility substantially hinders Twitter's potential as a space for political engagement. Based on this framework, this paper will finally offer a short review of two recent cases of Twitter activism, and namely the Ni Una Menos feminist movement in Argentina and the Rhodes Must Fall/Fees Must Fall student movement in South Africa.

### INTRODUCTION

The origin of the expression 'Twitter revolutions' is usually traced back to an opinion piece by Sullivan (2009) on the developing Iranian uprising and proudly titled 'The revolution will be tweeted'. Since then, observers in Europe and North America overwhelmingly adopted the narrative of the 'Twitter revolution' to describe the wave of popular uprisings that eventually got defined with the collective name of 'Arab Spring'. Curiously, pundits called these movements 'revolutions' way before any of them had claimed revolutionary character or had consolidated any form of regime change (Papacharissi 2015).

Academic circles were not immune to the hype, either. As a matter of fact, the inception of commercial social media platform as a new element in the political scene was welcomed with hyperbolic reactions by techno enthusiasts (Shirky 2008; Castells 2012) and techno-skeptics (example, Morozov 2009, 2010) alike. Once the dust had settled, however, positions started to converge towards a middle-ground stance that understands the relationship between social media and social movements as a complex matter (Papacharissi 2015; Fuchs 2016; Gerbaudo 2017; just to name a few seminal examples). Most famously and in open polemic with media-enthusiast Manuel Castells, Fuchs (2009, 2012) argues that lack of engagement with social theory is a

sign of intellectual impoverishment and invites scholars to take social theory into serious consideration when analyzing more or less popular cases of social media activism.

### Objectives and Aims

This paper wishes to pick up on Fuchs' invitation for engagement with social theory in the study of the relationship between social media and social movements. Accordingly, this paper will firstly discuss the merits of Gerbaudo's (2012) 'choreography of assembly' and Butler's (2015) 'performative theory of assembly' as powerful theoretical lenses that allow for the interpretation of Twitter as an Arendtian space of appearance and the actions therein staged as acts of political performativity. After outlining the features of these two similar yet independently developed theories, this study will draw from Fuchs' (2013b) 'asymmetrical political attention economy of capitalism' to argue that, despite potential for large scales acts of resistance (see also Kelsey and Bennet 2014), Twitter in particular and social media in general are power-laden spaces where access to visibility is firmly tied to a broad spectrum of inequalities that significantly hinder their emancipatory potential.

Based on the above framework, the paper will then move on to shortly discuss two relevant yet relatively under-studied cases of Twitter activism, and namely the 'Ni Una Menos'

feminist movement in Argentina (and wider Latin America) and the ‘Rhodes must fall’/‘Fees must fall’ movement in South Africa. These cases were selected specifically because of their origin outside of the so-called ‘West’ and because of the relatively small amount of scholarly attention devoted to them, especially in comparison to North American or European cases such as the Occupy movement in the US or the ‘Indignados’ movement in Spain.

### THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

#### From ‘The Tweets’ to ‘The Streets’, and Back Again

In *Tweets and the Streets*, Gerbaudo draws from Hannah Arendt to argue that public space is not given *a priori*, but rather needs ‘to be performatively constructed and re-constructed through the act of gathering of otherwise dispersed individuals’ (Gerbaudo 2012: 38). In other words, bodies need to come together in order to produce the space of appearance, occupy it, and therein act politically. Gerbaudo further argues that the gathering of bodies has become increasingly difficult because of the conditions of life under the present form of neoliberal capitalism, characterized by physical dispersion of people and by strong pushes for individualized lifestyles. In this context, Gerbaudo contends that summoning together a large number of people for a public gathering is de facto impossible without a core group of individuals orchestrating the gathering through some form of technological mediation.

Gerbaudo refers to this process with the term of ‘choreography of assembly’, defined as ‘the mediated “scene-setting” and “scripting” of people’s physical assembling in public space’ (Gerbaudo 2012: 40). The metaphor of the ‘choreography’ is borrowed by studies that compare public protests to performance arts because of their similar physicality (Foster 2003) and mediated character (Alexander et al. 2006). Adopting the metaphor is presented as bearing the following advantages. Firstly, it poses the emphasis on the need for a structure (however light) behind collective action and points the spotlight towards the presence of ‘choreographers’ working ‘behind the scenes’ to make collective action possible. Secondly, the metaphor stresses the temporality of public gatherings, thus allow-

ing for a full exploration of collective action as a process that goes through different phases over time (example, preparation, concentration, sustainment, follow up). Thirdly, the metaphor of the choreography stresses the social processes through which spaces become infused with meaning (Gerbaudo 2012: 44).

Gerbaudo further contends that the advent of social media did not radically disrupt the way in which the act of ‘choreographing’ public gathering used to take place in the past. That is to say, an allegedly horizontal circulation of practical/logistical information on social media might be a necessary element of present day public gatherings, but it is in most cases not sufficient to make a public gathering happen. Much like in the past, the coming together of bodies ‘requires the construction of common collective identifications among participants’ (Gerbaudo 2012: 40). In this sense, social media like Twitter and Facebook exert a function that is remarkably similar to that of their predecessors like TV, radio, leaflets, and word-of-mouth. Their role is chiefly that of facilitating the ‘choreographic’ process through which the collective is molded into a singular entity.

While not surrendering to enthusiasm about the ‘revolutionary’ potential of social media, Gerbaudo concedes that the advent of these platforms has substantially reshaped participation as well as leadership, insofar as they have rendered formal adherence to a social movement somewhat obsolete. He argues, however, that understanding contemporary social movements as leaderless rhizomes (Castells 2012) or swarms (Hardt and Negri 2005) would be largely misleading. Borrowing from scholarship on North American feminist groups in the 70s (Freeman 1972), Gerbaudo contends that leaderlessness is an ideology that only conceals the presence of informal or ‘liquid’ leadership and potentially blinds the research to the internal power dynamics that shape the functioning of a social movement.

In a world where formal adherence to a movement is no longer a requirement for participation in its activities, Gerbaudo re-reads the role of ‘choreographic’ leaders as that of setting the scene where mobilization can happen by providing potential adherents to the movement with an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau 2005: 69) to fill with their grievances. Leadership, therefore, entails the preparation of the scene for participation,

and is understood as ‘a relatively centralised form of influence over the course a collective action will take’ (Gerbaudo 2012: 43). Once the scene setting is done, the ‘performers’ (that is, those participating in the gathering) will then have substantial leeway in deciding how they will navigate the ‘stage’ (that is, the space of political visibility) that choreographers made available to them.

### Performing Assemblies

In her *Notes towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler’s argument starts from strikingly similar assumptions to those adopted by Gerbaudo. Butler draws from Hannah Arendt to argue that ‘to appear is to act politically’ and that public gatherings are a fundamental element of collective action. In Butler’s words, ‘when bodies assemble on the streets, in the square, or in other forms of public spaces (including virtual ones) they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear’ (Butler 2015: 11). As explained above, Gerbaudo points out that collective action in present day society is to some extent obstructed by physical dispersion and individualization. In a similar vein, Butler argues that neoliberal mentality demands self-sufficiency while at the same time the neoliberal economic order is making self-sufficiency impossible. Privatization, financialization, and ‘debtocracy’ are cumulatively working to ‘dispossess’ people of the necessary means of subsistence, de facto producing the conditions for their abjection (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 12). In other words, those who cannot keep up with the pace of life under neoliberal regimes become ‘surplus population’ that is ‘dispensable’. These people are systematically pushed out of the space of appearance, prevented from acting politically, and ultimately stripped of their ‘right to have rights’ (Butler 2015: 50).

The concept of ‘precarity’ is central to this theorization. Precarity is presented by Butler as the politically induced condition under which social groups are differentially exposed to arbitrary violence (Butler 2015: 33-34). Perhaps more crucially, Butler argues that precarity exposes the social character of human existence (Butler 2015: 119), insofar as it makes manifest the extent to which human beings profoundly depend on each other for their basic needs and for the establishment of those social structures that

make their provision possible (Butler 2015: 118-119). Precarity is therefore presented as having a silver lining: by exposing human sociality, it bears the potential for bringing together all the disenfranchised in a shared protest against the politically induced premises of their exclusion (Butler 2015: 27).

As explained in the previous section, Gerbaudo argues that collective action is a complex organizational practice requiring a significant amount of symbolic and (nowadays) technological mediation. Similarly, Butler argues that no human action can take place without some sort of ‘support’ (Butler 2015: 73). Without the adequate support, including ‘the availability of spaces where to perform and the technological means to capture and convey gatherings’ (Butler 2015: 19), collective action lacks the necessary conditions for its enactment. And just like Gerbaudo contends that the space of appearance is performatively produced, Butler argues that ‘sometimes we must act to institute those conditions’ for collective action to take place (Butler 2015: 16). Thus, when bodies come together and occupy a public space, they are enacting a claim to be political and to be recognized as such (Butler 2015: 18). Mass public demonstrations, therefore, not only re-appropriate the space of appearance, but also work to undo the power relationship between that space and the existing regime and thus performatively produce new possibilities for existing in the space of appearance (Butler 2015: 85).

While not dwelling at length on the issue, Butler hints to the fact that ‘some forms of political assembly do not take place on the streets because streets and squares do not exist or do not form the symbolic center of that political action’ (Butler 2015: 126). It is probably safe to state that such a statement could encompass online forms of collective action such as social media activism. In one of his examples, Gerbaudo points out that commercial social media such as Twitter and Facebook often acted as ‘training grounds’ where activists could prepare their ‘choreography of assembly’ in an environment that was comparatively safer than the public square (Gerbaudo 2012: 58). In this sense, social media activism can perhaps represent one example of ‘acting’ to produce the material conditions for appearance in the public square. Butler also contends that conveying the bodily assembly beyond its physical locality is a fundamental part

of the collective action itself (Butler 2015: 20, 102-108). If this is the case, it could be further argued that Butler's framework can also accommodate further forms of social media activism, including those aiming at reverberating a physical protest beyond its local context via, for example, Twitter.

### **Gerbaudo Meets Butler: Overlapping Frameworks?**

In the above section as shown, Gerbaudo and Butler have independently developed two highly compatible theoretical frameworks to interpret present day social movements. Both of them explicitly draw from the work of Hannah Arendt and her famous concept of the space of appearance to claim that any form of political action is in fact 'performed' or 'staged' in a public space that is equally produced in the context of that performance. Both authors recognize the conditions of post-modern life under neoliberal governmentality as averse to the performance of collective political claims. In light of this recognition, both suggest that some sort of mediation (Gerbaudo) or support (Butler) is necessary in order for collective action (indeed any action) to take place.

In a situation where formal adherence to a social movement is no longer a requirement, Gerbaudo contends that this mediation usually takes the form of a 'choreography' produced in the form of an 'empty signifier' engineered by a latent group of 'liquid' social movement leaders that are charged with setting the stage where participants can then perform their grievances. Butler's concept of precarity might offer a further over-arching framework to understand what brings people with seeming different grievances to join the same movement, and also potentially a link between the grievances voiced by seemingly different collective movements across the world. Indeed, a definition of 'precarity' as the differential exposure to arbitrary violence resonates strongly with the claims advanced by movements as diverse as those of the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, or indeed the newly emerging feminist movement *Ni Una Menos* in Argentina and wider Latin America or the Rhodes Must Fall/Fees Must Fall movement for a decolonized academia in South Africa.

Gerbaudo openly addresses the relationship between social movements and social media by

suggesting that the role of Twitter or Facebook in collective action is not radically different from that of their predecessors (TV, radio, leaflets). That is to say, social media mostly work as channels that facilitate the 'choreography' of assembling by providing practical information and (more crucially) affective attachment to the banner of the protest for those involved as well as for those sympathizing with it. Butler does not explicitly dwell on the role of social media in performed collective action. However, she acknowledges that 'virtual spaces' can represent alternative sites for collective action (for example, when physical spaces are unavailable) and that any definition of 'collective action' necessarily includes its mediated reverberations across time and space. Therefore, accommodating social media activism within Butler's framework is probably a possibility that would be compatible with the original intention of the author.

Discussion above might have suggested a relatively optimistic view of the role of commercial social media in facilitating collective action. However, this paper wishes to contend that said potential can only be understood by also taking into account the material, symbolic, and discursive inequalities shaping access to social media platforms in general and access to visibility on these platforms in particular. Neither Gerbaudo nor Butler directly addresses these issues, therefore limiting the explanatory potential of their frameworks. This is somewhat surprising, especially since both of them devote attention to social movements outside of the so-called 'West' (Palestine in the case of Butler, Iran and Egypt in the case of Gerbaudo), where commercial social media cannot be assumed to be as ubiquitous as in other contexts. The intention of this paper is to offer a specific set of reflections on inequality in accessing visibility on Twitter and its implication for choreographed/performed collective action *within* the frameworks outlined by Gerbaudo and Butler. The main theoretical aid for these reflection will be Christian Fuchs' (2013b) 'asymmetrical political attention economy of capitalism'.

### **Accessing Visibility through Twitter: Not as Easy as it Sounds**

As mentioned above, Fuchs is one of the most prolific scholars in the field of critical (so-

cial) media studies. A recurrent argument in Fuchs' work is that commercial social media such as Twitter and Facebook are highly stratified and non-participatory spaces (example, Fuchs 2011). Fuchs advances this argument in open polemic with a wide array of scholars who optimistically celebrated so called 'Twitter-revolutions', such as Jenkins (2008), Lothan et al. (2011), and most prominently Castels (2009, 2012). In opposition to their views, Fuchs argues that social media might facilitate collective action, but can hardly be said to drive it because of stark inequality in access to communication technology and inequality in access to visibility, as documented in a host of empirical studies he brings forward to substantiate his claims (Murthy 2013; Wilson and Dunn 2011; Fuchs 2013a; Gerbaudo 2012 among many others).

In Fuchs' view, the production and circulation of social media content is overwhelmingly dominated by big corporations and other actors who have preferential access to visibility because they are endowed with a disproportionate share of material, symbolic, and discursive resources. Simply put, '[t]hose who have a lot of reputation, fame, money or power tend to have many more followers than everyday people' and '[t]heir tweets also tend to be much more often re-tweeted than common people's tweets' (Fuchs 2013b: 192). Fuchs denotes this trend with the name of 'asymmetrical political attention economy of capitalism', and contends that under such conditions 'the concept of social media participation is an ideology' (Fuchs 2013b: 102). While not ruling out the possibility that commercial social media could facilitate the work of social movements, he argues that collective action can be impactful only in those cases where its operations extend far beyond social media.

This paper contends that Fuchs' work can help in expanding on some features that are only hinted in the work of Gerbaudo and Butler. More specifically, Fuchs' work can help in exploring how social media are deeply power-laden spaces on a par with offline spaces. Accordingly, social media platforms offer the possibility to 'appear' only to a restricted group of individuals and, crucially, offer support only to certain kind of action. Furthermore, adopting Fuchs' lens can help uncover the unequal distribution of visibility not only between large corporations and alternative political figures, but also the unequal distribution of visibility *within* specific

social movements, thus unlocking the potential to better identify 'choreographic' leaders and analyze those elements constituting the 'stage' that they set for the rest of the adherents to the movement.

The remaining part of this paper will offer an interpretation of two contemporary social movements through the above outlined theoretical lens. These will be, respectively, the Ni Una Menos Feminist movement in Argentina and wider Latina America and the Rhodes Must Fall/ Fees Must Fall movement in South Africa.

## SUPPORTING CASE STUDIES FROM THE EXISTING LITERATURE

### Ni Una Menos and Argentinian Feminism

'Ni Una Menos' (from Spanish, literally, 'not one less'), is the name of a feminist movement originating in Argentina and currently encompassing a wide number of loosely affiliated movements by the same name across Latin America as well as in Southern Europe. The movement's genealogy can be traced back to a small-scale event organized by a narrow number of local activists in Plaza Spivacow in Buenos Aires to disseminate information on femicide in March 2015. The social media face of the event started with a Facebook page on which around 100 people confirmed their participation in the event. The occasion that sparked large scale mobilization came a few months later with the assassination of Chiara Paez, a 14-year-old pregnant women on behalf of her partner on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Under the banner of 'Ni Una Menos' and through the hashtag #NiUnaMenos, a nation-wide coalition of feminist groups circulated a first manifesto of the movement (Ni Una Menos 2015) together with a call for participation in a rally to protest the endemic dimension of femicide in Argentina. The rally took place the following June 3<sup>rd</sup> (Prada 2016).

The main grievance advanced by the Ni Una Menos movement was the poor implementation of Law 26.485 of 2010, supposedly aiming at offering 'comprehensive protection to prevent, sanction, and eradicate violence against women'. However, the grievances voiced by those adhering to the movement soon expanded to encompass child abduction for purposes of sex trafficking, poor judiciary conduct in cases involving violence against women, restrictive abor-

tion laws, as well as symbolic violence perpetrated by the media industry (Rosales 2016: 10).

Public reaction was seemingly overwhelming. The communication consultancy Webindicios attempted to offer some quantitative measures on the reach of the movement and claims that, between the call for participation and the rally, some 1.3 million people participated directly to the discussion on social media or on other online sources and some 7.3 million users' visualized information referring to the movement. #NiUnaMenos soon became 'trending topic' on Twitter in the Buenos Aires area, then to become trending topic in all of Argentina on the day of the rally and eventually achieve prominence as worldwide number one trending topic at 17.05, with 28,400 mentions within an hour. The rally on June 3<sup>rd</sup> was a great success in terms of participation: some 500,000 people occupied the streets of Buenos Aires and were joined by many more in some 240 satellite events in other Argentinian cities (Rosales 2016: 6-7). The movement consolidated and spread across borders, running a continent wide demonstration on October 19<sup>th</sup> 2016 (Gogni 2016).

### **Rhodes Must Fall: Local Activism, Global Reach**

'Rhodes Must Fall' (RMF) is the name of the South African youth movement that invested universities campuses across the country and eventually spilled over into wider social discussion. The movement can be traced back to a student-led initiative at the University of Cape Town (UCT) advocating for the removal of the statue of British colonialist Cecil John Rhodes from the university campus because of the racist legacy of his figure. The first action of the movement was a sit-in next to Rhodes' statue on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Media hype around the movement gained momentum after a video of student-activist Chumani Maxwele throwing human excrements towards Rhodes' statue made it into national TV news (Pitso et al. 2015). The media success of RMF triggered emulation across the country as well as overseas by a wide number of relatable movements including Tuks Uprising, Open Stellies, Steyn Must Fall, and Black Students Movement, just to mention a few (Luescher 2016).

The small-scale and local objective of the original RMF movement (the removal of Rhodes state from UCT campus) eventually broadened

to include grievances towards the memorialization of colonialism in South African universities, the 'colonialized' nature of university curricula, racialized inequality in access to faculty position, and racialized inequality in access to tertiary education in the face of massive fees hikes. Once the removal of Rhodes' statue was successfully obtained in early-April 2015, the movement morphed into what is now known as 'Fees Must Fall' movement (FMF). FMF now acts as a framework where all the other grievances that arose in the context of the Rhodes Must Fall keep being advocated for (Bosch 2016).

Assessing the actual level of public engagement with RMF/FMF is no easy task. The 'state of the newsroom' report by the Wits Journalism Project argues that most of the news coverage on RMF/FMF circulated via social media (Becker 2016), perhaps hinting to the possibility that most of the coverage was user-generated. At a closer look, however, the overall impression emanating by the Wits Journalism Project is that social media mostly functioned as a tool that helped 'traditional' newsrooms in keeping up with the unfolding of events on the ground (Finlay 2016). This impression is also shared by other scholarly observations claiming that traditional newsrooms retained much of their hegemony in the production and circulation of information in the context of RMF/FMF (Daniels 2016; Bosch 2016). However, Daniels (2016) also notes that the engagement of private users rose significantly with the advent of #FeesMustFall; a trend that could perhaps be explained by the broader scope of the FMF (as compared to RMF) as well as with a convergence of nation-wide satellite movements under a single banner.

### **DISCUSSION**

Despite its success and its ability to survive beyond the early hype, the Ni Una Menos movement remains largely under studied and outside of the eye of English-speaking academia. A simple Google Scholar search for '#NiUnaMenos' yields just about 150 results, for the wide majority in the Spanish language and largely available in the form of un-published Masters or Doctoral dissertations defended in Argentinian universities. RMF/FMF certainly enjoyed broader academic scrutiny, perhaps thanks to the advantage of most English-speaking scholar in working in a mostly English-speaking context.

However, this attention should not be over-estimated. A similar Google Scholar search for '#RhodesMustFall' yields around 660 results; a quite risible number when compared to, for example, the 17,700 scholarly products retrievable by searching for '#OccupyWallStreet'. Despite this and based on the available information, this paper will attempt to cautiously advance the following propositions.

Firstly, neither Ni Una Menos nor RMF/FMF can be said to be movements that 'originated on the internet'. As hinted in the above recollections, the first steps for both movements were organized by pre-existing feminist groups/student groups in the local context of Buenos Aires and Cape Town, respectively. In the case of Ni Una Menos, a particularly visible case of femicide offered the occasion for the formation of a wider coalition of feminist groups that collectively seized the opportunity to expand their public presence and become a nation-wide phenomenon. In a relatable fashion, a particularly visible activist performance at the UCT campus created momentum for RMF to go beyond its local context and expand in a nationwide movement. In both cases, the key objectives of the movement were pre-determined by the core group of activists that initiated them: Ni Una Menos aimed at producing political pressure for better implementation of Law 26.485 of 2010; RMF aimed for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes from the UCT campus. Following Gerbaudo, it could be speculated that the core group of activists who set up the original initiatives might have retained power in setting the key goals of the movements and therefore acted as the 'choreographers' of the collective actions that followed.

Secondly, it is worth noticing how the names of both movements happen to be protest slogans. Once again following Gerbaudo, it could be argued that 'Ni Una Menos!' and 'Rhodes must fall!' acted as 'empty signifier' that the 'choreographers' offered to their perspective sympathizers. Despite the existence of a relatively narrow set of pre-established objectives for the two movements, adherents and sympathizers enjoyed the possibility of appropriating the respective slogans and 'fill them' with their own meanings and grievances. In this sense, some of the newly acquired features and objectives of the movements were indeed crowdsourced by those adhering to them. The hashtags #Ni-

UnaMenos and #RhodesMustFall/#FeesMust-Fall might have facilitate this process of creating a crowdsourced agenda. However, it should be noticed that the core objectives of both movements remain narrowly defined and close to the original ones, perhaps offering support to the above speculation that a core group of activist-choreographers retained at least some control of the respective narratives.

Thirdly and in Butler's terms, Ni Una Menos and RMF/FMF can be interpreted as a collective performance aimed at asserting the right of two differently subordinated groups to act politically and escape precarity. Indeed, the endemic dimension of femicide in Argentina or the systematic exclusion of people of color from tertiary education in South Africa (or anywhere, for that matter) closely fits Butler's definition of precarity in terms of a 'differential exposure to arbitrary violence' due to social subordination. By taking to the streets and/or occupying university campuses, 'women'/'people of color' and all those sympathizing with the case against their abjection can be said to have collectively occupied the space of appearance and to have brought their case into the political.

Finally and together with Fuchs, this paper argues the material conditions under which both movements operated necessarily imply that they might have been facilitated by social media, but surely were not driven by them. Regardless of the global prominence of #NiUnaMenos on Twitter on the day of the rally, the social media visibility of the event in Argentina itself was necessarily low because of Twitter's penetration rate in the country, counting some 4.9 million users (around 11% of the total population) (Statista 2017a). The official Twitter profile of Ni Una Menos (@NiUnaMenos\_) counts some 46,500 followers; a number that is remarkably low compared to the 11.6 million followers of Argentinian Football star Sergio Kun Aguero (the most followed profile in the country), or even the 4.7 million followers of the most famous Argentinian Basketball player Manu Ginobili (10<sup>th</sup> most followed profile in the country) (SocialBakers 2017a).

Twitter's penetration rate in South Africa is similarly low (around 10%) (Statista 2017b). The official Twitter profile of Rhodes Must Fall (@RhodesMustFall) counts around 10,600 followers; a number that pales in comparison to

the 9.1 million followers of business magnate Elon Musk (most followed profile in South Africa) or even the 1.6 million followers of radio host Gareth Cliff (10<sup>th</sup> most followed profile) (Social-Bakers 2017b). Furthermore, projects such as the State of the Newsroom at Wits University as well as other scholarly investigation (Daniels 2016; Bosh 2016) pointed out that, despite much newsmaking did take place on social media, traditional or alternative newsrooms retained substantial hegemony in the production and circulation of information.

Under these conditions, it is hardly plausible that the successes of either Ni Una Menos or RMF/FMF could be achieved solely through social media, let alone *because* of social media.

### CONCLUSION

By combining the frameworks proposed by Gerbaudo (2012), Butler, (2015) and Fuchs (2013), this paper advanced the following propositions. Firstly and foremost, social media in are power-laden spaces that can on occasion facilitate the activist projects of social movements on the ground but that can hardly be said to drive or cause 'revolutions'. In this framework, it was then suggested that social media might encourage new forms of participation in social movement and influence the way in which social movements are run towards more flexible forms of 'choreographic' leadership. This paper further argued that a generalized and embodied protest against 'precarity' might be an overarching element binding together many present day social movements despite their different outlooks. It was also pointed out that, on those occasions where physical spaces are unavailable, social media might offer an alternative way of occupying the space of appearance, act politically, and eventually create the necessary conditions for (physical) action in the public square. Finally, it was argued that material inequalities profoundly shape access to visibility on social media and thus significantly hinder their potential to facilitate collective action. This is not to say that social media are necessarily 'useless' for social movement. However, under current conditions of profound inequality in access to visibility, it is de facto impossible for social movements to achieve any of their objectives without mobilization on the ground.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The paper was concluded with an exploration of two examples of recent and relatively successful social movements, and namely the Ni Una Menos feminist movement in Argentina and the Rhodes Must Fall/Fees Must Fall movement in South Africa. Selected because of their geographical location outside of the so-called 'West', this paper attempted to offer an interpretation of these movements through the above outlined theoretical lenses and based on the information available to a quite narrow empirical literature. This paper strongly encourages further inquiry in the activities of Ni Una Menos, Rhodes Must Fall/Fees Must Fall, and other 'non-Western' examples of social media activism. Looking at said case studies can prove to be particularly fruitful in uncovering the role of a wide spectrum of inequalities in shaping collective action and the role of social media within it. Just as crucially, studying non-Western examples of social media activism can help counterbalance a Western bias in the field of social media and social movement that has so far privileged some case studies over other (example, Occupy Wall Street) and risks interpreting all other cases through their lenses.

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